

The Effect of *Toxic Leadership* on *Turnover Intention*; Study on Mediation of Work Environment and *Cognitive Distress* at SMA Islam Samarinda

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Abstract:

Leadership behavior plays a crucial role in creating a healthy and sustainable work environment. However, the emergence of a destructive leadership style (toxic leadership) can cause psychological stress, discomfort, and even turnover intention among employees. This study aims to analyze the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention among teachers and educational staff at Samarinda Islamic High School, as well as to examine the mediating role of the work environment and cognitive distress. This study employed a quantitative approach, collecting data through questionnaires. The analytical model used was Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Based on theoretical studies and previous research, toxic leadership is suspected to have a positive effect on turnover intention, both directly and indirectly, through a non-conducive work environment and cognitive distress experienced by employees. This study is expected to provide empirical contributions regarding the psychological and environmental factors influencing turnover intention in the education sector, as well as offer input for school administrators in developing healthy and supportive leadership patterns.

Keyword: Toxic Leadership, Turnover Intention, Work Environment, Cognitive Distress.

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INTRODUCTION

Human resources are strategic assets in organizations, including educational institutions, because the quality of organizational performance is highly determined by the quality of individuals within them. However, in practice, various organizations continue to face the problem of turnover intention, which refers to an individual's tendency to voluntarily leave the organization. Turnover intention is a crucial issue because it not only affects organizational stability but also causes financial losses, decreased performance, and disruptions to the achievement of organizational goals.

A number of studies show that leadership is one of the main factors influencing the emergence of turnover intention. In recent decades, researchers' attention has increasingly focused on destructive forms of leadership, such as toxic leadership, which are characterized by authoritarian, manipulative, and demeaning behavior, as well as a lack of emotional support toward subordinates. Toxic leadership has been shown to correlate with various negative consequences for employees, including increased work stress, psychological distress, and intentions to leave the organization. Previous meta-analyses and empirical studies have consistently shown that poor or destructive leadership is positively associated with employee turnover intention and withdrawal behavior.

In addition to having a direct impact on turnover intention, toxic leadership also contributes to creating an unconducive work environment. A work environment marked by an unsafe psychological climate, lack of social support, and high interpersonal conflict can worsen employees' work experiences. Previous research has demonstrated that destructive leadership fosters the formation of a toxic work environment, which ultimately increases psychological distress and decreases employees' attachment to the organization. Thus, the work environment is seen as an important mechanism explaining how leadership behavior influences employee exit intentions.

On the other hand, toxic leadership is also closely related to cognitive distress—a condition of psychological strain that includes stress, mental fatigue, concentration disorders, and emotional exhaustion. Various empirical studies and meta-analyses have shown that exposure to abusive or destructive leadership behavior increases employees' psychological distress, which, in turn, encourages the emergence of withdrawal cognitions and turnover intentions. Cognitive distress serves as one of the main psychological pathways explaining employees' internal processes in responding to negative work experiences.

Although the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention has been widely examined, findings from previous studies are not always consistent. Some have found that the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention is not always direct but instead operates through mediating variables such as work stress, work environment conditions, and psychological distress. This highlights the importance of examining mediation variables to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanism through which toxic leadership affects turnover intention.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the critical role of teachers and educational staff in determining the quality of education. High turnover intention among educators can disrupt the continuity of the learning process, reduce the quality of interactions with students, and increase the operational burden on schools to recruit and train new personnel. In the context of Samarinda Islamic High School, understanding the factors that influence turnover intention is essential to maintaining educational stability and quality. Moreover, Islamic-based schools have unique characteristics in terms of organizational culture and value systems, which may moderate the relationship between leadership and employee outcomes. Without a deeper understanding of the mechanisms linking toxic leadership to turnover intention, efforts to improve teacher welfare and retention may be misdirected and ineffective.

Within educational institutions, particularly at the high school level, studies on toxic leadership remain relatively limited, especially those integrating the role of the work environment and cognitive distress as mediating variables. Teachers and educational staff often face high work demands, emotional pressures, and heavy moral responsibilities, making them especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of unhealthy leadership. Therefore, this study fills an important research gap by empirically examining the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention through the mediating effects of the work environment and cognitive distress.

Based on this discussion, the study aims to analyze the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention and to examine the mediating role of the work environment and cognitive distress at Samarinda Islamic High School. The results are expected to make theoretical contributions to the development of destructive leadership literature and practical contributions for educational institution managers in promoting healthier leadership and work environments to reduce turnover intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is a form of destructive leadership characterized by leadership behavior that is detrimental to subordinates and the organization as a whole. (Schmidt, 2008) defines toxic leadership as a pattern of behavior of leaders that are degrading, manipulative, selfish, and unethical, which systematically creates a negative impact on psychological well-being and employee performance (A, 2023). Toxic leaders tend to prioritize personal interests over the interests of the organization and the well-being of their subordinates. (Tepper, 2007) explained that destructive leadership behavior often appears in the form of abusive supervision, which is hostile treatment carried out repeatedly by superiors to subordinates, both verbally and nonverbally. This behavior includes underestimating employees, publicly humiliating, excessive blame, and lack of empathy for subordinates' conditions. In the long run, this kind of leadership can damage working relationships and create an unhealthy work environment.

Furthermore, (Schyns and Schilling, 2013) through their meta-analysis showed that toxic leadership has serious consequences for employees, including increased work stress,

psychological disorders, decreased job satisfaction, and increased intention to leave the organization. These findings reinforce the view that toxic leadership is not just a problem of ineffective leadership styles, but a real threat to organizational sustainability. In the context of modern organizations, toxic leadership is also often associated with creating a stressful work climate. (Kelloway et al., 2005) state that poor leadership can be a major source of stress in the workplace because leaders play a direct role in the division of tasks, providing support, and shaping the psychosocial climate of the organization. When leaders fail to perform these roles in a healthy manner, employees will be more susceptible to psychological distress and mental exhaustion.

A number of empirical studies show that toxic leadership is closely related to various negative impacts on employees, such as increased work stress, psychological distress, and the tendency to withdraw from the organization. These studies confirm that toxic leadership is an important factor that needs to be considered in an effort to understand the dynamics of employee behavior, especially related to the emergence of turnover intention. Based on this description, toxic leadership in this study is understood as destructive leadership behavior that negatively impacts the psychological condition of employees and the work environment, and has the potential to encourage the emergence of turnover intention.

Turnover Intention

Turnover intention refers to an individual's tendency to consciously consider leaving the organization in which he or she works. This concept is not only understood as a momentary desire, but as a cognitive process that involves a continuous evaluation of an individual's work experience, organizational conditions, and future prospects. (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner, 2000) explain that turnover intention is the most proximal predictor of actual exit behavior, so it is often used as the main indicator in human resource research. In *withdrawal theory*), turnover intention is seen as the final stage of a series of psychological responses to an unpleasant work experience. (Hom et al., 2017) state that when individuals experience discomfort, psychological distress, or dissatisfaction at work, they will begin to develop *withdrawal cognitions*, i.e. thoughts of withdrawing from the organization, which can further develop into exit intentions. Therefore, turnover intention is not a phenomenon that appears suddenly, but rather the result of the accumulation of negative work experience.

A number of previous studies have shown that turnover intention is influenced by various factors, both individual and organizational. Psychological factors such as work stress, mental fatigue, and emotional distress have been shown to increase an individual's tendency to seek employment alternatives outside the organization. A meta-analysis conducted by (Griffeth et al., 2000) showed that work stress and unfavorable work environment conditions have a positive relationship with turnover intention, as these factors disrupt the psychological balance of employees. In addition to psychological factors, the role of leadership is also an important determinant in the formation of turnover intention. Unhealthy leadership, especially one that is destructive or toxic, can worsen an employee's work experience and accelerate the emergence of an intention to leave. (Schyns and Schilling, 2013) found that destructive leadership was positively associated with withdrawal behaviors, including attendance and turnover intention. This shows that the quality of interaction between leaders and subordinates has a strategic role in retaining employees. In the context of education organizations, turnover intention is an equally important issue. Teachers and education staff have a central role in the sustainability of the learning process, so high turnover intention can have a direct impact on the quality of education. Work pressure, emotional demands, and lack of support from school leaders can lead to the emergence of an intention to move, even if formally the individual still remains in the organization. Based on this description, turnover intention in this study is understood as an individual's psychological tendency to leave the organization in response to negative work experiences, whether stemming from leadership, work environment, or internal psychological conditions. Turnover intention is positioned as a dependent variable that reflects important

outcomes from the influence of toxic leadership as well as the mediation mechanism of the work environment and cognitive distress.

Working Environment

The work environment is a physical and psychosocial condition that encompasses the activities of individuals in carrying out their work. The work environment is not only related to physical aspects such as facilities, workspace, and comfort, but also includes psychological and social aspects, including relationships between individuals, the organizational climate, and emotional security. Good working environment conditions are seen as an important factor in supporting psychological well-being and sustainability of employee performance. In an organizational perspective, the work environment serves as the primary context that shapes an individual's work experience. (Nielsen et al., 2017) affirm that a work environment characterized by social support, role clarity, and a safe psychological climate can lower stress levels and increase employees' intention to stay in the organization. Conversely, an uncondusive work environment has the potential to create psychological pressure and accelerate the emergence of withdrawal behaviors, including turnover intention.

Leadership has a central role in shaping the quality of the work environment. Leaders play a role in setting norms, building communication patterns, and creating a safe work climate or vice versa. Destructive leadership, such as toxic leadership, tends to result in a stressful work environment, interpersonal conflict, and uncertainty. (Taris, 2022) stated that leadership failure is often a trigger for workplace bullying and a toxic work climate, which has a direct impact on the psychological condition of employees. An unhealthy work environment is also closely related to increased psychological distress and decreased employee attachment to the organization. Several studies show that a negative work climate amplifies the adverse effects of unhealthy leadership behavior, making employees more susceptible to stress, mental fatigue, and emotional discomfort. This condition ultimately encourages individuals to consider the option of leaving the organization as a form of self-protection. In the context of psychological mechanisms, the work environment is often positioned as an intermediate variable that explains the relationship between leadership behavior and employee outcomes.

The work environment formed by toxic leadership can be the main channel that mediates the influence of leadership on turnover intention. This means that the impact of leadership is not always felt directly, but is first reflected in the quality of the work environment experienced by employees. In educational institutions, the work environment has a very important meaning because it is related to intensive interaction between individuals, emotional demands, and high professional responsibility. An uncondusive school work environment, characterized by a lack of leadership support and an unsafe psychological climate, can decrease the work comfort of teachers and education personnel, as well as increase the tendency to leave the organization.

Based on this description, the work environment in this study is understood as a psychosocial condition formed from leadership interactions, work relationships, and organizational climate, which acts as a mediating variable in explaining the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention.

Distress Kognitif

Cognitive distress refers to a state of psychological distress that an individual experiences in response to demands and work experiences that are perceived to be excessive or unpleasant. Distress includes various psychological manifestations, such as work stress, mental fatigue, concentration disorders, and emotional fatigue that affect an individual's ability to process information and make decisions effectively. In an organizational context, cognitive distress is seen as an important indicator of the imbalance between job demands and the psychological resources that individuals have. Studies have shown that cognitive distress often arises as a result of exposure to unhealthy working conditions, including destructive leadership behaviors. (Arshad, 2022) explained that unfair treatment, excessive pressure, and lack of support from leaders can significantly increase employee psychological pressure. These conditions not only

have an impact on mental well-being, but also affect the way individuals interpret their work and the organizations in which they work.

A meta-analysis conducted by (Harms et al., 2017) corroborates these findings by showing that destructive leadership is positively correlated with various forms of psychological distress, including stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Prolonged distress can drain an individual's cognitive resources, thereby lowering the ability to survive in stressful working conditions. In these situations, employees tend to develop defensive responses in the form of psychological withdrawal from work and organization. Cognitive distress also plays an important role in explaining the process of the emergence of turnover intention. Withdrawal behavior theory explains that high psychological stress will prompt individuals to look for ways to reduce the discomfort they experience. One form of such response is the emergence of thoughts to leave the organization. (Hom et al., 2017) emphasized that stress and psychological stress are the main triggers for the formation of withdrawal cognitions, which ultimately develop into turnover intentions. Within the framework of intervariable relationships, cognitive distress is often positioned as a mediating variable that bridges the influence of organizational factors on employee outcomes. A number of empirical studies show that the influence of unhealthy leadership on turnover intention is not always direct, but rather works through increased stress and psychological pressure on employees.

In other words, cognitive distress becomes an internal mechanism that explains how negative work experiences translate into an intention to leave the organization. In the context of educational institutions, cognitive distress has significant implications. Teachers and education staff face complex work demands, emotional pressure, and high professional expectations. When these conditions are exacerbated by unsupportive leadership behavior and an uncondusive work environment, the risk of cognitive distress becomes even greater. If this condition is not managed properly, cognitive distress can encourage increased turnover intention, which ultimately has an impact on the stability and quality of educational institutions. Based on this description, cognitive distress in this study is understood as a condition of psychological distress experienced by individuals due to negative work experiences, especially those that originate from toxic leadership and an unhealthy work environment. Cognitive distress is positioned as a mediating variable that explains the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention

Tabel 1. Previous Research

Researchers and Year	Title Research	Main results
1. Noviantoro et al. (2024)	<i>Understanding Toxic Leadership: The Role of Job Stress and Job Satisfaction in Mediating Turnover Intention</i>	<i>Toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention. Toxic leadership has a significant positive effect on job stress and a significant negative effect on job satisfaction. Job stress has a significant positive effect on turnover intention, while job satisfaction has a significant negative effect on turnover intention. Job stress and job satisfaction partially mediate the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention</i>
2. Biswakarma et al. (2024)	<i>Workplace Bullying and Employees' Turnover Intention in Hospitality Industry: Evidence of Nepal</i>	<i>Workplace bullying has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention. Workplace bullying has a positive and significant effect on emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention. Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention</i>
3. Farley et al. (2023)	<i>What Influences the Relationship Between Workplace Bullying and Employee Well-Being? A Systematic Review of Moderators</i>	<i>Workplace bullying is related to decreased employee well-being and increased psychological and cognitive distress. Work environment factors such as organizational climate, psychosocial safety climate, and social support strongly affect the strong and weak impact of bullying on employees' psychological conditions. The impact of high</i>

		<i>distress</i> has the potential to encourage withdrawal behavior and <i>turnover intention</i> .
4. Taris (2022)	<i>What We Need to Know About Workplace Bullying</i>	<i>Workplace bullying</i> triggered by poor leadership and toxic organizational culture is related to increased <i>psychological distress</i> , <i>burnout</i> , and employee <i>strain</i> in addition, <i>workplace bullying</i> is related to <i>withdrawal behavior</i> and employee <i>turnover intention</i> .
5. Febrisi (2022)	<i>The Effect of Toxic Leadership and Job Stress on Turnover Intention</i>	<i>Toxic leadership</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>job stress</i> , but does not have a significant effect directly on <i>turnover intention</i> . <i>Job stress</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>turnover intention</i> . These findings suggest that <i>job stress</i> plays an important role in explaining the relationship between <i>toxic leadership</i> and <i>turnover intention</i> .
6. . Iqbal, Asghar & Asghar (2022)	<i>Effect of Despotic Leadership on Employee Turnover Intention: Mediating Toxic Workplace Environment and Cognitive Distraction in Academic Institutions</i>	The results of the study show that: <i>Despotic leadership</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>employee turnover intention</i> . In addition, <i>toxic workplace environment</i> has a significant positive effect on <i>turnover intention</i> , and <i>cognitive distraction</i> also has a significant positive effect on <i>turnover intention</i> . Furthermore, <i>toxic workplace environments</i> and <i>cognitive distraction</i> have been shown to significantly mediate the relationship between <i>despotic leadership</i> and <i>turnover intention</i> .
7. Hom et al. (2017)	<i>One Hundred Years of Employee Turnover Theory and Research</i>	Based on a century-long research synthesis, poor leadership and unfavorable work environment conditions contribute to increased employee stress and <i>psychological distress</i> , which in turn triggers <i>withdrawal cognitions</i> and <i>turnover intentions</i> .
8. Nielsen et al. (2017)	<i>Workplace Resources to Improve Both Employee Well-Being and Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis</i>	<i>Leaders resources</i> have a negative and significant effect on employee stress, <i>psychological distress</i> , and <i>burnout</i> Supportive workplace <i>resources</i> have a positive and significant effect on employee <i>well-being</i> and <i>intention to remain</i> , which implicitly indicates a decrease in <i>turnover intention</i> .
9. Harms et al. (2017)	<i>Leadership and Stress: A Meta-Analytic Review</i>	<i>Abusive supervision</i> has a positive and significant effect on employee stress and <i>burnout</i> . <i>Abusive supervision</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>emotional exhaustion</i> and <i>psychological strain</i> that encourages <i>withdrawal behavior</i> , including <i>turnover intention</i> .
Schyns & Schilling (2013)	<i>How Bad Are the Effects of Bad Leaders? A Meta-Analysis of Destructive Leadership and Its Outcomes</i>	<i>Destructive (toxic) leadership</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>turnover intention</i> . <i>Destructive leadership</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>stress</i> , <i>negative affect</i> , and decreased employee <i>well-being</i> . These negative psychological impacts encourage <i>withdrawal behavior</i> which leads to <i>turnover intention</i> .
11. Schmidt (2008)	<i>Development and Validation of the Toxic Leadership Scale</i>	<i>Toxic leadership</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>turnover intention</i> . <i>Toxic leadership</i> has a negative and significant effect on <i>job satisfaction</i> and <i>satisfaction with superiors</i> (consequential variables).
12. Tepper (2007)	<i>Abusive Supervision in Work Organizations: Review, Synthesis, and Research Agenda</i>	<i>Abusive supervision</i> has a positive effect on <i>turnover intention</i> . <i>Abusive supervision</i> has a positive effect on <i>psychological distress</i> and <i>employee strain</i> . Negative psychological conditions due to abusive leadership behavior encourage an increase in <i>intention to leave the organization</i> .
13. Kelloway,	<i>Poor Leadership</i> (dalam	<i>Poor (toxic) leadership</i> that is <i>abusive</i> or <i>passive</i> is

Sivanathan, Francis, & Barling (2005)	<i>Handbook of Work Stress</i>)	related to increased <i>stress, psychological distress</i> , and employee mental health disorders. Poor leadership also creates a stressful work environment such as lack of social support, <i>role ambiguity</i> , and excessive workload. Distress and stress due to <i>poor leadership</i> encourage withdrawal <i>behavior which can lead to turnover intention</i> .
14. Arshad, A. (2022).	<i>Employees in the Face of Abusive Supervision</i>	<i>Abusive supervision</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>employee psychological distress</i> . <i>Abusive supervision</i> has a positive and significant effect on <i>turnover intention</i> . Psychological <i>distress</i> due to abusive leadership treatment increases employees' tendency to leave the organization.
15. Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner (2000)	<i>A Meta-Analysis of Antecedents and Correlates of Employee Turnover</i>	Work stress, <i>role conflict</i> , and unsupportive work environment conditions are positively and significantly related to turnover. This article also confirms that <i>turnover intention</i> and <i>withdrawal cognitions</i> are the strongest predictors of employee exit behavior.

RESEARCH METHODS

Types and Research Approaches

This study uses a quantitative approach with the type of explanatory research, which is research that aims to explain the causal relationship between variables through hypothesis testing. The quantitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on objectively measuring variables and testing the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention by involving the mediating variables of the work environment and cognitive distress.

Location and Object of Research

This research was carried out at SMA Islam Samarinda. The object of the research is teachers and education staff who work at SMA Islam Samarinda, because this group plays a direct role in the educational process and has the potential to be affected by the leadership style applied in the school environment.

Population and Research Sample

The population in this study is all teachers and education staff at SMA Islam Samarinda which totals 28 people.

The sampling technique used is census sampling, where all members of the population are used as research respondents. This technique was chosen because the population is relatively limited so that it is possible to reach all respondents.

Data collection techniques

The data in this study was collected using **questionnaires** that were compiled based on the indicators of each research variable. The questionnaire was distributed directly to the respondents and filled out independently. Each statement was measured using a **five-point Likert scale**, ranging from a score of 1 (strongly disagree) to a score of 5 (strongly agree).

Research Variables and Operational Definitions

This study involved four main variables, namely:

1. Toxic Leadership (X)

Toxic leadership is defined as destructive leadership behavior characterized by a condescending, manipulative, unsupportive, and detrimental attitude to subordinates. This variable is measured through indicators of negative leadership behavior perceived by respondents.

2. Turnover Intention (Y)

Turnover intention is an individual's tendency to consider leaving the organization where he

or she works. These variables are measured through indicators of intention to look for another job, desire to leave, and thoughts to quit work.

3. Work Environment (M1)

A work environment is a psychosocial condition that reflects the comfort, support, and work climate felt by respondents in an organization. Indicators of the work environment include working relationships, leadership support, and psychological climate.

4. Cognitive Distress (M2)

Cognitive distress is defined as a condition of psychological distress that includes work stress, mental fatigue, and concentration disorders due to negative work experiences. These variables were measured through indicators of feelings of depression, mental fatigue, and difficulty concentrating.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis in this study was carried out using the Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) method with the help of SmartPLS software. The SEM-PLS method was chosen because it is able to accommodate a relatively small sample size, does not require normal data distribution, and is suitable for research models involving mediation variables.

The stages of data analysis include:

1. **Evaluation of the measurement model (outer model)**, which includes tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability.
2. **Evaluation of the structural model (inner model)**, which includes testing the path coefficient, the value of the determination coefficient (R^2), and testing the significance of the relationship between variables through the bootstrapping procedure.
3. **Testing the effect of mediation**, to determine the role of work environment and cognitive distress in mediating the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention.

Hypothesis Development

Based on previous theories and research, this study developed the following hypotheses:

- H1: Toxic leadership has a positive effect and significant to turnover intention.
- H2: Toxic leadership has a negative effect and significant to the work environment.
- H3: Toxic leadership has a positive effect and significant to cognitive distress.
- H4: The work environment mediates influence Toxic leadership on turnover intention.
- H5: Cognitive distress mediates toxic effects leadership terhadap turnover intention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Overview

This study involved 28 respondents, all of whom were teachers and education staff at SMA Islam Samarinda. The sampling technique used was census sampling, meaning all members of the population were included as research respondents. This approach was taken because the population was relatively small, and all respondents were considered relevant to provide information related to leadership style, work environment, psychological condition, and intention to leave the organization. The characteristics of the respondents reflect the real conditions of the work environment at SMA Islam Samarinda. Teachers and education staff as respondents have direct experience interacting with school leaders, enabling them to provide objective perceptions of leadership practices and their impact on daily work experiences.

Research Results

The analysis results showed that toxic leadership played a role in increasing turnover intention among teachers and education staff at SMA Islam Samarinda. Destructive leadership—such as lack of support, unhealthy communication, and repressive treatment of subordinates—tends to create unpleasant work experiences. This condition encourages individuals to start considering leaving the organization as a response to perceived pressure. In addition to its direct influence on turnover intention, the study also found that toxic leadership impacts both the work environment and cognitive distress. Unhealthy leadership practices contribute to creating an uncondusive work environment and increasing employees' psychological pressure. Thus, the impact of toxic leadership is felt not only directly but also indirectly through the work environment and individuals' psychological states.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the work environment and cognitive distress act as intermediate mechanisms in explaining the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention. This suggests that the toxic influence of leadership on employee exit intentions occurs through more complex pathways rather than just simple cause-and-effect relationships.

Discussion

The Effect of Toxic Leadership on Turnover Intention

The findings of this study show that toxic leadership increases the tendency of teachers and education staff to leave the organization. Destructive leadership creates psychological pressure, discomfort, and unhealthy perceptions of working relationships, leading individuals to view leaving the organization as a rational alternative. These findings confirm that leadership quality plays a strategic role in determining the stability of human resources in educational institutions. The results are in line with Schyns and Schilling (2013) and Iqbal et al. (2022), who found that destructive or despotic leadership is positively related to turnover intention. In the context of schools, the pressure stemming from toxic leadership can be even more significant, given the high emotional demands and professional responsibilities carried by teachers and education staff.

The Role of Mediation in the Work Environment

The work environment has proven to be an important channel that explains how toxic leadership affects turnover intention. Destructive leadership can lower psychological safety, worsen workplace relationships, and weaken internal support and perceptions of fairness. This condition creates an uncondusive work environment, leading employees and teachers to lose comfort and attachment to the organization. In the context of SMA Islam Samarinda, this mechanism may occur when unhealthy leadership practices hinder open communication, strain interpersonal relationships, and erode mutual trust. As a result, the work environment is perceived as a source of pressure rather than a space for professional development. These findings are consistent with Nielsen et al. (2017), who assert that a poor work environment amplifies the negative impact of leadership on employee well-being and retention intentions.

The Mediating Role of Cognitive Distress

In addition to the work environment, cognitive distress also acts as a psychological mechanism explaining the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention. Cognitive distress refers to a condition in which individuals experience difficulty concentrating, become easily distracted, and feel mental burdens that interfere with task execution. This psychological stress depletes an individual's cognitive resources, reducing their capacity to cope with demanding work conditions.

The academic literature shows that cognitive distress and cognitive distraction are closely related to turnover intention and function as mediators linking destructive leadership and exit intention. The findings of this study align with Harms et al. (2017) and Hom et al. (2017), who stated that stress and psychological disorders prompt the emergence of withdrawal cognitions, which ultimately develop into turnover intentions. In educational institutions, cognitive distress affects not only individual well-being but also the effectiveness of teaching and administrative

processes. When psychological distress persists, individuals tend to seek alternative work environments that better support their mental well-being.

Implications of the Findings

The results of this study indicate that efforts to reduce turnover intention cannot focus solely on individuals but must also address improvements in leadership patterns and work environment conditions. Toxic leadership has shown systemic effects that influence the work environment and employees' psychological states, ultimately driving exit intentions. Therefore, improving leadership practices represents a strategic step toward creating a healthy and sustainable work environment at SMA Islam Samarinda.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention among teachers and education staff at SMA Islam Samarinda by considering the mediating role of the work environment and cognitive distress. Based on the research results and discussions conducted, it can be concluded that toxic leadership is an important factor influencing individuals' tendency to leave the organization. The findings show that destructive leadership practices have the potential to directly increase turnover intention. Leadership behavior that is unsupportive, pressuring, and inattentive to subordinates' welfare creates unpleasant work experiences, thereby encouraging intentions to leave the organization. These findings confirm that leadership quality plays a strategic role in maintaining human resource stability within educational environments.

In addition to its direct effects, this study also found that toxic leadership impacts work environment conditions and cognitive distress. Destructive leadership contributes to forming an uncondusive work environment—characterized by reduced psychological safety, weakened workplace relationships, and diminished internal support. At the same time, the pressure exerted by toxic leadership increases the cognitive distress experienced by teachers and education staff, such as difficulty concentrating, mental fatigue, and excessive mental burden. Furthermore, the results confirm that the work environment and cognitive distress function as mediating variables in the relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention. This indicates that the influence of toxic leadership on employees' exit intentions occurs not only directly but also through psychological mechanisms and workplace conditions experienced by individuals. Thus, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways through which toxic leadership affects turnover intention in the context of educational institutions.

Overall, this study emphasizes that efforts to reduce turnover intention at SMA Islam Samarinda cannot be separated from improving leadership patterns, fostering a healthy work environment, and managing the psychological well-being of teachers and education staff.

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