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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<p>ELD, Employees Cynicism, Higher Education Institutions</p>	<p>The leadership and cynicism can be closely related, as leaders can have a significant impact on the organizational culture, attitudes, and behaviors of their employees. This study aims to investigate the dynamic relationship between ethical leadership and employee cynicism, with mediating role of psychological empowerment among the higher education institutions in Pakistan. The data were collected using an adopted construct, and after distributing 300 questionnaires, a total of 271 responses were appropriate for further analysis. The data were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) Macros mediational procedure. The results offer significant information in deciding about hypothesized relationships. The findings suggest that psychological empowerment mediates relationship between ethical leadership and employee cynicism." Furthermore, it is also evident that the psychological empowerment shows positive strength with employees' perception toward top crest ethical leadership attributes that enhance their abilities &amp; aptitudes to fulfill organizational tasks effectively and efficiently.</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

The leadership (Dobbs & Do, 2019) and cynicisms (Aboramadan, Turkmenoglu, Dahleez, & Cicek, 2020) can be closely related (Sungur, Özer, Saygili, & Uğurluoğlu, 2019), as leadership have the significant impact on organizational culture (Saif, 2015) attitudes and behaviors of their employees. According to (Dobbs & Do, 2019; Sungur et al., 2019), cynicism is a negative attitude or belief that individuals develop in response to perceived dishonesty, corruption, unfairness within organization. According to Nembr and Liu (2021), when leaders fail to act ethically, or when they create a culture that is not supportive of ethical behavior, it can lead to increased cynicism among employees (Qian & Jian, 2020). For example, if leaders are seen as being more concerned with their own interests than with the interests of their employees, it can create a sense of mistrust and cynicism among the

workforce (Evans, Davis, & Neely, 2021). On the other hand, when leaders act with integrity and demonstrate a commitment to ethical values, it can help to reduce the cynicism among employees (Akar, 2018). In this connection, the leaders who are transparent in their decision-making processes, who communicate openly and honestly, and who demonstrate the willingness to hold themselves accountable for their actions are more likely to gain the trusts, commitments and respects of their employees (Akar, 2018).

The future job opportunities (Saif, Khan, Shaheen, & Bangash, 2020) emphasized that emotional link among leadership and follower (Farooq, Saif, & Shaheen, 2022) cannot provide the equality of opportunity during insecurity period (Saif & Khan, 2020). People must establish and supervise their individual careers based on their individual insights and strengths. Workers should engage in professional development actions such as perception of control, management trust, and increasing loyalty (Saif, Khan, & Adnan, 2018). Thus, they will be able to make own career goals. Employees should engage themselves in such activities so that they maintain their job with in same workplace and in this regard the role of transformational (Saif, Khattak, & Khan, 2016; Shah et al., 2022) and transactional leadership and employees intrinsic motivation (Saif, Khan, Khan, & Adnan, 2022) is mandatory in today's challenging work structure. However, cynicism, which is a general distrust or skepticism towards others' motives (Dobbs & Do, 2019), can affect how people perceive different leadership styles (Dobbs & Do, 2019). For example, a cynical employee may view transformational leader (Peng, Li, Wang, & Lin, 2021) as insincere and manipulative, while viewing a transactional leader (Sirin, Aydin, & Bilir, 2018) as simply focused on results without considering the well-being of the employees.

It is important to note that cynicism can be detrimental to workplace morale and productivity, and leaders should work to build trust and foster a positive work environment (Akar, 2018; Peng et al., 2021; Sirin et al., 2018). Overall, the relationship between leadership and cynicism is complex and multifaceted. While leaders have the power to influence organizational culture (Peng et al., 2021) and attitudes (Saif, Saqib, & Arshad, 2018) and behaviors (Farooq et al., 2022) of their employees (Saif, Khan, Ali, & Wadood, 2019), they must also be mindful of the factors that contribute to cynicism, such as a lack of transparency, unfair treatment, and perceived favoritism. Ethical leaders demonstrate honesty and transparency through both their wording and actions. According to Nemr and Liu (2021), when leaders fail to act ethically, or when they create culture that is not supportive of ethical behavior, it can lead to increased cynicism among employees. Ethical leaders assume accountability for choices and conduct, ensuring that they and their peers are held responsible for their behaviors (Wang et al., 2021). By modeling ethical behavior and promoting a culture of the fairness and accountability, leaders can help to reduce cynicism and create a more positive and productive work environment. Based on detail introduction following are the research question for current study.

- RQ1: Is there any relationship exist between the ethical leadership (ELD) as well as employees' cynicism?
- RQ2: Is there any relationship exist between ethical employee psychological empowerment and employee's cynicism?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the view of (Evans, Davis & Neely, 2021; Nemr & Liu, 2021; Qian & Jian, 2020), ELD refers to a set of behaviors and actions that demonstrate moral and ethical values, principles, and standards in a leadership role. It involves making the decisions that are based on integrity, honesty, and fairness (Shakeel, Kruyen, & Van Thiel, 2019), and taking responsibility for the consequences of those decisions (Wang, Xing, Xu, & Hannah, 2021). ELD is important because it creates a positive culture and environment within an organization (Shakeel et al., 2019; Sharma, Agrawal, & Khandelwal, 2019). It fosters trust (Mo, Ling, & Xie, 2019), respect, and open communication between leaders and employees, which leads to increased motivation, engagement, and productivity. Additionally, ethical leaders set an example for others to follow, creating a ripple effect throughout organization and promoting ethical behavior at all levels. Thus, the ethical leaders demonstrate honesty and transparency through both their wording and actions. The ethical leaders assume accountability for their choices and conduct, ensuring that they and their peers are thus held responsible for their behaviors (Wang et al., 2021). Ethical leaders treat others with respect and dignity, regardless of their position or status.

The ethical leaders (Mo et al., 2019) make decisions that are fair and just, and they do not show favoritism or bias. The ethical leaders (Sharma et al., 2019), demonstrate empathy and compassion towards others, and they consider the impact of their decisions on all stakeholders. Overall, ELD (Shakeel et al., 2019) is essential for creating a positive and sustainable work environment, building trust and loyalty with stakeholders, and promoting a culture of integrity and accountability. There is a complex relationship between ELD and cynicism. ELD is characterized by leaders who make decisions based on principles of right and wrong, and who exhibit behaviors that are consistent with ethical values such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility (Mo et al., 2019; Shakeel et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021). Cynicism, on the other hand, is a negative attitude or belief that people are motivated primarily by self-interest and that their actions are driven by hidden agendas (Evans et al., 2021; Nemr & Liu, 2021). ELD can help reduce cynicism by providing clear communication and transparency (Akar, 2018). When leaders are open and honest about decisions and actions, it can help to build trust and credibility with employees, reducing their cynicism (Ivan, 2010) towards leadership.

Additionally, ethical leaders often lead by example and set high standards for behavior (Nemr & Liu, 2021). This can help to create a culture of ethical behavior within organization, can further reduce cynicism (Evans et al., 2021). If ELD is not consistent or if there is a perception of hypocrisy, it can actually increase cynicism. For example, if the leaders espouse ethical values but engage in unethical behavior themselves, it can erode trust and increase cynicism among employees. In the context of HEI's in Pakistan, ELD can be a critical factor in reducing cynicism (Nemr & Liu, 2021) and promoting a positive organizational culture. HEI's in Pakistan face the number of challenges, including corruption, nepotism, and favoritism, can lead to widespread cynicism among employees and students. ELD can help to address these challenges by setting clear standards of behavior and promoting culture of accountability and transparency (Akar, 2018). EDL in HEI's can demonstrate commitment to ethical values by modeling ethical behavior, communicating openly and honestly, and imposing ethical standards consistently. When ELD is practiced in HEI's in Pakistan (Akar, 2018;

Nemr & Liu, 2021; Shakeel et al., 2019) it can have a positive impact on employee and student attitudes towards organization.

Ethical leaders can help to create a culture of trust and respect, which can reduce cynicism and increase motivation and engagement. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the connection between ELD and cynicism is not necessarily the simple one (Mo et al., 2019; Shakeel et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021). In some cases, employees and students may be cynical since they perceive that ELD is lacking, or because they feel that the organization is not living up to its values. Therefore, it is important for leaders in HEI's in Pakistan to be aware of these issues and to take proactive steps to address them. A study conducted by (Nemr & Liu, 2021) examined the impact of ELD on cynicism in HEI's in Pakistan. The study found that ELD was negatively related to cynicism, indicating that when ELD is practiced in higher education institutions, it help to reduce cynicism among employees and students. Another study by (Chi, Chi, Khanfar, Gao, & Kaifi, 2020) investigated the relationship between servant leadership and organizational cynicism in HEI's of USA and China. The study found that servant leadership was negatively related to organizational cynicism, suggesting that when leaders exhibit values, it can help to create a positive organizational culture and reduce cynicism.

Similarly, a study by Naseer et al. (2018) explored the impact of ELD on employee cynicism in HEI's in Pakistan. The study found that ELD was negatively related to the employee cynicism, indicating that ethical leaders can help to create a sense of trust and respect among employees, which can reduce cynicism. However, it is important to note that some studies have found mixed results about the relationship between ELD and cynicism in HEI's in Pakistan. Cynicism, on the other hand, is a negative attitude or belief that people are motivated primarily by self-interest and that actions are driven by hidden agendas (Evans et al., 2021; Nemr & Liu, 2021). For example, a study by Rafique et al. (2018) found that ELD was positively related to cynicism among faculty members in higher education institutions, suggesting that employees may become cynical if they perceive that ethical values are not being practiced consistently. Overall, the literature suggests that ELD can play an important role in reducing cynicism in HEI's in Pakistan. It is important for leaders to be consistent in their ethical behavior and to communicate their values clearly to employees and students. Additionally, more research is needed to better understand the complex relationship between ELD and cynicism in this context.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Understanding the notion of research approaches, situated within the second layer of the Research Process Onion, is essential for undertaking a thorough and successful research study (Sahay, 2016). Research approaches encompass the overall strategies employed by researchers to conduct their investigations. Two main research approaches exist: deductive and inductive. Deductive approach employs top-down methodology, wherein researchers commence with a theory or hypothesis. They subsequently collect and analyze data to assess credibility of said theory or hypothesis (Azungah, 2018). This approach heavily relies on quantitative data, which can be objectively measured and subjected to statistical analysis (Soiferman, 2010). Inductive approach adopts a bottom-up stance. Researchers initially gather and analyze data, subsequently formulating a theory or hypothesis

grounded in the emerging patterns and themes within data. This approach hinges on qualitative data, which is subjective in nature and necessitates interpretation by researcher (Azungah, 2018; Sahay, 2016; Soiferman, 2010).

Each research approach possesses distinct merits and drawbacks. Selection between them hinges on factors such as research question and nature of the data being amassed. The deductive approach proves beneficial when scrutinizing pre-existing theories/hypotheses derived from prior research, whereas inductive approach shines when delving into novel phenomena and formulating theories. Thus, research approaches play a vital role in guiding overall direction of a study and influencing selection of research methods and techniques. In current study, a deductive approach is employed, as data collected from employees in HEIs will be analyzed using statistical procedures. Population clarifies generalizability of findings of research work (Eisenhardt, 1989b). Sample is representative of a population that effect internal and external validity of results of a research work (Simintiras & Diamantopoulos, 2003).

Population of current research study includes administrative staff of HEI's of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa while Sample of research work will be taken from universities located in Southern areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the current study as the population of administrative staff is known, hence non probability sampling technique was applied. The researchers initially gather and analyze data, subsequently formulating a theory or hypothesis grounded in the emerging patterns and themes within the data. For this purpose, 2 stage sampling was applied, in the first phase universities were distributed in the public and private sector, hence quota sapling was applied. In the final stage convenient sampling technique was applied. As the population is known, hence based upon the recommendation of the (Sekran, 2004) and applying G Power sample of 400 will be enough for the conduction current study.

### **Instruments**

The present study utilized adopted construct to gauge variable, and to fulfill this aim, the following questionnaire, which is adopted. Kalshoven et al (2011) scale instrument was used for evaluation of ELD. This scale includes 38 items (seven dimensions), based on 5-point Likert scale ranges from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) with sample items "My leader is pays attention to my personal needs". Psychological Empowerment acts as a mediator that explain association between ELD as well as employee outcome. To evaluate psychological empowerment, scale of Spreitzer (1995) was used contains 12 items based on 5-point Likert scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For analysis of Cynicism, single-dimensional scale developed by (Brandes et al, 1999) was used. The shorter version scale contains of 4 items based on 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (SDA) to 5 (strongly agree).

### **Data Analysis**

The pilot testing process entails administering the research design to a subset of the entire survey population. Its purpose is to pinpoint any essential modifications required before proceeding with final data collection (Gills & Johnson, 2010). This encompasses evaluating the survey participants' responses to questionnaire items, scrutinizing the research design, and assessing methods and tools employed for data collection (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Pilot study aids in recognizing practical

observations within real-world context and evaluates the dependability of respondents' data over the testing of scale reliability. In order to meet the established reliability benchmark, the adopted instrument should attain reliability score at least 0.70 (Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006). Cronbach's alpha interpretation is employed to assess measurement's reliability. A synopsis of the pilot study's discoveries is provided below.

Table 1 Pilot study Results

Construct	$\alpha$	Items counts	Respondents counts
Ethical Leadership	.811	23	45
Psychological Empowerment (Mediator)	.791	9	45
Cynicism	.822	4	45

The outcomes of pilot study unveiled that all variables employed in the ongoing investigation—comprising an independent variable (ELD), a mediator variable (PSW), and a dependent variable (Employee cynicism)—exhibited as dependable coefficient ratings. Each construct achieved an alpha value exceeding 0.70, signifying that Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.78 (falling within the "Good" range) to 0.89 (within the "Very Good" range). These encouraging findings led the researcher to distribute 335 sets of questionnaires to respondents for data collection within the study design. Ultimately, the collected data underwent analysis through the regression and correlation analysis using SPSS.

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

Table 2 Cronbach Alpha & VIF for Overall Scale.

Dimension	Cronbach Alpha	Tolerance	VIF
Ethical Leadership	0.877	0.651	1.43
Psychological Empowerment	0.901	0.342	3.23
Cynicism	0.745	0.502	2.81

In order to validate multi-collinearity, issue the values of VIF and tolerance must be lower than ( $\leq 10$ ; &  $< 0.20$ ), and result from the current study depict that it is also in acceptable range as depicted by (Miles, 2014) and recommended by (Altaf, Ayub, Shabbir, & Usman, 2022), hence there is no problem of multi collinearity existed (Table 4). Cronbach's alpha is statistical measure that is commonly used to assess internal consistency of a set of items in a questionnaire or survey. It is often used to measure the reliability of scale or construct, which is composite of several items that measure a specific concept. In context of given dimensions, CA values indicate degree of internal consistency of the items that measure constructs of ELD, PSW and employee's cynicism. According to the results all Alpha values are higher than threshold level of (0.7), hence the construct can be used for further analysis.

Table 3 Correlation Between Variables

		PSWF	ELDF	CYNF
Psychological empowerment [PSWF]	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	271		
Ethical Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.824**	1	

[ELDF]	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	271	271	
Cynicism [CYNF]	Pearson Correlation	-.145*	-.254**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	.000	
	N	271	271	271
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).				

Table shows the relationship between inter relationship of major variable of the study. Findings shows that the highest correlation ( $r = 0.824$ ) exist between ELD and psychological empowerment, while only (-25%) correlation exist between ELD as well as employee's cynicism (see table 4.2). According to the general rule of thumb correlation values between (0.2 & 0.4) are consider as of moderate nature, while higher than (0.7) shows stronger correlation (Alfalrah, Muneer, & Hussain, 2022; Ali et al., 2020; Barrientos-Báez, Martínez-González, García-Rodríguez, & Galán, 2022; Minghui, 2018).

Table 4 Regression Analysis Model Summary for Employees Cynicism

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	25.120	2	12.560	11.190	.000b
Residual	300.821	268	1.122		
Total	325.942	270			
a. Dependent Variable: CYNF					
b. Predictors: (Constant), PSWF, ELDF					

Table 5 Coefficient of Regression for Employees Cynicism

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		T	Sig.		
		B	Std. Error			LLCI	ULCI
1	(Constant)	3.398	.319	10.665	.000	2.771	4.025
	ELDF	-.571	.142	-4.030	.000	-.850	-.292
	PSWF	.291	.151	1.921	.056	-.007	.588
a. Dependent Variable: CYNF							

Results from table (4.3) address the relationship between criterion variables (Employees Cynicism) and predictor (Employees PSWF & ELD) in work context of HEIs in Pakistan. Findings for regression analysis with ( $R^2 = .432$ ) depicts that Psychological Empowerment explain 43% variance with (F statistics=11.90) in Employees Cynicism. The coefficient of regression model indicate that intensity of predicted model is less than (0.05), while beta values ( $\beta = .291$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $t = 1.872$ ) state the direct effect of Psychological Empowerment (IV) is established with DV (Employees Cynicism Behavior). On the other side the results for relationship between criterion variables (Employees Cynicism) and predictor (ELD) in work context of HEIs in Pakistan. Findings for regression analysis with ( $R^2 = .432$ ) depicts that Psychological Empowerment and ELD explain 43% variance with (F statistics=11.90) in Employees Cynicism. The coefficient of regression model indicate that intensity of predicted model is less than (0.05), while beta values for ELD ( $\beta = -0.571$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $t = -4.030$ ) state the direct effect of Psychological Empowerment (IV) is established with DV (Employees Cynicism Behavior). However, the negative sign indicates the inverse relationship between criterion and predictor

(ELD) is based on the assumptions the employees suffering from cynicism depict lack of trust toward leadership abilities.

### **DISCUSSION**

The current study proposed theoretical model that tries to link the direct relationship between ELD and employees' cynicism in HEI sector of Pakistan through PSW empowered employees. The statistical findings confirm the direct relationship between ELD and employee's cynicism as well as PSW. ELD refers to a leadership style that prioritizes ethical and moral values, such as fairness, transparency, honesty, and accountability. ELD aim to create the positive work environment, build trust with their employees, and foster a sense of shared purpose and values. One of the reasons why ELD is important is that it can help to reduce employees' cynicism and negative attitudes towards their work and organization. Thus, when the employees perceive that their leaders are ethical and trustworthy, they are more likely to feel engaged, committed, and satisfied with their jobs. This can lead to a range of positive outcomes, such as higher productivity, lower turnover rates, and better customer service. Overall, the literature suggests that ELD can play an important role in reducing cynicism in HEI's in Pakistan. On the other hand, when employees perceive that their leaders are unethical or dishonest, they may become cynical and skeptical about their work and organization. This can lead to a range of negative outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction, higher turnover rates, and decreased productivity.

Furthermore, cynicism can spread quickly among employees, creating a toxic work environment where trust and collaboration are low. This can have a ripple effect throughout the organization, affecting morale and performance at all levels. ELD is important because it can help to create a positive work environment, build trust with employees, and reduce cynicism and negative attitudes towards work and the organization. By fostering ELD, organizations can create a culture of trust and integrity that benefits both employees and organization as a whole. Our findings depict that ELD is significantly associated to employees PSW in HEIs sector of Pakistan. The results are consistent with findings of (Suifan et al., 2020), (Dust et al., 2018) and (Li et al., 2023). Considering that leaders who are ethical tend to be effective at communicating work values that provide a sense of purpose to subordinates. ELDs are known to recognize competencies of subordinates provide constructive feedback, which contributes to positive morale and feeling of competence (Suifan et al., 2020). ELDs are poised about delegating errands and giving subordinates autonomy. By communicating ethical standards, employees feel a greater sense of the impact and importance. These four factors meaningfulness, competency, self-determination, as well as the impact ~ work together to increase employees' sense of PSW.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on detail literature it is evident that ELD and employee's cynicism is inversely related to each other, because ELD focus on fair treatment of employees while cynicism is about negative emotions of employees about organization. There are limited studies that are conducted in the work structure of higher education institution; hence it is direly needed to explore such kind of dynamic relationship in detail. Very few articles investigate the attributes of ELD relation with employee's cynicism. Future research needs to address several limitations identified in this study. Firstly, the



findings of this study were based on data collected from selected universities in KP, Pakistan. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the generalizability of these findings to other organizational settings may be limited. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanism, it would be valuable for future researchers to investigate the current model in diverse organizational setups, such as banking, insurance, college education, SMEs, and startups. Secondly, data used in study was gathered over adopted constructs and single-stage sampling, ensuing in cross-sectional study design. This approach may raise concerns about the robustness of the results. To address this issue, it is recommended that future researchers obtain data over different intervals or timeframes and compare the results. This would provide a more nuanced perspective and potentially enhance the reliability of findings.

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