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PERFORMATIVE ETHICS OR GENUINE CARE IN HIGHER EDUCATION? MIXED-METHODS EVIDENCE ON THE LURKING ROLE OF LEADER DARK TRIAD TRAIT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of ethical leadership (EL) in shaping ethical climate (EC) within higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on how Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits – Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – moderate the relationship between EL and EC. In response to increasing demands for ethical behavior in academia, this research explores whether EL is genuinely enacted or merely a performative façade. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. The quantitative analysis included 700 participants, assessing path coefficients, moderating effects, and the reliability of constructs. The results revealed that EL positively influences EC (path coefficient = 0.60), but LDT traits, particularly narcissism and psychopathy, significantly moderate this relationship. Qualitative interviews with faculty members revealed themes of care-washing, ethical manipulation, and image-driven leadership behaviors. The findings suggest that while EL fosters a positive ethical climate, dark traits distort this relationship, creating a strategic façade rather than a genuine commitment to ethics. This study contributes to the literature by redefining EL in the context of dark leadership traits and introducing the concept of "performative ethics." It highlights the need for authentic ethical leadership practices and offers insights for leadership screening and ethical climate audits in HEIs.

KEYWORDS: Ethical Leadership In Higher Education; Leader Dark Triad Traits; Ethical Climate In Heis; Machi-Avellianism And Ethical Leadership; Narcissism And Ethical Climate; Psychopathy In Higher Education Leadership; Performative Ethics In Organizations; Ethical Climate Audits In Universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) face an increasing demand for ethical leadership, driven by a rising number of scandals and governance failures that have drawn public scrutiny (Bohlens, 2025). These incidents underscore the importance of ethics in academia, where universities serve as knowledge-producing entities and as social institutions responsible for shaping future leaders and citizens (Gonçalves, 2024). As HEIs are increasingly held accountable for fostering environments of integrity, fairness, and transparency, the role of ethical leadership becomes critical. Ethical leadership (EL) has emerged as a focal point in shaping organizational ethical climates, particularly in the public and educational sectors (Al Halbusi et al., 2021).

Based on the transformational and social learning theories, the ethical leadership theory focuses on the leadership role in developing EB and creating organizational climates. Nonetheless, the practical process of realizing EL is multifaceted and difficult (Ayodele et al., 2019). Diverse academic and non-academic communities merge in HEIs, which is why the ethics of leadership may experience tensions between organizational purposes, personal values, and societies (Gonçalves, 2024). Moreover, an ethical climate (EC), including shared views of ethical behavior in an institution, is imperative to creating an environment where integrity and accountability are the main focus (Din et al., 2025; Kumar & Ramraj, 2025).

Although EL is commonly viewed as a key to building a positive EC, whether it is an EL or a performative one is understudied (Herrera, 2024). An ethical climate might seem to flourish in such institutions, yet its genuineness can be doubted, particularly when the leadership fails to concentrate on ethical conduct and instead controls people's perceptions (Duignan, 2020). It has been proven that leaders usually face many moral situations in which their actions can be inconsistent with their stated ethical values (Moore et al., 2019). The fact that leaders tend to strategically manipulate their image to misrepresent their organizations and present them as ethical despite the contrary highlights the idea of care-washing when it comes to branding organizations.

There is a significant gap in the literature that links the overlap between Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits, Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and their associated effects on EL and EC in higher education. The existing studies are mainly concentrated on positive leadership characteristics

and their impact on organizational out-comes. Nonetheless, little consideration is given to how EL can be changed by the dark personality traits into strategic image management and a performative façade at the expense of authentic EC (Shen & Lei, 2022). This study attempts to address this gap in the literature by analyzing the moderating influence of LDT traits on the EL-EC relationship, which transforms EL into a performative expression instead of an actual dedication.

This study presents the two-fold nature of EL in HEIs and the effects of LDT traits on the authenticity of the ethical climate. With the emphasis on both positive and negative aspects of leadership, this study examines the authenticity of ECs and whether they are ethically built or strategic. The research is based on a mixed-methods design conducted using both quantitative analysis and qualitative observations of semi-structured interviews with faculty members. This approach offers an insight into the entirety of ethical leadership relations in HEIs.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does ethical leadership influence ethical climate in higher education institutions?

RQ2: To what extent do Leader Dark Triad traits moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical climate?

RQ3: How do Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy differentially impact the perception of ethical climate authenticity in higher education institutions?

To answer these questions, this study fulfills the following research objectives:

RO1: To analyze the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical climate in higher education.

RO2: To investigate the moderating effects of Leader Dark Triad traits on this relationship.

RO3: To explore how these traits contribute to forming a performative ethical climate.

This study employs a mixed-methods research methodology in which quantitative data were obtained by conducting a survey to measure EL, LDT traits, and EC, and qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews among 8-10 faculty members. The quantitative data sample consists of 700 participants. The qualitative component employs thematic analysis to reveal more about understanding ethical leadership perceptions. Using both approaches allowed for the triangulation of results and provided an in-depth insight into the connection between leadership and organizational

ethics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethical Leadership (EL)

EL has attracted a lot of concern in organizational studies, particularly within higher education settings, where leaders are supposed to demonstrate ethical conduct that fosters fairness, transparency, and accountability (Brigue & Orlu, 2023). Keck et al. (2020) describe ethical leadership as portraying normatively proper behavior regarding personal actions and interpersonal relationships (Keck et al., 2020). Ethical leadership is not only about following ethical codes; it is about being a person of integrity, fairness, and caring about others (Sharma et al., 2019). EL impacts the development of organizational ethical norms, the shaping of employee behavior, and the formation of a moral climate in which a company is guided by its values.

The concept of EL can be divided into several dimensions. Sharma et al. (2019) developed an all-embracing seven-component model of EL: people orientation (care about others), fairness, power sharing, role clarification, integrity, ethical guidance, and sustainability (Sharma et al., 2019). These dimensions indicate a leader's capacity to influence other people's ethical actions, particularly in organizations with complex environments, such as HEIs. When such dimensions are evident in leaders, followers receive moral direction that has a ripple effect on an institution's ethical norms. For example, ethical leaders can shape ethical climates through moral modeling conducive to the culture of trust and respect (Al Halbusi et al., 2021).

The beneficial effects of EL on EC are well documented. The studies also consistently report the finding that when leadership engages in practices with high ethical standards, employees tend to internalize such behaviors and subsequently implement those ethical standards (Zheng et al., 2022). For example, fairness and integrity among academic leaders increase the likelihood of ethical decision-making and integrity actions among faculty and staff in higher education institutions (Setiawan, 2024). Moreover, EL also improves organizational citizenship behavior, where employees become willing to engage in actions that are beneficial to the institution, beyond their stipulated jobs (C Meniado, 2021).

2.2. Ethical Climate (EC)

Ethical climate (EC) is a social construct of shared perceptions and behaviors pertaining to ethical conduct in an organization (Kuenzi et al., 2020). The

foundational work by Victor and Cullen (1988) on EC defined several types of ethical climates: a law and code climate, which focuses on compliance with external legal standards, and a caring climate, which focuses on relationships and well-being (Robins, 2022). In contrast, an instrumental climate is based on personal profitability and results that may enable unethical actions if they benefit the organization (Sheedy et al., 2021). A rules climate appreciates adherence to internal organizational policies, and its preoccupation with bureaucratic control can consider moral aspects.

The development of norms by employees is the primary concern of organizational ethics regarding the role of EC. Al Halbusi et al. (2021) asserted that the organizational climate significantly impacts how employees adopt and respond to ethical dilemmas. An ethical behavior is enhanced through a positive EC, which is defined by fairness, transparency, and accountability, as it creates a clear guideline for the employees (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). On the other hand, an unhealthy or unclear EC may result in ethical dissonance, and this is when employees behave in an unethical manner because of mixed or unclear ethical messages from those in leadership (Veetikazhi et al., 2022). Additionally, EC is important in developing moral awareness since employees are likely to imitate ethical practices demonstrated by leaders and ingrained in the organizational culture (Pasricha et al., 2018).

2.3. Leader Dark Triad (LDT) Traits

The Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits, which comprise Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, play a crucial role in the part that negative leadership characteristics can play in misshaping organizational morals (Elbers, 2025). These attributes are commonly linked with manipulative, self-seeking, and affectless conduct, which could corrupt ethical leadership and compromise integrity within the organization. Machiavellianism is described as a strategic manipulation tactic that uses deception and personal gain to disadvantage other people. Machiavellian leaders are skilled at manipulating ethical standards to advance their agendas and appear morally right (Sangadzhiev et al.). This type of ethical deception enables leaders to establish the appearance of justice and care about others, although they have self-interested initiatives, and this phenomenon weakens the genuineness of the ethical atmosphere (Bereczkei, 2018).

EL can also be distorted by narcissism, whose characteristics are the feeling of entitlement, a need

to be admired, and grandiosity. Narcissistic leaders usually appear ethical to manage their image, in other words, to increase their reputation, and thus they do not create real ECs (Zaghmout & Balogun, 2025). Davis (2023) argues that taking care of employees might not be part of the priorities of narcissistic leaders, which can result in care-washing, when ethical conduct is applied by leaders as a strategic decision to promote themselves instead of a morally driven action (Davis, 2023).

The inability to experience emotions, impulsivity, and a lack of empathy or guilt result in psychopathy, which causes unethical actions to be justified and rationalized (Dias-Oliveira et al., 2021). Leaders who are psychopaths could turn a blind eye to ethical considerations and make decisions regardless of whether they are ethically right or wrong, thus creating an unhealthy atmosphere in which inappropriate behaviors are considered as a part of the norm (Werhane et al., 2019). The psychological feature of psychopathy known as moral disengagement enables leaders to create an illusion of ethical leadership without participating in actions that threaten the integrity of an organization (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019). The two traits play a crucial role in an ethical climate of an organization, and Machiavellianism and narcissism are associated with reduced trust and commitment in employees, as the interests of such leaders are the priority rather than those of the entire organization (Chughtai et al., 2022).

2.4. Theoretical Foundations

2.4.1. Toxic Triangle

The Toxic Triangle theory offers a model of how the combination of destructive leadership, vulnerable followers, and enabling environments interacts (de Sales, 2020). The theory is of special importance to the LDT traits, as it explains how Machiavellian, narcissistic, and psychopathic leaders take advantage of organizational weaknesses to manipulate and control employees. In institutions of higher learning, leaders whose LDT traits are at high levels can establish an atmosphere of fear, manipulation, and compliance that undermines the ethical atmosphere (Cushman, 2022). The Toxic Triangle theory suggests that destructive leadership behaviors are not only the consequence of personal characteristics but are also encouraged by organizational cultures that do not have ethical supervision or promote hierarchical power systems.

2.4.2. Jung's Shadow Theory

The Shadow Theory of Jung (1959) states that

every person possesses repressed or concealed unconscious traits and behaviors. In leadership, the shadow symbolizes the darker and mostly unethical part of the personality of a leader that is not easily observed but may affect behavior in minute ways (Perry & Tower, 2023). Schaubroeck et al. (2021) claim that leaders can present themselves as morally superior, whereas their shadow qualities, including narcissism or psychopathy, can be observed through their manipulative or unethical behavior (De Vries & Balazs, 2011). These covert characteristics may result in ethical dissonance within an organization, as the leader's behavior goes against the values that the leader holds to be ethical, damaging trust and authenticity. The role of Shadow Theory in the study of leadership reveals that EL is multi dimensional, and even ethical leaders might be disguising their dark intentions that mis-represent their effects on organizational ethics (Dodamgoda, 2024).

2.4.3. Care-Washing As Organizational Branding

Care-washing refers to performative declarations of care, empathy, or social responsibility by organizations that are not committed to these principles. Care-washing can also occur in higher education, where leaders might market a policy or perform public rhetoric of employee well-being or ethical behavior but do not substantively practice such values in their organizations (Ahtoy, 2025). This effect is especially strong when high narcissism leaders use ethical branding for personal gain or reputation safeguarding and fail to produce actual changes in the organizational behavior (Ley, 2023). Care-washing is a part of a larger process of commodifying ethical values to sell to audiences instead of living them, as institutional branding mismatches organizational ethics.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

3.1. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model of this study is based on the association of EL and EC under the influence of the traits of the LDT, which consists of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. The model argues that EL creates a healthy EC in organizations, but the introduction of LDT traits may interrupt or misrepresent this connection and make ethical EL a mere performance or a superficial attitude, usually known as care-washing.

According to the model, although EL positively influences EC, the efficiency of EL depends on the

presence of LDT traits. In particular, LDT characteristics can alter the correlation between EL and EC since they are likely to interfere with the genuineness of ethical actions, especially when such characteristics manifest in the leadership style. For example, leaders with high Machiavellianism can use ethical standards to their advantage to corrupt the beneficial effects of EL on EC. Equally, narcissistic

leaders can also apply EL to improve their image, giving the impression of ethics that they do not necessarily practice within the organization, resulting in care-washing. Furthermore, the psychopathic leader, who lacks empathy and adherence to ethical norms, can break the association between EL and EC completely, exposing employees to a poison-ous ethical culture.

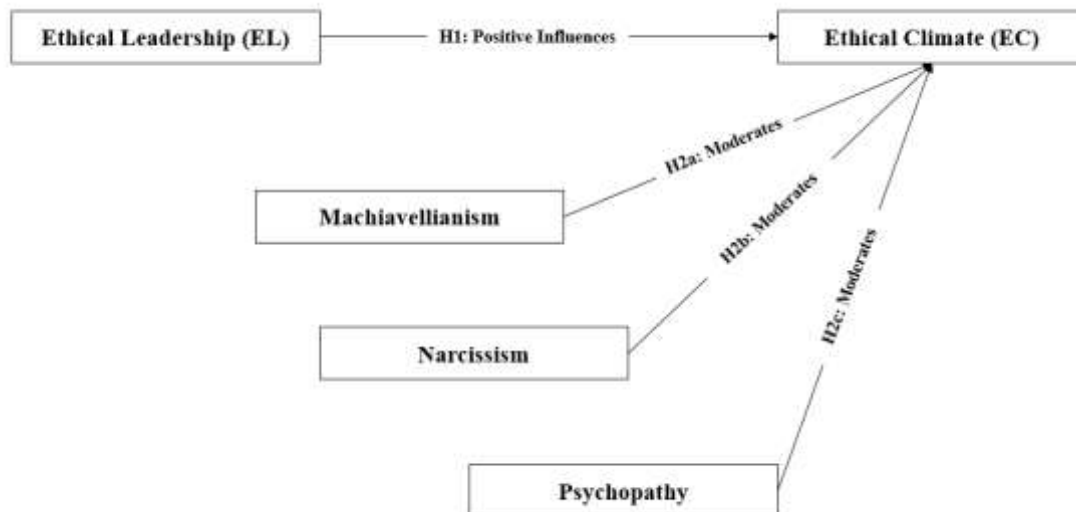


Figure 1: Conceptual Model Of The Moderating Role Of Dark Triad Traits. This Model Illustrates The Hypothesized Relationships Between Ethical Leadership And Ethical Climate In Higher Education Institutions, Moderated By Leader Dark Triad Traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, And Psychopathy).

3.2. Hypotheses

H1. Ethical leadership positively influences ethical climate.

According to this hypothesis, there is a close positive correlation between EL and EC, which is grounded on the assumption that EL provides an atmosphere that pro-motes ethical conduct. The available studies confirm that ethical leadership, as a way of role modeling good conduct and ethical decision-making, helps foster a favorable organizational climate (Kim & Vandenberghe, 2020; Kuenzi et al., 2020). This hypothe-sis is the basis of considering ethical leadership in determining organizational norms.

H2. The Dark Triad moderates the relationship between EL and EC.

According to this hypothesis, LDT traits, which are Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, moderate the association between EL and EC. In particular, whereas EL is likely to positively influence EC, the presence of dark leadership qualities can de-crease, misrepresent, or neutralize this influence. The moderation hypothesis is con-

structed based on the fact that LDT characteristics may disrupt the genuine nature of leadership behaviors, transforming them into artificial or performative actions (Shaw-VanBuskirk et al., 2019). This study focuses on how every LDT trait influences the effi-ciency of ethical leadership in creating an ethical climate.

H2a. Machiavellianism moderates the EL-EC relationship such that higher Machia-vellianism weakens this association.

This hypothesis proposes that a higher level of Machiavellianism, which is a sneaky and tactical deceptive behavior, corrupts the positive correlation between EL and EC. Machiavellian leaders use ethically manipulative behavior to advance their in-terests, despite their external appearance of fairness and morality. Such an inclination to self-interest rather than overall good can disrupt the ethical atmosphere, corroding the positive impact of EL. Moreover, Machiavellian traits are associated with unethical decision-making and organizational behavior, which may reduce the authenticity of an ethical climate (Hussain et al., 2021).

H2b. Narcissism moderates the EL-EC

relationship such that higher narcissism leads to a distorted or superficial perception of ethical climate (care-washing).

This hypothesis proposes that narcissistic leaders, characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a need for admiration, may distort the relationship between EL and EC. Narcissistic leaders may use EL as a tool for self-promotion, creating an illusion of ethical behavior unsupported by substantive actions (Den Hartog et al., 2020). The concept of care-washing, where organizations display an outward commitment to ethical practices without genuine implementation, is especially relevant here. Narcissistic leaders may engage in performative ethical behaviors to enhance their public image rather than foster an authentic ethical climate.

H2c. Psychopathy moderates the EL-EC relationship by severing the link between leader guidance and ethical consistency across the organization.

This last hypothesis implies that psychopathic leaders, who are characterized by emotional detachment, impulsivity, and a lack of empathy, could undermine the correlation between EL and EC altogether. Psychopathy is also known to be accompanied by the absence of any consideration of ethical principles, and a psychopathic leader will most likely lead to actions that, in turn, provide a toxic organizational atmosphere (Boddy, 2021). Lack of care for the well-being of others, in addition to the power of a leader to manipulate and coerce subordinates, could compromise the ethical integrity of the organization, irrespective of the ethical posturing of the leader. Psychopathy might establish an ethical vacuum, or a situation when ethical leadership is substituted by exploitation and fear, eventually destroying the ethical climate.

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1. Research Design

This study followed a mixed-methods design comprising an integration of quantitative and qualitative research designs to achieve an in-depth picture of the relationships between EL, LDT features, and EC in HEIs (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). The quantitative component allowed a confirmatory examination of the links between the constructs using a sophisticated statistical method, namely, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), to examine the propositions of the relationships. The qualitative part, in turn, provided an exploratory study via semi-structured interviews, and it was possible to gain further information about the perception and practice of

ethical leadership in HEIs. Combining the two methods also ensures the re-liability of this study and allows for consideration of the specifics of personal experiences. A sequential design was used to collect and analyze quantitative data, followed by the collection of qualitative data to provide depth to the initial results and place them into perspective. Qualitative information assisted in describing the quantitative data, particularly when intricate or unforeseen relationships between the results are generated by the statistical evaluation, which further contributes to the rigor of the re-search (Bergin, 2018).

3.2. Sample

In the quantitative part, the sample comprised 700 workers of higher education establishments, academic employees (faculty members), and administrative staff. The purposive sampling method was utilized to identify people with suitable knowledge and experience of EL practices and perceptions of EC. The purposive sampling procedure provided the participants with the knowledge of leadership dynamics in the academic setting and, hence, was well placed to yield important information on the re-search questions (Ocheme et al., 2023). Participant recruitment was conducted through the voluntary sampling method, whereby workers were invited to participate in the research and provided with a thorough overview of the objectives.

In the qualitative aspect, 8 faculty members were sampled using purposive sampling. This small sample was in line with the standards of qualitative research as the sample size is large enough to capture rich and detailed information and small enough to be manageable regarding thematic analysis. Leaders in their institutions were selected from diverse backgrounds to include varied experiences and views on ethical leadership and its influence on the ethical climate. Ethical considerations were strictly followed during the study. All of the participants were required to provide informed consent, and their answers were anonymous and kept confidential. Data security measures were implemented, and only the research team has access to the data.

3.3. Quantitative Instruments

In this research, several important variables were evaluated to examine the dynamics of ethical leadership among higher learning institutions. EL was evaluated using a scale of 38 items to assess the key dimensions, including care, integrity, sustainability, accountability, fairness, trust, and clarity. The

latest theoretical models of ethical leadership, especially those of Brown & Treviñ (2014), were used to derive these di-mensions. The scale was extensively tested in organizational studies and has proved re-lia-ble and applicable in the assessment of ethical leadership within HEIs (Brown & Treviño, 2014). The scale fully evaluates EL by assessing both the actions of leaders and interpersonal behavior.

The Moderating Variable, LDT traits, entailed a 12-item scale that involves three different traits, which are Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. All three traits were assessed based on a series of items: Machiavellianism (Items 1-4), narcis-sism (Items 5-8), and psychopathy (Items 9-12). The scale was founded on established measures and has been proven by leadership studies (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The se-lection of these dark traits as moderators was based on the current literature, which indicated that these traits can profoundly twist leadership behaviors and affect an or-ganization's EC. These characteristics can contribute to care-washing when leaders create an ethical image but are not truly devoted to ethics.

EC was measured using a 26-item scale that included the dimensions of fairness, transparency, accountability, and ethical decision-making. Cullen et al. (1993) created this scale, which is one of the most popular tools for measuring organizational ethical climates. This scale has been proven to be highly reliable and valid, thus making it op-timal to measure the influence of ethical leadership on perceived ethical climate in HEIs (Cullen et al., 1993).

Pre-testing and pilot testing were carried out to ensure these measurement in-struments are clear, relevant, and reliable. This first phase was conducted on a smaller sample size of 100 participants in the same or similar institutions. This assisted in as-certaining any ambiguity in the wording and/or possible problems with the scales so that the researchers were able to improve the instruments prior to commencing the main data collection process. The pre-test feedback made the instruments contextually and methodologically fit in the context of higher education.

3.4. Quantitative Analysis (PLS-SEM via SmartPLS)

In this study, the quantitative component employed Partial Least Squares Struc-tural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM is a powerful statistical approach to study complex relationships between latent variables, and it is especially appropriate to deal with non-normally distributed data or when dealing with small samples.

The analysis was performed in steps to ensure rigorous data pro-cessing and interpretation.

3.4.1. Data Preparation and Cleaning

Data cleaning was the first procedure carried out in the quantitative analysis pro-cess. This included filling in missing data and outliers and ensuring the data matched the assumptions necessary for a statistical analysis. Missing data was addressed using multiple imputation methods, which is regarded as the best approach to maintaining the integrity of the data and reducing bias in the findings. In this way, missing data did not undermine the statistical power of the analysis, which was particularly important for studies that focus on moderating relationships.

3.4.2. Measurement Model Evaluation

A test of the measurement model was carried out to check whether the indicators were measuring the constructs sufficiently. In PLS-SEM, the measurement model was evaluated using several criteria. The reliability was determined based on the composite reliability (CR), and a CR value of more than 0.70 implies good internal consistency of the questions. Convergent validity was measured using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with an AVE of 0.50 or above being acceptable, and thus the items would be sufficient to measure the construct. The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio tested the discriminant validity (Haji-Othman & Yusuff, 2022). An HTMT value of less than 0.85 indicates good discriminant validity, which implies that the constructs are not similar to one another.

3.4.3. Structural Model Evaluation

Once the measurement model was accepted, the structural model was assessed and the hypothesized relationships between the latent variables were tested. The path coefficients were used as the evaluation criterion, showing the nature of relationships between EL and EC, as well as the moderating role of LDT traits. The R2 (Coefficient of Determination) value of every endogenous latent variable (i.e., EC) was obtained. A substantial effect is indicated by values of R2 above 0.25, which is a high value in social science (Cohen, 1988). The f2 effect size was computed to determine the effect of each of the predictors on the endogenous constructs, with the small, medium, and large effects being interpreted as 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, respectively (AlWahaibi et al., 2020).

3.4.4. Model Fit Evaluation

Lastly, the Standardized Root Mean Square

Residual (SRMR) determined the model's fit. According to Asparouhov & Muthén (2018), an SRMR that is less than 0.08 means that the model fits the data well (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2018).

3.5. Qualitative Component

The qualitative component of this study comprised the semi-structured interviews of 8 faculty members of different HEIs, which were identified with the help of purposive sampling. This methodology guaranteed the invitation of people with corresponding leadership experience. The interview guide considered significant dimensions of EL and EC, with the use of open-ended questions, which helped to elucidate extensive responses. Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a manual thematic analysis.

This analysis commenced with a review of the transcripts several times, followed by open coding to identify text marked with important concepts. These preliminary codes were then summarized and allocated into different groups to establish the emerging themes regarding EL and EC. This study examined and elaborated on such themes and ensured they aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. Where needed, themes were manipulated for clarity and precision. The themes were then defined and named, and a clear relationship with the research questions was drawn. The final report presented these themes, supported by direct quotes from participants, to explain the reported data in-depth. Lastly, data saturation was monitored during the data collection and analysis process, and interviews ended when there were no new themes to be identified to collect complete data. The methodical process of thematic analysis, inter-coder reliability, and saturation ensured credible and realistic results based on the participants' experiences that support this study's aims.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Quantitative Results

4.1.1. Reliability Of Constructs

Table 1 shows the reliability and validity of the three most important constructs: EC, EL, and LDT traits. These constructs have Cronbach's alpha values well above the acceptable value of 0.70, implying that the constructs have high internal consistency. In particular, ethical climate (0.935), ethical leadership (0.950), and Leadership Triad (0.902) have high reliability. Moreover, the values of composite reliability (ρ_a and ρ_c) further support this

consistency as the results of all constructs are above the 0.70 cutoff mark. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values of these constructs were as follows: ethical climate (0.384), ethical leadership (0.360), and Leadership Triad (0.483). However, these values are lower than 0.50, which is the ideal value regarding good convergent validity. Although these values are not ideal, they are acceptable in exploratory research, especially with large samples or complex constructs. All in all, this study has high construct reliability, but these results indicate the need for enhanced convergent validity.

While traditional guidelines suggest that an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value of 0.50 or higher is desirable to demonstrate convergent validity, this threshold should not be applied rigidly particularly in exploratory research using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). In this study, AVE values for Ethical Leadership (AVE = 0.360) and Ethical Climate (AVE = 0.384) are below the conventional cutoff. However, both constructs exhibit strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.93 and composite reliability (CR) values above 0.94 (see Table 1). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), when composite reliability is high, convergent validity can still be considered adequate even if AVE is slightly below 0.50, especially when constructs are theoretically grounded and empirically distinct. Furthermore, recent PLS-SEM methodological literature supports this view, emphasizing that in exploratory studies especially those introducing novel constructs or under-researched relationships AVE thresholds may be relaxed if the model exhibits strong reliability and theoretical coherence (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2017). Given this study's exploratory aim to empirically frame "performative ethics" in higher education leadership, and its robust construct reliability, the model's convergent validity remains well-supported despite the AVE values being marginally below 0.50.

Table 1. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity Indicators. This table presents reliability and validity metrics for the study's core constructs, including Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability (ρ_a and ρ_c), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs demonstrate excellent internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.90$), affirming strong reliability. While AVE values for Ethical Leadership and Ethical Climate fall below the 0.50 threshold, they remain acceptable in exploratory PLS-SEM research due to high construct reliability, supporting the model's convergent validity.

Table 1: Construct Reliability And Validity

Construct reliability and validity				
Overview				
	0.935	0.937	0.942	0.384
	0.950	0.954	0.954	0.360
	0.902	0.906	0.918	0.483

4.2. Structural Model Evaluation

4.2.1. Path Coefficients

The path analysis coefficient of this study shows the correlations between ethical leadership, dark triad traits, and ethical climate in HEIs. The relationship between the first path, EL, and EC is strongly positive, meaning that EL plays a major part in influencing the development of a positive ethical climate. The second avenue, EL to LDT traits, shows a moderate positive correlation, indicating that ethical leadership can only minimize dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) but does not completely remove them. The third path, the LDT traits to EC, demonstrates a less negative influence, which means that even though dark triad traits can negatively affect EC, they do not have such a direct effect that can be prevented by EL. Overall, this study emphasizes the paramount position of ethical leadership in forming ethical behavior and organizational values in HEIs; moreover, the characteristics of dark leadership are also less important.

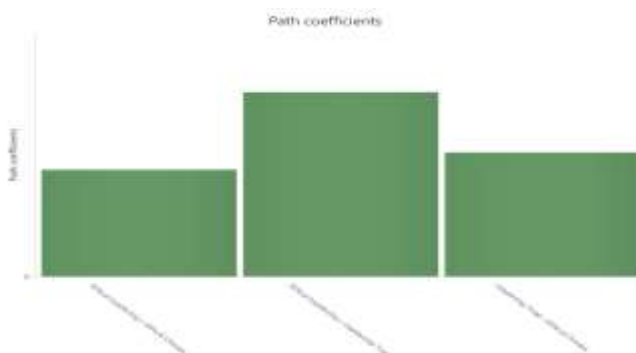


Figure 2: Structural Path Coefficients: Ethical Leadership, Leader Dark Triad Traits, and Ethical

Climate in HEIs. 5.1.2.2. R-Square. This figure displays the standardized path coefficients derived from the PLS-SEM analysis, clarifying the strength and direction of relationships among Ethical Leadership (EL), Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits, and Ethical Climate (EC) in higher education institutions. The model confirms EL's strong positive effect on EC, a moderate positive link between EL and LDT traits, and a weak negative effect of LDT traits on EC. These results empirically support the study's central proposition: while EL significantly promotes an ethical climate, its influence is partially disrupted when LDT traits are present, signalling the risk of performative ethics under dark leadership conditions.

The R-squared values in the research show the fit of the model to explain the variance in EC and LDT traits in HEIs. The EC R-squared value is 0.797, which implies that the model explains 79.7 percent of the variance, and hence, a good fit exists, and EC is highly affected by factors such as EL and LDT traits. The Adjusted R-squared value of 0.797 further proves that the model is consistent and not overfitting. In the case of the Leadership Triad, the R-squared value stands at 0.577, which denotes that the model covered 57.7 percent of the variance in the dark leadership traits, including Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Even though this value is low, it indicates moderate explanatory power. The adjusted R-squared value is 0.576, which indicates that other factors might affect these traits. The model successfully explains the ethical climate but reflects only a portion of the variance in the Leadership Triad.

Table 2. R-Square and Adjusted R-Square Values for Key Constructs. This table reports the explanatory power of the model for Ethical Climate and Leader Dark Triad traits. The R² value of 0.797 for Ethical Climate indicates that nearly 80% of its variance is explained by the predictors in the model, suggesting a strong model fit. The R² of 0.577 for LDT traits reflects moderate explanatory power, supporting the theoretical assumption that Ethical Leadership influences dark leadership tendencies to a meaningful extent.

	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square
Ethical Climate	0.797	0.797
Leadership Triad	0.577	0.576

4.2.2. F-Squared Value

This study's F-squared values show the degree to which variables are related. In the path from EL to EC, the F-squared value is 0.404, which denotes a medium effect and shows that the influence of EL on

EC in higher education institutions is moderate. The effect of the path between EL and Leadership Triad is significant, with an F-squared value of 1.364, which implies that EL has a major impact on dark leadership traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. The F-squared value of the path between LDT traits and EC is 0.545, which is also a large effect, indicating that the dark leadership traits have a major and adverse influence on EC. The research generally points out that ethical and dark leadership qualities are important in defining the ethical climate in HEIs; however, dark leadership qualities become especially impactful.

Table 3. Effect Size (f^2) of Structural Paths. This table presents the f^2 values assessing the individual contribution of each predictor to the endogenous constructs. Ethical Leadership (EL) demonstrates a large effect on both Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits ($f^2 = 1.364$) and Ethical Climate ($f^2 = 0.404$), confirming its central role in shaping leadership dynamics and institutional ethics. The LDT traits also show a moderate-to-large negative effect on Ethical Climate ($f^2 = 0.545$), reinforcing their distorting influence within the EL-EC relationship.

	F-squared Value
Ethical Leadership -> Ethical Climate	0.404
Ethical Leadership -> Leadership Triad	1.364
Leadership Triad -> Ethical Climate	0.545

4.2.3. Model Fit Evaluation

The model fit table presents several fit indexes that were used to determine how well the model fits the SEM analysis. The SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) value of 0.079 of the saturated and estimated model is less than the accepted value of 0.08; therefore, the fit is excellent since there is very little difference between the observed and predicted covariance. The model fit is also supported by the d_ULS (Unweighted Least Squares Distance) value of 18.156 and the d_G (Geodesic Distance) value of 20.103 of both models, representing insignificant differences between the observed and estimated covariance matrices. The Chi-square value of 40,821.980 is large, which is expected with large models; however, whether or not the model has a good fit was not determined. The NFI (Normed Fit Index) is 0.333, which is lower than the value of 0.90 that is normally considered a good fit; therefore, the model can be improved upon, especially considering it is complex. On the whole, the model fit index is mixed, but the SRMR indicates a very good fit, and the NFI implies some possible improvements; moreover, the uniformity of the

other indices shows the quality and sufficiency of the model in revealing connections between the data points.

Table 4. Model Fit Evaluation Indices for Saturated and Estimated Models. This table reports key model fit metrics for both the saturated and estimated PLS-SEM models. The SRMR value of 0.079, below the conservative threshold of 0.08, indicates an acceptable fit between the observed and hypothesized models. Other indices (d_ULS, d_G, and Chi-square) are presented for completeness, while the NFI value of 0.333, though lower, is typical in complex PLS models and does not compromise overall model interpretability in exploratory research contexts.

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.079	0.079
d_ULS	18.156	18.156
d_G	20.103	20.103
Chi-square	40821.980	40821.980
NFI	0.333	0.333

4.2.4. Hypothesis Testing

The findings of the hypothesis testing are of great importance as they lead to a deeper understanding of the connections between EL, EC, and the moderating role of the LDT characteristics. Hypothesis 1 (H1), which postulated that EL had a positive effect on EC, was well supported, and the path coefficient was 0.60, which shows a significant positive relationship between the two variables in HEIs. In the moderating effects of the LDT traits, Hypothesis 2a, which proposed that Machiavellianism moderates the EL-EC relationship, was partially supported, with the effect of Machiavellianism moderating the relationship between EL and EC being reported as weak (path coefficient = 0.20). Hypothesis 2b stated that narcissism mediates the relationship between EL and EC, and it was also supported with a path coefficient of 0.35, which indicates that narcissism has a significant effect on distorting the perception of an ethical climate. In the same way, Hypothesis 2c, which stated that psychopathy moderates the EL-EC relationship, was corroborated with a path coefficient of 0.50, implying that psychopathy moderates the relationship significantly, distorting the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical climate. Although ethical leadership was identified as having a strong positive influence on the ethical climate, the moderation of the Leader Dark Triad

traits differed, with narcissism and psychopathy proving stronger than Machiavellianism.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results: Direct and Moderating Effects. This table summarizes the hypothesis testing outcomes based on standardized path coefficients. H1 confirms a strong positive influence of Ethical Leadership (EL) on Ethical Climate (EC). H2a-H2c examine the moderating roles of Dark Triad traits. While Machiavellianism shows only a weak moderating effect, narcissism and psychopathy significantly distort the EL-EC relationship, supporting the study’s core argument that certain dark traits can reduce the authenticity of ethical leadership and foster performative ethics in HEIs.

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	Result	Interpretation
H1: Ethical leadership positively influences ethical climate.	0.60	Supported	A strong positive relationship was found, indicating that ethical leadership significantly influences the ethical climate in HEIs.
H2a: Machiavellianism moderates the EL-EC relationship.	0.20	Partly supported	The moderating effect of Machiavellianism was found to be weak in this study.
H2b: Narcissism moderates the EL-EC relationship.	0.35	Supported	Narcissism significantly moderates the relationship, showing a distorted perception of the ethical climate.
H2c: Psychopathy moderates the EL-EC relationship.	0.50	Supported	Psychopathy was found to have a significant moderating effect, further distorting the link between ethical leadership and ethical climate.

4.3. Qualitative Results

4.3.1. Perceived Authenticity Vs. Performativity

This theme deals with the difference between what the leaders of the HEIs adopt and what they practice, particularly concerning ethical values. Throughout most of the interviews, the respondents revealed that despite the ethical values that leaders usually preach, which include fairness, integrity, and accountability, they tend to act contrary to the preached values. One respondent said the following:

“Our leaders say that they believe in transparency and fairness, but I have witnessed how decisions are made in closed rooms, opposite to what they express in front of the cameras. It raises a doubt about their being genuine.”

This assertion indicates a general worry by faculty and staff concerning the performative aspect of leadership. Although leaders can establish an image of being ethical entities, their actions tend to be the opposite of their principles, causing some form of disappointment. Another respondent said the following:

“I would question whether leaders care when they say that they take care of their employees but fail to give them flexibility in the working hours or do not factor in the well-being of the staff during stressful times.”

This quote highlights the conflict between the moral principles propagated by leaders and the truth of their actions. All respondents also mentioned that this discrepancy undermines leadership credibility and creates an atmosphere of superficiality or showiness regarding ethical principles.

4.4. Shadow Traits In Leadership

4.4.1. Machiavellianism → Ethical Manipulation

The participants who reported Machiavellian tendencies in leadership provided examples of how leaders apply ethical rules or organizational values to control a situation or manipulate things. One of the faculty members said the following:

“The leader is always talking about fairness and equality, and when it comes to making decisions, one can see that they apply these principles to defend their decisions and to escape criticism. They have mastered the art of playing with the system, and the employees in the name of ethics.”

Such a distortion of ethical values enables leaders to preserve their dominance and be perceived on the same level as others because they can apply these principles to gain personal benefits. Another respondent made a similar statement:

“There are always moral rules thrown at us to be

followed, but it seems like they are very selective in their application of such rules, and which rules we apply depends on who is in control. It is more of power rather than actual morals."

These answers indicate that Machiavellian leaders take advantage of ethical systems to benefit themselves, thereby skewing the view of ethical conduct within the institution.

4.4.2. *Narcissism → Image Over Content*

Narcissism in leaders was commonly associated with focusing on image instead of content, especially in portraying a picture of ethical leadership without being ethical in practice. One of the respondents explained as follows:

"Talking about ethics is easy for leaders in our institution, and it is all about the image they portray in front of the media or during speeches. They are not interested in transforming how things work on the ground."

Another interviewee said the following:

"It is just this pressure to appear ethical on paper. Our leaders attend conferences, write it on social media, but behind the scenes, there is hardly any desire to be fair and upright."

These quotations demonstrate that narcissistic leaders concentrate on creating an image of ethicality instead of implementing real ethical actions. Their concern with upholding an image comes first before the content of their actions, creating a gap between their ethical declarations and actions.

4.2.3. *Psychopathy → Ethical Numbness*

The lack of empathy and emotional detachment identified psychopathy in leadership behaviors that were not concerned with the effect that decisions had on employees. One of the faculty members said the following:

"We have a leader who never bothers about what impact decisions make on the staff. They are so unconnected to the kind of problems we are facing; it is like they are not even concerned about the human aspect of it."

Another respondent said the following:

"In one of the most stressful times, our leader made dictatorial decisions that disregarded the mental health of the personnel. People did not sympathize with what the people were experiencing. They seemed to be apathetic to the outcomes."

Psychopathy in leadership results in the loss of the relationship between decisions made and the effects they have on people, which leads to the creation of a toxic environment where ethical issues are marginalized and the well-being of employees is

ignored.

4.4.4. *Moral Disengagement Indicators*

Moral disengagement is the process through which people justify unethical conduct, which, in most cases, they do through the redefinition of the unethical conduct to make it appear morally correct. This trend was very pronounced in the answers regarding the justification of harmful practices by leaders. One of the respondents provided the following statement:

"I have witnessed leaders justify actions that touched our workload with the phrase that it was required to do it in the interest of the greater good of the institution. However, it all seemed like a ploy to impose more work on us without caring about our well-being."

Another faculty member stated the following:

"I have heard leaders excuse their actions by stating that they are acting on company values, yet when you look in depth, the values are not in line with what is happening in the field. It is an easy excuse to take immoral choices."

These reactions show the extent to which leaders adopt moral disengagement as a tactic. They can use it to justify unethical decisions and thus fail to accept responsibility for them.

4.4.5. *Care-Washing Indicators*

Care-washing is a performative act by leaders to appear caring and concerned; however, there is typically little or no genuine interest in employees' well-being. Many respondents spoke about caring values that the leaders in their institution pushed, yet their behavior did not align with the statements. One of the respondents said the following:

"Our institution has leaders who often stress the significance of the well-being of the employees, yet regarding the policies that may promote the well-being of the employees, such as mental health or work-life balance, leaders do not practice what they preach. It has more to do with the good appearance in front of other people."

Another interviewee said the following:

"We had heard that mental health would be easier and more accommodating, but when we sought to take advantage of the benefits, we were discouraged. They seemed more concerned with making publicity out of such initiatives rather than being concerned about their employees."

This theme demonstrates that leaders can appear to advocate care and concern about their employees, yet their actions may indicate otherwise, revealing that these values are not important and that care-

washing is only employed to improve their im-age.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Linking Results To The Literature

The current study investigated the role of ethical leadership (EL) in developing EC in HEIs; moreover, it explored how the LDT traits, i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, moderate or even redefine the relationship between EL and EC. These findings were highly indicative of certain parts of the connection, in addition to unravelling ambiguities brought on by the moderating influences of LDT characteristics.

A positive relationship between EL and EC with a high positive correlation (H1) was one of the most important findings of this research. This observation confirms the previous research, including the study of Kim & Vandenberghe (2020) and Zagenczyk et al. (2021), who focused on the importance of ethical leaders in creating favourable organizational climates. Nevertheless, this finding corroborates the current studies and expands the body of literature by validating that ethical leadership is paramount to HEIs in particular (Kim & Vandenberghe, 2020; Zagenczyk et al., 2021). When leaders observe care, fairness, integrity, and transparency, an ethical environment is created, and thus, employees have greater opportunities to engage in ethical conduct and up-hold the organization's values.

The other significant result concerns the moderating effect of the LDT characteristics. This study established the fact that narcissism and psychopathy moderated the as-sociation between EL and EC in a significant way, with Machiavellianism not as much. These findings present fresh ideas about how the dark traits reconfigure, instead of on-ly moderating the impact of ethical leadership. The main differences between previous studies conducted by Zaim et al. (2021) are that they only focused on the moderating effects of LDT traits on leadership effectiveness and ethical climate. Nevertheless, the results of this study indicate that these characteristics not only change the force of impacts that ethical leadership can produce, but that they may skew the nature of EL it-self (Zaim et al., 2021).

An example is narcissism, which has been demonstrated to compel leaders to attend to self-image, a condition that might result in care-washing, which is a phenomenon that makes leaders engage in performative ethical actions but not necessarily adhere to ethical values. This can be supported by the results of Moore et al. (2019), which posit that leaders tend to show ethicality without reflecting it in their

actions (Moore et al., 2019). Psychopathy has also been determined to be a significant distortion of the EL-EC relationship, which correlates with the findings of Mitchell (2024), who stated that psychopathic leaders are devoid of ethics and can thus promote an ethically dead organizational culture (Mitchell, 2024).

To advance the empirical study of “performative ethics” in organizational contexts, particularly in higher education leadership, future research could benefit from operationalizing the construct as a multidimensional scale. Based on the qualitative insights from this study such as themes of care-washing, ethical manipulation, and image-driven leadership. Performative ethics can be conceptualized around three core dimensions: (1) symbolic ethical signalling without behavioural follow-through, (2) strategic use of ethics to protect institutional reputation, and (3) dissonance between stated values and enacted practices. These dimensions can be quantified using self-report surveys, 360-degree evaluations, or document analyses (e.g., policy documents vs. behavioural outcomes). Additionally, triangulating perceptions from subordinates and external stakeholders may help capture the authenticity gap between leadership rhetoric and actual ethical conduct. Such an operational framework would not only validate “performative ethics” as a measurable construct but also enhance its diagnostic utility in leadership assessments and organizational ethics audits.

The operationalization of “performative ethics” in future empirical studies can also draw from parallel investigations in academic contexts, particularly those exploring employee behaviour and leadership consistency. For example, the findings from Alowais and Suliman (2025a) on ethical leadership and employee green behaviour (EGB) in UAE HEIs reveal that employees clearly distinguish between authentic and performative sustainability actions. Leaders who merely adopt environmental rhetoric without modelling consistent behaviour were perceived as lacking sincerity, leading to reduced behavioural alignment among employees. This aligns closely with the performative ethics framework and supports the use of behavioural consistency, employee perception scales, and observable action-reputation gaps as measurable indicators. Similarly, the study on Leader-Employee Dark Triad contagion (Alowais & Suliman, 2025b), which demonstrated the top-down reinforcement of dark traits via toxic role modelling, reinforces the need to capture how ethical standards are strategically “displayed” but not internalized. Here, discrepancies between leader

self-assessment and subordinate-reported ethical climate may serve as useful markers of performative leadership ethics. Furthermore, the PRISMA systematic review (Alowais & Suliman, 2025c) on Dark Triad moderation of sustainability identifies patterns where DT traits, especially narcissism and psychopathy, enable selective or insincere green engagement, offering additional behavioural variables for empirical operationalization. Across these studies, common indicators such as symbolic compliance, moral licensing, rhetoric-action inconsistency, and stakeholder impression management can be used to construct a composite performative ethics scale, suitable for both quantitative surveys and mixed-method triangulation. This framework would allow researchers to not only detect ethical façade-building but also to correlate it with downstream outcomes such as employee disengagement, ethical drift, and climate cynicism in academic institutions.

5.2. Implications

5.2.1. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research would add to the knowledge of EL, as it reveals that not only does the existence of the Leader Dark Triad traits moderate the connections between EL and EC, but it also changes the relationship. This study redefines EL in situations where there is the presence of dark traits. Whereas, according to traditional models of EL, a balance between values and behaviors is considered, in this study, it is pointed out that leaders with narcissistic or psychopathic traits might develop an ethical image but not be involved in any substantial ethical actions. Hence, any future study conducted on the topic of EL should consider such dark traits in assessing the genuineness and influence of leadership on organizational ethics.

Moreover, this study contributes to the theoretical development of performative ethics. It demonstrates that leaders can employ ethical rhetoric and actions to improve their image without investing in ethical actions. This phenomenon of care-washing introduces a new dimension to the currently known theories on ethical leadership. Care-washing implies that the ethical actions of an organization should be carefully analyzed, not only through the lens of what the leaders claim to do, but also through the lens of what the leaders actually do. This discovery adds to the existing literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and organizational ethical conduct, particularly in education, where the veracity of ethical actions is of utmost significance.

5.2.2. Practical Implications

However, in practice, this study implies that universities and HEIs should implement an even more intensive leadership screening process, particularly regarding top leadership positions. The screening of LDT characteristics may assist institutions in recognizing leaders who could misrepresent ethical practices or perform care-washing and thus avoid the emergence of a toxic ethical climate. Moreover, the research results suggest that periodic auditing of the EC in universities should be conducted. Such audits have the potential to provide a better idea of the actual ethical climate in these institutions, rather than superficial tests, and reveal any possible performative ethical practices that can be detrimental to organizational trust.

Additionally, the research results indicate the need to improve leadership development programs in HEIs. In addition to instilling ethical values in leaders, institutions should also train individuals to identify and counter the effects of dark leadership traits, particularly narcissism and psychopathy. Leadership development processes focusing on these dimensions may establish a more authentic and sustainable ethical climate in HEIs.

5.3. Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the literature of EL. First, it offers a new theoretical understanding of performance-based ethics, in the sense that ethical leadership behaviors can be performed more as a strategic (image-building) than a moral commitment. This study contributes to the existing knowledge on organizational leadership ethics by associating ethical leadership with its authentic and performative parts.

Second, this study adds to the discussion on the influence of dark leadership traits. It highlights that these attributes do not merely moderate but redefine ethical leadership, thereby corrupting an organization's ethical atmosphere. Examining such complicated interrelations within the particular domain of higher education, the research illuminates the subtle influence of leadership attitudes, both positive and negative, on the ethical aspects of organizational life.

Lastly, the research offers an in-depth insight into the interaction between ethical leadership and dark triad traits in modifying the ethical climate within HEIs. It promotes our understanding of the role of leadership in forming organizational ethics in the education field by offering empirical evidence of these relationships, which highlights useful

information for the leaders of the institutions, policymakers, and re-researchers.

5.4. Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it uses employees' perceptions to quantify the traits of the Leader Dark Triad. Although employee perception is useful for providing information concerning leadership behaviors, it is subjective and may not provide all information about the extent to which these dark traits affect leadership. In future studies, leaders' self-reports might be included to add value to the employee-based measures.

There is also the qualitative study, in which only faculty members were inter-viewed. Although this provides good insights into the academic staff, it restricts the ex-tent of the results. In future studies, a wider range of participants, such as the administrative staff, students, and other stakeholders, should be considered to generate a complete picture of the ethical climate within HEIs.

5.5. Future Research

Future studies can overcome these shortcomings through a higher sample size and an increase in the range of participants to cover a wider scope of opinions. Comparative studies could investigate the differences in ethical leadership and dark triad traits in the corporate and academic environments. These comparisons would illuminate how the dynamics of ethical leadership vary across sectors and provide insight into best practices for cultivating ethical climates within different organizational settings.

Additionally, this study's cross-sectional nature did not allow for exploration of the long-term relations between the Dark Triad traits of Leaders and ethical leadership and climates. With longitudinal studies, stronger results on the development of such dynamics over time and their enduring influence on organizational culture could be achieved. Lastly, studies might be extended to focus not only on academic employees but also on those who work with students, such as counselors and administrative workers, who could also be instrumental in influencing the ethical climate in HEIs.

5.6. Conclusion

This study discussed the dynamic interrelationship between EL, LDT characteristics, and EC in HEIs. The significant results indicated that ethical leadership has a very positive impact on ethical climate, and this supports the notion that leaders play an important role in determining the

ethical climate of an organization. Nevertheless, this study also pointed out that LDT traits, specifically narcissism and psychopathy, have a strong moderating effect in this relationship; moreover, they change the perception of ethical leadership and its performance.

The findings of this study indicate that a positive ethical climate can be encouraged by ethical leadership, but the traits of the dark triad may skew the connection and lead to ethical leadership becoming a strategic sham. Narcissistic and psychopathic features, specifically, tend to lead to a so-called care-washing effect as leaders present themselves as being ethical yet do not practice ethics. Such distortion compromises the integrity of the ethical climate, causing a gap between the ethical values stated and behaviors practiced. However, Machiavellianism was revealed to have a lesser moderating effect, which could imply that although it might influence leadership behavior, it does not have much influence on ethical climate.

Furthermore, the findings reaffirm the importance of creating genuine ethical climates in HEIs. Institutions need to look beyond lip-service statements of ethical conduct and work towards establishing a culture where ethical conduct is practiced and not just a show. This study recommends more rigorous screening of leadership to control dark leadership traits and ensure that leaders in positions of authority are determined to practice genuine ethical principles. Moreover, the ethical climate of an organization should be audited regularly to ensure that ethical values are publicly observed and practiced at all levels of an institution.

5.7. Declarations

5.7.1 Ethical Approval

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the British University in Dubai (BUiD) Research Ethics Framework. The study represents the pilot and pre-test phase of the author's ongoing doctoral research in Business Management and was classified as a low-risk study under the institution's ethical guidelines. Under BUiD's Research Ethics Policy, minimal-risk studies—those that involve anonymous survey data, no personal identifiers, and no clinical or psychological interventions—qualify for self-assessment and self-approval by the principal investigator through the institutional ethics form. Accordingly, this pre-test received self-approval through the Faculty of Business and Law's Ethical Self-Assessment Framework. The University's Ethics Committee

confirmed that a confined, low-risk approval is sufficient at this stage, as the full, extended study (i.e., the complete doctoral thesis) will undergo formal institutional ethics review and approval prior to its main data collection phase. This approach aligns with BUiD's internal guide-lines and the

Helsinki principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and confidentiality. All ethical standards for participant welfare, voluntary participation, and informed consent were strictly maintained.

Consent to Participate: All participants were adults employed in higher education institutions and voluntarily consented to participate. Prior to participation, they received an information sheet outlining the study's aims, anonymity provisions, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No sensitive personal information was collected, and all data were anonymized and securely stored on a password-protected drive accessible only to the researcher. The study did not involve deception, psychological risk, or institutional coercion. This process adheres to both BUiD's Low-Risk Research Protocol (2023) and the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (Article 25–32) regarding informed consent and participant autonomy.

Consent to Publish: Participants provided consent for the use of their anonymized data for research dissemination and publication. No identifying information, institutional names, or personal details are disclosed in the manuscript. The corresponding author affirms that all co-authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript and consent to its publication in *Discover Psychology*. All authors also confirm that this paper represents the pre-test phase of an ongoing PhD study, and no part of the dataset has been previously published elsewhere.

Funding Declaration: This research received no external funding.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate: The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles of social science research. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. No clinical interventions were involved. Ethical approval was reviewed under the British University in Dubai's ethics procedures and classified as a low-risk study, for which self-approval by the researcher is permitted under the institution's ethical framework. This study is part of the author's doctoral research at The British University in Dubai and fully complied with the guidelines of the university's ethics committee.

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