

Despotic leadership on happiness at work: Job crafting and optimism as key mechanisms

Devi Alviani¹, Puspa Dewi², Ivalaina Astarina³, Tomy Fitrio^{4*}, Riky Perdana⁵

¹Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung 40132, Indonesia

^{2,3,4}Department of Management, Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri, Rengat 29314, Indonesia

⁵Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau, Pekanbaru 28294, Indonesia

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*Corresponding author:

tomy@itbind.id

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Abstract

The decline in workplace happiness has become an urgent issue in the healthcare sector in the post-pandemic era, particularly within organizations characterized by high job demands and rigid power relations, which have the potential to drain employees' psychological resources. This situation calls for a deeper understanding of mechanisms that help workers maintain occupational well-being under harmful leadership styles. This research aims to examine the influence of despotic leadership on employee well-being in the workplace, specifically investigating the role of job crafting as a mediator and optimism as a moderator. The study utilizes a quantitative approach supported by a cross-sectional research design. The population includes 286 employees working in healthcare institutions in Riau Province, of which 165 respondents were chosen through systematic random sampling. Data were gathered anonymously through an online survey and processed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS 3.0. The findings reveal that despotic leadership significantly reduces workplace happiness and weakens job crafting behaviors. Job crafting mediates this relationship, as employees who proactively reshape their tasks and workplace relationships report higher levels of workplace happiness. Additionally, optimism moderates the negative effect of despotic leadership on workplace happiness by buffering psychological resource depletion. The novelty of this study lies in testing an integrated model that positions job crafting and optimism as psychological resource recovery and protection mechanisms within the context of dark leadership in the healthcare sector.

Introduction

The decline in workplace happiness has become a critical concern, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Data indicate a consistent annual decrease of approximately 6% since 2020, reaching its lowest point in 2023, when the employee Net Promoter Score dropped to only 9%, reflecting a sustained deterioration in employee morale (BambooHR®, 2023). Previous studies further confirm that low workplace happiness reduces productivity, increases turnover, and weakens employee engagement, while happier employees are able to generate up to 150% higher sales and exhibit significantly stronger retention rates (Ullah, 2024). The findings of this study emphasize the critical necessity of investigating the variables that diminish professional satisfaction, enabling firms to develop efficient interventions aimed at improving both the wellness and productivity of their staff. One of the key factors associated with the decline in workplace happiness is despotic leadership (Fisher, 2010).

Despotic leaders drain employees' psychological and emotional resources by imposing excessive control, engaging in exploitation, and fostering a work environment characterized by fear

and oppression (Albashiti et al., 2021; Naseer et al., 2016). This resource depletion diminishes employees' capacity to engage in positive work behaviors, including job crafting (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Holmgreen et al., 2017). When employees experience reduced personal capacity or are exposed to toxic leadership, their ability to act proactively in task completion and to seek meaningful social interactions declines significantly, resulting in lower levels of job development and work role optimization (Masood et al., 2021; Tuan, 2022). The sustained loss of these proactive capabilities consistently leads to declining well-being and workplace happiness, as employees lose opportunities to shape and optimize their roles effectively (Ruparel et al., 2022). Under such conditions, optimism may function as a psychological buffer. Optimistic employees demonstrate greater ability to maintain motivation and resilience when facing resource loss, enabling them to continue crafting and improving their jobs even under unsupportive leadership (Carver et al., 2010). Optimism has further been identified as a psychological resource that safeguards staff well-being during periods of high stress and exposure to destructive management, effectively reducing the detrimental impact of authoritarian leadership styles on overall professional satisfaction (Beloskar et al., 2024).

Workplace happiness and its challenges have drawn increasing attention in healthcare service institutions. The healthcare sector has been recognized as one of the consistently least happy industries since 2020 (BambooHR®, 2023). Healthcare employees face chronic challenges, including excessive workloads, fatigue, high turnover rates, workforce shortages, and work-related stress, compounded by intense emotional demands and the nature of their roles in public service delivery. Consequently, the healthcare sector has exhibited persistently negative employee net promoter score (eNPS) trends amid high emotional labor and its public-serving work characteristics. This makes healthcare a uniquely critical and relevant context for examining the mechanisms of workplace happiness, particularly under despotic leadership. Despotic leadership also warrants investigation in non-Western settings to provide valuable cross-cultural evidence and address geographical bias in organizational studies (Gentry et al., 2014).

This study empirically tests this relationship within Indonesian healthcare institutions. Indonesia reflects a collectivistic culture and high-power distance, where authoritarian leadership behaviors may emerge more prominently and influence employees differently compared to Western contexts. In such cultural environments, employees are generally more likely to accept unequal power relationships and comply with authoritative leadership practices, potentially normalizing despotic behaviors within organizational settings. This cultural characteristic creates a distinct theoretical context because the effects of despotic leadership on employee attitudes and behaviors may operate differently compared to low power distance and individualistic cultures that dominate existing organizational research. Therefore, examining despotic leadership within the Indonesian healthcare sector is not merely a geographical extension of prior studies, but an important contextual contribution that helps explain how cultural values shape employee responses to destructive leadership and workplace happiness.

Despotic leadership, as a manifestation of destructive leadership behavior, has attracted relatively little attention in organizational research (Syed et al., 2022). Previous studies on workplace happiness have mainly concentrated on positive leadership approaches, including servant, transformational, and altruistic leadership (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Research examining the consequences of despotic leadership for employee outcomes is relatively underdeveloped, with even fewer studies conducted in non-Western environments (De Clercq et al., 2018; Gentry et al., 2014). Furthermore, although job crafting has been associated with enhanced well-being and job satisfaction, its functioning within despotic leadership contexts remains insufficiently understood (Masood et al., 2021; Ruparel et al., 2022; Tuan, 2022). In addition, limited research has examined how optimism moderates the associations between despotic leadership, job crafting, and workplace happiness, especially when considering gender differences (Beloskar et al., 2024). Current study, such as the work conducted by Mehmood et al. (2023), underlines the necessity of deeper exploration into the specific processes by which leadership behavior shapes the psychological health and satisfaction of employees.

Existing academic literature has yet to develop a holistic framework that clarifies the connection between authoritarian leadership and worker satisfaction, especially regarding the

integrated influence of job crafting and optimism within high-pressure settings. Consequently, this research offers three primary contributions to the field. First, it advances the dark leadership literature by filling the existing gap regarding the influence of despotic leadership on happiness at work; second, it advances understanding of job crafting and optimism as psychological mechanisms within negative leadership environments; and third, it provides cross-cultural evidence from a non-Western healthcare sector. The findings are expected to benefit human resource practitioners and organizational leaders by highlighting practical approaches to foster workplace happiness even under adverse leadership conditions.

The theoretical basis for this research is the conservation of resources theory, which posits that people are driven to obtain, maintain, and protect significant psychological and vocational assets (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Under this lens, authoritarian leadership serves as a stressor that exhausts the emotional and mental reserves of staff, thereby inhibiting proactive engagement like job crafting and diminishing overall job satisfaction. On the other hand, optimism acts as a vital personal asset that helps employees navigate resource loss and sustain mental health when facing difficult management. Thus, conservation of resources theory offers a robust structure for understanding how job crafting mediates and optimism moderates the link between abusive leadership and professional well-being, providing the rationale for examining these specific dynamics within the current model.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The conservation of resources theory developed by Stevan E. Hobfoll (1993) suggests that people have a fundamental drive to acquire, maintain, and protect significant assets, including emotional, mental, social, and professional resources. According to this model, stress occurs when these resources are under threat, actually lost, or when efforts fail to yield expected gains (Halbesleben et al., 2014). In a corporate environment, the conduct of leaders serves as a primary external influence that either bolsters or depletes these employee reserves. Specifically, despotic leadership functions as a destructive force that drains the psychological and emotional energy of workers. In contrast, optimism serves as a beneficial internal resource that helps individuals manage difficult organizational conditions. Furthermore, staff may engage in proactive behaviors like job crafting to replenish and preserve their essential resources. Therefore, the conservation of resources theory offers a pertinent conceptual base for analyzing the relationships between authoritarian leadership, job crafting, optimism, and overall workplace happiness.

Happiness at work

Professional happiness encompasses the constructive emotions and psychological health individuals feel while performing their duties (Espasandín-Bustelo et al., 2021). It signifies the degree of fulfillment, wellness, and positive identification an employee maintains with their tasks and the broader firm. Previous research indicates that this state is influenced by a range of tangible and intangible elements, such as financial compensation, job stability, institutional backing, interpersonal connections, and mental wellness (Ravina-Ripoll et al., 2023). This research adopts the framework established by Cynthia D. Fisher (2010) which identifies job satisfaction, work engagement, and affective commitment as the three core components of workplace happiness. Work engagement captures the energy, dedication, and active involvement an individual brings to their role. Job satisfaction represents the favorable assessments and internal contentment a worker feels regarding their work environment and responsibilities. Finally, affective commitment describes the emotional loyalty and sense of belonging a person feels toward their organization. Together, these factors provide a comprehensive picture of an employee's positive affective state and overall well-being within a professional context.

Job crafting

Job crafting is defined as the self-initiated effort by workers to modify various components of their roles, including specific duties, social connections, and general professional experiences, to better

align their work with their individual talents, interests, and needs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Instead of merely complying with fixed job descriptions, individuals dynamically alter their professional surroundings to foster deeper purpose, drive, and efficiency. This research concentrates on two specific facets of job crafting identified by Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2013), task crafting and relational crafting. Task crafting involves adjusting the scope, nature, or volume of one's assignments to more accurately reflect personal strengths and inclinations. Meanwhile, relational crafting entails intentionally shaping social exchanges and professional bonds, such as cultivating better teamwork and constructive communication with peers. By engaging in these proactive adjustments, employees can refine their daily work life and bolster their overall mental wellness.

Optimistic

Optimism is characterized by a person's inclination to anticipate favorable occurrences and successful results in the years ahead (Yeşilkaya & Yıldız, 2022). Those possessing an optimistic outlook usually view obstacles as solvable and keep their expectations high even when facing hardship. Dember et al. (1989) define this trait as a constructive life perspective that shapes how a person processes their experiences and reacts to misfortune. Within a corporate context, optimism serves as a critical psychological asset that underpins emotional steadiness, resilience, and flexible coping strategies. Workers with a strong sense of optimism are typically better equipped to remain motivated and maintain a positive mindset amidst high-pressure scenarios. This research evaluates optimism through metrics based on the life orientation test revised by Scheier et al. (1994), concentrating specifically on the positive outlook employees hold regarding future events.

Despotic leadership

Despotic leadership is a destructive leadership approach in which leaders exhibit authoritarianism, dominance, manipulation, and behaviors primarily intended to serve their own interests (Cheng & Wang, 2015). Despotic leaders prioritize personal interests and power while disregarding employees' well-being and autonomy. Such leaders tend to demand unquestioning obedience, suppress employee participation, and create fear-based work environments. Employees working under despotic leaders may experience psychological pressure, emotional exhaustion, and reduced motivation due to exploitative and controlling leadership behaviors. This study adopts the measurement scale developed by De Hoogh and De Hartog (2008), which assesses despotic leadership through indicators related to manipulation, dominance, selfishness, and authoritarian behavior.

Despotic leadership and happiness at work

Despotic leadership fosters a toxic professional climate marked by manipulative tendencies, overbearing control, and a significant deficiency in empathy toward subordinates. Staff subjected to these management styles often suffer from emotional exhaustion, dampened motivation, and a decline in their mental health. When supervisors consistently put their own agendas ahead of their team's interests, they damage the employees' sense of worth and their emotional bond with the firm. Viewed through the lens of conservation of resources theory, such oppressive leadership endangers vital psychological and emotional assets, triggering stress and undermining job-related wellness. Individuals who frequently deal with coercion, inequity, or extreme pressure are prone to experiencing weakened dedication, lower job satisfaction, and a loss of emotional loyalty to the organization. Previous studies have corroborated that despotic management styles have a detrimental impact on worker contentment and general well-being (Raja et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2024).

H1: Despotic leadership is negatively associated with the overall happiness of employees at work.

Despotic leadership and job crafting

Job crafting requires employees to demonstrate initiative, confidence, and proactive behavior in modifying aspects of their work. However, despotic leadership may discourage such proactive efforts because employees often feel psychologically unsafe and fear negative consequences when attempting to introduce changes or new ideas. Despotic leaders tend to create rigid and controlling

work environments that limit employee autonomy and reduce opportunities for personal initiative. Employees under such leadership may become more passive and avoid engaging in proactive behaviors, including job crafting, in order to protect themselves from potential criticism or punishment. Previous studies have found that destructive leadership behaviors reduce employees' willingness to engage in proactive work behaviors and self-initiated improvements (Masood et al., 2021; Tuan, 2022).

H2: Despotic leadership adversely influences employees' capacity to perform job crafting behaviors.

Job crafting and happiness at work

Workers who participate in proactive job crafting are more likely to enjoy increased positive affect, elevated levels of dedication, and a more robust psychological bond with their roles. By reimagining their professional duties and fostering constructive workplace relationships, individuals can cultivate experiences that are both more satisfying and purposeful. Additionally, job crafting allows for the alignment of job requirements with personal talents and interests, which enhances drive and lowers professional tension. When employees successfully customize their work surroundings, they often feel a greater sense of autonomy, achievement, and social connection, all of which serve to bolster job-related contentment. Past empirical studies regularly demonstrate that the practice of job crafting leads to better overall wellness, increased job satisfaction, higher engagement, and improved happiness within the organization (Harju et al., 2016; Moulik & Giri, 2024).

H3: Employees who actively practice job crafting generally experience increased happiness within the workplace.

Despotic leadership and happiness at work: job crafting as mediator

Despotic leadership may indirectly reduce workplace happiness by weakening employees' proactive work behaviors. Employees exposed to controlling and manipulative leadership tend to lose motivation and confidence to reshape or improve their work environment. As job crafting decreases, employees may experience lower engagement, reduced meaning in work, and weaker emotional attachment to the organization. Conversely, employees who continue engaging in job crafting despite adverse leadership conditions may still maintain positive work experiences and psychological well-being. Through proactive adaptation of work tasks and relationships, employees can partially restore emotional and psychological resources that have been threatened by despotic leadership. Prior studies suggest that job crafting functions as an important mechanism linking workplace conditions and employee well-being (Khan et al., 2023; Ruparel et al., 2022).

H4: Job crafting, which represents the capacity of workers to modify and refine their professional surroundings, may serve as an intervening process that mitigates the negative consequences of authoritarian management and subsequently boosts job-related satisfaction.

Despotic leadership on happiness at work: optimistic as a moderation

Employees differ in their ability to cope with negative workplace conditions. Optimistic employees generally possess stronger psychological resilience and are more likely to maintain positive expectations despite experiencing workplace adversity. Optimism, as an important psychological resource, may assist employees in managing stress and alleviating the adverse emotional impacts of despotic leadership. Employees with higher optimism are more capable of interpreting difficulties constructively, maintaining emotional stability, and preserving positive attitudes under stressful leadership conditions. Therefore, optimism has the potential to reduce the detrimental influence of despotic leadership on workplace happiness. Prior findings also indicate that optimism helps protect employee well-being from the negative impact of stressful workplace situations (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022; Zheng et al., 2014).

H5: Employees with a more optimistic attitude are likely to experience a lower negative impact of despotic leadership on their happiness at work.

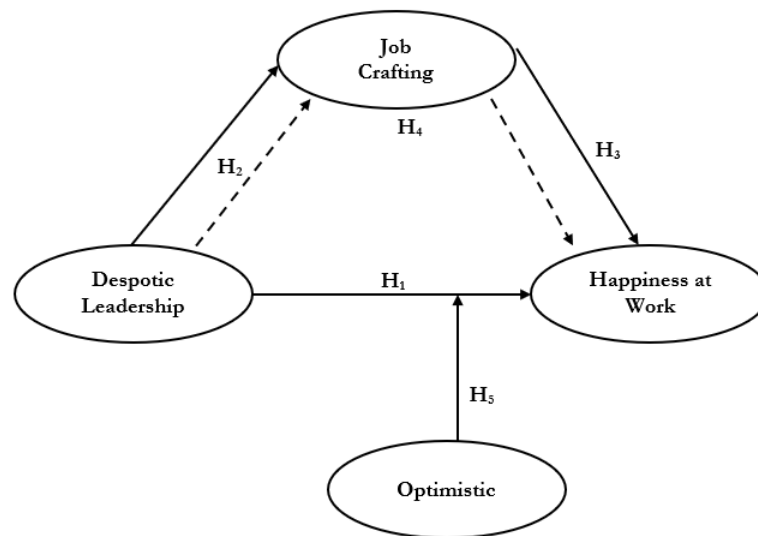


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Research Methods

This research utilizes a quantitative methodology to investigate how job crafting acts as a mediator and optimism functions as a moderator within the link between authoritarian leadership and employee happiness. A cross-sectional design was chosen to observe the psychological conditions and behavioral patterns of staff at a single point in time, aligning with previous studies on leadership and well-being that employ individual-level mediation and moderation frameworks. Although this design allows efficient model testing, its main limitations include the inability to establish causal direction with full certainty and vulnerability to temporal bias, such as mood-state bias or recall bias, where respondents' current emotional condition may influence how they assess leadership behavior or their own happiness. To mitigate this risk, the questionnaire used balanced wording, randomized item order, and statistical checks for common method variance (CMV) using the full collinearity assessment in SmartPLS, following Kock (2015). In addition, systematic random sampling was applied to reduce selection bias, ensuring that all members of the population had an equal interval-based chance of participation.

The study population comprised 286 medical professionals located in Riau, Indonesia, offering enough detail for future replication while upholding the anonymity of the organization as mandated by the data source. To establish the required sample size of 165 participants, the researchers utilized the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, which is a standard reference for probability sampling in finite populations. Participants were selected via systematic random sampling, with every k th individual from the staff directory invited to join the study. To account for potential non-response bias, the researchers oversampled by sending 200 digital surveys through Google Forms during a two-week window from April 3 to April 16, 2025. Ultimately, 154 usable responses were collected, representing a 93.33% response rate. The remaining 6.67% of non-responses were largely attributed to unfinished forms or missing essential data. This participation rate was evaluated using the late-response comparison method by Armstrong and Overton (1977). The analysis revealed no meaningful differences between those who responded early and those who responded late, indicating that non-response bias did not meaningfully impact the study's findings.

Information was gathered through a self-completed, closed-ended survey utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to maintain consistent measurement and facilitate ease of use for participants. Before starting, individuals were provided with a digital informed consent form detailing the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and guarantees of privacy. Several protocols were implemented to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents: first, no personal identifiers such as names, email addresses, or IP addresses were recorded or examined; second, the data was compiled and presented only in an aggregated format; third, access to raw data was restricted to the research team and kept within encrypted, password-protected systems; and finally, participants were informed that the findings would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

The research instruments were chosen based on their conceptual alignment, proven validity, and pertinence to the dynamics of professional well-being. To evaluate despotic leadership, the study utilized a six-item scale created by De Hoogh and De Hartog (2008), featuring statements such as “My leader demonstrates a punitive attitude and shows minimal pity or compassion.” Job crafting was measured through the framework established by Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2013), focusing on the dual dimensions of task and relational crafting; this 10-item construct included prompts like “I actively try to build good relationships with people at work.” For optimism, three specific items were adapted from the life orientation test-revised by Scheier et al. (1994) —omitting filler items—due to its established reliability in assessing positive expectations within organizational settings, with examples such as “During uncertain times, I tend to expect favorable results.” Lastly, workplace happiness was appraised using a 9-item scale from Salas-Vallina and Alegre (2021), that covers job satisfaction, work engagement, and affective commitment, illustrated by items like “In my work, I feel energized and full of vitality.”

Data analysis in this study was conducted using structural equation modeling with the assistance of SmartPLS 3.0, which was selected due to its suitability for examining mediation and moderation effects, analyzing small-to-medium samples, accommodating non-normal data, and focusing on latent variable prediction. The study also employed the full collinearity test to examine common method variance (CMV), and the results demonstrated that all VIF values were below the suggested threshold of 3.3, confirming that CMV was not a serious problem. The analytical stages included data screening, measurement model evaluation, structural model testing, moderation analysis, and mediation analysis.

Results and Discussion

A demographic analysis revealed that most respondents were women, totaling 85 individuals (55.19%), while male respondents numbered 69 (44.81%), offering a near-gender balance for analysis. In terms of work experience, 15 respondents (9.74%) had under five years, 56 (36.36%) had five to eight years, 77 (50.00%) had eight to ten years, and six (3.90%) had over ten years. Educationally, 125 respondents (81.17%) held a bachelor’s degree (S1), 12 (7.79%) a master’s degree, and 17 (11.04%) a diploma or high school education, suggesting a well-equipped sample to understand the questionnaire.

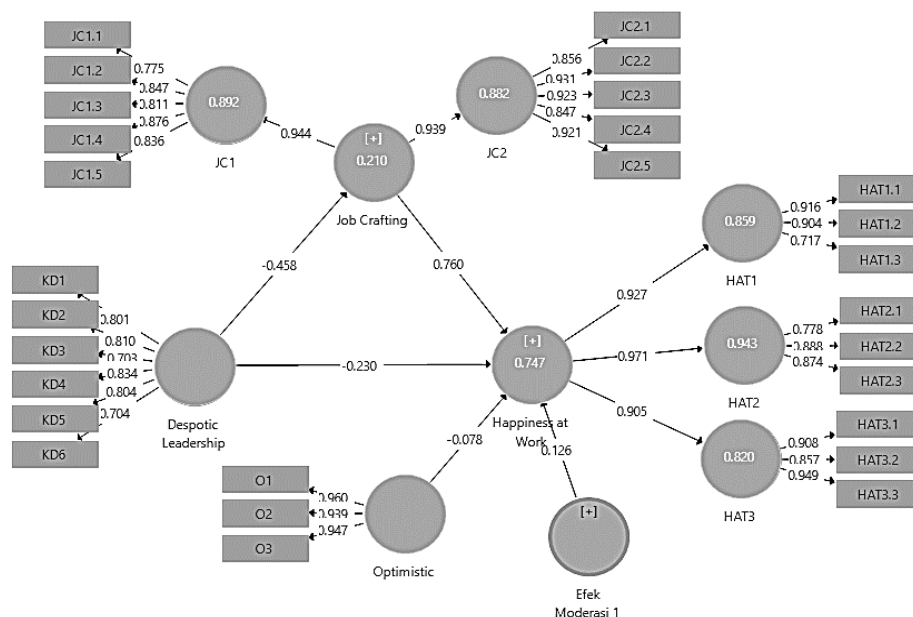


Figure 2. First-Order Outer Model

The first-order outer model results demonstrate that all indicators have satisfactory loading factor values, indicating good convergent validity. The constructs of job crafting, despotic

leadership, optimism, and happiness at work are measured reliably by their respective indicators, with most loading values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. In addition, the AVE values for each construct are above 0.50, confirming adequate construct validity. Overall, the measurement model shows that the indicators are valid and reliable in representing their latent variables.

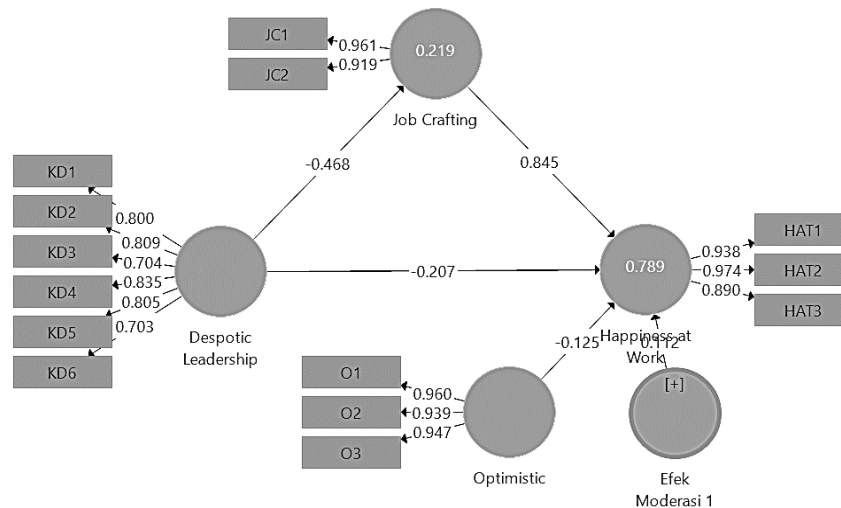


Figure 3. Second-Order Outer Model

Table 1. Convergent Validity and Reliability Assessment Results

Variables (Dimension)	Items	First-Order				Second-Order			
		Loading	CA	CR	AVE	Loading	CA	CR	AVE
Despotic Leadership	KD1	0.801	0.869	0.901	0.605	0.800	0.869	0.901	0.605
	KD2	0.810				0.809			
	KD3	0.703				0.704			
	KD4	0.834				0.835			
	KD5	0.804				0.805			
	KD6	0.704				0.703			
Job Crafting (Task Crafting)	JC1.1	0.775	0.945	0.917	0.677	0.961	0.873	0.938	0.884
	JC1.2	0.847							
	JC1.3	0.811							
	JC1.4	0.876							
	JC1.5	0.836							
Job Crafting (Relational Crafting)	JC2.1	0.856	0.945	0.953	0.804	0.919			
	JC2.2	0.931							
	JC2.3	0.923							
	JC2.4	0.847							
	JC2.5	0.921							
Optimistic	O1	0.960	0.945	0.964	0.900	0.960	0.945	0.964	0.900
	O2	0.939				0.939			
	O3	0.947				0.947			
Happiness at Work (Work Engagement)	HAT1.1	0.916	0.801	0.886	0.724	0.938	0.927	0.954	0.873
	HAT1.2	0.904							
	HAT1.3	0.717							
Happiness at Work (Job Satisfaction)	HAT2.1	0.916	0.803	0.885	0.720	0.974			
	HAT2.2	0.904							
	HAT2.3	0.717							
Happiness at Work (Affective Organizational Commitment)	HAT3.1	0.908	0.889	0.942	0.820	0.890			
	HAT3.2	0.857							
	HAT3.3	0.949							

Source: SmartPLS 3.0

The second-order outer model figure 3 shows that all indicators for each construct have high loading factor values, exceeding 0.70, indicating that they are valid and capable of representing the latent variables effectively. The measurement model was evaluated using factor loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, and AVE. As shown in Table 1, all indicators met the recommended criteria, indicating good validity and reliability (Hair et al., 2017).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker approach by comparing the square root of AVE values with correlations among constructs. The findings demonstrated that all first- and second-order constructs satisfied the required criteria, indicating strong measurement model validity and consistency (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, all indicators were considered appropriate for measuring the study variables.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

First-Order	Despotic Leadership	Happiness at Work 1	Happiness at Work 2	Happiness at Work 3	Job Crafting 1	Job Crafting 2	Optimistic
Despotic Leadership	0.778						
Happiness at Work 1	-0.532	0.929					
Happiness at Work 2	-0.525	0.887	0.922				
Happiness at Work 3	-0.453	0.708	0.835	0.905			
Job Crafting 1	-0.501	0.851	0.848	0.748	0.858		
Job Crafting 2	-0.356	0.724	0.647	0.419	0.774	0.896	
Optimistic	-0.457	0.884	0.750	0.494	0.830	0.852	0.949
Second-Order	Despotic Leadership	Happiness at Work			Job Crafting		Optimistic
Despotic Leadership	0.778						
Happiness at Work	-0.541	0.934					
Job Crafting	-0.468	0.868			0.940		
Optimistic	-0.457	0.777			0.907	0.949	

Source: SmartPLS 3.0

The study employed bootstrap analysis to assess the second-order model. Based on the R^2 criteria, values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 reflect high, moderate, and weak explanatory strength, respectively (Hair et al., 2019). Specifically, the adjusted R-Square values are 0.783 for happiness at work and 0.214 for job crafting, implying that despotic leadership and job crafting explain 78.3% of the variance in happiness at work, and despotic leadership accounts for 21.4% of the variance in job crafting. This model is categorized as “good”, particularly given the R-Square values above 0.67. The F-square test results indicate that despotic leadership has a weak effect on happiness at work with an f^2 value of 0.147 and a moderate effect on job crafting with an f^2 value of 0.280. Furthermore, the moderation effect shows an f^2 value of 0.051 on happiness at work, indicating a small moderating effect. Job crafting has the largest f^2 value of 0.586, demonstrating a strong effect on happiness at work. Meanwhile, the optimism variable has an f^2 value of only 0.013, indicating that its effect on happiness at work is very weak or almost negligible. In addition, the Q-square values were greater than zero, indicating that the model has adequate predictive relevance.

Table 3 reports the results of the structural model assessment, covering direct effects, mediation effects, and moderation effects. The results show that despotic leadership exerts a significant negative influence on happiness at work. The path coefficient of -0.207 indicates that increasing levels of despotic leadership are associated with lower employee happiness at work. This effect is statistically supported by a t-statistic of 3.744 and a p-value lower than 0.001. In addition, the standard error value of 0.055 suggests that the estimation error is relatively low, reflecting a

stable and reliable coefficient estimate. The confidence interval, ranging from -0.307 to -0.090 , does not cross zero, further confirming the significance and reliability of the relationship.

Table 3. General Hypothesis Testing

	Original Sample	Standard Error	T- Statistics	P- Values	CI Lower	CI Upper
<i>Direct Effect</i>						
Despotic Leadership → Happiness at Work	-0.207	0.055	3.744	0.000	-0.307	-0.090
Despotic Leadership → Job Crafting	-0.468	0.071	6.611	0.000	-0.616	-0.327
Job Crafting → Happiness at Work	0.845	0.077	10.942	0.000	-0.679	-0.989
Optimistic → Happiness at Work	-0.125	0.082	1.532	0.126	-0.285	-0.032
<i>Mediation Effect</i>						
Despotic Leadership → Job Crafting → Happiness at Work	-0.395	0.059	6.741	0.000	-0.512	-0.278
<i>Moderation Effect</i>						
Optimistic*Despotic Leadership → Happiness at Work	0.112	0.038	2.957	0.003	0.039	0.184

Source: SmartPLS 3.0

The results demonstrate that authoritarian leadership exerts a significant negative influence on job crafting. A coefficient of -0.468 suggests that increased levels of oppressive management notably diminish the tendency of employees to engage in job crafting activities. This connection is statistically meaningful, supported by a t-statistic of 6.611 and a p-value of less than 0.001. Precision in this estimation is confirmed by a standard error of 0.071, while the confidence interval, spanning from -0.616 to -0.327 , remains entirely below zero to reinforce the robustness of this negative impact. Conversely, job crafting is shown to have a substantial positive effect on professional happiness. With a coefficient of 0.845, individuals who actively refine their work tasks are significantly more likely to report higher levels of well-being, marking this as the most potent direct relationship within the model. This link is highly significant, evidenced by a t-statistic of 10.942 and a p-value under 0.001. A standard error of 0.077 reflects high estimation accuracy, and a confidence interval between 0.679 and 0.989 stays completely above zero, verifying the consistent and strong nature of this positive correlation.

The study further evaluated the influence of optimism on professional happiness, revealing that this personal trait does not possess a statistically significant impact. Despite a coefficient of -0.125 , the resulting t-statistic of 1.532 and a p-value of 0.126 fail to meet the standard 0.05 significance level. A standard error of 0.082 suggests a higher degree of estimation variability than other paths within the structural model. While the confidence interval lies between -0.285 and -0.032 , staying within a negative range, the data lacks sufficient statistical strength to establish a definitive direct correlation between optimism and workplace happiness in this context.

In terms of the mediation analysis, the findings indicate that job crafting serves as a significant intermediary in the link between authoritarian leadership and workplace happiness. An indirect effect coefficient of -0.395 suggests that despotic management negatively impacts happiness by suppressing the job crafting activities of employees. This mediation is statistically meaningful, supported by a t-statistic of 6.741 and a p-value of less than 0.001. A standard error of 0.059 confirms the precision of this indirect effect estimate. Furthermore, the confidence interval, which spans from -0.512 to -0.278 and does not include zero, validates the presence of this mediating mechanism. These data suggest that the reduction in either the opportunity or the motivation to engage in job crafting is a primary channel through which oppressive leadership erodes overall professional well-being.

The moderation analysis further demonstrates that the moderating variable significantly enhances happiness at work. The moderation coefficient of 0.112 reflects a positive moderating effect. This relationship is statistically significant, supported by a t-statistic of 2.957 and a p-value of 0.003. The standard error value of 0.038 indicates high estimation precision with relatively low variability. Furthermore, the confidence interval ranges from 0.039 to 0.184, remaining entirely

above zero, which confirms the strength and significance of the moderating effect. These findings suggest that the moderating variable reinforces the relationship within the structural model and contributes positively to employees' happiness at work.

The simple slope analysis based on the moderation results indicates that at low levels of optimism, the negative effect of despotic leadership on happiness at work tends to be stronger. Conversely, at high levels of optimism, the negative relationship becomes weaker. This finding suggests that optimism functions as a psychological resource that helps employees maintain workplace happiness despite being in a destructive leadership environment. Therefore, optimism can be understood as a protective factor that reduces the negative impact of despotic leadership on happiness at work.

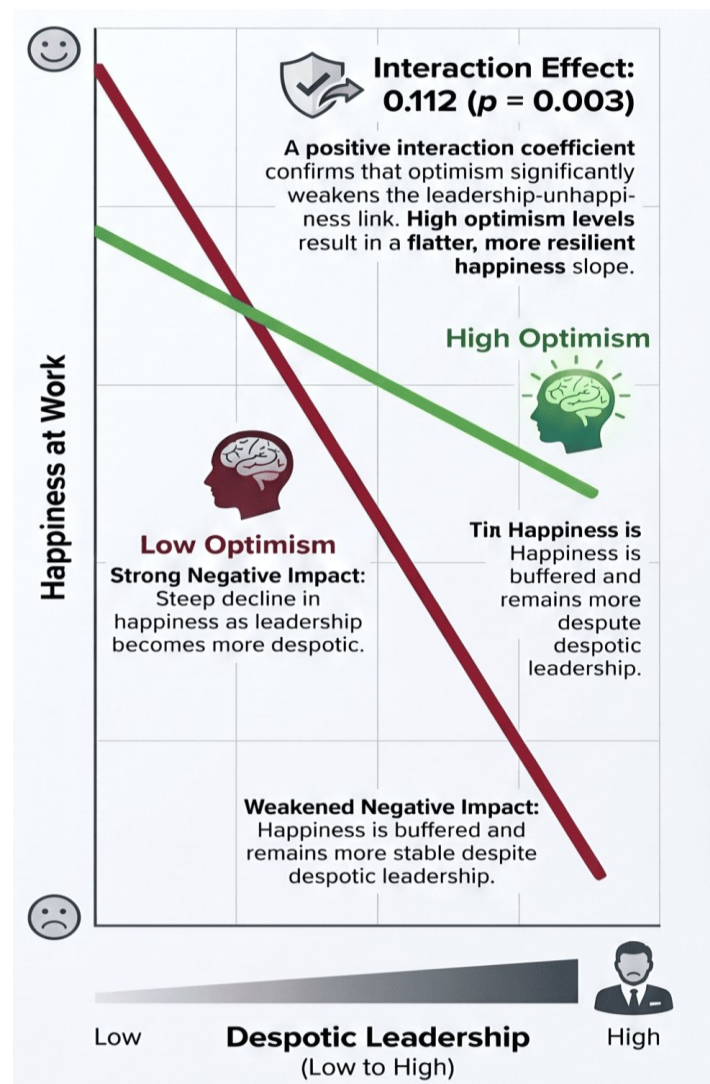


Figure 4. Simple Slope Analysis

Discussion

Despotic leadership and happiness at work

The current research illustrates that workplace happiness is significantly undermined by despotic leadership. When workers are managed by tyrannical figures—defined by their authoritarianism, inability to empathize, and resistance to delegating authority—they frequently experience a downturn in both job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. Essential components of professional well-being, such as resilience, enthusiasm, and an emotional bond with the institution, suffer under such leadership styles. These results support the conservation of resources theory, which suggests that stress arises when individuals face the exhaustion of their personal assets due to negative

circumstances (Holmgreen et al., 2017). By fostering a toxic climate through exploitation, manipulation, and unethical conduct, despotic leaders deplete the mental and emotional reserves of their subordinates (Khizar et al., 2023). Consequently, this resource drain fosters heightened stress and diminished happiness within the professional sphere, mirroring the conclusions reached by Naseer et al. (2016) and Raja et al. (2020).

In the context of Indonesian healthcare institutions, these effects may become more pronounced because employees tend to work within hierarchical structures characterized by strong authority relationships and high respect for seniority. In collectivistic and high-power distance cultures, employees are often reluctant to openly challenge or question authoritarian leaders, even when leadership behaviors negatively affect their well-being (Arrindell, 2003; Rockstuhl et al., 2011). Consequently, healthcare employees may suppress dissatisfaction and continue complying with despotic leadership practices, which gradually intensifies emotional strain and reduces workplace happiness. This finding highlights the importance of understanding how cultural values shape employee reactions to destructive leadership behaviors in non-Western healthcare settings.

Despotic leadership and job crafting

Research indicates that despotic leadership exerts a substantial adverse influence on the practice of employee job crafting. This finding reinforces the perspective that the caliber of the relationship between a leader and their subordinates is a fundamental determinant in fostering proactive workplace behaviors, such as job crafting (Xue & Woo, 2022). Job crafting encompasses actions that employees undertake to align their roles more closely with their skills and interests, such as implementing new approaches, adjusting task scope or type, or choosing additional responsibilities that better match their strengths. Job crafting also includes relationship-building efforts, such as fostering stronger social connections, participating in work-related social functions, or mentoring new colleagues. Despotic leadership (characterized by exploitative, narcissistic, and unforgiving behavior) creates an oppressive environment that drains employee resources, diminishing both the motivation and capacity for job crafting. In such settings, employees may feel that any attempts to modify or improve their work could be met with disapproval or even punishment.

For example, they may hesitate to take on new initiatives or introduce task changes due to fear of negative reactions from their leader. This environment limits employee innovation, hinders self-development, and reduces opportunities for organizations to benefit from enhanced employee performance and creativity. Such observations align with the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014), which posits that when staff members encounter intimidating behaviors—including narcissism, abusiveness, manipulation, and an unforgiving managerial nature (Naseer et al., 2016), they often resort to disengagement as a strategy to protect their remaining assets and avoid additional depletion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Consequently, individuals working under despotic leaders frequently suffer from increased emotional fatigue and psychological strain (Huang et al., 2020), which eventually stifles their task performance and discourages them from pursuing job crafting activities (Masood et al., 2021).

The Indonesian cultural context may further explain why employees under despotic leadership exhibit lower job crafting behavior. In high power distance environments, employees may perceive role modification or proactive changes as inappropriate because work structures are expected to follow leader directives rather than employee initiative (Kirkman et al., 2009). Within healthcare organizations, where formal authority and procedural compliance are strongly emphasized, employees may become increasingly cautious about engaging in proactive behaviors that could be interpreted as resistance or deviation from organizational norms. As a result, despotic leadership not only suppresses individual initiative but also reinforces passive work behaviors shaped by cultural expectations regarding authority and obedience.

Job crafting and happiness at work

Evidence suggests that job crafting exerts a powerful positive influence on employee happiness, as individuals who proactively shape their roles report elevated levels of professional well-being. By realigning their tasks to better suit their personal interests and competencies, employees foster a

deeper sense of motivation and engagement. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at developing robust social ties at work enhance happiness by fostering a supportive environment and a sense of communal connection. This heightened level of involvement results in increased satisfaction across various dimensions of employment, such as the inherent nature of the work, financial compensation, and prospects for professional growth. Additionally, engaging in job crafting strengthens an employee's emotional bond with their institution, cultivating a more profound sense of belonging and bolstering their long-term intent to stay. These results are consistent with the conservation of resources theory, which suggests that people are motivated to acquire, protect, and augment significant personal assets (Holmgreen et al., 2017). Ultimately, job crafting promotes greater job satisfaction, work engagement, and affective commitment, all of which serve as the building blocks of happiness in the workplace (Fisher, 2010).

In the Indonesian healthcare context, job crafting may also strengthen interpersonal harmony and collective cooperation among employees, which are highly valued within collectivistic cultures. Employees who actively build supportive relationships and adapt their work roles collaboratively are more likely to experience social acceptance and emotional support from coworkers. Such social connectedness may become an important source of workplace happiness, particularly in healthcare environments characterized by high emotional demands and teamwork dependence. This suggests that the positive effects of job crafting in collectivistic societies extend beyond individual fulfillment and also contribute to stronger relational and social well-being at work.

Despotic leadership and happiness at work: job crafting as mediator

The findings from the mediation analysis demonstrate that job crafting serves as a complete mediator between despotic leadership and workplace happiness, with the former significantly hindering the latter by suppressing proactive work behaviors. When subjected to despotic leadership, employees often lack the drive and the autonomy required to modify their professional roles, leading to a measurable decline in their overall job satisfaction. On the other hand, the ability to engage in job crafting allows workers to realign their tasks with their personal interests, thereby boosting their happiness. This dynamic aligns with the conservation of resources theory, which posits that people strive to maintain or reclaim essential resources when faced with external stressors (Holmgreen et al., 2017). Within this framework, job crafting acts as a strategic approach to resource management, enabling individuals to alter their tasks, social connections, and mental perceptions of their roles to build resilience (Luu, 2021). Ultimately, these adjustments foster a more significant sense of purpose at work, which directly improves employee well-being (Ruparel et al., 2022).

This mediating mechanism appears particularly relevant in Indonesian healthcare institutions, where hierarchical organizational systems may limit employees' perceived autonomy in modifying their work roles. Under despotic leadership, employees may avoid expressing creativity or initiating work adjustments because maintaining conformity and respect toward authority figures is culturally prioritized. Consequently, employees lose opportunities to improve work meaning, social interaction, and personal control over their tasks, all of which are essential contributors to workplace happiness. These findings indicate that the negative impact of despotic leadership on happiness may become stronger in collectivistic and high-power distance contexts because employees tend to internalize restrictive leadership conditions rather than openly resisting them.

Despotic leadership and happiness at work: optimistic as moderation

The moderation analysis indicates that the interaction between despotic leadership and optimism significantly impacts happiness at work, though optimism lacks a direct statistical effect on happiness itself. This suggests that optimism serves primarily as a protective buffer rather than an independent driver of well-being in this specific context. Workers possessing high levels of optimism—defined as maintaining positive expectations for the future—demonstrate a greater capacity to navigate the stressors associated with despotic leadership (Carver et al., 2010). By

bolstering personal resilience, optimism enables these individuals to sustain their morale despite hostile management. While this contradicts some earlier literature that suggests optimism inherently increases happiness (Pflug, 2009), it aligns with evidence showing that optimism functions effectively to neutralize the damage caused by negative workplace environments, such as job instability (Zheng et al., 2014).

The moderating role of optimism may be especially important within Indonesian healthcare organizations characterized by collectivistic values and high-power distance. In such contexts, employees often avoid direct confrontation with leaders and may prefer adaptive coping mechanisms to maintain workplace harmony and professional relationships. Optimistic employees are therefore more likely to reinterpret negative leadership experiences in a constructive manner, maintain emotional stability, and continue functioning effectively despite despotic treatment. This finding suggests that optimism acts as an important psychological coping resource in cultures where employees may feel constrained from openly challenging authoritarian leadership behaviors. Furthermore, within healthcare environments that require emotional endurance and continuous interaction with patients, optimism may help employees preserve psychological balance and sustain workplace happiness even under adverse leadership conditions. These findings support previous international studies emphasizing the importance of personal psychological resources in reducing the harmful effects of destructive leadership in high-stress organizational settings (Avey et al., 2011; Luthans, 2004).

Conclusion and Implications

This study shows that despotic leadership significantly undermines employee happiness and job crafting behavior. Leaders with despotic tendencies create work conditions that restrict autonomy, drain psychological resources, and suppress employees' initiative to reshape their tasks and relationships at work, ultimately reducing their happiness. Job crafting mediates this negative influence, while optimism buffers its impact. Consistent with conservation of resources theory, optimism functions as a vital psychological resource that helps employees preserve adaptability when leadership becomes a resource threat.

This research contributes meaningful insights to the academic discourse on despotic leadership and employee well-being by specifically examining workplace happiness and job crafting. The results demonstrate that despotic leadership depletes personal resources, diminishes happiness, and discourages employees from taking proactive steps to refine their professional roles, providing empirical proof that such leadership stifles motivation and engagement. Crucially, the study identifies job crafting as a complete mediator in the link between despotic leadership and happiness, while optimism acts as a moderator that weakens the intensity of this negative impact. These observations are consistent with the conservation of resources theory, emphasizing how individuals strive to safeguard their assets during periods of threat, with optimism serving as a vital psychological asset. Practically, organizations should prioritize leadership development programs that foster supportive management styles to cultivate a healthier organizational culture. Furthermore, implementing initiatives that build optimism, resilience, and job crafting autonomy can empower employees to restructure their work, ultimately driving higher levels of engagement, satisfaction, and affective commitment.

Several limitations characterize this study, beginning with its cross-sectional design, which prevents the establishment of definitive causal links. Furthermore, the findings may lack broad generalizability because the sample was confined specifically to healthcare professionals within Riau Province, potentially limiting its relevance to other regions or industries. The data collection method, which utilized online self-report surveys, also presents a risk of social desirability bias, as participants might have skewed their responses regarding negative feelings or job crafting to appear more positive. Finally, the research model is limited in scope, focusing exclusively on job crafting and optimism as resource-based mechanisms; it omits other significant variables, including social support from colleagues, the broader organizational culture, and how leaders perceive their own management styles, all of which could play a role in determining employee well-being.

Future studies should employ longitudinal or multi-wave designs to better capture resource loss-gain dynamics over time, consistent with conservation of resources theory. Subsequent research would also benefit from expanding samples across diverse healthcare sub-sectors. Integrating mixed-method approaches (e.g., interviews, focus groups, or observational data) could further mitigate response bias and enrich explanation of behavioral patterns. Investigating additional resource-based buffers (such as coworker support, team psychological capital, and inclusive supervisory climate) and incorporating leaders' perspectives would deepen understanding of how despotic leadership impacts wellbeing and adaptive work behaviors.

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