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## Perceived toxicity in leaders: Through the demographic lens of subordinates.

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### Abstract

In an environment where perceptions of unfairness and toxicity are becoming more endemic and more complex too, this research attempts to investigate whether perceived toxicity in leaders varies with demographic factors such as age, gender, and education level of their subordinates. Data collected from 150 IT professionals of India was statistically analysed. The study revealed a significant difference in the perceived toxicity of leaders across gender and education level of subordinates. There was no statistical difference based on age of subordinate. Pearson Correlations revealed significant relationship of perceived toxicity only with gender and education; again age did not have any significant correlation. Regression analysis of perceived dimensions of toxicity with demographic factors prompted gender as the most significant determinant. The study is an attempt to enhance the concept of toxicity in leaders as to how it is perceived differently by their subordinates based on their demographic profiles.

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### Introduction

Recent squandering of power in corporate, politics and religious arena have invigorated interest in dark leadership. In spite of much of positive hype promoted by the 'leadership research industry' leaders are not by definition always good, ethical, or correct in their behaviour and it is evident in articles in the popular press [1],[2-6]. Hostile leader behaviour has wrinkled public trust in leadership. As of 2014, research literature has indicated decline in employee perceptions and confidence to an all-time low, with one-third of employees reporting unethical behaviour by their senior leadership [7].

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Toxic leadership, a dark side of leadership, has become a widespread phenomenon in organizations. Subordinates counter the negative behaviour with psychological and physiological strained behaviours leading to decreased job performance, and increased intention to quit [8], [9]. Such leaders prove to be slow poison for both subordinates and organisation however it predominantly depends on the perception of the subordinate whether to consider their leader to be toxic or not. As described by Jean Lipman Bluemen ‘a hero for one may be villain for other’ [3]. Considerable bodies of research evidence, moreover, suggests the role of gender in leadership but have ignored the prominence of demographics of subordinates in the perception of toxicity. Hence, adhering to the detrimental effect that toxic leaders have on individual and organization, a systematic study on perception of toxicity in leadership in Indian context appears to be need of the hour. This paper specifically aims to contribute to the knowledge of toxic leadership by analysing its pattern across various demographic variables, if perceived toxicity of leaders varies with difference in gender, age and education of subordinates.

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Toxic leadership

In spite of the concept being a decade old and having gained amplified attention in the popular press recently, toxic leadership has not been methodically studied [4], [10]. Bad or destructive leadership may be seen as comprising six forms: tyrannical [11], abusive [9], bullying [12], destructive [13] and concerned to this study, toxic [3]. Toxicity is acutely sniping. Toxic derives from Greek mythology: toxicus means “poison” [14]. Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker was the first person who linked toxicity with leadership [16]. Based on the literature review, this study hypothesizes toxic leadership as a discrete, specific construct that does not include impaired mental health, evil intentions or simple mismanagement. The concept of toxic leadership can be interpreted as an irreplaceable set of leadership behaviours that rancorously impact the subordinate group in inevitable ways.

There are numerous aspects to toxic leadership but what has emerged from extensive literature as key theme includes- Destructiveness [13], neglect for well-being of subordinate, harmful or abusive [15],[9],[2],[3], micromanaging, authoritarianism [3],[11], commandeering, narcissistic [16],[3],[17], lack of integrity, divisiveness, unpredictability, self-promoting [5]. Thus, toxic leadership emerged as higher order multidimensional construct that comprises of “individuals, who by dint of their destructive behaviours and dysfunctional personal qualities generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organizations, communities, and even entire societies they lead” [3]. The definition by A.A.Schmidt [5] was inclusive these dimensions. He defines toxic leaders as “narcissistic, self-promoters who engage in an unpredictable pattern of abusive and authoritarian supervision”.

### 2.2 Indian IT Industry

The Indian IT industry is an upshot of swift world of revolution, where information, ideas and insight fly high on wings beyond boundaries of world. IT has mellowed over the years and has emerged to be a prime contributor to the global economic growth. It has gone from 1% of India’s economy in 1998 to 9.3 % in 2016. Its revenue has increased from USD 175 million in 1989-92 to USD 143 billion in 2016 majorly contributed by distinct range of service providers with more than 15,000 firms in operations [18]. Subsequently, the industry and its’ operations have attracted the concentration of the researchers in the past 10 years, more interestingly research on employee attitudes and positive psychology. “The organizations succeed less by rules, roles and routines and more by speed, learning and change”[19]. Business leaders have to learn to adapt and stay current. The complexity and criticality of the work in industry invigorate leaders to indulge in a style of leadership which is more toxic for the subordinate. This kind of destructive leadership has today emerged as a silent killer

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