

Abusive Leadership Mitigates Psychological Well-being and Increases Presenteeism: Exploration of the Negative Effects of Abusive Leadership on Employees' Mental Health

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Objectives: In this paper, we examined the impact of abusive leadership (AB) on psychological well-being (PWB) and presenteeism (PR) by considering the moderating effect of mental health (MH) of employees in Saudi small and medium enterprises (SME's). **Methods:** We used non-probability sampling to collect data from employees in the Saudi SME's. We used 152 complete questionnaires for statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics, validity and reliability tests, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. **Results:** AB significantly and negatively impacted the PWB of employees in the Saudi SME's ($p < .05$). Furthermore, we found a statistically significant association ($p < .05$) between AB and PR, where increased AB increased presenteeism. Regarding the moderation effect, findings revealed that MH significantly suppressed the negative association between AB and PWB and significantly dampened the positive relationship between AB and PR. **Conclusion:** Leadership plays a critical role in employees' well-being and presenteeism; therefore, our study has important implications for managers, workers, and policymakers to promote healthy leadership for improved employee well-being and productivity.

Keywords: abusive leadership, psychological well-being, presenteeism, mental health, SME's, Saudi Arabia

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In recent times, counterproductive or improper behaviors have received increased attention in the workplace.¹ Consequently, much research on cruel and bullying supervision and the dark side of leadership has taken place.² This paper focuses on the adverse effects of abusive supervisors on the workforce. According to the definition of abusive supervision, it is the subordinates' impressions of supervisors regarding confrontational verbal and nonverbal attitudes and behaviors, excluding physical contact.³ Abusive supervision constitutes the maltreatment of subordinates that is emotionally and psychologically damaging for an prolonged period of time.⁴ These behaviors occur over an extended period, and may include hiding essential information, using foul language, using perilous tactics, and insulting subordinates in the presence of co-workers.⁵ Due to the constant nature

of abusive supervision, employees face mental health damage, and sometimes they intend to quit their job due to dissatisfaction.⁶ With a consistent increase in the confrontational verbal and nonverbal behaviors in organizations, researchers have focused on abusive supervision, which constitutes the deviant behavior of leaders. Hongbo et al.⁷ define abusive supervision as aggressive behaviors of supervisors perceived by the subordinates, excluding physical contact.

Abusive management is connected with the wellness of the employee and constitutes an important source of stress in the workplace. It causes various mental health issues such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, stress, depression, dissatisfaction with the job, and anxiety.⁸ An organization's dysfunction occurs due to unethical practices at the workplace, and abusive supervision is one of those practices. Along with having a negative impact

on the business operations of the organization, it has an adverse effect on the employees. The same thing applies to abusive behaviors of leaders and peers.⁹ Substantial evidence on leader/supervisor deviant behaviors and their rising prevalence in the workplace have been published in public newspapers and academic journals.¹⁰ Examples of destructive behaviors are misuse of power, sexual and physical harassment, anger, public humiliation, unfairness, abuse, improper assignment of blame, and use of threats.¹¹ Other outcomes of abusive supervisor/leader behavior are a decline in organizational citizenship behavior and increasingly dysfunctional workplace behavior. In broader terms, an abusive supervisor is associated with workplace aggression, which adversely affects the employee's psychological well-being.¹² However, in recent years, the main focus of researchers has been on the problem of deviant behaviors of supervisors/leaders and their outcomes. But in fact, organizations tend to conceal the unethical behaviors of their leader/supervisor to prevent the organization's bad image in the marketplace.¹³ Almost every developed or developing country and culture does have these unethical practices. The reason behind this is the desire of the leaders/supervisors to display their positional power. According to research on organizational behavior, it is clear that due to several interpersonal reasons, most leaders/supervisors target some employees and use abusive behavior with them.¹⁴ Because of their leadership style, there are some leaders/supervisors who only behave offensively with the whole workforce of the organization.¹⁵ Studies about how employees respond to abusive supervision indicate that subordinates who perceive more excellent abusive supervision engage more in taking revenge and retaliation activity than those who perceive less abusive supervision.¹⁶ Usually, employees do not take action against the top-management abusers.¹⁷ According to Irum et al.¹⁸ the retaliatory responses, along with maintaining the deviant behaviors of the abusive supervisors/leaders, can result in worsening the relationships.

Literature Review

Theoretical background: Leadership styles have a direct effect on staff commitment and may have an impact on organizational sustainability. According to the COR theory, stress emerges when central or important resources are threatened with loss, lost totally, or when considerable attempts fail to obtain them. As people lose resources, they work hard to gain, keep, cultivate, and safeguard essential values and resources to cope with work demands or life stress.¹⁹ Organizations are

held responsible for causing mental distress among employees, leading them to engage in counterproductive work behavior, such as absenteeism, sabotage, and work-life conflict.²⁰ According to Social Exchange Theory, employees prefer to reciprocate the treatment they receive from their superiors, which is valuable for analyzing workplace behavior. As a result, if employees are subjected to hostile treatment from their superiors, they are likely to respond in kind, which is harmful to the firm.²¹ Transformational leaders have the power to broaden and strengthen their followers' concerns. They motivate individuals to become conscious of, and committed to the group's mission and aims, and they enable subordinates to put the group's interests ahead of their own.²² The idea that poor leadership, typified by people's unfavorable or unjust treatment, harms them is not a revolutionary concept.²³ Most research on the link between leadership and employee psychological well-being has concentrated on the adverse consequences of poor leadership, such as increasing levels of employee stress and agony^{24,25} and symptoms of anxiety, despair, and psychosomatic illness.²⁶ Aside from the consequences of psychiatric disturbance,²⁷ poor leadership also has been linked to physical outcomes such as higher blood pressure,²⁸ presenteeism, and sickness absenteeism.²⁹

Impact of abusive leadership on psychological well-being: Positive organizational psychology also has focused on exploring the potential advantages that leadership can have on the psychological well-being of employees. One study presented a conceptual rationale for transformational leadership's favorable benefits on employee psychological well-being.³⁰ In contrast, another study presented compelling examples and research-based observations into how compassionate leaders may improve their employees' mental health.³¹ Past studies believed that the components of transformative leadership highlighted by the researcher were especially relevant to employees' psychological well-being. Idealized influence, for example, happens when leaders prefer ethical choices over convenient ones, emphasize their followers' interests over self-interest, and favor the organization's interests over self-interest.³² Leaders who demonstrate idealized influence prioritize the long-term welfare of their employees over short-term financial gains, disregarding organizational pressures. Those who exhibit inspirational motivation inspire their staff to surpass their previously perceived limits and achieve more. These leaders inspire their colleagues to overcome mental barriers and provide them with the skills to face future problems.³³ Leaders that demonstrate intellectual stimulation enable people

to question their assumptions, rethink difficulties, and tackle them creatively.³⁴ Allowing workers to build their particular techniques for addressing personal and work-related issues increases their confidence in protecting and improving their well-being. Employees are better equipped to grasp their surroundings when encouraged to explore difficulties from new viewpoints.³⁵ Past research highlights that individual concern is demonstrated when leaders emphasize their workers' accomplishment and growth requirements, exhibiting empathy, compassion, support, and direction that improve their well-being. Such leadership concerns foster an environment inside the team that fosters the well-being of team members. This approach by leaders creates the groundwork for creating relationships that promote employee growth.^{36,37}

H1: *There is a significant and negative impact of abusive leadership on the psychological well-being of employees.*

Impact of abusive leadership on presenteeism:

Employees who are physically present but psychologically absent are said to be presenteeism. In other words, employees are present at work, but their cognitive activity is not directed toward it. In certain circumstances, people will go through the motions of their job while concentrating elsewhere. The impact of leader support on worker health and stress is crucial. Police officers, among other professionals, are workers who frequently encounter high levels of stress. The effects of high-level stress may result in psychological distress symptoms, which, in turn, can lead to presenteeism, where employees are physically present at work but are experiencing mental health symptoms.³⁸ One study investigated the influence and process of authoritarian leaders on presenteeism. Researchers found that the excessive authoritarianism displayed by leaders and the tremendous workload nurses encounter are potential drivers of presenteeism among nurses.³⁹ Furthermore, this same study discovered that leader identification does not always have a protective benefit and may potentially exacerbate the association between dark leadership and its consequences. These findings contribute to studies on authoritarian leadership and presenteeism and significant insights for fostering good workplace practices.³⁹ According to the theory of paternalistic leadership, authoritarian leaders have 4 different traits. These aspects include: (1) an autocratic style characterized by the consolidation of power, control of knowledge, and strict monitoring of subordinates; (2) denigration of subordinates' abilities, which involves the complete disregard of their significant contribution and suggestions;⁴⁰ (3) image decoration, which involves

manipulating information to present a favorable image; and (4) instructional behaviors that emphasize the importance of performance and provide direction to guarantee high levels of performance.⁴¹

H2: *There is a direct and positive impact of abusive leadership on presenteeism among employees.*

Moderation of mental health: In recent years, the function of employee mental well-being has garnered more emphasis in the organizational literature. Past research investigated the impact of work-organization circumstances, abusive leadership, and their interaction on the psychological well-being and intention to resign of Quebec healthcare system workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴² The study's findings recognized that factors such as skill utilization, decision authority, social support, and recognition were positively associated with psychological well-being. In contrast, psychological and physical demands had negative associations. Having irregular work schedules and lacking recognition were associated with a higher intention to quit, while psychological demands increased the intention to quit. Abusive leadership reduced the benefits of identification and decision authority on psychological well-being, resulting in a higher intention to resign among workers.⁴² Although there are positive elements of psychological well-being, the scientific literature focuses on the negative aspects of mental health.⁴³ As a result, rather than measuring a good psychological state, researchers frequently assess the presence or absence of symptoms and behaviors linked with long-term mental health disorders. It is important to note that psychological health entails more than the subjective or objective absence of signs or symptoms of mental diseases.⁴³ A reasonable level of psychological well-being is often defined as mental health,⁴⁴ critical for healthcare personnel during a pandemic.

Past research defined postgraduate researchers as more vulnerable to mental health problems, most likely due to the hostile atmosphere of mental health stigma and prejudice inside institutions. Certain environmental conditions may cause PGRs to be missing or present, which has detrimental personal and institutional consequences and may increase absenteeism and presenteeism.⁴⁵ Working when unwell can be useful; nevertheless,⁴⁶ presenteeism is connected with fatigue and depersonalization,⁴⁷ conflict and poor work quality,⁴⁸ and a negative influence on coworkers.⁴⁹

H3: *Mental Health significantly suppresses the negative association between abusive leadership and psychological well-being.*

H4: *Mental Health significantly suppresses the positive relationship between abusive leadership and presenteeism.*

METHODS

We used a quantitative research method, collecting numerical data from the target population –the employees working in small and medium enterprises (SME’s) of Saudi Arabia. The study has targeted employees from several different SME’s, because the survey has been conducted in the context of employees’ mental health. The impact of abusive leadership mitigates their psychological well-being and increased presenteeism.

The study has designed a closed-ended questionnaire. This questionnaire was completed by employees working in SME’s in Saudi Arabia. For measuring employees’ mental health, a 6-item scale was adopted from Spell et al.⁵⁰ For measuring the psychological well-being of the employees, we adopted a 5-item scale from Nielsen et al.⁵¹ A 15-item scale was taken from Jabbar et al.⁵² to measure abusive leadership. Presenteeism was measured based on the 6-item scale adapted from Gilbreath et al.⁵³

Approximately 700 questionnaires were distributed, and almost 650 questionnaires were received. Few service responses were inadequate or incomplete, and 152 questionnaires were considered for analysis from among those returned. Data analysis occurred using the statistical software Amos, and the association between the observed variables was tested using structural equation modeling.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the sample included age, education, employment, and experience. The sample was fairly representative of both genders, as 53.8% of the participants were male, and 46.2% were female. Many participants were between the ages of 26 to 30 years (40.6%), 30.8% were younger than 25, and 24.6% were in the age range of 31 to 35. Only 4.0% of the participants from the SME’s were over age 35. Approximately half of the sample (49.7%) had completed a bachelor’s degree, and 24.7% of the participants had a master’s degree. Regarding experience in the SME’s, 43.0% of the participants worked for 6 to 10 years, 34.5% stated they had an experience of 11 to 15 years, and 9.2% revealed that they had an experience of over 15 years.

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics. The mean for abusive leadership (AB) and mental health (MH) lies between 3.0 and 3.5, whereas the mean values for psychological well-being (PWB) and presenteeism (PR) are below 3.0. The normality of the data was assessed through Kurtosis. According to Kline⁵⁴, the values

of Kurtosis must be below 10. The kurtosis values in this study are found to be within the suggested range.

Table 1
Descriptive Variables

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	Std. Error
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
AB	152	1.00	5.00	3.3216	1.03403	-.614	.204
PWB	152	1.00	5.00	2.7648	1.15552	-.757	.204
PR	152	1.00	5.00	2.5424	1.14133	-.851	.204
MH	152	1.00	5.00	3.3885	1.04590	-.855	.204
Valid N (listwise)	152						

Note.
AB=Abusive leadership, PWB=Psychological well-being, PR=Presenteeism, MH=Mental health

The adequacy of the sample and suitability of the data for factor analysis was tested using the KMO and Bartlett’s Test. The value of the KMO test is 0.955, as Table 2 shows. Values above 0.7 are considered excellent;⁵⁵ thus, it was concluded that the sample is adequate. With a p<.05, Bartlett’s sphericity test established the data’s suitability for further analysis.

Table 2
KMO and Bartlett’s Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.955
Approximate χ^2	21930.629
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity	df 496
Significance	.000

Furthermore, the reliability and validity of the constructs were established. Table 3 shows that the Cronbach Alpha values are above 0.9, indicating excellent reliability of the constructs.⁵⁶ As per the suggested benchmark of CR>0.7 and AVE>0.5 for convergent validity,⁵⁷ we infer from Table 4 that both criteria were achieved. Discriminant validity is established as the cross-loading of a construct with other variables is weaker than the loading on its construct.⁵⁸

Table 3
Convergent and Discriminant Validity

	α	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR (H)	PWB	AB	PR	MH
PWB	.9350	.9290	.7220	.714	0.935	0.850			
AB	.9680	.9620	.6320	.714	0.989	-0.845***	0.795		
PR	.9480	.9470	.7490	.182	0.959	0.412***	-0.427***	0.865	
MH	.9200	.9280	.6960	.141	0.956	-0.308***	0.375***	-0.339***	0.834

Note.
AB=Abusive leadership, PWB=Psychological well-being, PR=Presenteeism, MH=Mental health

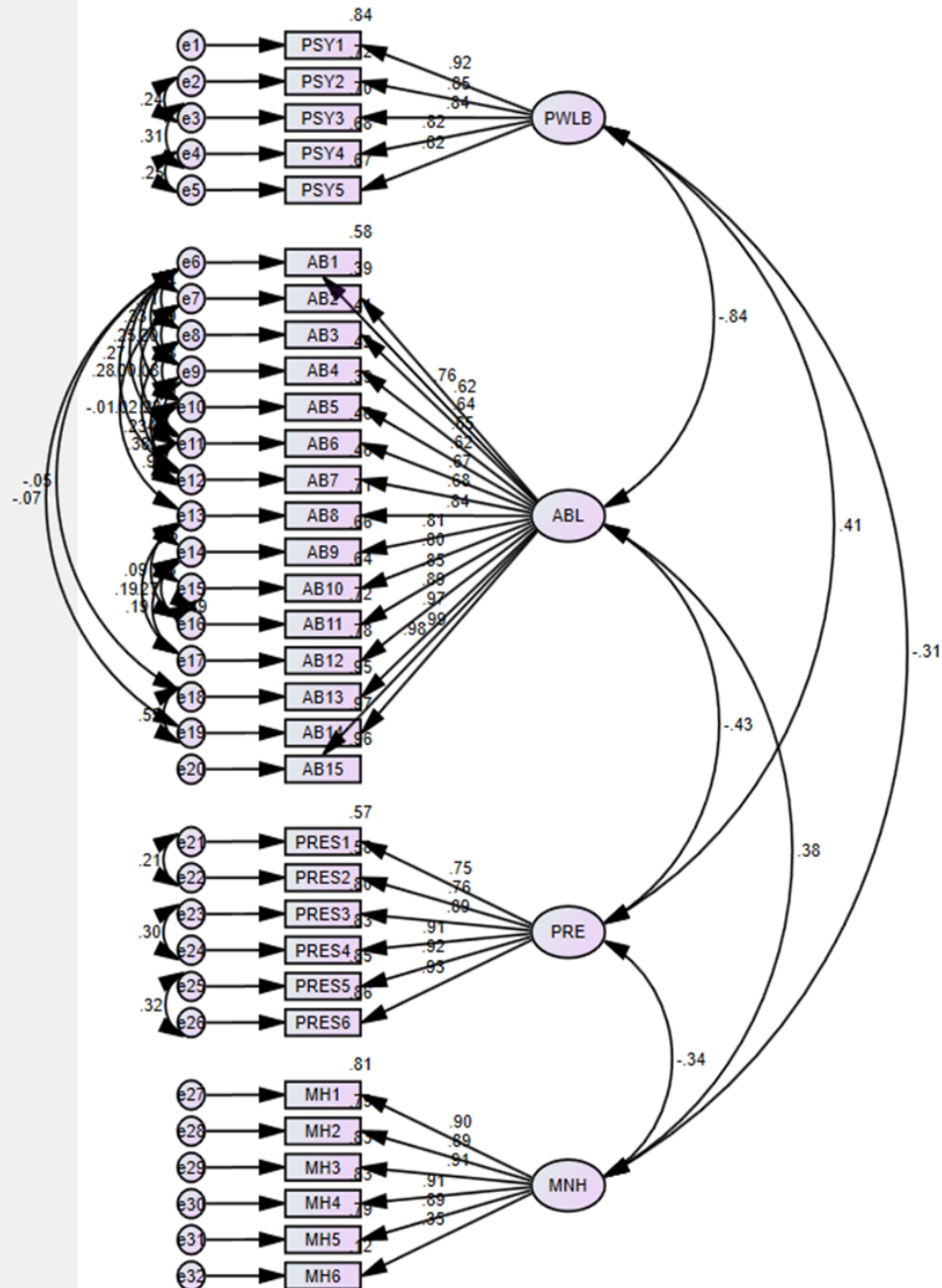
Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out, and the results in Table 4 confirm that the model proposed fits with the data.⁵⁹ The observed values for CMIN/df, TFI, CFI, IFI, and RMSEA were within the recommended levels.

Table 4
Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA Indicator	Baseline	Observed Value
CMIN/df	Less than 5.00	2.962
TFI	Greater or equal to 0.90	.956
CFI	Greater or equal to 0.90	.962
IFI	Greater or equal to 0.90	.962
RMSEA	Less than or equal to 0.08	.059

The measurement model is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Measurement Model



All factor loadings are greater than 0.4,⁶⁰ and there are no cross-loadings, as Table 5 shows.

Table 5
Rotated Component Matrix

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
AB1		.675		
AB2		.639		
AB3		.639		
AB4		.664		
AB5		.674		
AB6		.771		
AB7		.766		
AB8		.793		
AB9		.810		
AB10		.831		
AB11		.826		
AB12		.823		
AB13		.839		
AB14		.839		
AB15		.845		
PWB1	.699			
PWB2	.642			
PWB3	.682			
PWB4	.692			
PWB5	.689			
MH1				.897
MH2				.891
MH3				.900
MH4				.903
MH5				.884
MH6				
PR1			.765	
PR2			.797	
PR3			.892	
PR4			.893	
PR5			.890	
PR6			.898	

Note.
AB=Abusive leadership, PWB=Psychological well-being, PR=Presenteeism, MH=Mental health

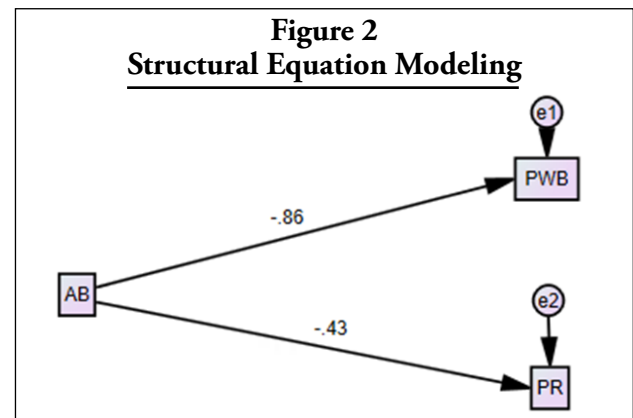
We adopted the widely-known technique, structural equation modeling (SEM), to test the hypothesis as it allows us to evaluate the structural linkages between the underlying and observed variables.⁶¹ The direct effect of AB on PWB and PR is shown in Table 7. Hypothesis 1 is supported as the analysis unveiled a significant negative association between AB and PWB ($p < .05$). A unitary increase in AB decreases PWB by 96.0%. Similarly, AB and PR have a significant relationship,

and hypothesis 2 is accepted. The association was positive, as increasing AB by a unit increases PR by 47.6%. Figure 3 displays this analysis.

Table 6
Structural Equation Modeling

Hypothesized Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p	Label
AB→PWB	-.960	.024	-40.216	***	par_1
AB→PR	.476	.042	11.435	***	par_2

Note.
AB=Abusive leadership, PWB=Psychological well-being, PR=Presenteeism, MH=Mental health

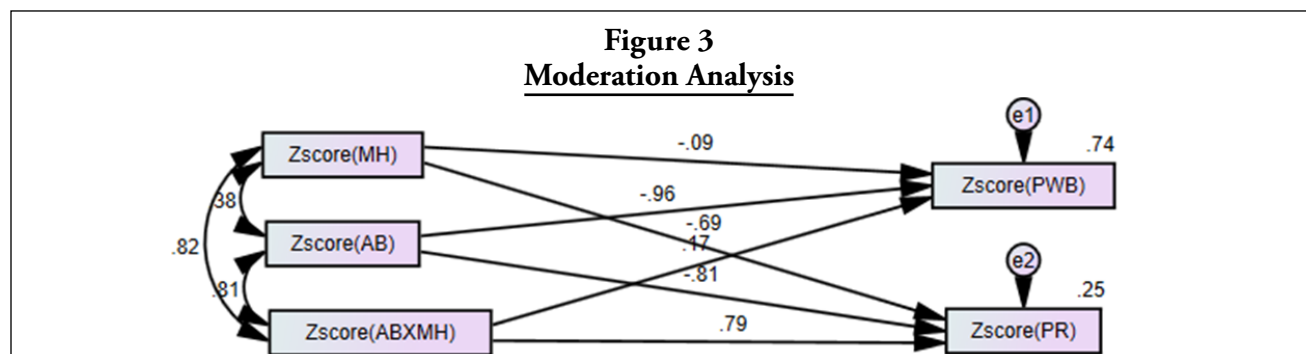


The moderating effect of MH was considered, and the results are displayed in Table 8. The moderation of MH between the relationship of AB and PWB is statistically significant, with $p < .05$. MH significantly moderates the relationship between AB and PR with $p < .05$, Table 7 and Figure 4 show.

Table 7
Moderation Analysis

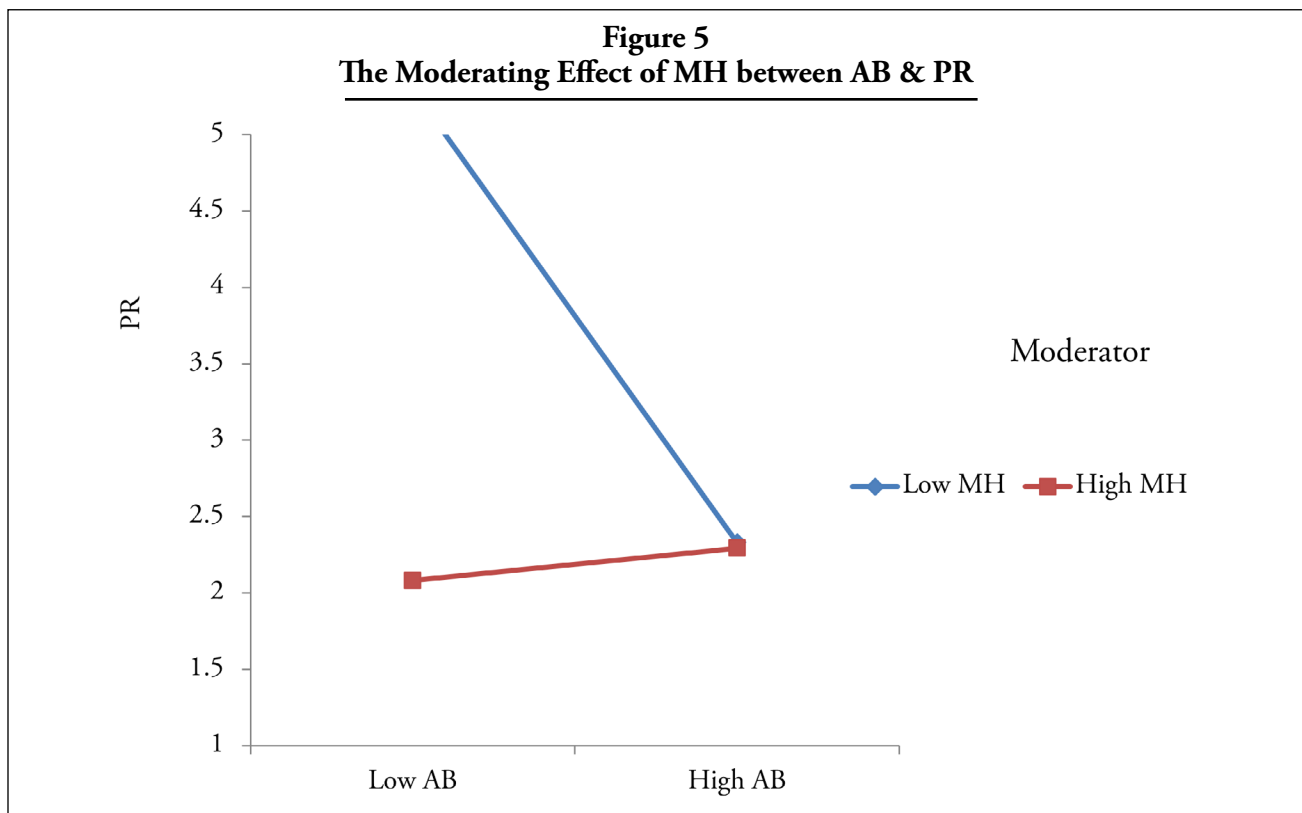
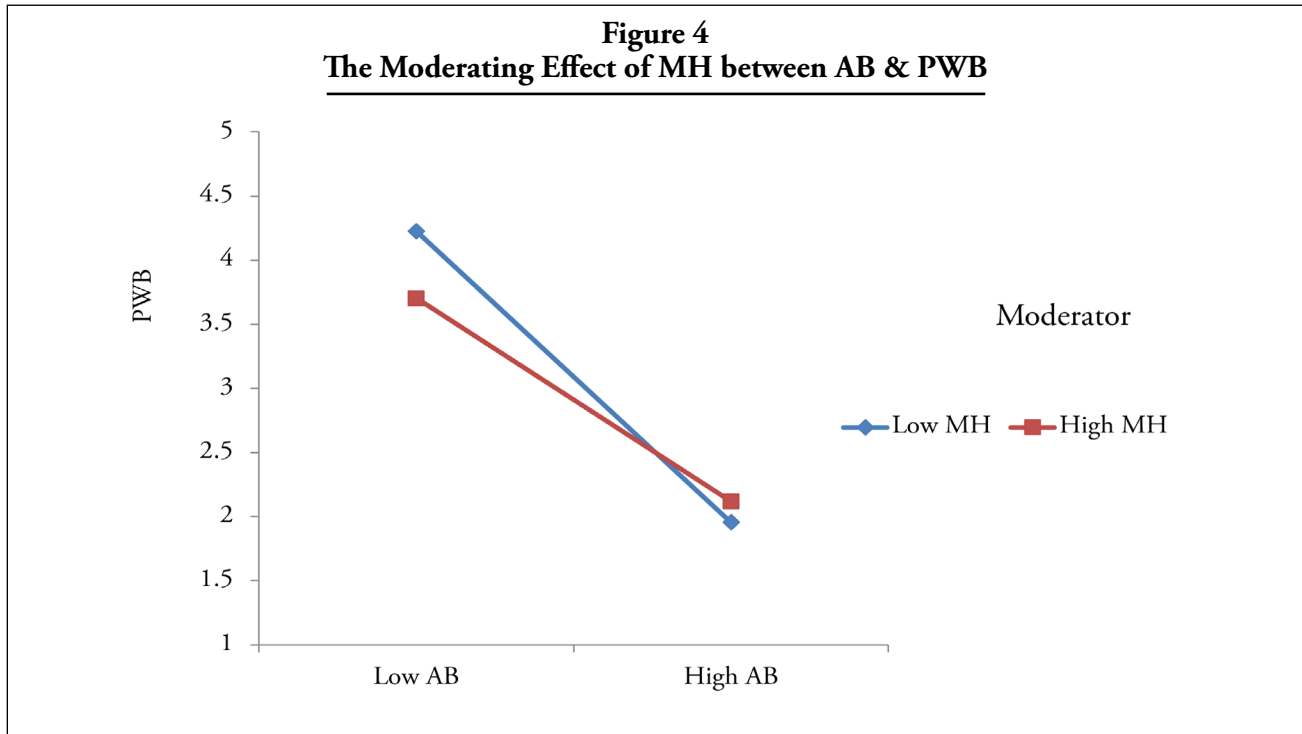
Parameter	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P value
ZABXMH→ZPWB	.171	.027	.330	.046
ZABZMH→ZPR	.794	.567	1.122	.006

Note.
AB=Abusive leadership, PWB=Psychological well-being, PR=Presenteeism, MH=Mental health



Moderation analysis is represented in Figures 5 and 6. It can be deduced that MH suppresses the negative

relationship between AB and PWB. Similarly, MH also dampens the positive relationship between AB and PR.



DISCUSSION

Contemporary researchers are concerned with the destructive effects of ineffective leadership in an organization. Abusive leadership, in this regard, engages in the sustained presentation of hostile behavior that harms and violates the ethical and social norms in an organization.⁶² Ronen et al.⁶³ believe that abusive leadership leads to lower autonomous motivation and enhances the intention of employees to quit their job, affecting their job satisfaction and innovative behavior. In this regard, this study analyzed the impact of abusive leadership (AB) on the psychological well-being (PWB) of employees and the impact of AB on presenteeism (PR) in Saudi SME's. In addition, in this study, we analyze the moderating role of mental health (MH) on the association of AB with PWB and AB with PR. Accordingly, 4 hypotheses were formulated, and the study's results accepted these hypotheses and identified the impact of these determinants.

H1 states that abusive leadership negatively impacts the psychological well-being of employees. The results support this hypothesis and identify this negative association between AB and PWB. Bullying bosses badly affect their employees' psychological state, damaging their mental health. Therefore, AB is the prime source of turnover intentions of employees in an organization.⁸ Khan et al.⁶⁴ suggest that AB impacts the psychopathy of employees' creativity and negatively impacts their socio-emotional behaviors. Abusive leadership has been identified as having various negative consequences on employees' psychological health, resulting in workplace deviance, high turnover rate, feelings of helplessness, job burnout, and low performance of employees.^{64,65} Accordingly, our results are validated by the existing evidence that AB negatively impacts the PSB of employees in a firm.

H2 brings forth a negative correlation between abusive leadership and presenteeism (PR). Thus, it is crucial to identify how the supervisor's behavior enhances employee PR. Gilbreath et al.⁵³ highlight that presenteeism is subjected to influence by the behavior of the supervisor. Leaders' negative and abusive behavior is more strongly correlated with presenteeism than leaders' positive and encouraging behavior. In the view of Kenny et al.⁶⁶, leaders who are not abusive are less related to the presenteeism of employees. Accordingly, the leader-member exchange is significantly related to presenteeism;⁶⁷ thus, it can be stated that leaders' negative or abusive behavior enhances the PR of employees and hinders their potential to serve the company.

H3 highlights that mental health (MH) significantly moderates the relationship between AB and PWB. Accordingly, it is crucial to identify that employees' mental well-being is necessary for an organization's effective performance. Abusive relationships enhance the negative aspects of the mental well-being of employees, which impacts psychological health by inducing stress, affective symptoms, and other health complaints.⁶⁸ According to Zhang et al.⁶⁹, subordinates who experience abusive behavior from their leaders encounter challenges of emotional support. Employees' reaction to abusive leadership generally resulted in a 'fight' (internal conflict) or 'flight' (turnover) of employees. He et al.⁷⁰ highlight that work procrastination, which is the negative mental capacity of employees, is significantly determined by abusive supervision of leaders and results in the great loss at both the individual and organizational levels. Therefore, it can be stated that abusive leadership affects mental health, which enhances employees' mental and psychological issues.

H4 brings forth that MH significantly moderates the association between AB and PR. Arjona-Fuentes et al.⁷¹ highlight that the mental issues aggravated by abusive leadership result in employees' presenteeism. The psychological aspects of mental health are a true manifestation of how the workplace environment gets to employees. Mental issues associated with the workplace increase presenteeism.⁴⁵ A positive correlation exists between work-related stress and presenteeism via the moderation of mental health.⁷² Accordingly, mental health-related issues enhanced by abusive relationships promote presenteeism and negatively impact employee creativity.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the impact of abusive leadership (AB) on the psychological well-being (PWB) of employees and the levels of presenteeism (PR). In addition, the moderating role of mental health (MH) on the relationship of AB with PWB and its moderating impact of association between AB and PR on employees of Saudi SME's. The data were collected and organized from employees of SME firms in Saudi Arabia. We collected 152 responses. In addition, reviewing past studies formulated 4 hypotheses that were supported by our data. Per our findings, AB negatively impacts the PWB of employees, and AB also significantly impacts the presenteeism of employees. Besides this, the results highlight that MH significantly moderates the association of AB with PWB and the linkage of AB with PR.

Theoretical and Practical Implications of this Work

This study has numerous theoretical and practical contributions. It extended the theoretical framework of studies that identify the mental health factors with which employees must deal. This study significantly extended the relevant literature by identifying abusive leadership as an important factor that impacts the psychological health of employees and causes loss of creativity and increases employee presenteeism. On practical grounds, this study offers important implications for managerial staff and practitioners of firms to enhance effective and cooperative leadership strategies that enhance employee mental well-being and performance. Policies to eliminate abusive leadership should be made by organizations in this regard.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Despite its significant contribution, this study has certain limitations. First, data were collected from one firm segment, ie, employees. Future studies can also fill this gap by collecting data from other segments. Moreover, this study limits the sector by analyzing selected variables' impact on SME's firms. Other studies also can examine industries related to other sectors. Last but not least, data from extended time frames or cross-national boundaries also can be collected by other researchers, which was unheeded in this study.

Human Subjects Approval Statement

The authors need to provide evidence that this study was reviewed and approved by an institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

The authors need to declare whether they have any conflicts of interested related to aspects of this study.

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