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Toxic traits at work: how perceived coworker dark triad behaviours deplete resources and fuel burnout

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how perceived coworker dark triad (DT) traits − narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy − contribute to employee burnout through the mediating role of job stress. Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory, the study conceptualises toxic peer behaviour as a chronic interpersonal stressor that depletes emotional and psychological resources, undermining employee well-being.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data were collected from 540 professionals employed in US professional service firms. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to establish construct validity, and structural equation modelling was used to test the hypothesised relationships. Indirect effects were assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

Findings – Perceived coworker Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively associated with job stress, which in turn predicted burnout. Direct relationships between these traits and burnout were nonsignificant, indicating full mediation through stress. These findings show that peer-driven toxicity contributes to burnout indirectly by sustaining resource depletion, as reflected in elevated stress.

Practical implications – Organisations should attend to peer-level social dynamics alongside workload and leadership factors. Monitoring toxic interpersonal patterns and intervening early may help protect shared psychological resources and sustain employee engagement and well-being.

Originality/value – This study reframes burnout as a socially transmitted, peer-driven process that develops through routine interactions with coworkers. By applying COR theory to peer-level DT exposure, this study extends burnout research beyond hierarchical explanations and highlights lateral social climates as a critical source of strain.

Keywords Dark triad, Stress, Burnout, Conservation of resources theory, Workplace well-being, Organisational behaviour

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Burnout is a pervasive and costly occupational syndrome characterised by chronic emotional exhaustion, detachment and diminished professional efficacy resulting from sustained workplace stress (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Beyond its individual toll, burnout poses substantial organisational and societal costs: poor working environments contribute to an estimated $1tn in annual global productivity losses and 12 billion lost workdays worldwide (World Health Organization, 2024). Although burnout is often attributed to excessive workloads or ineffective leadership, it also emerges from the everyday social environment in which employees work. Coworkers who exhibit Dark Triad (DT) traits − narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy − undermine trust and psychological safety through

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manipulation, exploitation and callousness (Başar, 2020; Paulhus and Williams, 2002). These behaviours constitute workplace toxicity: recurring interpersonal stressors that drain emotional resources, normalise incivility through repeated exposure and gradually embed strain into team functioning (Copková, 2021; Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Understanding how such peer-driven stressors contribute to burnout is therefore essential for explaining why resource depletion persists even in the absence of overtly poor leadership or excessive job demands.

Contemporary work arrangements further intensify these dynamics. Flattened hierarchies, hybrid collaboration and algorithmic coordination place coworkers at the centre of performance and well-being, increasing reliance on peers for information, feedback and support (Ganster and Rosen, 2013; Keegan and Meijerink, 2025). Constant connectivity and digital comparison amplify interpersonal pressure, while reduced structural buffers limit opportunities to disengage from or recover after toxic interactions (Sull *et al.*, 2022; Valtonen *et al.*, 2025). As lateral dependence increases, exposure to coworkers' interpersonal styles becomes more frequent and consequential, heightening the strain imposed by manipulative or callous peer behaviour (Ding *et al.*, 2025; Keegan and Meijerink, 2025).

Conservation of resources (COR) theory provides a parsimonious framework for explaining these processes. COR conceptualises stress as a response to threatened or actual loss of valued resources − such as emotional energy, time and psychological stability − and emphasises that repeated losses can trigger self-reinforcing depletion spirals (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Toxic coworker behaviour functions as a chronic social demand that requires sustained emotion regulation, vigilance and coping effort, accelerating resource loss and impeding recovery. Over time, these cumulative losses manifest as burnout, reflecting the downstream consequences of prolonged resource expenditure under persistent interpersonal strain (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Maslach *et al.*, 2001). From a COR perspective, peer-driven toxicity is especially damaging because it represents a persistent resource drain embedded in daily work interactions, limiting opportunities for recovery and increasing the likelihood of cumulative loss over time.

Despite extensive research on burnout and dark personality traits, important gaps remain. Burnout scholarship has largely emphasised hierarchical stressors, such as leadership behaviour and workload, while giving less attention to how peer interactions operate as ongoing social demands (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, DT research has focused primarily on leaders or high-power individuals, leaving coworker-level exposure underexamined despite the frequency and intensity of lateral interactions in contemporary work settings (Alturaysi, 2024; Başar, 2020). Consequently, little is known about how perceived dark traits among peers deplete employees' psychological resources through routine collaboration.

Addressing these gaps, the present study advances a lateral, COR-based pathway in which perceived coworker DT traits operate as daily interpersonal stressors that deplete resources, elevate job stress and ultimately contribute to burnout (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Conceptually, the study reframes burnout as a socially transmitted process that develops through repeated peer interactions rather than solely through workload or leadership failures (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993). In practice, it underscores the importance of peer-level dynamics for understanding and managing employee well-being in increasingly interdependent work systems.

Literature review

Dark triad and peer-level strain

The Dark Triad − narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy − comprises socially aversive personality traits marked by manipulation, entitlement and low empathy (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; Spain *et al.*, 2014). Although these traits share a common antagonistic core, they are conceptually distinct in their interpersonal expression (Furnham *et al.*, 2013).

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Narcissism is characterised by grandiosity, entitlement and sensitivity to ego threat; Machiavellianism reflects cynicism, strategic manipulation and instrumental use of others; and psychopathy involves impulsivity, callousness and a lack of remorse. Prior research shows that individuals' own Dark Triad traits can undermine workplace functioning, including reduced organisational citizenship behaviour (Al-Abrrow *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, however, employees are also affected by exposure to these traits in others, particularly when such traits shape daily interpersonal exchanges.

From a peer-level perspective, perceived Dark Triad traits operate as chronic social demands within the work environment. Coworkers perceived as narcissistic, Machiavellian or psychopathic tend to prioritise self-interest, disregard collective goals and engage in manipulative or exploitative behaviour, forcing colleagues to expend additional emotional and cognitive resources to manage interactions (Başar, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2019). These patterns align with definitions of workplace toxicity as recurring interpersonal undermining or hostility that erodes trust and psychological safety (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020; Tepper, 2007). Under COR theory, such conditions are especially harmful because they require sustained vigilance, emotion regulation and conflict management − forms of hidden emotional labour that accelerate resource depletion and limit recovery (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). As these resource losses accumulate, toxic peer climates can propagate strain through contagion and interpersonal conflict, reinforcing loss spirals over time (Copková, 2021).

A growing body of organisational research further supports conceptualising Dark Triad traits as socially perceived interpersonal cues, rather than solely as self-reported dispositions. Szabó *et al.* (2023), for example, demonstrate that observer ratings of Dark Triad traits capture work-relevant consequences that are only weakly correlated with self-reports. Self-assessments may under-detect interpersonal harm, whereas informant or observer ratings more accurately reflect experienced toxicity and its downstream effects (Jonason and McCain, 2012; Walker and MacCann, 2024). Accordingly, when research focuses on employee well-being, perceived dark traits in coworkers constitute the theoretically appropriate stimulus, as it is employees' experienced social reality that shapes stress appraisals, coping demands and resource-loss processes central to COR theory.

Conservation of resources theory

COR theory explains how individuals respond to social and psychological loss by emphasising the protection, accumulation and depletion of valued resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Resources include emotional energy, time and psychological stability, all of which are essential for effective functioning at work. Stress emerges when individuals perceive that these resources are threatened, lost or insufficiently replenished. Interpersonal ambiguity and tension are especially resource-depleting because they require sustained vigilance and emotion regulation, while digitalised work settings further intensify these demands through constant connectivity and social comparison (Ding *et al.*, 2025; Lambert *et al.*, 2005). When such pressures persist, COR theory predicts the emergence of loss spirals in which depleted resources reduce individuals' capacity to cope with subsequent demands, amplifying strain over time (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018).

From a COR perspective, adverse workplace conditions function as resource threats that initiate strain processes and downstream maladaptive outcomes. Empirical research supports this logic. For example, Abdullah and Al-Abrrow (2025) demonstrate that negative workplace perceptions − including organisational politics, abusive supervision and perceived overqualification − increase counterproductive work behaviour primarily through resource-depletion pathways involving job stress. Extending this reasoning to peer dynamics, exposure to manipulative, competitive or callous coworkers represents a persistent interpersonal demand that consumes emotional and cognitive

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resources. Accordingly, perceived Dark Triad traits in coworkers can be conceptualised as salient social stressors that undermine employees' capacity to protect and replenish resources, making job stress a central mechanism linking peer toxicity to burnout.

Classic burnout scholarship reinforces this COR-based account. Freudenberger (1974) described burnout as a gradual process of depletion under chronic strain, while Beehr and Newman (1978) and Maslach *et al.* (2001) emphasised exhaustion as a consequence of failed recovery. Similarly, Cordes and Dougherty (1993) identified sustained social demands as a key driver of emotional fatigue. Managing manipulative or hostile peers exemplifies this process: employees expend limited resources monitoring behaviour, regulating affect and preserving fragile relationships − interactions that would otherwise serve as sources of support and recovery. Over time, these repeated expenditures erode emotional reserves, increasing vulnerability to stress and ultimately culminating in burnout.

COR-based theoretical framework

Building on COR theory, this study conceptualises perceived coworker Dark Triad behaviours as chronic interpersonal stressors that threaten and deplete employees' emotional and psychological resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). COR theory emphasises that stress arises from persistent resource loss and constrained recovery rather than isolated demands. In peer-based work systems, exposure to manipulative, self-serving or callous coworkers requires sustained vigilance, emotion regulation and interpersonal monitoring, accelerating resource depletion over time. As resources are repeatedly expended without sufficient replenishment, employees become increasingly vulnerable to strain, positioning job stress as a proximal mechanism linking peer-level toxicity to burnout.

Although the Dark Triad traits share a socially aversive core, they differ in their interpersonal expressions. Machiavellianism involves strategic manipulation and deception, narcissism reflects entitlement and ego reinforcement and psychopathy is characterised by callousness and emotional detachment (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012). When enacted by coworkers, these behaviours impose distinct but overlapping social demands that undermine recovery and heighten vulnerability to stress. Figure 1 presents the proposed COR-based conceptual model.

Coworker dark triad traits and burnout

Burnout reflects a state of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy that develops in response to sustained stressors that overwhelm individuals' coping resources (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). From a COR perspective, burnout emerges when ongoing resource losses exceed individuals' capacity for recovery, resulting in cumulative depletion over time (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018).

Coworkers' Dark Triad traits can contribute to this process by functioning as persistent interpersonal stressors that erode emotional and psychological resources. For example, perceived coworker Machiavellianism and psychopathy have been linked to knowledge sabotage, which can spread strain and undermine collective functioning (Serenko and Choo, 2020). Machiavellian coworkers engage in strategic manipulation and self-interested behaviour, fostering uncertainty and mistrust that require sustained vigilance and coping effort. Narcissistic coworkers are entitled and attention-seeking, often generating interpersonal tension and conflict that consume emotional resources. Psychopathic coworkers expose employees to direct interpersonal threat through callousness, impulsivity and moral disengagement, increasing emotional strain and resource expenditure. Across contexts, exposure to Dark Triad traits has been associated with counterproductive behaviour, relational dysfunction and burnout-related symptoms (Copková, 2021; O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012).

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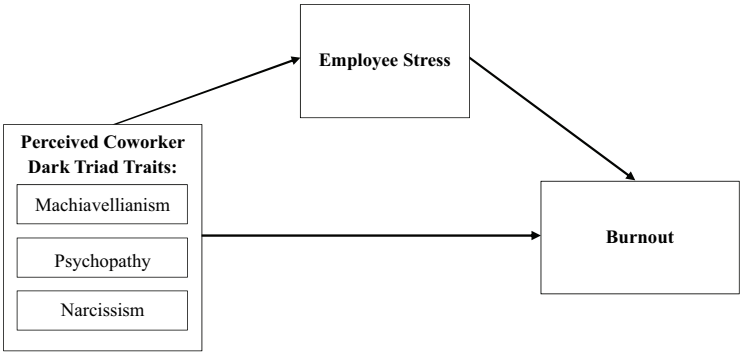


Figure 1. Conceptual model depicting hypothesised relationships among perceived coworker Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy), employee stress and burnout. Each Dark Triad dimension was hypothesised to exert both direct effects on burnout and indirect effects via stress. Control variables (gender, education, industry) were included in analyses but are omitted from the figure for clarity

Consistent with COR theory, repeated exposure to peer-driven interpersonal strain is expected to accelerate resource loss and increase vulnerability to burnout. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a. Perceived coworker Machiavellianism is positively associated with employee burnout.

H1b. Perceived coworker narcissism is positively associated with employee burnout.

H1c. Perceived coworker psychopathy is positively associated with employee burnout.

Coworker dark triad traits and employee job stress

Employee job stress refers to the psychological strain experienced in response to sustained interpersonal and task-related demands within the work environment (Beehr and Newman, 1978). From a COR perspective, stress arises when individuals perceive persistent threats to valued resources − such as emotional energy, time and psychological stability − or when resource replenishment is constrained (Hobfoll, 1989).

Perceived Dark Triad traits in coworkers can heighten job stress by functioning as ongoing interpersonal resource threats. Machiavellian coworkers introduce uncertainty and distrust through strategic manipulation, requiring sustained vigilance and monitoring. Narcissistic coworkers generate relational instability through entitlement, attention-seeking and conflict escalation, increasing emotional labour and resource expenditure. Psychopathic coworkers expose employees to emotionally threatening and norm-violating behaviour, intensifying strain through heightened alertness and defensive coping. Under COR theory, these repeated interpersonal demands consume emotional and cognitive resources, limit opportunities for recovery and elevate stress over time.

This focus is consistent with research showing that observer-based personality judgements capture socially meaningful behavioural reputations and demonstrate meaningful agreement with targets' interpersonal functioning, particularly for socially evaluative traits such as those reflected in the Dark Triad (Kim *et al.*, 2019; Letzring *et al.*, 2021). Because resource threat

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operates through workers' interpretations of their social environment, coworker perceptions represent a theoretically appropriate basis for understanding stress responses.

Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a. Perceived coworker Machiavellianism is positively associated with employee job stress.

H2b. Perceived coworker narcissism is positively associated with employee job stress.

H2c. Perceived coworker psychopathy is positively associated with employee job stress.

Employee job stress and burnout

Job stress is a well-established antecedent of burnout across occupational settings (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004). From a COR perspective, persistent job stress reflects ongoing resource loss that accelerates depletion, constrains recovery and increases vulnerability to exhaustion and disengagement over time (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). As emotional and psychological resources are repeatedly expended without sufficient replenishment, individuals are more likely to experience the core dimensions of burnout, including emotional exhaustion and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Accordingly, we propose:

H3. Employee job stress is positively associated with burnout.

The mediating role of employee job stress

From a COR perspective, employee job stress represents the primary mechanism through which perceived coworker Dark Triad traits contribute to burnout. COR theory posits that chronic exposure to resource-threatening conditions initiates loss processes that accumulate over time, reducing individuals' capacity to cope and recover (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). When coworkers exhibit manipulative, self-serving or callous behaviours, employees must expend sustained emotional and cognitive resources to manage interactions, increasing job stress as a proximal indicator of resource strain.

As these resource expenditures persist without adequate replenishment, stress intensifies and accelerates depletion, ultimately culminating in burnout. In this way, perceived coworker Dark Triad traits are not expected to directly cause burnout, but rather to do so indirectly through sustained job stress that reflects ongoing resource loss. Consistent with COR theory, job stress therefore serves as the central psychological pathway linking peer-level toxicity to burnout.

Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4a. Employee job stress mediates the relationship between perceived coworker Machiavellianism and burnout.

H4b. Employee job stress mediates the relationship between perceived coworker narcissism and burnout.

H4c. Employee job stress mediates the relationship between perceived coworker psychopathy and burnout.

Method

Participants, procedure and data collection

Data were collected via Qualtrics from 540 participants recruited through Prolific. All participants resided in the USA, held at least a bachelor's degree and were employed in

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professional service organisations, including accounting, finance and insurance, law and legal services and medical and healthcare services. All respondents passed Prolific's built-in attention and verification checks. Participation was voluntary, and compensation aligned with platform norms (approximately $2.50). After providing informed consent, participants completed a ten-minute survey with randomised item order and embedded attention checks. Reverse-coded items were recoded prior to analysis. The study received Institutional Review Board approval. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Perceived coworker dark triad traits. Perceptions of coworkers' Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy were measured using the Dirty Dozen Scale (Jonason and McCain, 2012; Jonason and Webster, 2010), adapted from self-referent wording to a coworker referent (Volmer *et al.*, 2016). Items such as *"My colleagues manipulate others to get their way"* were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with higher scores indicating higher perceived levels of the corresponding trait. Internal consistency was high for Machiavellianism ($\alpha = 0.91$), narcissism ($\alpha = 0.83$) and psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.90$). Full item wording and factor loadings are provided in Appendix 1.

The Dirty Dozen was selected for its brevity and established psychometric performance, making it well-suited for multi-construct organisational surveys and informant-report contexts in which respondent burden is a concern (Jonason and Webster, 2010). Although longer measures such as the Short Dark Triad (SD3) provide greater facet-level differentiation, prior research indicates that the Dirty Dozen demonstrates acceptable reliability and convergent validity with longer instruments and is appropriate for capturing overall trait tendencies (Jonason and Webster, 2010; Jones and Paulhus, 2014). This consideration is particularly relevant for perceptual ratings of coworker behaviour. In the present study, the subscales demonstrated strong internal consistency and convergent validity (see Table 2 and Appendix 2).

Stress. Job stress was measured using the Job Stress Scale (Lambert *et al.*, 2005), which includes five items assessing emotional strain and frustration (e.g. *"A lot of the time my job makes me feel very frustrated or angry"*). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.84$). One item was reverse-coded. Items were summed (or averaged), with higher scores indicating greater perceived job stress.

Burnout. Burnout was measured using the work-related subscale of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen *et al.*, 2005), which captures emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from sustained work demands (e.g. *"Is your work emotionally exhausting?"*). Participants rated seven items on a five-point scale (1 = never or almost never, 5 = always; $\alpha = 0.86$). One item was reverse-coded.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Machiavellianism	2.30	0.99	–				
2. Psychopathy	2.23	1.05	0.78**	–			
3. Narcissism	3.00	1.10	0.58**	0.59**	–		
4. Stress	2.63	1.03	0.49**	0.47**	0.28**	–	
5. Burnout	2.75	0.97	0.31**	0.31**	0.18**	0.57**	–

Note(s): $N = 540$. Means represent averaged composite scores. Correlations are Pearson coefficients.
**$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

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Table 2. Measurement properties, structural paths and model fit

Construct	α	CR	AVE
Panel A: Measurement model summary			
Machiavellianism	0.91	0.92	0.74
Narcissism	0.83	0.85	0.59
Psychopathy	0.90	0.91	0.72
Stress	0.84	0.86	0.56
Burnout	0.86	0.88	0.53

Path	Estimate (b)	SE	*z*	*p*	Std. β
Panel B: Structural model results (with controls)					
Stress ← Machiavellianism	0.356	0.088	4.06	< 0.001	0.381
Stress ← narcissism	−0.104	0.093	−1.12	0.262	−0.081
Stress ← psychopathy	0.269	0.101	2.67	0.008	0.274
Stress ← gender	0.023	0.068	0.34	0.733	0.013
Stress ← education	−0.002	0.036	−0.05	0.963	−0.002
Stress ← industry	0.123	0.036	3.47	0.001	0.143
Burnout ← stress	0.622	0.051	12.22	< 0.001	0.868
Burnout ← Machiavellianism	−0.044	0.060	−0.73	0.467	−0.066
Burnout ← narcissism	0.001	0.050	0.03	0.979	0.001
Burnout ← psychopathy	0.014	0.060	0.24	0.812	0.020
Burnout ← gender	0.005	0.041	0.13	0.894	0.004
Burnout ← education	−0.005	0.022	−0.22	0.827	−0.007
Burnout ← industry	0.026	0.020	1.29	0.198	0.043

Effect	Estimate	SE	*z*	*p*	Std. β
Panel C: Indirect and total effects					
Mach → stress → burnout	0.222	0.060	3.70	< 0.001	0.331
Narc → stress → burnout	−0.065	0.058	−1.11	0.265	−0.071
Psych → stress → burnout	0.167	0.062	2.68	0.007	0.238
Total Machiavellianism effect	0.178	0.069	2.57	0.010	0.265
Total narcissism effect	−0.064	0.069	−0.92	0.360	−0.069
Total psychopathy effect	0.182	0.074	2.45	0.014	0.258

χ^2(df)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	R^2 stress	R^2 burnout
Panel D. Model fit indices						
713.45 (308)	0.95	0.94	0.049	0.039	0.36	0.72

Note(s): Standardised estimates reported. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Gender, education and industry were included as control variables. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrapped standard errors. Full item wording and standardised factor loadings are provided in Appendix 1

Data screening and analytic strategy

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 31 and R 4.4.1 with the lavaan package. Data were first screened for missingness, outliers and distributional properties (skewness and kurtosis). Missing data were minimal (<2%) and were handled using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation. Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) and zero-order correlations were then computed for all study variables.

To assess the potential impact of common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted by entering all substantive measurement items into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring. The first factor accounted for 37.19% of the

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total variance, which is below the commonly cited 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to fully account for the observed relationships.

Next, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate a five-factor measurement model distinguishing Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, job stress and burnout. This model was compared with alternative models that collapsed the Dark Triad dimensions and/or combined constructs. Consistent with established recommendations, values of CFI and TLI ≥ 0.90, RMSEA ≤ 0.08 and SRMR ≤ 0.08 were interpreted as indicating acceptable model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The five-factor model demonstrated good fit to the data, $\chi^2(242) = 605.21$, CFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.053, SRMR = 0.036. All indicators loaded significantly on their intended factors, with standardised loadings exceeding recommended thresholds. Scaled chi-square difference tests confirmed that the five-factor model fit significantly better than a three-factor model (CFI = 0.873, RMSEA = 0.086) and a one-factor model (CFI = 0.630, RMSEA = 0.146; $\Delta\chi^2$, $p < 0.001$).

Finally, the hypothesised structural model was tested using structural equation modelling (SEM) in lavaan with robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) and FIML to handle missing data. Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy were modelled as distinct latent predictors of job stress, which in turn predicted burnout. Direct paths from each Dark Triad dimension to burnout were included to assess partial versus full mediation. Gender, education and industry were included as control variables predicting both job stress and burnout. Indirect effects were evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Standardised estimates and R^2 values are reported for all endogenous variables.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all study variables. All scales demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.83 to 0.91. Perceived coworker Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy were moderately to strongly intercorrelated, consistent with prior Dark Triad research while remaining empirically distinct.

At the bivariate level, all Dark Triad traits were positively associated with job stress and burnout. Job stress was strongly correlated with burnout, indicating substantial shared variance and supporting its role as a proximal psychological mechanism.

Structural model and hypothesis tests

The hypothesised structural model demonstrated good fit to the data, $\chi^2(308) = 713.45$, CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.942, RMSEA = 0.049, SRMR = 0.039. Gender, education and industry were included as control variables in the analyses predicting both job stress and burnout. Full results are presented in Table 3.

Consistent with expectations, perceived coworker Machiavellianism was positively related to job stress ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), as was psychopathy ($\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.008$). Perceived coworker narcissism was not significantly associated with job stress ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = 0.262$). Among the control variables, industry was positively associated with job stress ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.001$), whereas gender and education were not.

Job stress was strongly associated with burnout ($\beta = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$). The direct paths from Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy to burnout were nonsignificant, indicating that the effects of coworker Dark Triad traits on burnout operated primarily through job stress. Gender, education and industry did not exhibit significant direct effects on burnout. The model explained 36% of the variance in job stress and 72% of the variance in burnout. Robustness checks, including all control variable paths, are reported in Appendix 3.

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Table 3. Measurement properties and structural equation modelling results

Construct / path	Item / path	Std. loading / β	SE	z	p
Machiavellianism	DTM1	0.90	–	–	< 0.001
	DTM2	0.87	0.03	29.61	< 0.001
	DTM3	0.88	0.03	32.08	< 0.001
	DTM4	0.77	0.04	23.63	< 0.001
α = 0.91; CR = 0.91; AVE = 0.71					
Narcissism	DTN1	0.67	–	–	< 0.001
	DTN2	0.80	0.09	13.45	< 0.001
	DTN3	0.64	0.06	15.29	< 0.001
	DTN4	0.85	0.09	14.08	< 0.001
α = 0.83; CR = 0.84; AVE = 0.57					
Psychopathy	DTP1	0.89	–	–	< 0.001
	DTP2	0.87	0.04	24.98	< 0.001
	DTP3	0.87	0.04	26.51	< 0.001
	DTP4	0.71	0.04	18.54	< 0.001
α = 0.90; CR = 0.90; AVE = 0.70					
Stress	St1	0.83	–	–	< 0.001
	St2	0.66	0.05	15.95	< 0.001
	St3	0.77	0.05	20.07	< 0.001
	St4R	0.53	0.05	10.42	< 0.001
	St5	0.78	0.04	23.79	< 0.001
α = 0.84; CR = 0.85; AVE = 0.54					
Burnout	Bu1	0.66	–	–	< 0.001
	Bu2	0.72	0.07	16.65	< 0.001
	Bu3	0.73	0.08	14.49	< 0.001
	Bu4R	0.47	0.08	8.02	< 0.001
	Bu5	0.71	0.09	13.52	< 0.001
	Bu6	0.71	0.09	12.17	< 0.001
	Bu7	0.80	0.08	15.68	< 0.001
α = 0.86; CR = 0.87; AVE = 0.51					
Structural paths	Mach → stress	0.38	0.09	4.06	< 0.001
	Narc → stress	−0.08	0.09	−1.12	0.262
	Psych → stress	0.27	0.10	2.67	0.008
	Stress → burnout	0.87	0.05	12.22	< 0.001
	Mach → burnout	−0.07	0.06	−0.73	0.467
	Narc → burnout	0.00	0.05	0.03	0.979
	Psych → burnout	0.02	0.06	0.24	0.812
Indirect effects	Mach → stress → burnout	0.33	0.06	3.70	< 0.001
	Narc → stress → burnout	−0.07	0.06	−1.11	0.265
	Psych → stress → burnout	0.24	0.06	2.68	0.007
Controls	Gender → stress	0.01	0.07	0.34	0.733
	Education → stress	−0.00	0.04	−0.05	0.963
	Industry → stress	0.14	0.04	3.47	0.001
	Gender → burnout	0.00	0.04	0.13	0.894
	Education → burnout	−0.01	0.02	−0.22	0.827
	Industry → burnout	0.04	0.02	1.29	0.198

Note(s): Model fit was acceptable [$\chi^2(308) = 713.45$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.049, SRMR = 0.039]. Standardised estimates are reported. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrapped standard errors. The model explained 36% of the variance in stress and 72% of the variance in burnout. Full item wording is provided in Appendix 1

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Mediation analyses

Bootstrapped mediation analyses supported significant indirect associations of Machiavellianism and psychopathy with burnout via job stress. The indirect effect association with Machiavellianism was significant ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$), as was the indirect association with psychopathy ($\beta = 0.24$, $p = 0.007$). The indirect association with narcissism was not significant ($\beta = -0.07$, $p = 0.265$).

Total effects showed the same pattern. Machiavellianism ($\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.010$) and psychopathy ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.014$) were significantly associated with burnout, whereas narcissism was not. The combination of nonsignificant direct effects and significant indirect effects indicates full mediation for Machiavellianism and psychopathy.

Summary of results

Overall, the results indicate that not all DT traits exert equivalent effects on employee well-being. Perceived coworker Machiavellianism and psychopathy were indirectly associated with burnout through elevated job stress, whereas perceived coworker narcissism showed no meaningful association with either job stress or burnout. Taken together, these findings identify job stress as the central pathway through which specific forms of perceived coworker toxicity translate into burnout.

Discussion

Overview of findings

The present study demonstrates that perceived coworker Machiavellianism and psychopathy contribute to burnout indirectly through elevated stress, whereas coworker narcissism shows no meaningful association with either stress or burnout. One explanation is that narcissistic behaviour, while often self-focused and attention-seeking, may be less consistently experienced as a resource threat than the manipulation and callousness characteristic of Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Narcissistic coworkers may at times seek visibility, recognition or social approval, which can create interpersonal tension but does not necessarily impose the sustained vigilance, distrust or emotional threat that, under COR theory, accelerates resource depletion. As a result, narcissism may represent a more socially disruptive but less chronically draining interpersonal style, limiting its impact on employees' stress and burnout. Stress emerged as a strong proximal predictor of burnout and fully mediated the effects of Machiavellianism and psychopathy, indicating that DT traits do not exert equivalent consequences for employee well-being. Rather than operating as direct mechanisms of exhaustion, these forms of peer-driven toxicity function primarily through strain-based pathways.

The nonsignificant direct effects of all three DT dimensions on burnout further suggest that toxic coworker behaviour undermines well-being indirectly through sustained emotional and cognitive strain. Burnout, therefore, reflects not only leadership behaviour or workload intensity, but also the interpersonal climates coworkers create through routine interactions. This pattern highlights coworker-driven strain as a lateral pathway to burnout, extending traditional models that emphasise hierarchical authority or task demands.

Theoretical contributions

This study extends COR theory by identifying coworker toxicity as a chronic interpersonal resource threat that contributes to burnout through sustained stress. COR theory proposes that individuals strive to protect emotional and social resources and experience strain when these resources are threatened or depleted (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Whereas prior applications have focused primarily on supervisory behaviour or structural job demands, the present findings demonstrate that coworkers themselves can function as persistent social stressors. Routine exposure to manipulative, competitive or callous peer

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behaviour consumes emotional energy, constrains recovery and embeds resource loss within everyday work interactions, extending COR theory beyond episodic stressors and formal role relationships.

Consistent with COR-based accounts of strain, perceived coworker DT traits were associated with higher job stress, which in turn predicted burnout. The nonsignificant direct effects of Dark Triad perceptions on burnout, combined with significant indirect effects through stress, indicate that burnout reflects cumulative resource depletion rather than an immediate reaction to peer behaviour. This pattern aligns with prior evidence that adverse workplace perceptions operate through strain-based pathways (Abdullah and Al-Abrrow, 2025). The findings therefore clarify the temporal mechanism through which interpersonal toxicity translates into long-term well-being outcomes.

These results also extend burnout research by shifting attention from predominantly vertical sources of strain, such as leadership behaviour and workload, to lateral social dynamics embedded in everyday collaboration. In interdependent work systems, repeated exposure to toxic peer behaviour requires sustained vigilance, emotion regulation and conflict management, accelerating depletion even when formal job demands are moderate.

This study further contributes to DT research by emphasising the role of perceived coworker traits rather than self-reported dispositions. Because resource threat operates through individuals' interpretations of their social environment, observer-based judgements represent the theoretically relevant mechanism linking interpersonal context to stress. An additional strength of the present design is the use of observer-based personality assessments, which capture socially consequential behaviour as it is experienced by others. Research on personality judgement shows that informant reports provide meaningful and behaviourally relevant information that is not always accessible through self-perception, particularly for interpersonal and evaluative traits (Letzring *et al.*, 2021). Meta-analytic evidence also indicates substantial agreement between self- and other-reports across personality domains, supporting the general accuracy and validity of observer ratings (Kim *et al.*, 2019). Focusing on perceived coworker toxicity, therefore, strengthens the COR-based explanation by capturing the social reputational signals through which interpersonal environments translate into resource threat and strain.

Together, these contributions advance theory by demonstrating that resource loss can accumulate laterally through peer interactions and by positioning coworker toxicity as a critical, yet often overlooked, driver of burnout in algorithmically structured and socially fragmented work environments.

Reframing the burnout literature

Burnout scholarship has traditionally emphasised leadership behaviour, workload and structural design. However, as hierarchies flatten and coordination intensifies, daily interactions with coworkers increasingly influence employees' emotional states. The present study demonstrates that peer dynamics can reproduce the same depletion patterns typically attributed to abusive supervision or excessive job demands. This reframing challenges dominant burnout models that implicitly assume strain flows downward from authority or upward from workload, showing instead that burnout can emerge laterally through repeated peer interactions.

Recent research reinforces this perspective. For example, Fuad *et al.* (2025) show that agile leadership can heighten burnout by intensifying workload, illustrating how even well-intentioned systems create new social pressures. Similarly, toxic peer environments impose hidden emotional labour, as employees regulate affect, manage impressions and avoid conflict to preserve harmony. These continuous, often invisible efforts deplete

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psychological resources even when formal demands are moderate. Such environments may also foster counterproductive behaviours, including knowledge sabotage, further undermining productivity and amplifying stress (Serenko and Choo, 2020). Recognising this lateral transmission of strain reframes burnout as a socially contagious condition that develops through everyday collaboration.

Implications for practice

Managing employee well-being requires addressing lateral toxicity alongside workload and leadership factors. Organisations should integrate interpersonal risk checks into hiring and promotion processes, embed civility and feedback training into development programmes and cultivate recovery-oriented, psychologically safe team climates. Routine climate and well-being assessments can help identify early warning signs of toxic peer dynamics, enabling leaders to protect the shared emotional resources that sustain engagement, trust and performance.

Organisations can operationalise peer-level risk management through brief, behaviourally anchored monitoring tools embedded in routine climate or pulse surveys. For example, short checklists assessing observable behaviours − such as manipulation, chronic credit-taking or disregard for others' input − can be administered periodically to identify emerging toxic patterns without relying on personality labelling. Aggregated team-level indicators can flag units where interpersonal strain is likely to deplete shared resources and warrant early intervention.

Organisations may also implement targeted civility and feedback training focused on lateral interactions rather than supervisory control. Such programmes can emphasise norm-setting, boundary management and constructive response strategies for managing manipulative or callous peer behaviour. Effectiveness can be evaluated using pre- and post-intervention assessments of stress, burnout and perceived peer support, alongside reductions in reported toxic behaviours. Framing these initiatives as resource-protection and recovery mechanisms, rather than disciplinary tools, may increase buy-in and reinforce shared responsibility for sustaining healthy team climates.

Overall, these implications highlight that burnout can arise from daily peer interactions that erode emotional resources. Recognising lateral strain underscores the need for organisational systems that monitor peer relationships, foster supportive climates and reduce the hidden costs of toxic personalities (Alturaysi, 2024; Liu *et al.*, 2025). Viewing burnout as socially transmitted reframes well-being as a collective responsibility embedded in team relationships.

Limitations and future research

Although the sample included respondents from multiple sectors, medical and financial services were somewhat overrepresented. As a result, the findings may be most directly applicable to professional service contexts characterised by high interpersonal demands and frequent peer interaction. Future research could extend this work to additional occupational settings to examine the generalisability of peer-driven resource depletion across different work environments.

The cross-sectional design reflects a common approach in organisational stress research but limits strong causal inference. Longitudinal or multilevel designs would provide valuable insight into how exposure to coworker toxicity accumulates and unfolds over time. Experience-sampling or diary methods may be particularly useful for capturing day-to-day peer interactions, recovery processes and short-term fluctuations in stress and resource availability.

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The study relied on self-report measures, which are widely used and appropriate when examining perceptual experiences such as stress, burnout and exposure to interpersonal behaviour. Because the theoretical model focuses on employees' perceptions of coworkers' conduct as a psychological stressor, self-reports provide meaningful insight into the subjective process of resource loss. Future research could complement these measures with peer, supervisor or multi-source assessments to further strengthen validity and distinguish perceived from externally observed behaviour. Multilevel designs may also examine whether team norms, leadership climates or structural conditions buffer or amplify peer-driven strain within work units.

Finally, prior research suggests that certain resources may mitigate the negative effects of DT traits (Al-Abrrow *et al.*, 2020). Future studies should examine recovery-oriented moderators such as team psychological safety, moral climate or structured peer accountability practices that may interrupt resource loss spirals initiated by toxic coworkers. Researchers might also explore whether specific combinations of coworker DT traits produce additive or interactive effects on stress and burnout, particularly in highly interdependent teams.

Conclusion

Burnout reflects not only excessive demands or poor leadership but also the interpersonal climates sustained by coworkers. This study demonstrates that perceived coworker Machiavellianism and psychopathy operate as chronic social stressors that deplete shared psychological resources, elevating stress that culminates in burnout. By showing that job stress fully mediates the relationship between peer-level DT traits and burnout, the findings clarify how toxic coworker dynamics translate into diminished well-being. Positioning burnout as a peer-driven, socially transmitted process underscores the need for organisational scholarship to move beyond purely hierarchical explanations and attend more closely to the relational dynamics through which strain accumulates and spreads in interdependent work systems.

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Appendix 1. Measurement items and standardised factor loadings

Table A1. Measurement items and CFA loadings

Construct	Item	Item wording	Std. loading
Machiavellianism	DTM1	My coworkers manipulate others to get their way	0.90
	DTM2	My coworkers exploit others for their own benefit	0.87
	DTM3	My coworkers use flattery to get what they want	0.88
	DTM4	My coworkers are willing to deceive others to achieve their goals	0.77
Narcissism	DTN1	My coworkers expect special favors from others	0.67
	DTN2	My coworkers seek admiration from others	0.80
	DTN3	My coworkers insist on getting the respect they feel they deserve	0.64
	DTN4	My coworkers think they are more important than others	0.85
Psychopathy	DTP1	My coworkers lack remorse when they hurt others	0.89
	DTP2	My coworkers are unconcerned with the morality of their actions	0.87
	DTP3	My coworkers tend to be callous or insensitive	0.86
	DTP4	My coworkers act impulsively without considering consequences	0.71
Job stress	St1	A lot of the time my job makes me feel very frustrated or angry	0.83
	St2	I feel a great deal of stress because of my job	0.66
	St3	My job is extremely stressful	0.77
	St4R	I feel relaxed at work. *(reverse-coded)*	0.53
	St5	I feel emotionally drained by my work	0.78
Burnout	Bu1	Is your work emotionally exhausting?	0.66
	Bu2	Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?	0.72
	Bu3	Does your work frustrate you?	0.73
	Bu4R	Do you feel energized by your work? *(reverse-coded)*	0.47
	Bu5	Do you feel burned out because of your work?	0.71
	Bu6	Does your work make you feel emotionally exhausted?	0.71
	Bu7	Do you feel tired of your work?	0.80

Note(s): Standardised loadings are reported. All loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Reverse-coded items are marked with "R"

Appendix 2. Reliability and convergent validity statistics

Table A2. Reliability and validity evidence

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Machiavellianism	0.91	0.93	0.76
Narcissism	0.83	0.88	0.65
Psychopathy	0.90	0.92	0.74
Job stress	0.84	0.89	0.63
Burnout	0.86	0.91	0.61

Note(s): CR values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, and AVE values exceed 0.50, supporting convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981)

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Appendix 3. Structural model with controls (robustness analysis)

Table A3. Structural paths including control variables

Path	Std. β	p
Machiavellianism → stress	0.38	< 0.001
Narcissism → stress	−0.08	0.262
Psychopathy → stress	0.27	0.008
Stress → burnout	0.87	<0.001
Machiavellianism → burnout	−0.07	0.467
Narcissism → burnout	0.00	0.979
Psychopathy → burnout	0.02	0.812
Gender → stress	0.01	0.733
Education → stress	−0.00	0.963
Industry → stress	0.14	0.001
Gender → burnout	0.00	0.894
Education → burnout	−0.01	0.827
Industry → burnout	0.04	0.198

Note(s): Standardised coefficients are reported. Gender, education level and industry were included as control variables predicting both stress and burnout. Inclusion of controls did not alter the significance or substantive interpretation of the hypothesised relationships. Stress remained the primary mechanism linking perceived coworker Machiavellianism and psychopathy to burnout

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