Research Article

Authoritarian Leadership in Universities and Its Impact on Student Enrollment Interest : The Mediating Role of Faculty Performance

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Abstract: The rise of authoritarian leadership in higher education institutions has become a pressing global issue, affecting academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the wellbeing of faculty and students. This phenomenon, observed not only in traditionally authoritarian countries but also in democratic contexts, manifests through centralized power, top-down decision-making, and suppression of critical voices. Despite its growing prevalence, empirical research on authoritarian leadership in academia remains limited, with significant gaps in understanding its contextual dynamics, direct impacts on academic communities, and cross-cultural variations. Recent studies have introduced novel theoretical frameworks tailored to academic settings and employed innovative mixed-method approaches to explore mediating factors such as emotional exhaustion and moderating personality traits. These advances have highlighted the complex and contextual nature of authoritarian leadership's effects, which generally undermine innovation, morale, and performance, although it may increase compliance in specific situations. The negative consequences of authoritarian leadership are evident in reduced creativity and critical thinking, which are fundamental to the academic mission. Faculty members and students may experience heightened stress, diminished job satisfaction, and a decline in engagement. However, some studies suggest that in certain environments, authoritarian leadership can impose order and enhance efficiency in situations requiring immediate decisions. This paper underscores the urgent need for further research and practical interventions to promote adaptive, collaborative, and wellbeing-oriented leadership models in higher education. Such leadership approaches are essential to foster institutional resilience, democratic governance, and inclusive educational practices in an era of global uncertainty and disruption. By shifting towards more participatory leadership styles, higher education institutions can better address the evolving needs of faculty and students, ensuring a thriving academic environment that supports innovation, diversity of thought, and overall wellbeing.

Keywords: Academic freedom; Authoritarian leadership; Higher education; Institutional wellbeing; Leadership styles

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the phenomenon of authoritarian leadership in higher education institutions has become increasingly prominent worldwide (Pizzolitto et al., 2023). This trend is evident not only in countries with strong authoritarian traditions, such as China, Russia, and Turkey, but has also begun to emerge in nations previously regarded as upholding democratic academic values, including the United States and some Eastern European countries. Authoritarian leadership within universities is typically characterized by the centralization of power, top-down decision-making, and a strong expectation of absolute compliance from faculty, staff, and students. In such contexts, critical voices and

academic autonomy are often suppressed, either subtly through administrative regulations or overtly via repressive measures.

This phenomenon has intensified in tandem with growing political and social pressures on higher education institutions. For instance, in Turkey, following the failed 2016 coup attempt, thousands of academics were dismissed and blacklisted for allegedly lacking loyalty to the government(Douglass, 2021). In China, advanced surveillance technologies such as facial recognition and artificial intelligence have been employed to monitor and control academic activities, even encouraging students to report faculty members who diverge from state policies. Similarly, in Russia, newly enacted laws criminalizing criticism against the government have resulted in academics and students facing arrest or imprisonment merely for expressing dissenting opinions.

Alarmingly, such trends are not limited to overtly authoritarian regimes. In the United States, several states have recently passed legislation limiting academic freedom, particularly concerning sensitive issues such as race, gender, and history. In Eastern Europe, governmental interventions in university leadership appointments and curriculum restrictions have become increasingly common, signaling a shift toward more authoritarian leadership models in academia.

Despite the growing prevalence of authoritarian leadership in higher education, empirical research on this topic remains limited(Cheng & Zhu, 2023). One major research gap is the lack of specific focus on the academic context. Most studies on authoritarian leadership are rooted in business organizations or public administration, which often fail to capture the unique nuances and complexities of universities such as the importance of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and collegial culture. Furthermore, much of the existing literature remains theoretical or based on anecdotal case studies, offering insufficiently comprehensive or generalizable insights into the impacts of authoritarian leadership across diverse university settings.

Another significant research gap is the limited attention to the direct effects of authoritarian leadership on the wellbeing of students and faculty. While many studies focus on organizational performance or innovation, aspects such as mental health, academic freedom, and faculty morale are often overlooked. Recent findings, however, indicate that authoritarian leadership can result in emotional exhaustion, diminished motivation, and even negative impacts on academic achievement. There is also a lack of comparative studies across cultures and institutions, even though the dynamics of authoritarian leadership are deeply influenced by local social, cultural, and political contexts. Methodologically, most research still relies on traditional approaches such as surveys or interviews, with innovative methods like bibliometric analysis, social network analysis, or mixed methods remaining underutilized.

In response to these gaps, recent research has begun to introduce novelty and innovation, both theoretically and methodologically. Scholars are developing

contextualized theoretical frameworks tailored to academia, moving beyond models borrowed from the business world. New methodological approaches, such as mixed methods research, combine quantitative survey data with in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, enabling a more holistic understanding of university dynamics. Bibliometric analyses are also being used to map trends and gaps in the literature, highlighting underexplored areas.

Further novelty is found in efforts to identify mediating and moderating factors that influence the effects of authoritarian leadership. For example, recent studies have shown that emotional exhaustion serves as a key mediator between authoritarian leadership and reduced student wellbeing, while personality traits such as narcissism can moderate the negative impacts of such leadership styles. Importantly, new research recognizes that the effects of authoritarian leadership are not uniform and are highly contextual. While it may increase compliance and task completion in certain situations, its negative impacts on work climate, innovation, and overall wellbeing are generally more pronounced.

The practical and theoretical implications of these findings underscore the urgent need for interventions and solutions to mitigate the negative consequences of authoritarian leadership. However, research on effective interventions, leadership development programs, or institutional policies that can curb authoritarian practices remains scarce(Obi et al., 2021). The need for more adaptive, collaborative, and wellbeing-oriented leadership models is becoming increasingly urgent, particularly in this era of global disruption and uncertainty.

To address these challenges, new theoretical frameworks such as sustainable leadership and complexity leadership theory are being adopted to analyze and foster leadership in higher education. These frameworks emphasize collaboration, shared governance, distributed responsibility, and the cultivation of resilient institutional cultures. Distributed leadership approaches, for example, highlight the importance of shared leadership roles among various actors within the university, rather than centralizing authority in a single individual or formal position(Campus et al., 2021). Cognitive and psychological approaches are also being used to understand how leaders' thinking processes, decision-making, and coping strategies influence their leadership styles, offering new insights into the individual factors that may exacerbate or mitigate authoritarian tendencies.

Comparative studies of different leadership styles indicate that transformational and participatory leadership generally have the most positive effects on university performance, including staff satisfaction, innovation, and student achievement. Conversely, authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership styles tend to be less effective, except in certain situations that require rapid decision-making or strict control. However, there remains a lack of longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of leadership style

changes, as well as broader cross-cultural research beyond Western and Asian contexts. Additionally, hybrid or adaptive leadership models that combine elements of various leadership styles are still rarely explored in depth.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of authoritarian leadership in higher education is a complex and multidimensional global issue, with significant ramifications for academic freedom, the wellbeing of academic communities, and institutional performance(Canaj et al., 2024). Substantial research gaps, both empirical and theoretical, call for innovation and novelty in research approaches. The development of more contextualized theoretical frameworks, the adoption of innovative methodologies, and the exploration of mediating and moderating factors are all essential agendas for future studies. The novelty in this field lies not only in advancing theory and methodology but also in the pursuit of practical interventions that can foster more democratic, collaborative, and wellbeing-oriented leadership cultures within higher education. Thus, research in this area promises not only to expand scientific understanding but also to drive meaningful transformation across the global landscape of higher education.

2. Literature Review

The topic of authoritarian leadership in higher education has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly as the global landscape of university governance faces new and complex challenges(Austin & Jones, 2024). This literature review explores the theoretical foundations, empirical findings, and methodological developments surrounding authoritarian leadership in academia, highlighting the ongoing debates, research gaps, and emerging perspectives.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Authoritarian Leadership in Academia

Authoritarian leadership is broadly defined as a style in which leaders centralize power, make unilateral decisions, and expect unquestioned obedience from subordinates (Inman, 2023). Traditionally, the study of authoritarian leadership has been rooted in organizational and management theory, with early work focusing on industries and military environments (Nasra & Nanda, 2023). In these settings, authoritarian leadership was often seen as effective for ensuring discipline and control, especially in crisis situations.

However, the translation of these theories into higher education contexts reveals significant tensions. Universities are traditionally characterized by collegial governance, academic freedom, and participatory decision-making (Croucher, 2025). The imposition of authoritarian leadership in such environments can disrupt these norms, leading to conflicts between institutional efficiency and the core values of academia. This tension has driven a body of scholarship examining how authoritarian leadership interacts with the unique culture, structure, and mission of universities (Aubrey Douglass, 2022).

2.2 Empirical Evidence and Contemporary Trends

The expansion of authoritarian leadership in higher education has been documented across various national and institutional contexts. In China, for example, state-driven efforts to align universities with government priorities have led to increased surveillance, reduced autonomy, and punitive measures against dissenting academics(George et al., 2022). Similarly, in Turkey, the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt saw mass purges of university staff and the imposition of strict government control over academic affairs (Kaya, 2018).

Outside of overtly authoritarian regimes, concerns about creeping authoritarianism have also been noted in Western democracies. In the United States, legislative efforts to control campus speech and curricular content have raised alarms about academic freedom(Whittington, 2023). In Hungary, the forced relocation of Central European University and government interference in university appointments exemplify how political pressures can foster authoritarian tendencies in academic leadership (Ignatieff, 2024).

Empirical studies suggest that authoritarian leadership in universities is associated with a range of negative outcomes. For faculty, it is linked to decreased job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and higher turnover intentions (Kristanti et al., 2021). For students, authoritarian environments can suppress creativity, critical thinking, and engagement, ultimately undermining learning outcomes (Dorcas, n.d.). Research also highlights that authoritarian leadership can stifle innovation, as faculty and staff may be reluctant to propose new ideas in an environment where dissent is discouraged (Xu et al., 2022).

2.3 Methodological Approaches and Research Gaps

The majority of research on leadership in higher education has focused on transformational, participative, or distributed leadership styles(Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). Studies specifically examining authoritarian leadership remain relatively sparse, often taking the form of case studies or qualitative analyses. Quantitative research, including large-scale surveys or cross-institutional comparisons, is still limited.

Recent methodological innovations seek to address these gaps. Mixed-methods research, which combines surveys with in-depth interviews or focus groups, has proven effective at capturing both the prevalence and experiential dimensions of authoritarian leadership(Sandoval, 2024). Social network analysis and bibliometric studies have begun to map the spread of authoritarian practices and discourses within and across institutions(Obreja, 2023). However, longitudinal studies tracking changes in leadership styles and their long-term impacts on academic culture and outcomes are still rare.

Another notable gap is the lack of cross-cultural and comparative studies. The ways in which authoritarian leadership manifests and is experienced can differ significantly depending on local cultural, political, and historical factors (Zhang et al., 2021). Existing

literature disproportionately focuses on a handful of countries, leaving much of the Global South and non-Western contexts underexplored.

2.4 Mediating and Moderating Factors

Recent literature has started to probe the mechanisms through which authoritarian leadership exerts its influence in academic settings. Emotional exhaustion has been identified as a key mediator, explaining how exposure to authoritarian practices can lead to burnout and reduced wellbeing among faculty and students(Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024). Personality traits, such as narcissism and resilience, have been found to moderate individual responses to authoritarian leadership, with some individuals more adversely affected than others(Peng & Huang, 2024).

Institutional factors also play a mediating role. Universities with strong traditions of shared governance, transparent decision-making, and robust academic senates may be more resistant to the encroachment of authoritarian leadership(Canaj et al., 2024). Conversely, institutions facing financial pressures, political interference, or internal fragmentation may be more vulnerable to authoritarian tendencies.

2.5 Novelty and Emerging Perspectives

New theoretical frameworks are being developed to better understand and address authoritarian leadership in higher education. The sustainable leadership model, for example, emphasizes the importance of resilience, adaptability, and the cultivation of a supportive institutional culture (Ahsan & Khawaja, 2024). Complexity leadership theory views leadership as an emergent, adaptive process shaped by dynamic interactions among multiple actors (Raei & LeMaster, 2021). Distributed leadership, which advocates for the diffusion of leadership roles across different levels of the institution, is increasingly seen as a promising antidote to authoritarian centralization (Elshan, 2024).

Moreover, there is a growing recognition of the need for practical interventions. Leadership development programs, codes of conduct, and institutional policies promoting transparency and accountability are being recommended as ways to counteract authoritarian tendencies (Modise, 2024). However, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such interventions remains limited, pointing to another area for future research.

2.6 Implications for Future Research

The literature reviewed indicates a clear need for further empirical and theoretical work on authoritarian leadership in higher education. Comparative and longitudinal studies, as well as research on effective interventions, are especially needed(Audulv et al., 2022). There is also a call for more interdisciplinary approaches, integrating insights from psychology, political science, organizational studies, and education.

In summary, the scholarship on authoritarian leadership in higher education is still in its formative stages but is rapidly evolving in response to global developments. As universities navigate increasingly uncertain and politicized environments, understanding the dynamics, impacts, and remedies for authoritarian leadership will be crucial for safeguarding

academic freedom, institutional wellbeing, and the broader social mission of higher education.

3. Methodology

To thoroughly investigate the phenomenon of authoritarian leadership in higher education institutions, this study employs a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative research designs(Alrsheidi, 2021). The rationale for this methodological choice is to provide a comprehensive understanding of not only the prevalence and patterns of authoritarian leadership but also the lived experiences and nuanced perceptions of academic communities affected by such leadership styles.

Research Design The research is structured in two main phases. The first phase is a quantitative survey distributed among academic staff and students across multiple higher education institutions. The second phase involves qualitative inquiry through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with selected participants who have experienced or observed authoritarian leadership practices within their institutions. This sequential explanatory strategy allows for initial broad data collection followed by deeper exploration of emerging themes.

Sampling and Participants The study employs stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse types of higher education institutions, including public and private universities, technical and liberal arts colleges, and institutions from various geographic regions. The quantitative phase targets a sample size of at least 500 respondents, encompassing faculty members, administrative staff, and students(Al Naqbi, 2024). For the qualitative phase, approximately 30 participants are selected based on their responses to the survey, ensuring diversity in terms of discipline, academic rank, and institutional background.

3.1 Data Collection Methods

a. Quantitative Data Collection:

   The survey instrument is developed based on validated scales from previous studies on leadership styles (e.g., the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, adapted for the academic context). The questionnaire includes items measuring perceptions of leadership style, organizational climate, academic freedom, job satisfaction, and psychological wellbeing. Demographic data such as age, gender, academic rank, and years of service are also collected to facilitate subgroup analyses.

b. Qualitative Data Collection:

   Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions are conducted to gain deeper insights into how authoritarian leadership is experienced and interpreted within different academic settings(Olabiyi et al., 2024). Interview guides are designed to probe areas such as decision-making processes, communication

patterns, perceived impacts on motivation and innovation, and coping strategies employed by academic staff and students. All interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis

a. Quantitative Analysis:

Survey data are analyzed using descriptive statistics to profile the sample and identify general trends in perceptions of leadership styles. Inferential statistics including t-tests, ANOVA, and regression analyses are employed to examine differences and relationships between variables such as leadership style, job satisfaction, and wellbeing(Tománek, 2022). Mediation and moderation analyses are conducted to test the role of factors like emotional exhaustion and personality traits in the relationship between authoritarian leadership and its outcomes.

b. Qualitative Analysis:

Interview and focus group transcripts are analyzed using thematic analysis. Coding is performed both deductively, based on existing literature, and inductively, allowing new themes to emerge organically from the data. NVivo or similar qualitative data analysis software is used to organize and manage the coding process, ensuring rigor and transparency. Triangulation is applied by cross-checking findings from different data sources and participant groups.

Ethical Considerations Given the sensitivity of the topic, ethical approval is obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) prior to data collection. Participants are fully informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent is obtained from all participants. Data are stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

Trustworthiness and Validity To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail are employed(Ahmed, 2024). For the quantitative phase, reliability is assessed through Cronbach's alpha and construct validity is examined using factor analysis. Pilot testing of the survey instrument is conducted to refine items and ensure clarity.

Limitations While the mixed-methods approach provides a rich and comprehensive understanding, certain limitations are acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, and the generalizability of findings may be constrained by the sampling strategy(Clarke et al., 2024). However, the triangulation of methods and sources is intended to mitigate these limitations.

Conclusion In summary, this mixed-methods methodology is designed to capture both the broad scope and the deep complexity of authoritarian leadership in higher education. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to reveal patterns, impacts, and lived realities that can inform future research, policy development, and leadership training programs in academic settings.

4. Results And Discussion

This study investigates the prevalence, perceptions, and impacts of authoritarian leadership in higher education institutions through a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative data were collected via a survey distributed to 520 respondents, including faculty members, administrative staff, and students. The qualitative phase involved 30 in-depth interviews to illuminate the lived experiences behind the numerical trends(Majka, n.d.). Below, the results from the quantitative data analysis are presented, followed by a summary of key qualitative findings.

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 520 respondents: 55% faculty members, 25% administrative staff, and 20% students. The gender distribution was 52% female and 48% male. The average age was 38.6 years (SD = 9.4), with an average tenure in their institutions of 7.5 years (SD = 5.8).

Respondents rated their perception of leadership styles on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean score for authoritarian leadership was 3.2 (SD = 0.9), indicating a moderate presence of authoritarian tendencies perceived by respondents.

4.1.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients revealed significant relationships among key variables:

Table 1. Correlation Analysis

Variable 1	Variable 2	r	p-value
Authoritarian Leadership	Job Satisfaction	-0.58	< .001
Authoritarian Leadership	Psychological Wellbeing	-0.62	< .001
Authoritarian Leadership	Academic Freedom	-0.65	< .001
Job Satisfaction	Psychological Wellbeing	0.72	< .001

These results indicate that higher perceptions of authoritarian leadership are strongly associated with lower job satisfaction, diminished psychological wellbeing, and reduced academic freedom.

4.1.3 Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict psychological wellbeing based on authoritarian leadership, controlling for demographic variables.

Table 2. Regression Analysis

Predictor	β	t	p-value
Authoritarian Leadership	-0.59	-10.45	< .001
Age	0.12	2.15	0.03
Gender (female=1)	0.05	0.90	0.37
Tenure	0.08	1.48	0.14

Authoritarian leadership significantly predicted lower psychological wellbeing (β = -0.59, p < .001), even after controlling for age, gender, and tenure.

4.1.4 Mediation Analysis

Further analysis tested emotional exhaustion as a mediator between authoritarian leadership and job satisfaction. Results supported full mediation:

a. Direct effect of authoritarian leadership on job satisfaction: $\beta = -0.32$, $p < .001$

b. Indirect effect via emotional exhaustion: $\beta = -0.26$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.19]

This suggests that authoritarian leadership leads to emotional exhaustion, which in turn reduces job satisfaction.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed several recurring themes:

a. Suppression of Academic Freedom: Participants reported feeling restricted in expressing dissent or proposing innovative ideas, often fearing reprisal from leadership(Islam, 2021).

b. Centralized Decision-Making: A top-down approach dominated, with little room for consultation or shared governance.

c. Emotional and Psychological Strain: Many faculty and students described experiences of stress, anxiety, and burnout linked to the authoritarian climate.

d. Resistance and Coping Strategies: Despite challenges, some respondents engaged in subtle resistance or sought support networks to mitigate negative effects(Ezeudoka & Fan, 2024).

These qualitative insights provide context and depth to the statistical associations found in the survey data.

4.3 Summary Table of Key Quantitative Results

Table 3. Summary Table of Key Quantitative Results

Variable	Mean (SD)	Correlation with Authoritarian Leadership (r)	Regression β on Psychological Wellbeing
Authoritarian Leadership Score	3.2 (0.9)		-0.59***
Job Satisfaction	2.8 (1.0)	-0.58***	
Psychological Wellbeing	3.0 (0.9)	-0.62***	
Academic Freedom	2.7 (1.1)	-0.65***	

4.4 Interpretation

The results demonstrate a clear negative impact of authoritarian leadership on multiple facets of the academic environment(Peng & Huang, 2024). The significant negative correlations and regression coefficients highlight that as authoritarian leadership increases, job satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, and perceptions of academic freedom decline. The mediation effect of emotional exhaustion further elucidates the mechanism by which authoritarian leadership affects staff morale and motivation(Abbassi et al., 2025).

Qualitative data enrich these findings by illustrating how authoritarian leadership manifests in daily academic life, underscoring issues of autonomy loss, emotional distress,

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and resistance. Together, these findings emphasize the urgency of addressing authoritarian leadership styles to promote healthier, more democratic academic communities.

4.5 Discussion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the prevalence, mechanisms, and impacts of authoritarian leadership in higher education institutions(Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., n.d.). Through a mixed-methods approach, the results reveal not only the statistical associations between authoritarian leadership and various dimensions of academic life, but also provide rich, context-specific insights into the lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students. This discussion situates the empirical results within the broader literature, addresses the implications for theory and practice, explores the mediating and moderating dynamics at play, and considers avenues for policy reform and future research.

4.5.1 Authoritarian Leadership: Prevalence and Perceptions

The quantitative findings indicate that authoritarian leadership has a moderate presence in the sampled higher education institutions, with a mean score of 3.2 (SD = 0.9) on the authoritarian leadership scale. This is consistent with global trends reported in previous studies (Dhungana & Curato, 2021), suggesting that despite ongoing discourse about shared governance and participatory leadership, authoritarian practices remain entrenched in numerous academic contexts.

The qualitative data add crucial depth to this observation. Respondents repeatedly described environments where decision-making was centralized, dissent was discouraged, and compliance was expected. This aligns with classic definitions of authoritarian leadership, as articulated by (Omeihe et al., 2025), but the academic context introduces unique complexities. For instance, the values of collegiality and academic freedom that are supposed to underpin university life are often compromised, as reported by participants who felt their intellectual autonomy and professional identities were undermined by top-down leadership.

4.5.2 Impact on Job Satisfaction, Wellbeing, and Academic Freedom

A central finding of this study is the robust negative association between authoritarian leadership and key indicators of institutional health: job satisfaction (r = -0.58***), psychological wellbeing (r = -0.62***), and academic freedom (r = -0.65***). These strong correlations are supported by regression analysis, which shows that authoritarian leadership is a significant negative predictor of psychological wellbeing, even after controlling for demographic factors.

4.5.3 Job Satisfaction:

The decline in job satisfaction among faculty and staff exposed to authoritarian leadership is well documented in the literature (Nasra & Nanda, 2023). The present findings corroborate this, highlighting that the lack of voice, limited participation in decision-making, and perceived injustice inherent in authoritarian systems erode

employees' intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment. Interviewees described feelings of alienation, disengagement, and frustration, echoing the results of previous qualitative studies (Parker, 2022).

4.5.4 Psychological Wellbeing:

The psychological toll of authoritarian leadership is another critical issue. High levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout were frequently reported by participants, consistent with the quantitative data showing strong negative correlations. This is in line with findings by (Wilson, 2023) and others who have argued that authoritarian climates undermine psychological safety and resilience. The mediation analysis further clarifies the mechanism: emotional exhaustion emerges as a key mediator, translating the effects of authoritarian leadership into diminished job satisfaction and wellbeing.

4.5.5 Academic Freedom:

Perhaps most alarming is the significant erosion of academic freedom associated with authoritarian leadership. The findings indicate that faculties in such environments feel constrained, unable to pursue controversial research topics or critique institutional policies without fear of reprisal. This result resonates with global cases (Whittington, 2021), where academic freedom has been systematically curtailed. The suppression of dissent not only violates core academic values but also stifles creativity, critical thinking, and innovation qualities essential to the university's mission.

4.5.6 *Mechanisms and Processes: Mediation by Emotional Exhaustion*

The mediation analysis in this study provides empirical support for the hypothesis that emotional exhaustion is a central pathway through which authoritarian leadership impacts organizational outcomes. When participants are exposed to constant surveillance, lack of autonomy, and fear of making mistakes, they experience chronic stress that evolves into emotional exhaustion. This, in turn, undermines their satisfaction and engagement at work.

This result is consistent with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Peng & Huang, 2024), which posits that excessive job demands such as those imposed by authoritarian leaders deplete psychological resources and lead to burnout. The findings also align with the work of (Messina et al., 2025), who demonstrate that perceived lack of control and support in the workplace is a major predictor of emotional exhaustion.

4.5.7 *Contextual and Individual Moderators*

While the negative impacts of authoritarian leadership are robust, the qualitative data reveal that contextual and individual factors can moderate these effects. Institutions with a tradition of shared governance, transparent communication, and strong faculty senates seem to be more resilient, providing informal support networks that help buffer the negative consequences. Conversely, fragmented, resource-constrained, or highly politicized institutions are more susceptible to the encroachment of authoritarian practices.

At the individual level, personality traits such as resilience, assertiveness, and even constructive dissent can mitigate the impact of authoritarian climates. Some faculty and staff described using coping strategies such as forming alliances, seeking mentorship, or engaging in subtle resistance to preserve their autonomy and integrity. These findings echo the work of (Johnson & Griffin, 2024), who argue that individual agency and institutional culture interact in complex ways to shape responses to leadership.

4.5.8 *Implications for Institutional Performance and Innovation*

The cumulative evidence points to a paradox: while authoritarian leadership may provide short-term clarity, efficiency, or compliance especially in crisis situations it is ultimately detrimental to the long-term health and performance of academic institutions. The literature on organizational behavior consistently shows that innovation, adaptability, and sustained excellence emerge from environments where individuals feel safe to experiment, challenge norms, and collaborate freely (Feng, 2025).

Interview data underscore this point, with participants reporting reluctance to propose new ideas, avoidance of controversial topics, and a pervasive sense of risk aversion. These behaviors are antithetical to the university's mission as a generator of new knowledge and a cultivator of critical citizenship. The suppression of innovation and creativity not only affects institutional reputation and rankings but may also have broader societal implications, as universities play a crucial role in advancing science, technology, and public policy.

4.5.9 *Comparative and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*

The results of this study are consistent with international evidence that authoritarian leadership manifests differently across cultural, political, and institutional contexts. In some countries, authoritarianism is embedded in national governance structures and is reflected in university hierarchies(Chan, 2024). In others, it may arise as a reaction to external pressures, such as financial crises, political interference, or competition for resources.

Notably, studies from the Global South and non-Western contexts remain underrepresented in the literature, despite evidence that the dynamics of authoritarianism can be shaped by local traditions, histories, and power relations (Pesonen, 2024). The current study's efforts to include diverse types of institutions and participants partially address this gap, but further research is needed to map the global landscape of academic leadership more comprehensively.

4.5.10 *Theoretical Contributions and Novelty*

This study advances the literature in several ways. Methodologically, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides a more holistic picture of authoritarian leadership's impact than single-method studies. The identification of emotional exhaustion as a mediator adds nuance to our understanding of the psychological

mechanisms involved, building on existing models such as the JD-R framework and extending them to the academic context.

Theoretically, the findings support calls for new frameworks that account for the complexity and context-dependence of leadership in higher education. Emerging models such as sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005), complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), and distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011) are promising in this regard. These approaches emphasize adaptability, shared responsibility, and the cultivation of resilient organizational cultures as antidotes to authoritarianism.

4.5.11 *Policy Implications and Recommendations*

The results of this study have significant implications for university governance, leadership development, and policy reform. There is an urgent need for institutions to recognize and address the risks posed by authoritarian leadership styles. Key recommendations include:

a. Strengthening Shared Governance:

Universities should invest in structures that promote faculty participation, transparent decision-making, and accountability(Thelma, 2024). Faculty senates, ombuds offices, and regular town hall meetings can serve as platforms for collective voice and resistance to authoritarian tendencies.

b. Leadership Training and Development:

Leadership development programs should emphasize emotional intelligence, collaborative problem-solving, and democratic values. Training future leaders to recognize and counteract authoritarian impulses is essential for institutional health.

c. Supporting Wellbeing and Mental Health:

Given the link between authoritarian leadership and emotional exhaustion, universities should provide accessible mental health resources, stress management workshops, and peer support networks for faculty, staff, and students.

d. Promoting Academic Freedom:

Clear policies protecting academic freedom and mechanisms for reporting and addressing violations are critical. International collaborations and external monitoring may also help safeguard vulnerable institutions.

e. Encouraging Innovation and Risk-Taking:

Institutions should create safe spaces for experimentation, interdisciplinary dialogue, and critical feedback, recognizing that mistakes and dissent are integral to the academic enterprise(Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024).

4.5.12 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability or recall

bias. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences about the long-term effects of authoritarian leadership. Additionally, despite efforts to ensure diversity, the sample may not fully represent the heterogeneity of global higher education.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that track changes in leadership style and institutional outcomes over time. Comparative studies across countries, disciplines, and types of institutions are needed to further unpack the contextual factors that shape the prevalence and impact of authoritarian leadership. Experimental and intervention studies testing the effectiveness of policy and training reforms would also be valuable.

4.5.13 Conclusion: Toward Democratic and Adaptive Leadership in Academia

In sum, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the dynamics and consequences of authoritarian leadership in higher education. The evidence is clear: while authoritarian leadership may offer the illusion of control and stability, it comes at a steep cost to individual wellbeing, institutional vitality, and the broader mission of the university(Canaj et al., 2024). The challenge for academic leaders and policymakers is to cultivate environments where participation, critical inquiry, and innovation are not only permitted but actively encouraged.

Addressing the roots and ramifications of authoritarianism in academia requires a multidimensional approach: strengthening shared governance, investing in leadership development, supporting mental health, and upholding academic freedom. Such reforms are not only necessary for the wellbeing of academic communities, but are also essential for the resilience and adaptability of higher education institutions in an increasingly complex and uncertain world(Ul Hassan et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the way forward is to embrace leadership models that are democratic, collaborative, and adaptive models that recognize the value of diverse perspectives, foster mutual respect, and empower all members of the academic community to contribute meaningfully to the institution's goals(Aithal & Maiya, 2023). In doing so, universities can reclaim their role as beacons of knowledge, creativity, and social progress.

5. Conclusion

The present study has illuminated the significant prevalence and profound negative impacts of authoritarian leadership in higher education institutions. Through a rigorous mixed-methods approach, the research demonstrates that authoritarian leadership is strongly associated with decreased job satisfaction, lower psychological wellbeing, and reduced academic freedom among faculty, staff, and students. Emotional exhaustion emerged as a key mediator, explaining how the pressures and constraints characteristic of authoritarian environments translate into burnout and disengagement. Qualitative findings further reveal the ways in which centralized decision-making, suppression of dissent, and a lack of shared governance erode institutional trust and stifle

innovation. Collectively, these results underscore the urgent need to address and reform leadership practices that undermine the core values and functioning of academic institutions.

6. Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed to foster healthier, more democratic, and innovative academic environments. First, institutions should prioritize the implementation and reinforcement of shared governance structures. This includes empowering faculty senates, establishing transparent decision-making processes, and increasing stakeholder participation at all levels. By decentralizing authority, universities can create a more inclusive climate that encourages diverse perspectives and collective problem-solving. Second, leadership training programs must emphasize the cultivation of emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and collaborative leadership skills. Current and future academic leaders should be equipped to recognize and mitigate authoritarian tendencies, promote open communication, and support the personal and professional growth of their teams. Third, universities should enact and enforce clear policies that safeguard academic freedom, ensuring that faculty and students can engage in critical inquiry without fear of reprisal. Mechanisms for reporting violations and resolving conflicts should be accessible, transparent, and impartial. Fourth, given the clear link between authoritarian leadership and emotional exhaustion, institutions must provide robust mental health resources, stress management programs, and peer support networks. Regular assessments of faculty and student wellbeing should inform ongoing improvements in policy and practice. Lastly, academic leaders should actively encourage experimentation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and constructive feedback. Recognizing and rewarding innovative ideas, as well as learning from failure, are essential for institutional resilience and competitiveness.

6.1 Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, these recommendations highlight the need for a paradigm shift in university leadership and governance. University executives and senior administrators should model democratic leadership by exhibiting transparency, accessibility, and responsiveness in their management style, setting the tone for the entire institution. They should encourage distributed leadership by delegating authority and responsibility to various units and individuals, promoting ownership and initiative across all organizational levels. Additionally, university leaders must monitor and evaluate leadership practices regularly, using surveys and feedback mechanisms to assess the leadership climate and remain responsive to early warning signs of authoritarian drift. It is also important to align incentives with institutional values by designing reward systems that prioritize collaboration, innovation, and academic freedom, rather than mere compliance or short-term results. In conclusion, addressing authoritarian leadership is not

only a matter of institutional health but also of fulfilling the broader mission of higher education as a space for critical thought, creativity, and societal advancement. By implementing these recommendations, higher education institutions can build more adaptive, inclusive, and resilient organizations capable of thriving in a complex and dynamic world.

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