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## EXPLOITATIVE LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE VITALITY IN THE SOFTWARE INDUSTRY OF PAKISTAN: WORKPLACE IMPOSTOR THOUGHTS AS A MEDIATOR AND SELF-COMPASSION AS A MODERATOR

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### Abstract

This study explores how exploitative leadership (EL) affects employee vitality (EV), a vital element for productivity and motivation. It further delves into how workplace impostor thoughts (WIT) mediate and self-compassion (SC) moderates the relationship between the two constructs. The data were gathered through a structured questionnaire survey from full-time employees working in software houses in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. 305 questionnaires were distributed, of which 255 were received. The research used quantitative research design and tested research hypotheses through Structural Equation Modelling using SmartPLS-4 and SPSS. The findings show valuable insights into how exploitative leadership negatively affects employee vitality and positively affects workplace impostor thoughts. Further, self-compassion moderates the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace impostor thoughts. It is assumed to serve as a psychological resource that mitigates the effects of exploitative leadership. Addressing the gaps, the present study's findings demonstrate the need for the IT sector to develop supportive leadership styles and strengthen employees' psychological resources.

## Introduction

In an era of rapid growth and digital acceleration, organizations are eager to achieve a competitive landscape to excel in their industry. As the backbone of the modern digital economy, Information Technology (IT) plays a momentous role in enhancing efficiency, creating innovation, and serving as a medium for economic activities across all sectors (Viglia et al., 2022). Employee vitality is described as an energized psychological state that enables people to put in effort and to stick with it even when there are obstacles, as well as to connect with their jobs emotionally (Kark & Carmeli, 2009). Studies show that vitality levels are proven to be high in people with a high level of work engagement, creativity, and proactive behavior, as well as being resilient in challenging situations (Wörtler et al., 2020). Also, workplace experiences and interpersonal interactions can positively influence vitality. Leadership styles that reduce vitality must be understood to contribute to the development of organizational behavior both in theory and in practice. Exploitative leaders focus on their

personal gain by taking subordinates' work and crediting themselves, and then neglecting followers' development once their potential is fully utilized (Schmid et al., 2019).

Impostor syndrome is a phenomenon that entails self-doubt and a fear of being found out (Clance & Imes, 1978). The overwhelming majority of modern studies and literature attribute employee self-doubt to the workplace context, and the relationships that employees have over and under with management, as opposed to employee self-doubt being a function of maladaptive thinking (Gullifor et al., 2024). Organizational leadership and supervisory environment are important and underexplored areas in the impostor phenomenon literature (Tewfik et al., 2025). This current study responds to this gap and states that leadership has an impact on impostor thoughts and has significant implications for employee motives and psychological well-being.

Leadership styles' impact on employees' feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth is significant. When leaders, in a non-

dramatic way, downplay someone's contributions to the workplace or, dismissively, arbitrarily offer recognition, employees will likely leave the toxic workplace (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Impostor thoughts impact employees in different ways, and self-compassion may help explain some of this variation. Self-compassion is described as the ability to relate to and care for oneself personally while also recognizing the imperfection that comes with being human. Being high in self-compassion has been shown to reduce self-criticism and enhance stress-coping abilities (Neff et al., 2018). Employees facing impostor thoughts may be high in self-compassion such that self-evaluative thinking and rumination are reduced, and psychological energy is preserved. Conversely, given impostor thoughts, employees low in self-compassion may suffer more in terms of psychological energy reduction. Thus, self-compassion is positioned to protect against the impact that impostor thoughts have on an individual's psychological energy.

In today's global economy, one of the most rapidly growing and important

industries is information technology (IT). The twin cities Islamabad and Rawalpindi are becoming important centers of software development and a growing number of software houses providing engineering, digital, and outsourced technological services. Exploitative leadership practices in Pakistan's software sector may differ from other sectors due to project-based work, performance expectations, and project governance that centralizes power in leaders' hands. In Information and Communication Technology, project governance practices may allow leaders to control resources, time, and performance assessments, leading to the justification of self-serving actions in the name of delivering project objectives and institutionalizing exploitative leadership in everyday management practices (Zaman et al., 2022). The software sector employees in Pakistan face pressure due to strict client requirements, competition, and resource scarcity, which leads to uncertainty and reliance on supervisory power. Recent research reveals that under exploitative leadership, employees' well-being is heavily influenced by their personal



resilience resources, marking a shift from institutional protection to personal coping in emerging economies (Elahi et al., 2025). As a result, the interplay of project governance, power imbalance, and institutional void makes exploitative leadership in Pakistan's software industry more institutionalized, embedded, and psychologically impactful than in any other sectors or in developed economies.

## **Theoretical Orientation and Hypothesis Development:**

The research draws on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which explains the desperation principle that individuals who experience resource loss become hostile and irrational, entering a self-preservative state, which is described as having irrational consequences. The COR theory explains how individuals formulate their behaviors by acquiring, protecting, and retaining valued resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). These resources can be stressed, and can include one's energy, self-esteem, and emotional balance. Leadership of any kind can be a huge contributor of psychological resources in

a workplace and can help employees function in an effective manner. However, negative forms of leadership do the opposite and create psychological drain, as these leaders create a sense of psychological incompetence. COR theory outlines a resource principle that states individuals should allocate resources to mitigate losses, recover, and gain resources. Also, Workplace impostor thoughts are one of the internal mechanisms, since self-doubt and fear of exposure consume cognitive and emotional resources. This state compels individuals to remain vigilant and to ruminate and become anxious. With the depletion of these internal resources, employees lose energy. Stress also acknowledged the value of personal resources in loss mitigation. In this scenario, self-compassion operates as a positive and significant resource that assists employees in dealing with impostor thoughts with self-kindness and not self-criticism, consequently improving the loss spirals and preserving energy.

## **Exploitative Leadership and Employee Vitality:**

Dark leadership styles that are essentially self-interested and treat their followers to accomplish their goals. An exploitative leadership style is self-serving in nature, where leaders use their power and resources to benefit themselves (Schmid et al., 2019). Whereas vitality in employees is a subjective feeling of being strong, feeling alive, and enthusiastic at the workplace. It is a positive state of mind that is crucial for high performance and being creative at work (Wörtler et al., 2020). A meta-analysis examined the correlation between six leadership constructs and six types of mental health outcomes in a large sample of studies and found that destructive leadership is robustly and consistently linked to poor follower mental health (Montano et al., 2017). Moreover, a recent systematic literature review on destructive leadership and its impact on employee mental health confirmed that abusive and toxic leadership escalates stress, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress at the workplace (Ahumada et al., 2025).

In a collectivist culture like Pakistan, dark leadership is seen to be empirically

more dominant and scores high on uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and high power distance, which provides a pathway for leaders to pursue their self-interest with less personal accountability (Sarwar et al., 2023). Prior researchers show that the impact of abusive supervision was majorly seen in high power distance societies compared with low power distance samples (Lian et al., 2012). Software houses in Pakistan also have a strong centralized structure. The labor laws are ambiguous and poorly enforced, whistleblower protection and HR reporting channels lack independence, and restrictive cultural norms of the hierarchical system leave employees with no reliable means of standing against exploitative leadership and workplace mistreatment (Hayat et al., 2025; Shah & Sarif, 2023). Thus, exploitative leadership has been widely recognized as a significant stressor that adversely affects employee outcomes and lowers vitality. Employees subjected to exploitation at workplaces by their leaders experience low scores in mental and physical health (Schmid et al., 2019). Further, it has been observed that exploitative leadership leads to low

frustration tolerance and disengagement at work. Moreover, when employees experience exploitative behaviors at the workplace, their energy to work decreases, and they feel demotivated.

Based on this, we propose:

**H1:** Exploitative leadership is negatively related to employee vitality.

### **Workplace Impostor Thoughts as a Mediator:**

Impostorism can be viewed as a resource depletor as it taps into impostors' psychological and cognitive resources. "Entertaining workplace impostor thoughts is a stressful situation, as impostors hold the belief that other individuals overestimate their abilities and that their lack of competence will be revealed at any moment (Jiang et al., 2025)." They spend more time, effort, and overperform to cover their perceived shortcomings and involve themselves in maladaptive practices (Hutchins et al., 2018). Prior studies that explored exploitative leadership have focused on how the self-serving and manipulative styles of leaders can have a detrimental impact on employees' psychological experiences at work. It also harms employees through organizational

identification. Subordinates begin to lose their sense of professional identity and coherence in the organization (A. Bajaba et al., 2023). Moreover, exploitative leadership has several psychological outcomes, like organizational cynicism caused by resource depletion and emotional strain (Elsaied, 2022).

Prolonged exposure to dark leadership styles is linked to low job satisfaction, low normative and affective commitment, work-life balance problems, and psychological distress caused by the deficit of resources under the Conservation of Resources theory (S. Bajaba et al., 2022). When leaders continually seek personal gain and take credit for their work, employees begin to doubt their own competence and their value to the organization. Such hostile work environments can foster workplace impostor phenomena, where employees feel that they are not deserving of their accomplishments and believe that they are not contributing to the overall success of the organization. Thus, higher impostor feelings have a detrimental effect on employee vitality. Individuals lose their psychological fuel, which threatens their creative thought process

and makes them less enthusiastic about their work. Also, the loss of professional identity is the breeding ground for impostors' cognition. The follower is consistently provided with evidence of incompetence, inadequacy, and self-doubt, which can devastate lives and performance. Those cognitive circumstances create impostor thoughts. Environmental factors have been shown to predict impostor syndrome, like gender, family, and social role expectations, and personality (K.H. & Menon, 2022). Hence, Impostor feelings are better managed by people who have more self-belief and mental strength (Guedes, 2024).

Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H2:** Workplace Impostor thoughts mediate the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee vitality.

### **Self-Compassion as a Moderator:**

The presence of self-compassion can act as a moderating factor between exploitative leadership and workplace impostor thoughts. Self-compassion as a personal resource is indicative of an individual's disposition of being kind, understanding, and having balanced

awareness of oneself and one's mistakes, and not dwelling on self-criticism (Neff et al., 2018). It is associated with psychological well-being and how an individual can be optimistic in stressful situations.

Self-compassionate employees can view challenges as a common experience, have balanced control over their negative emotions, and have the mental ability to deal with them.

SC is characterized in terms of six interdependent components, i.e., being kinder to oneself, indulging in common humanity, and mindfulness, and lesser in self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification. It suggests that the combination of these features helps an individual to overcome self-suffering and results in lowering the adverse effects of exploitative leadership on workplace impostor thoughts, and helps individuals in protecting their vitality at the workplace (Neff, 2023). The systematic literature review on organizational self-compassion confirms that it diminishes emotional exhaustion, increases performance satisfaction, strengthens resilience, and improves interpersonal functioning in working



adults, all of which characterize a resource profile that is exactly the opposite of the circumstances in which impostor thoughts thrive (Dodson & Heng, 2022).

The moderating mechanism is theoretically consistent with COR logic. Researcher show in their longitudinal field survey and experience sampling design that self-compassion enhances salutogenic resources such as self-control that replenish depleted psychological resources, and not only serves as a passive buffer, but a therapeutic resource that should operate actively in the workplace environment (Schabram & Heng, 2022). SC has been determined to be a personal resource that mitigates the psychological damage of dark leadership in different work settings (Dodson & Heng, 2022; Schabram & Heng, 2022). The findings confirm that self-compassion mitigates the effects of EL on impostor thoughts by disrupting self-critical processes and giving employees confidence through self-compassionate behavior. The moderating effect on the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee outcomes in the IT and

software industry has never received enough attention. The current study fills this contextual gap by testing self-compassion as a boundary condition in a sector where its protective role is most theoretically significant.

We therefore hypothesize:

**H3:** Self-compassion moderates the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace impostor thoughts, such that the positive effect of EL on WIT is weaker when SC is high.

### Research Methodology:

In this study, quantitative methodology and cross-sectional research design are used to establish relationships between exploitative leadership, workplace impostor thoughts, self-compassion, and employee vitality. Primary data was gathered from full-time employees of software houses in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. In addition, a purposive sampling method was used. After the data were screened for missing values and response completeness, 255 usable responses were retained. SPSS performed the preliminary analysis and descriptive statistics. Smart PLS-4 was used for the SEM analysis. Before gathering data, consent was obtained

from respondents, and they were provided with a brief overview of the study.

For the Exploitive Leadership construct, we use a 15-item measure by (Schmid et al., 2019). A sample item is: “My leader takes it for granted that my work can be used for his or her personal benefit”. Unless otherwise stated, we use a 5-point Likert scale “1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree”. We use 5-item scale for Workplace Impostor Thoughts developed by (Tewfik, 2022). Sample item is: “At work, I am not as qualified as others think I am”. Self-Compassion was measured using the (Raes et al., 2011) 12-item scale. A sample item of self-compassion is: “I am part of the human condition”. Lastly, the 5-item measure by (Porath et al., 2012) was used for Employee Vitality. A sample item is: “At work, I feel alive and vital”.

The study included four variables

(exploitative leadership, self-compassion, workplace impostor thoughts, and employee vitality). Since the variables are latent/unobserved, the Structural Equation Modelling technique was used to analyze the data.

**Results:**

The values of descriptive statistics and correlations among variables have been presented in Table 1. Further, the diagonal values (in bold) are the square root of AVE values. Exploitative leadership was positively associated with workplace impostor thoughts ( $r = 0.352, p < 0.01$ ) and negatively associated with employee vitality ( $r = -0.532, p < 0.01$ ). In addition, workplace imposter thoughts were negatively related to employee vitality ( $r = -0.421, p < 0.01$ ). However, self-compassion was not significantly correlated with exploitative leadership, workplace imposter thoughts, and employee vitality ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Constructs**

		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1.	EL	3.031	0.855	<b>0.741</b>			
2.	SC	3.227	0.771	-0.074	<b>0.751</b>		
3.	WIT	3.075	0.856	0.352	-0.058	<b>0.824</b>	

4.	<b>EV</b>	2.902	0.717	-0.532	-0.046	-0.421	<b>0.777</b>
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**Note:** Square root of the AVE value on the diagonal (in bold) and off-diagonal values are correlations between the constructs.

In this study, we used a variance-based structural equation modeling technique using SMART-PLS4 software for data analysis. The measurement model results are presented in Table 2. The value of Cronbach’s alpha for EL was 0.941, for SC was 0.937, for WIT was 0.882, and for EV was 0.837. The value of CR for EL was 0.948, for SC was

0.939, for WIT was 0.914, and for EV was 0.884 (see Table 2). Further, the AVE value for EL was 0.55, for SC was 0.564, for WIT was 0.679, and for EV was 0.605. CFA shows that all factor loadings meet the required threshold of 0.708 or higher (Hair et al., 2022) is achieved except for (SC1, and SC4).

**Table 2: Confirmatory factor analysis results**

Latent Variables	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach’s alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
<b>EL</b>	EL 1	0.711	0.941	0.948	0.55
	EL 2	0.762			
	EL 3	0.705			
	EL 4	0.719			
	EL 5	0.75			
	EL 6	0.721			
	EL 7	0.724			
	EL 8	0.752			
	EL 9	0.754			
	EL 10	0.753			
	EL 11	0.726			
	EL 12	0.742			
	EL 13	0.773			

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	EL 14	0.779			
	EL 15	0.745			
SC	SC 1	0.669	0.937	0.939	0.564
	SC 2	0.854			
	SC 3	0.738			
	SC 4	0.656			
	SC 5	0.8			
	SC 6	0.737			
	SC 7	0.746			
	SC 8	0.75			
	SC 9	0.737			
	SC 10	0.735			
	SC 11	0.802			
	SC 12	0.764			
WIT	WIT 1	0.834	0.882	0.914	0.679
	WIT 2	0.825			
	WIT 3	0.825			
	WIT 4	0.838			
	WIT 5	0.798			
EV	EV 1	0.775	0.837	0.884	0.605
	EV 2	0.759			
	EV 3	0.771			
	EV 4	0.779			
	EV 5	0.804			

**Note:** EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts, EV= Employee Vitality

Moreover, two methods were used for establishing discriminant validity. First, the Fornell-Larcker criterion (see table-1) was used (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Second, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion (Henseler et al., 2015) (see table-3) was used for establishing discriminant validity.

**Table 3: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Criterion)**

	EL	EV	SC	WIT
EL				
EV	0.6			
SC	0.095	0.083		
WIT	0.387	0.491	0.078	

**Note:** EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts, EV= Employee Vitality

**Hypotheses Testing:**

The results indicate that EL has a significant negative effect on EV ( $\beta = -0.436, t = 9.03, p < 0.001$ ), thereby supporting H1. In addition, mediation analysis reveals that WIT significantly mediates the relationship between EL and EV ( $\beta = -0.092, t = 3.893, p < 0.001$ ), providing support for H2.

Furthermore, the moderation analysis shows that SC significantly moderates the relationship between EL and WIT ( $\beta = -0.189, t = 2.663, p = 0.008$ ). The negative interaction effect indicates that higher levels of SC weaken the positive association between EL and WIT. Thus, H3 is supported.

**Table 4: Results of the PLS-SEM Model**

	Original sample (O)	T statistics	P values
EL -> EV	-0.436	9.03	0.000
EL -> WIT	0.335	6.062	0.000
WIT -> EV	-0.274	4.98	0.000
SC x EL -> WIT	-0.189	2.663	0.008

**Note:** EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts, EV= Employee Vitality

**Table 5: Mediation Analysis**

	Original sample (O)	T statistics	P values
EL -> WIT -> EV	-0.092	3.893	0.000

Note: EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts, EV= Employee Vitality

Figure 1: Structural Model (Beta Values)

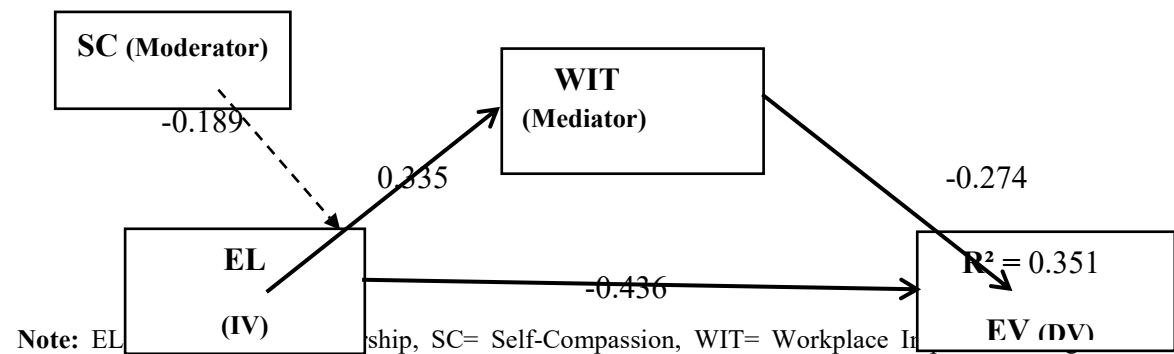
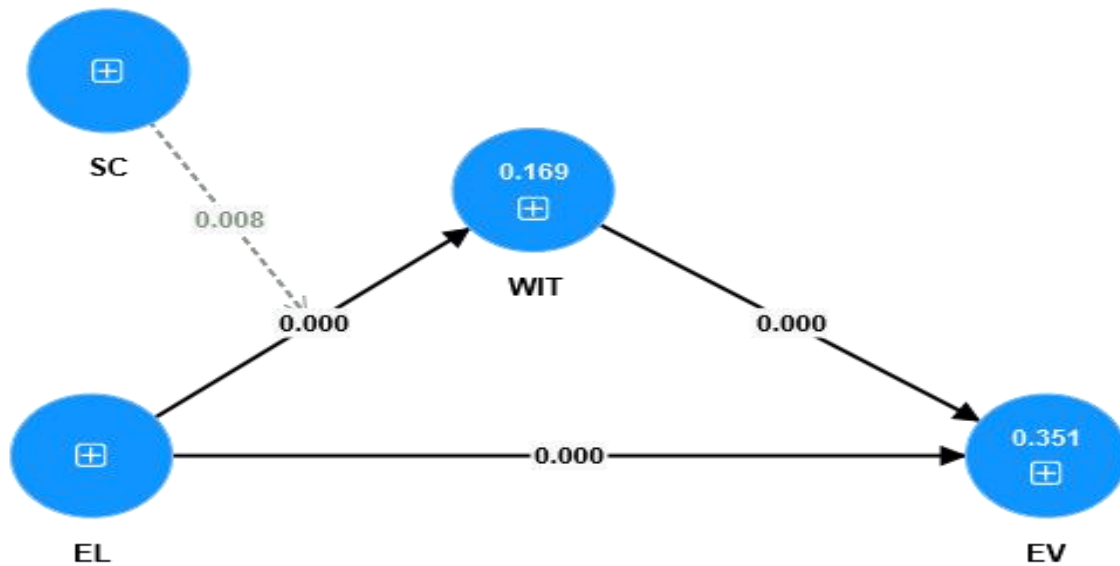
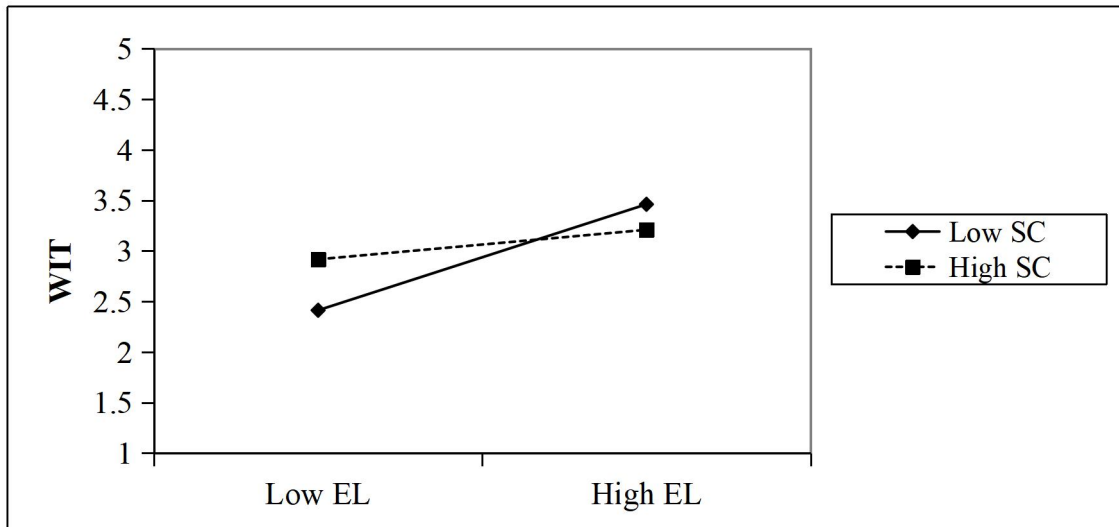


Figure 2: Structural Model (p-values)



Note: EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts, EV= Employee Vitality

Figure 3: Interaction Effect Diagram (EL x SC-> WIT)



Note: EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts

Harman's single-factor test was conducted to analyze the presence of common method bias suggested by (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The first factor explained only 27.641 % of the variance of the indicators. Therefore, common method bias was not considered to be a serious issue in this study. Variance

Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to assess multicollinearity. In Table 6, VIF values were measured by using PLS-SEM. If the value of VIF is less than 5, preferably lower than 3, then there is no problem of multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2022). All the values are within the threshold.

Table 6: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

	EL	EV	SC	WIT	SC x EL
EL		1.151		1.023	
EV					
SC				1.011	
WIT		1.151			
SC x EL				1.014	

Note: EL= Exploitative Leadership, SC= Self-Compassion, WIT= Workplace Impostor Thoughts, EV = Employee Vitality

Finally, the PLS Predict results have been presented in Table 7. The predictive power of a model has been assessed by using the PLS predict procedure (Shmueli et al., 2016, 2019). As presented in Table 7, the Q<sup>2</sup>predict values are >0, and all the PLS\_RMSE

values are < LM\_RMSE values. Likewise, all the PLS\_MAE values are lower than the LM\_MAE values. According to the results of PLS Predict, the model has high predictive power (Hair et al., 2022).

**Table 7: PLS Predict**

	Q <sup>2</sup> predict	PLS SEM_RMSE	PLS- SEM_MAE	LM_RMSE	LM_MAE
EV1	0.143	0.862	0.711	0.915	0.727
EV2	0.16	0.842	0.696	0.911	0.73
EV3	0.177	0.821	0.682	0.874	0.709
EV4	0.162	0.85	0.706	0.894	0.728
EV5	0.182	0.841	0.699	0.883	0.716
WIT1	0.104	0.973	0.795	1.022	0.814
WIT2	0.06	1.045	0.852	1.135	0.928
WIT3	0.086	1.029	0.855	1.096	0.91
WIT4	0.131	0.965	0.79	1.066	0.859
WIT5	0.09	0.933	0.744	1.01	0.82

Note: EV = Employee Vitality, WIT = Workplace Impostor Thoughts

**Discussion:**

This study’s results highlight the effect of exploitative leadership on employees’ vitality, the role of self-compassion as a moderator, and workplace impostor thoughts as a mediator on employees working in software houses. Hypothesis 1, which states the negative association between EL and EV. Employees who view their managers as exploitative leaders report lower levels of work

vitality. The results reveal that self-centered leadership behaviors can destroy employees’ psychological resources and their well-being at work. Hypothesis 2 proposed that WIT mediates the relationship between EL and EV. The results validated this hypothesis and explained that exploitative leadership adversely impacts employee vitality by creating impostor thoughts. Workplace impostor

thoughts can develop when an individual questions their own abilities and fears being found out as being deficient because of the exploitative nature of their leader, and then strongly impact employee vitality. Hypothesis 3 explored whether SC moderates the relationship between EL and WIT, and the results provide support for this hypothesis, indicating that self-compassion reduces the impact of EL on WIT.

The culture of constant assessment and competence, learning new technologies, meeting strict deadlines, and creating innovative solutions under exploitative leadership creates a fertile ground for workplace impostor thoughts. Self-compassion breaks this cycle in a particularly powerful way in an IT environment precisely because of its three main components: being kind to oneself counteracts the harsh self-criticism that naturally accompanies a culture where every error is visible; recognizing the struggle and reducing the shame that feeds impostor feelings; staying mindfully aware of self-doubt without being consumed by it. This helps in preventing the kind of mental

spiral that derails focus and drains the vitality that high-pressure technical work demands.

### **Theoretical Contributions:**

The study demonstrates that positive psychological work energy, such as self-compassion at work, enhances employees' vital state of mind and helps them perform better. The research expands existing knowledge of the impostor phenomenon by establishing workplace impostor thoughts as an explanatory mechanism for how exploitative leadership erodes employee vitality. Our research contributes to the literature on personal resources by determining self-compassion to be an important boundary condition in the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace impostor phenomenon thinking. The study also contributes by synthesizing direct, indirect, and moderating effects into one framework. Instead of viewing exploitative leadership as having a singular negative consequence for employees, the model elaborates how the impact is more complex. Exploitative leadership, in this case, diminishes vitality, leads to an indirect



impairment of vitality due to workplace impostor thoughts, and is posited to have less harmful impact when self-compassion is elevated. The study, therefore, contributes to the field by providing an elaborate explanation of detrimental leadership behaviors that employees encounter in innovation-driven organizations.

### **Managerial Suggestions:**

Our research provides valuable insights and has significant practical value for IT companies. Human capital's creativity, continuous learning, and mental effort are of utmost importance. Employees at software companies are required to tackle multiple complicated issues, work within short time frames, adjust to changing demands from customers, and work with multiple people. Employee energy and vitality in such settings is not a peripheral issue. It is a key driver of performance, innovation, and sustained organizational effectiveness. It appears from our results that exploitative leadership and workplace impostor feelings can psychosocially and directly diminish employee energy and vitality. This insight from our study illustrates the importance of placing leadership

behavior at the organizational strategic level for IT firms. Organizations must acknowledge self-doubt and mask the psychological insecurities of their people. In many software houses, especially with a more aggressive culture and higher performance pressure, employees may seem to be fine on an escalated technological ladder, when, in fact, they experience a crippling feeling of not being enough.

First, at a leadership level, Organizations must use compulsory leadership assessment instruments, 360-degree feedback mechanisms that specifically gauge the experiences of fairness, credit attribution, and developmental support by subordinates necessary for performance evaluations and promotions. The Human Resources department and senior leaders ought to be trained to understand the behavioral patterns of exploitative leadership at an early stage and use systematic observation schemes and frequent pulse surveys on employees to detect when the psychological climates are becoming too deteriorated to continue as a chronic drain of organizational resources.

Second, Self-compassion weakens the detrimental link between exploitative leadership and workplace impostor feelings. At the employee level, organizations must invest in self-compassion training programs as a formal feature of employee well-being strategy in software houses. Self-compassion is not an innate personality trait; it is a trainable mental ability. Mindful Self-Compassion training has been shown to produce significant reductions in burnout, self-criticism, and emotional exhaustion among working adults. Mentorship, feedback, and performance discussions in a psychologically safe climate also lessen the chances of employees internalizing workplace stress as a reflection of their inadequacy. This study shows that IT companies should consider the well-being of their employees as one of the priorities if they target sustainable growth.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research:**

Despite contributions, the design and execution of this study highlighted certain limitations that could be addressed in future studies. The study

used a cross-sectional design, which does not allow the study to engage in strong causal reasoning. Future studies should refine and establish a clearer picture of how exploitative leadership shapes and influences impostor thoughts and employee vitality by employing longitudinal or time-lagged studies. Further, the dimensions of exploitative leadership and employee vitality may be altered by the employee's structural, cultural, and job demands. Future studies should test the model in other contexts such as education, health, finance, and public administration. This study explored self-compassion as a significant moderator. Future research can explore other moderators such as psychological capital, perceived organizational support, and emotional stability. Future research should consider qualitative or mixed methods approaches as well.

### **Conclusion:**

This research explored how exploitative leadership affects employees' vitality. Further, this study explored workplace impostor thoughts as a mediator and self-compassion as a moderator in the relationship among constructs.



Employees with greater self-compassion are more able to cope with negative experiences associated with leadership and are less likely to internalize such experiences as personal inadequacies. Pakistan's IT industry is fast-growing and has become competitive across the globe. This study shows that organizations must focus more on the nexus between leadership, behaviors, and the employee's psychological resources to create a healthier and more sustainable work environment.

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