
Review of Toxic Positivity: The Smile That Kills Organizational Culture

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Abstract

Toxic positivity occurs when we push positive emotions too far too often and too relentlessly and it not only squelches effective emotional expression among teams, but harms their overall well-being by a wide margin. While there is a general link between positivity and better performance outcomes, accumulating research suggests that excessive winking is associated with various negative consequences that may sabotage the very goals it seeks to promote. This systematic review aims to consolidate the extant literature thus far and offer a more nuanced comprehension of the conceptualization, antecedent factors and multidimensional effects of toxic positivity in organizational contexts. Following a PRISMA-based Systematic Literature Review methodology, 56 articles published in peer-review portals from the period spanning 2015 to 2025 were analysed. These findings from this critical analysis indicate that toxic positivity is endemic in everyday leadership practices, pervasive organizational culture and performance pressure. The outcome of this toxic atmosphere is undermined psychological safety, increased emotional exhaustion among employees and for the company one of the worst outcomes are that organizational performance declines sharply. This study offers one meaningful theoretical contribution building on emotional labour, psychosocial safety climate and toxic leadership concepts in an integrated way. Future research should mainly aim on empirical studies, valid instruments and cross-cultural studies. Those efforts will be necessary to better understand toxic positivity and develop strategies to help reduce its negative impacts in organizations.

Keywords: toxic positivity, organizational culture, psychological safety, emotional regulation, employee well-being, workplace emotion.

1. Introduction

Sociologically, the buzz around positivity in modern organizations has made optimism, resilience, and emotional health not just peripheral but downright staples of management conversation and organizational performance. However, alongside this clear positive frame of mind, the opposite unwanted enemy is now being sharply highlighted: toxic positivity. Its definition is the over-policing of positive feelings that ends up constraining sincere emotional experience and thus delegitimizing real-life bad experiences. Although there is often a relationship between positivity and increased engagement leading to improved performance, there is an emerging body of empirical literature indicating that overdoing positivity creates multiple downstream challenges. Consequently, such negative results may manifest in emotional depletion, a substantial decline of psychological safety and an aggregate deterioration of productivity within profiting institutions (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Skogstad et al., 2017; Rasool et al., 2019) In practice, organizations are breeding cultures of “always positive” at all levels, be it through leadership messaging, well-being policies and practices or performance evaluation systems that silence staff who dare to express feelings of frustration, pressure or critiques. This stark divide between the idealized concept of positivity and the on-the-ground experiences in the workplace serves to reinforce our argument that toxic positivity must be considered as an increasingly important issue at work.

The novelty of this specific research stems from the exploration of an important, but poorly studied topic in organizations. Despite the examination and scholarly works on its interconnected constructs—including toxic leadership (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015), workplace toxicity (Singh et al., 2018), emotional labour (Kwan et al., 2017) and psychological safety (Rasool et al., 2021)—the idea of toxic positivity itself is scattered and not well theorized with a structured framework. Most of the existing literature summarizes negative workplace behaviour, or the nuanced mechanisms associated with emotional regulation, without directly addressing how forced positivity serves as an organizational hero and a collective structural mechanism that could unwittingly lead to negative outcomes (Hochschild, 1983; Iddekinge et al., 2022). Research on toxic leadership explains how destructive managerial behaviours causing emotional strain lead to reduced well-being at work (Laguda, 2021; Lee et al., 2024; Lopes et al., 2025), while studies examining the psychosocial safety climate highlight how important supportive environments are where communication is fostered (Sjöblom et al., 2022; DeOrsey & Agars, 2024). However, despite this divergence in streams of research, the two have yet to coherently synthesize to explain the paradoxical positivity phenomenon which in some organizational contexts generates harm.

By precisely defining toxic positivity as a complex, multidimensional and multilevel construct that is woven into the organizational system's web, this study clearly differentiates itself from previous studies. Unlike previous studies which treat emotional labour, the phenomenon of finding one's leadership to be toxic, or even the more generalised construct of well-being as different and dissociated phenomena this research takes a comprehensive Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to derive these diverse constructs into a holistic integrated theoretical understanding. The existing literature has reflected on a few aspects related to ubiquitous issue of

workplace toxicity, such as emotional labour through the lens of Grandey and Gabriel (2015) and toxic workforce environments by Anjum & Ming (2018), Rasool et al. in 2019, in addition to the investigation of toxic leadership behaviours proposed by Skogstad et al. in 2017 and Singh et al. in 2018, which eventually led to the growing discourse around toxic positivity in and out of the digital yet organization atmosphere (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022; Wyatt, 2024; Kaunang et al. in 2025). Although each of these individual studies provides further critical insights on the multi layered and complex nature of workplace dynamics, they are always limited in scope and often do not integrate across levels of analysis. To address the above-mentioned significant limitation, this study aims to systematically synthesize these different domains of inquiry in order to develop a more holistic and nuanced comprehension of the interaction between these important constructs.

This research has three main contributions which enhance the subject matter. First, it defines and clarifies toxic positivity as a single conceptual phenomenon into the organizational behaviour canon, creating clear distinctions from similar constructs such as emotional labour and toxic leadership that have seen much more scholarly attention. Second, it proposes an integrating theoretical model that effectively links multiple antecedents (the impacts of leadership and organizational culture) with the mechanisms (emotional regulation and psychological safety), providing critical outcomes through work well-being and performance. Thirdly, by providing a thorough synthesis of not only empirical but also conceptual examination on the subject matter derived from different field of study, this research provides a holistic view on toxic positivity. By integrating disconnecting streams of previous research that have historically been explored in isolation such an approach contributes to the literature on toxic positivity while also illustrating the systemic nature inherent within this phenomenon and expanding academic discourse about the crucial topic.

Drawing from this pertinent and ongoing conversation, the extensive study is carefully framed through key research questions: (1) How the toxic positivity construct is conceptualized and operationally defined in a variety of organizational contexts? (2) What are the fundamental antecedents and motivators leading to the development of toxic positivity in organizations, and what sustains it? (3) What impact does toxic positivity have on key factors such as psychological safety, employee wellbeing and the larger performance of the organization? (4) Which models of theory have made an appearance in explaining the complexities surrounding toxic positivity and how might these diverse models be bridged into one cohesive, unified construct? Those questions are detailed and provide a strong reaction for looking at the convolute behaviour from many angles.

This complex investigation draws upon a various theoretical-frameworks to encourage holistic support. Emotional Labour Theory describes the complex ways that employee skill fully manages their emotions to meet what are often demanding organizational performance requirements that lead frequently to surface acting and emotional dissonance (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). In contrast, Psychosocial Safety Climate Theory stresses the impact of organizational context on whether a person is able to express their feelings freely at work or not

(Kwan et al., 2016), which was amended in time by DeOrsey & Agars (2024). Moreover, Toxic Leadership Theory provides important understanding of the mindset ocean that different leadership behaviours can create within workplaces, and how these waters at large shape an infinite variety of employee outcomes (as deeply explored by Skogstad et al. (2017) and by Laguda (2021). Perspective from related literature on employee stress and health at work complements such understanding of the interplay between toxics and workers performance that is suggested by Rasool et al. (2021), Wang et al. (2020), and Zhou et al. (2020). Through careful consideration of these varied theories, this study offers a strong and multidimensional conceptual basis to unravel the complexities inherent in the phenomenon of toxic positivity.

Therefore, the overarching aim of this review is threefold: firstly, to rigorously synthesize and integrate the current literature on toxic positivity and its related constructs; secondly, to systematically identify and critically discuss the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes found in organizational settings; and thirdly, to provide a cohesive conceptual framework that both advances theory as well as guides future research. This multifaceted approach allows the study to be based on literature that is growing and shows important implications for workplace well-being and the delicate dynamics of organizational behaviour in general while highlighting the need to balance positivity with authenticity... The bottom line is that this research highlights the quite poignant point: The sustainable success of organizations does not rest solely on their ability to curate positive workplaces but also on the growing requirement and need for psychological safety spaces, where team members feel they have permission to display as wide a range of human emotion as possible.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Toxic Positivity Conceptualized and Organizational Contexts

Toxic positivity is a norm in organizations, where you need to be cheerful always, no matter how stressed you are. Although few studies use the term explicitly (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022; Wyatt, 2024; Kaunang et al., 2025), conceptualizations of toxic leadership and emotional labor demonstrate its manifestation in organizational dynamics. Emotional Labor Theory describes how employees are required to display approved emotions, which can lead to surface acting when genuine feelings conflict with established norms (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Studies show that organizational norms and leadership affect how people handle their emotions, which can lead positivity to feel like a socially mandated obligation rather than an authentic emotion (Elfenbein, 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

To combat this 'toxic positivity', we can break down the organizational mechanisms through which toxic positivity manifests on behavioral, cultural, and structural levels. In behavioral terms, it means shutting down emotion and rejecting dissent. Culturally, it connects optimism to professionalism, which discourages vulnerability and criticism (Clegg et al., 2023; Rasool et al., 2021). Statistically speaking, this is only strengthened by performance systems and leadership communication that incentivize positive but isolating emotions. This phenomenon has been studied in various sectors, finding that such environments result in emotional exhaustion and

disengagement (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ofei et al., 2023; Sakr et al. Toxic positivity is positively correlated with stress, and negatively correlated with productivity and support in emerging economies (Anjum & Ming, 2018; Rasool et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021). It clearly puts performative positivity ahead of emotional reality and dooms both personal journeys toward well-being and organizations' efforts to create them.

2.2 The Key Antecedents of Toxic Positivity in Organizations

Toxic positivity is perpetuated by toxic organizational leadership practices, which psychologically mould emotional norms within an organization. Leaders set the standard of permissible emotion, and toxic positivity becomes a means of control. Toxic leadership that discourages dissent and lacks empathy compels employees to hide negative emotions (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015; Singh et al., 2018; Laguda, 2021; Octavian, 2023) This type of leadership is associated with emotional burnout and behaviours counterproductive to work (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ofei et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024; Lopes et al., 2025). Abusive supervision also deters open communication and replaces it with superficial positivity (AlZgool et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2022; Tiwari & Jha, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). Toxic positivity is therefore associated with power dynamics that elevate organizational image and interest above psychological authenticity.

It is also the organizational culture and structural conditions that institutionalize toxic positivity. High-performance cultures, competitive environments resist vulnerability and normalise the repression of emotionality (Matos et al., 2018; Clegg et al., 2023). Such attitudes cause employees to regard negative emotions as unprofessional. High job demands and low support were associated with disengagement and poor well-being (Rasool et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Sakr et al., 2025). If a weak psychosocial safety climate dampens employees' motivation to speak up, this further promotes a superficial harmony (Kwan et al., 2016; Sjöblom et al., 2022; DeOrsey & Agars, 2024). Moreover, positive psychology further misapplied in well-being initiatives stresses optimism and disregards negative emotions (Luthans et al., 2024; Hakeem et al., 2025; Bhardwaj et al., 2025). In a nutshell, toxic positivity is birthed from leaders who are more concerned with appearances than authenticity; cultures that emphasize good instead of growth; structures that pressure us to deliver positive narratives rather than the truth.

2.3 Toxicity Positivity, Psychological Safety, Employee Well-being and Organisational Performance

Toxic positivity adversely affects psychological safety, which leads to open communication and innovation. Employees, then, may perceive that voicing dissatisfaction violates organizational norms and thus engage in silence or impression management. These climates breed fear and knowledge sharing (Skogstad et al., 2017; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Lee et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Very few support structures exist, forcing workers to downplay concerns and resistance that would enable openness and healthy communication essential for collaboration skills in a world permanently transformed (Kwan et al., 2016; Sjöblom et al., 2022; DeOrsey & Agars, 2024).

Employee wellbeing and organisational performance is negatively impacted by toxic positivity. The pressure to stay positive induces the emotional labor that creates dissonance and stress (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Wang et al., 2023), eventually leading to exhaustion, burnout, and declining job satisfaction (Rasool et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021; Tang & Thomson, 2019). These effects are magnified in high-demand industries such as healthcare and hospitality, leading to increased turnover intentions and disengagement (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ofei et al., 2023; Sakr et al., 2025). At the organizational level, discontent at the individual level results in decreased productivity and compromised decision-making because fearful employees concern themselves with downplaying issues rather than addressing them (Clegg et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Toxic positivity, therefore, is something of a double negative: it undermines both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness, compelling us to need more balanced environments where people feel safe from psychological harm at work.

2.4 Theoretical Models Are Being Used to Explain Toxic Positivity

Toxic positivity has emerged in the extant literature, as its subject matter has been explored via pre-existing theories from organizational behaviour and psychology. Emotional Labour Theory describes the regulation of emotional expressions by employees to fit organizational expectations (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Recent Toxic Positivity Work Environments While employees may feel differently, they must act optimistic and positive, resulting in emotional dissonance. A growing corpus of research on emotion regulation indicates that there is a presence of organizational norms shaping how individuals experience affect and what coping strategies they use (Elfenbein, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Relatedly, the psychosocial safety climate concept emphasizes how systems in organizations affect employees' perceptions of feeling safe when sharing thoughts/opening up emotionally (Kwan et al., 2016; Sjöblom et al., 2022; DeOrsey & Agars, 2024). Employees in low psychological safety environments are more likely to internally process negative feelings. Moreover, the literature on toxic leadership and workplace toxicity demonstrates how leadership behaviors and organizational culture lead to emotional suppression and a lower sense of well-being (Skogstad et al., 2017; Laguda, 2021; Lee et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). These models offer fragmented insights into toxic positivity.

However, a unified theoretical perspective that combines these views is absent. A multi-level organizational process approach can conceive toxic positivity as more than individual perceptions (antecedents), which have mediating mechanisms and outcomes. At the antecedent level, toxic leadership, organizational culture and structural pressures influence emotional display rules. At the process level, Emotional Labour Theory and emotion regulation do explain employee responses using surface acting and emotional suppression features. The level of psychosocial safety climate impacts employees' perception of whether they can communicate authenticity. Workplace outcome effects include emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2020), lower well-being and disengagement (Zhou et al., 2020), and, eventually, reduced organizational performance (Rasool et al., 2021) in the toxic workplace studies. This holistic model includes a feedback loop such that negative results then strengthen toxic leadership and ironclad norms, reinforcing toxic positivity. Our synthesis of these theoretical perspectives articulates a novel framework that enhances understanding of toxic positivity and lays the groundwork for future

empirical validation and organizational interventions that balance positivity with authenticity and psychological safety.

3. Method

In the current study, a carefully implemented Systematic Literature Review (SLR) has been conducted to provide such a stringent, transparent, and replicable synthesis of the available knowledge on toxic positivity in organizations. Since this complex topic spans several fields of study (e.g., organizational behaviour, psychology, management) and is in a fragmented and emergent state, the use of SLR is especially warranted. The process of noting relevant information in such studies, along with it being all reviewed critically and included in the current bibliography or not (Snyder, 2019) is defined as Systematic Literature Review (SLR) influenced by processes found in private sector practice. Over the last couple of years, and especially for theory building and conceptual clarification purposes (Paul & Criado, 2020), the method is getting significant popularity in management and social sciences as a methodological framework. Many researchers have successfully utilized SLR in order to explore constructs that are complex and multidimensional (Xu & Abdulah, 2025), further validating its use in distilling out the scattered and heterogeneous literature on this topic area. The fact that toxic positivity is conceptually related to these constructs despite there being no overarching, coherent or unified model suggests that an SLR approach is a fundamental requirement for synthesising evidence and establishing relevant gaps in the existing literature.

Following a rigorous methodological framework guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (see Figure 1), the current study follows a structured SLR protocol (Page et al., 2021). There are several important, systematic stages of the research process. During the first step (i.e., identification), we performed an extensive search across relevant academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar given certain keywords (e.g., “toxic positivity,” “emotional labour,” “psychological safety” or “workplace emotions”). This is an attempt to cover all significant and relevant research articles published over a range of preferred years from 2015 to 2025. Second, the screening step uses very well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to narrow down the initial studies. Exclusion criteria focus on peer-reviewed journal articles based specifically on organisational or workplace settings, filtering out non-scholarly publications as well as duplicates and studies lacking either empirical or theoretical contributions (Page et al., 2021). The third stage is the eligibility stage, where full text of selected articles are obtained to verify whether they indeed meet the overarching research aims. In this phase studies are critically analysed considering their methodological quality, theoretical contributions and relevance to toxic positivity and related constructs (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Step 3 (Inclusion & synthesis) — Systematic extraction of data and detailed analysis of the data from the included studies. This involves the coding of essential themes, theoretical possibilities, antecedents and consequences connected to the notion of toxic positivity. Thematic analysis will be used to identify similar themes and relationships found across different studies, following the steps of qualitative synthesis as previously described (Lame, 2019). In addition, this study takes

an integrative approach to accurately represent the interrelations of constructs and create a comprehensive conceptual framework. The review process further strengthens the findings by a validation of sources and iterative refinement of themes (Snyder, 2019). Through strict adherence to its systematic phases, the SLR method guarantees a thorough and impartial consolidation of literature which creates a robust foundation for enhancing theoretical understandings while steering future empirical efforts on the key topic of toxic positivity across work life.

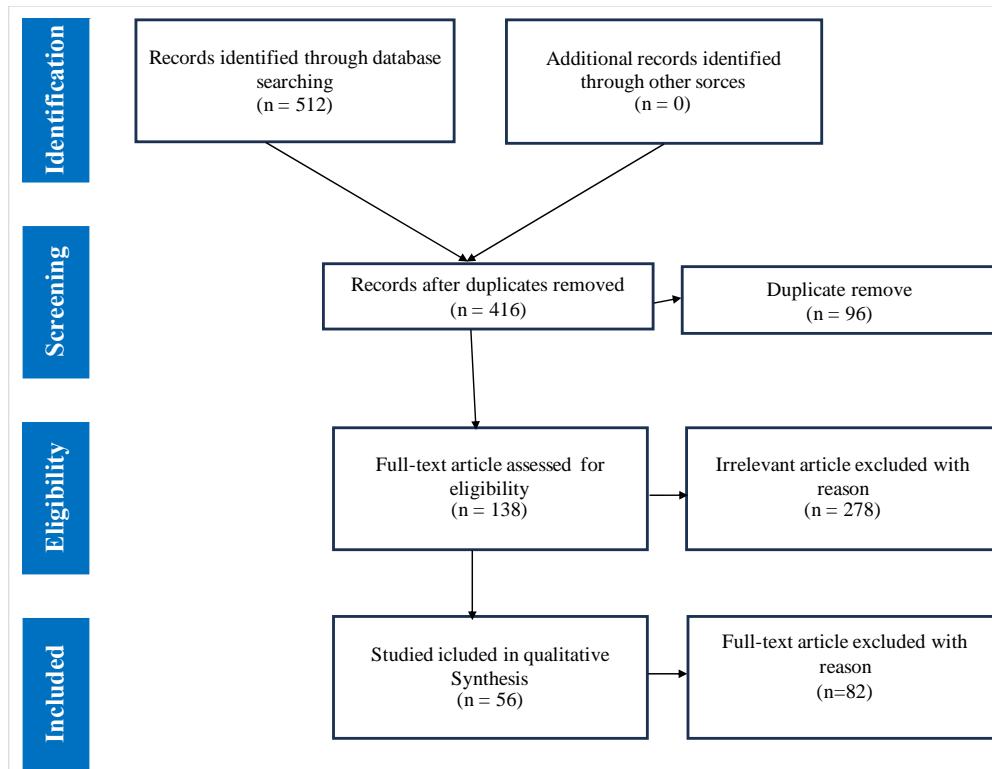


Figure 1. PRISMA Protocol’s (selecting of quality articles)

Source: Own elaborate (2026)

Reporting on the number of articles identified and selected at every unique layer of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) process, this study is intended with an emphasis on transparency and methodological rigor all through the research process. A total of about 512 potential records were obtained from a thorough and systematic database search using some major academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) through adequately predefined keywords used “toxic positivity”, “emotional labour” and “psychological safety”. A total of 512 articles returned after removing duplicate records (96 duplicates were removed) and these were further screened in a rigorous manner, eventually leaving us with 416 unique articles to review.

The title and abstract of the detected articles were reviewed according to the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with 278 articles discarded as not relevant in an organizational context or without theoretical or empirical robustness needed for this analysis. As a result, 138 articles proceeded to the eligibility stage.

Assessment of inclusion in full-text was quantified on the basis of relevance, methodological quality and conceptual contribution for all studies. At this stage, 82 articles were excluded for reasons such as a lack of focus on constructs explaining toxic positivity, non-peer review status or limited theoretical contribution to the construct. This detailed methodology led to a final set of 56 quality articles found to meet the inclusion criteria and therefore included for review. Therefore, the inclusion step for this review consisted of these 56 selected studies that were then analysed through thematic synthesis in order to elicit important patterns, antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes of toxic positivity.

This rigorous selection process closely follows the PRISMA guidelines outlined by Moher et al. (2009) and refined by Page et al. (2021), which will make the review systematic and transparent as well as reproducible. Providing counts of how many articles remained at each stage not only adds credibility and transparency to the study but also creates a traceable audit trail for researchers interested in repeating or extending this vital field work.

4. Results

The thorough, systematic review of fifty-six carefully selected studies reveals a striking and trending trajectory in academic research around the multivariate toxic workplace phenomenon (summary see in Table 1). These negative aspects include toxic leadership, poisoned feelings, and more recently the stealthy notion of toxic positivity. From a chronological point of view, the existing literature displays an identifiable evolution of focus and level of exploration. The earlier studies from 2015–2018, the majority focused on core constructs that underpin this field such as emotional labour and the nature of toxic workplaces (e.g. Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Moore et al. 2015; Anjum & Ming, 2018). During the next phase of research, between 2019 and 2021, interest turned to studying the negative effects toxic environments had on employees themselves – including through metrics such as performance, engagement and well-being. The amended focus is well noticed in the works of Rasool et al. (2019), Coldwell (2019), Wang et al. (2020), Wang et al. (2023). The latest contributions, from 2022 to 2025, show a clear intensification of the academic interest in psychological safety, mental health and toxic positivity becoming understood as an own relevant and important concept (as pointed out by Kaunang et al., 2025; Wyatt 2024; Bhardwaj et al., 2025).

Table 1. SLR Result by Year, Country, Publisher, Affiliation, and Keywords

Category	Key Findings	Representative Studies
Year of Publication	of Increasing 2015–2018 (conceptual), 2019–2021 (impact), 2022–2025 (mental health & toxic positivity)	trend: Grandey & Gabriel (2015); Moore et al. (2015); Anjum & Ming (2018); Rasool et al. (2019); Coldwell (2019); Wang et al. (2020); Kim (2020); Mergen & Ozbilgin (2021); Rasool et al. (2021); Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022); Elfenbein (2023); Wyatt (2024); Kaunang et al. (2025); Bhardwaj et al. (2025); Sakr et al. (2025)
Country	Dominated by Europe, and emerging economies emphasize structural toxicity	Asia, Anjum & Ming (2018); Rasool et al. (2021); Wang et al. (2020); Zhou et al. (2020); Tang & Thomson (2019); Kim (2020); Elfenbein (2023); Lee et al. (2024); Lopes et al. (2025); Ofei et al. (2023); Zhao et al. (2024); Clegg et al. (2023); Hung et al. (2022); Roh et al. (2023); Sakr et al. (2025)
Publisher	Dominated by impact Elsevier, MDPI, SAGE	high-publishers: Grandey & Gabriel (2015); Moore et al. (2015); Rasool et al. (2019); Wang et al. (2020); Zhou et al. (2020); Rasool et al. (2021); Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022); Elfenbein (2023); Roh et al. (2023); Zhao et al. (2024); Ahmed et al. (2024); Lee et al. (2024); Lopes et al. (2025); Bhardwaj et al. (2025); Sakr et al. (2025)
University Affiliation	Global distribution including US, Europe, Asia; doctoral research	Atmadja (2019); Swanson (2022); Moore et al. (2015); Cech & O’Connor (2017); Kim (2020); Mergen & Ozbilgin (2021); Rasool et al. (2021); Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022); Elfenbein (2023); Lee et al. (2024); DeOrsey & Agars (2024); Zhao et al. (2024); Lopes et al. (2025); Whitsed et al. (2025); Chib et al. (2025)
Keywords	Dominant keywords: toxic leadership, well-being, safety, labor	Grandey & Gabriel (2015); Hülshager & Schewe (2011); Rasool et al. (2019); Rasool et al. (2021); Wang et al. (2020); Kim (2020); Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022); Elfenbein (2023); Roh et al. (2023); Wyatt (2024); Ahmed et al. (2024); Zhao et al. (2024); Kaunang et al. (2025); Lopes et al. (2025); Bhardwaj et al. (2025)
Discipline	Multidisciplinary: OB, Psychology, Health, Sociology	Skogstad et al. (2017); Rasool et al. (2019); Rasool et al. (2021); Wang et al. (2020); Kim (2020); Mergen & Ozbilgin (2021); Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022); Elfenbein (2023); Roh et al. (2023); Ahmed et al. (2024); Zhao et al. (2024); Wyatt (2024); Kaunang et al. (2025); Lopes et al. (2025); Sakr et al. (2025)

Source: Research Results (2026)

Focus of the Contribution Geographically, most contributions to this subject came from around the world, but showed a stronger representation in different parts of Asia (e.g., Pakistan, China, Malaysia), Europe and USA. This distribution illustrates the international relevance and significant consequences of toxic workplace dynamics. Studies originating from developing economies are noticeably biased towards discussing the structural and managerial factors that contribute to toxic work environments as reflected by Anjum and Ming (2018) and Rasool et al. (2021). However, Western-based research tends to theorize and investigate psychological processes first (e.g., Elfenbein, 2023; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021).

The top outlets of academic publishers, including Elsevier (Biological Psychology), Springer (Forensic Science International), MDPI (Diagnostics and Cancers), Emerald (International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences) and SAGE (Criminology & Criminal Justice) are well represented here, suggesting that this is a serious subject area for scholarship generating enough papers to build up its own growing academic legitimacy. There is visible objectivity from the disciplinary perspective of the analysis as we get organizational behavior and human resource management as dominant fields with a highly interdisciplinary nature of the literature. Through these areas of study, critical elements such as toxic leadership, workplace culture, and employee outcomes are explored (Skogstad et al. (2017), Rasool et al. (2021), and Lopes et al. (2025). Indeed, the field of Psychology also provides important perspectives on critical features underlying emotional management to well-being and mental health consequences (Gross 2015; Elfenbein 2023; Wyatt 2024). Additionally, the fields of Public Health and Occupational Health focus on highly relevant topics such as stress, burnout, and other occupational health hazards emerging in today's workplaces — exemplified by researches like those of Ahmed et al. (2024), Zhou et al. (2020), and Sakr et al. (2025). The fields of Sociology and critical management studies also offer valuable explanations on the social systems, discourses, and power dynamics that contribute to toxic positivity (see Lecompte-Van Poucke 2022; Clegg et al. (2023). This triangulation of transdisciplinary viewpoints highlights that toxic positivity cannot simply be categorized as a workplace issue — rather, it is a socio-psychological occurrence rooted in the core fabric of institutional structures.

4.1 Thematic

1) Toxic positivity conceptualization and operationalization within different contexts of organizations

It is associated with an emerging world view, toxic positivity depends on the entity—individual, group, or organization—as a socially constructed and institutionally reinforced expectation of members to express constant optimism across time and space in their experience when contextual phenomenology requires otherwise, i.e., feelings like anger or despair that arise in connection with stressors such as injury, conflict, mind-body perpetration due to identity strain. Only a small number of scholarly studies clearly use the specific term toxic positivity—most notably Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022), Wyatt (2024), and Kaunang et al. (2025) — the wider academic literature reflects this complex phenomenon through overlapping constructs such as toxic leadership, emotional labour, psychosocial safety climate and workplace well-being. It implies that toxic positivity is rarely regarded as a standalone construct in its own right — but rather as intricately woven into the larger fabric of organizational cultures that promote the

erasure of feelings and inhibit real self-expression. The need for regulation of emotion is a pressing one within the complex fabric of organizational life (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015), and there are great pressures as to how emotions get displayed in organizations and the relationships that they shape (Elfenbein, 2023). Also, Wang et al. (2023) provide evidence that the performance of emotion is subject to varied contextual and institutional influences, illustrating that positive emotions are often externally imposed rather than internalised. This can be framed as a normative emotional regime, where expressions vulnerability, frustration or dissent are delegitimated and discouraged in favour of performative and superficial positivity. This conclusion is supported by literature that has been conducted around toxic and destructive leadership, whereby leaders purposely foster climate centred on silence, compliance, and impression management instead of authentic psychological support (Cheang & Appelbaum, 2015; Singh et al., 2018; Laguda, 2021; Octavian, 2023).

Working across different forms of organizations, toxic positivity plays out in a variety of ways at multiple entry points that are specific to and uniquely represent those ecological systems. And, nowhere is this phenomenon more impactful than in the world of health care and nursing, where impassioned requests for emotional immunity never cease amidst the fact that greater than 75% ever report feeling burned out. In addition to chronic stressors due to under-staffing resources, the repeated exposure of clinical professionals with trauma and traumatic experiences magnifies this predicament (Ofei et al., 2023; Celebi Cakiroglu & Tuncer Unver, 2024; Tang & Thomson, 2019).

Rather, toxic positivity is inscribed in the emotional display rules that control the hospitality and service sectors, as many employees find themselves obligated to project smiles and enthusiasm during customer-service interactions while they are internally suffering (AIZgool et al., 2023; Sakr et al., 2025). In all forms of academia and education it has a more subtle, yet unmistakable presence led by combined forces for collegiality, institutional optimism that knows no bounds, and a marked hesitation towards conflict of any kind — especially in organizations where the psychological safety is not even plausibly high (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Sjöblom et al., 2022; Swanson, 2022; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022).

Although emotional load doesn't explicitly manifest in industrial and project-based environments as toxic positivity, the cultural forces that make these spaces run smoothly for achievement lead to productive pressure (Matos et al., 2018; Clegg et al., 2013; Coldwell, 2019; Wang et al., 2020). Simultaneously, the perception of burnout and its operationalization through components such as strain, alienation, decreased productivity or organizational politeness (Anjum & Ming 2018; Rasool et al. 2019; Rasool et al. 2021) have been studies done in developing countries.

All of which together suggest that toxic positivity is produced by shallow displays of harmony, mandates to manage emotional expression, silencing vulnerability and the stories told in organisations about positivity being professional. Although the explicit contexts of these diverse settings vary, a common thread runs across them all—the masking of negative feelings under the

guise of performative positivity and this ultimately results in a pernicious shift in an organizational culture that undermines employee well-being.

2) The key antecedents and driving forces of toxic positivity in organizations

The reinforcement of effective practices and action forms toxic positivity as a by-product instead of simply an attitude on its own that can be taken or left, reflecting an intricate interplay among other leadership activities, cultural norms and systemic structures within organizations. One of the many things that have been identified in numerous studies as a powerful precursor to bullying is toxic and destructive leadership, which helps inform what behaviours and expressions we deem acceptable in the workplace. Cheang and Appelbaum (2015) and Singh et al. (2018), Kurtulmuş (2020), Laguda (2021) and Octavian (2023) show that often in cultures of toxic leadership, people are mainly expected to please leaders by conforming to their will without question and remain steadfastly loyal, while explicitly forcing the overly emotional contents of the organization to be temporarily held at bay. Work culture is framed with expectations from the managers, which themselves come with their own set of worries and insecurities which can be assisted by making employees suppress feelings of dissatisfaction, stress levels and dissent in questioning. Educational institutions also implement say take a look at colleges. This fact is further substantiated by empirical studies that indicate a worrying trend where toxic leadership results in numerous adverse consequences which, among other things, include emotional exhaustion (Ahmed et al., 2024), deviant workplace behaviours (Ofei et al., 2023), and overall well-being decline in general among employees contributing to the organization (Lee et al., 2024; Lopes et al., 2025). Likewise, the phenomenon of abusive supervision and despotic leadership (AlZgool et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2022; Tiwari & Jha, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024) increase feigning of emotions and discourage authentic interaction leading to an organizational climate where positivity becomes more performative rather than real. Thus, toxic positivity can be understood as a form of emotional expression associated with hierarchical power dynamics that favour the exertion of control and the management of appearance over authentic psychological experience.

However, as is often the case beyond leadership, organizational culture, and structural conditions are also powers that perpetuate toxic positivity. Many studies have shown that this disturbing phenomenon is exacted in work environments with a high-pressure to perform, strict rules of displaying emotions and win-or-die (Matos et al., 2018; Clegg et al., 2023). In these circumstances, positivity often becomes an expected societal norm to the point where employees feel any negative sentiment they might experience could be seen as unprofessional or counter-productive and thus something that they shouldn't think, nor express. Moreover, pull as a supporting factor, toxic workplace contributes in the prevailing emphatic of employees to understand the above-mentioned conflicting work settings; these are stress-intensive job demands, conspicuous organizational obstacles, and workplace conflict significantly correlate to suppression of emotions and burnout (Rasool et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Sakr et al., 2025). Moreover, a weak psychosocial safety climate significantly reduces employees' willingness to voice concerns or vulnerabilities and reinforces an inauthentic atmosphere of harmony (Kwan et al., 2016; Sjöblom et al., 2022; DeOrsey & Agars, 2024).

Another significant contributor to this phenomenon is the misconstrue of positive psychology for organisations, such that well-being initiatives increasingly promote a never-ending fixation on happiness and an aversion to negative emotional experiences. Despite the fact that these are aimed to increase engagement and resilience (Luthans et al., 2024; Hakeem et al., 2025; Bhardwaj et al., 2025), ultimately, they risk creating pressure to remain in a continuous state of positive emotion which could only be perpetuating emotional inauthenticity among employees. While the individual findings indicate different factors in this process, these working mechanisms together suggest that toxic positivity arises through the mutual reinforcement of leaders within an organization, norms and expectations above leadership level to be positive, structural pressures to be a source of positivity externally and reflections upward toward the top of institutional narrative. However rather than seeing positivity as a useful emotion which balances out the high/low regime between emotional responses that encompass pain and pleasure within human experience, it becomes an obligatory component for any actor operating within organizations.

3) Relationship between toxicity positivity with psychological safety, employee well-being and organisational performance

All of the literature suggests that toxic positivity has a very negative impact on psychological safety in organizations, and therefore inhibits employee's ability to openly share what they think, feel, and worry about. Psychological safety, which is characterized by a shared belief that people will not incur negative consequences for speaking up, significantly erodes when a culture of forced positivity becomes the prevailing norm. Within these conditions employees may begin to feel that speaking out about unhappiness, stress or dissent is not only an affront to but contradicts the signals on unrelenting positivity and exceptional fortitude that are often adapted upon them. In fact, comprehensive research tracking toxic leadership and wider workplace toxicity refers to the pervasive climate of hostility as causing silence, fear, and impression management instead of conducive conditions for open and honest dialogue (Skogstad et al., 2017; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Lee et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Moreover, studies examining the psychosocial safety climate demonstrate that without systems for supporting emotional authenticity in organizations, employees are more likely to stifle their concerns and align with a false sense of surface-level harmony (Kwan et al., 2016; Sjöblom et al., 2022; DeOrsey & Agars, 2024). Thus, this concept of toxic positivity creates a climate where psychological safety is eroded while also creating an environment that provides minimal opportunities for knowledge sharing and ultimately hinders innovation and collective learning.

Toxic positivity has strong correlations with emotional exhaustion, high levels of stress and a decrease in mental health when it comes to employee wellbeing. Workplace policies, which dictate the need to uphold positive expressions until integral part of employee identity and work culture, create emotionally exhausting demand that manifest as surface level association with positive emotions — a link already confirmed as predictors of burnout and lower job satisfaction (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Hung et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). According to empirical studies, toxic workplaces are associated with increased depression and disengagement as well as a decline in overall psychological well-being (Rasool et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021; Tang &

Thomson, 2019). In high-stress domains of service, such as healthcare and hospitality, the demand to continue smiling, when significantly impacted by emotional fatigue, adds to emotions of emotional exhaustion alongside increased turnover intentions (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ofei et al., 2023; Sakr et al., 2025). In addition, the emerging literature specifically addressing toxic positivity underscores its harmful effects on the mental health of individuals by explicitly citing the high psychological price of repression of genuine feelings (Kaunang et al., 2025; Wyatt, 2024)

Such negative individual-level consequences are bound to turn into organizational performance consequences. Toxic positivity essentially leads to suppressing constructive criticism, reducing the motivation of employees and polluting the quality of decision-making by making workers more unwilling to question dominant beliefs or disclose problems (Grant, 2013; Clegg et al., 2023). Consistent evidence highlights that toxic work environments lead to decreased levels of employee productivity, increased level of counterproductive work behaviours and lower levels of organizational commitment (Anjum et al., 2018; Brohi et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2021). Also, emotional exhaustion that stems from the compliance with a positivity mandate inhibits not only job performance but also the potential for innovation especially in knowledge-intensive and service-oriented sectors (Wang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). In general, the literature indicates that toxic positivity is a counter-intuitive phenomenon: what may be meant for positivity and resilience breaks down psychology security, harms employee health and reduces collective strength.

4) Theoretical models are being used to explain toxic positivity

Although toxic positivity is a newly defined concept, the available literature suggests that it has been previously described in both organizational behaviour and psychological domains through several well-grounded theoretical frameworks. Of the myriad of frameworks that exist along these lines, one of the most notable and ubiquitous is Emotional Labour Theory, which describes how workers scrupulously manage their emotion display to meet sometimes stringent organizationally-imposed standards (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). It leads the employees to indulge in surface acting that is pretending as if they are happy without truly feeling happy, a normal phenomenon in workplace environments around toxic positivity. This ubiquitous characteristic will always trigger a sense of emotional dissonance, resulting in extreme levels of stress and discomfort. In a similar vein, work emphasizing emotion regulation highlights a significant influence that organizational norms have on emotional display and the diverse range of strategies utilized to navigate, emotion-related adversity (Elfenbein, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Another applicable model relevant to this discussion is the psychosocial safety climate that emphasizes the importance of organizational systems in allowing (or constraining) open and honest emotional expression. Kwan et al. (2016), Sjöblom et al. (2022), and DeOrsey and Agars (2024) have shown that lower psychosocial safety climates enable environments with containerized emotions and silence, characterized behaviours that closely align with toxic positivity dynamics. Finally, the literature surrounding toxic leadership and workplace toxicity gives a strong structural explanation for how particular leadership behaviours as well as what types of cultures dominate (positivity enforced vs. negative prevention) which can be seen

through how some organizations literally do enforce positivity while punishing dissenting commentary and criticism (Skogstad et al., 2017; Laguda, 2021; Lee et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Together, these theoretical models provide pieces of a diverse puzzle that help us understand the nuanced mechanisms at play in toxic positivity.

Nevertheless, while these novel works have made important contributions to the field, the current state of the literature has a general lack of a shared and integrated theoretical model allowing for encapsulation of toxic positivity's multidimensional complexity across levels of analysis. Overall, a richer and more fine-grained theory can be developed by integrating these theoretical lenses into an overarching multilevel framework. At the antecedent level, toxic leadership, organizational culture and different structural pressures are dominant factors for determining emotional display rules and expectations. These elements corroborate the findings based on theories in toxic leadership and organizational culture. At the process level, Emotional Labour Theory and emotion regulation frameworks explain how employees attend to these expectations predominantly via surface acting and emotional suppression. At the same time, psychosocial safety climate meaningfully contributes to whether people feel safe enough to authentically express how they feel, or whether they are under pressure to conform with a culture of forced positivity. These dynamics compound at the outcome level, leading to emotional exhaustion and a reduction in well-being, disengagement, and poor performance, as seen in toxic workplace settings.

Through elaborate interlinking of these disparate models, toxic positivity can be theorized as an organizational phenomenon of systemic proportions that traverses individual, relational and structural levels. Not only does this integrative pathway language pursue theoretical sensitivity for the field, but it can also stimulate empirical testing and interventions tailored to ensure that organizations create an appropriate balance between cultivating positivity without compromising authenticity and psychological safety.

4.2 Conceptual Framework

The model in figure 2 that we apply conceptualizes toxic positivity as a multilevel organizational phenomenon propelled by mutual interactions among behavioural, cultural and structural nuances of organization which translate to employee-psychological outcomes. It pinpoints toxic leadership, organizational culture and a performance-driven approach to work as key motivators. Toxic behaviours by leaders, such as excessive optimism and emotional suppression, shape norms that prioritize positivity over authenticity. Cultures that value harmony and performance entrench rules against negative expression. Such norms become institutionalized by structural factors (e.g., performance metrics and customer expectations) that pressure employees to fit into positive emotional standards.

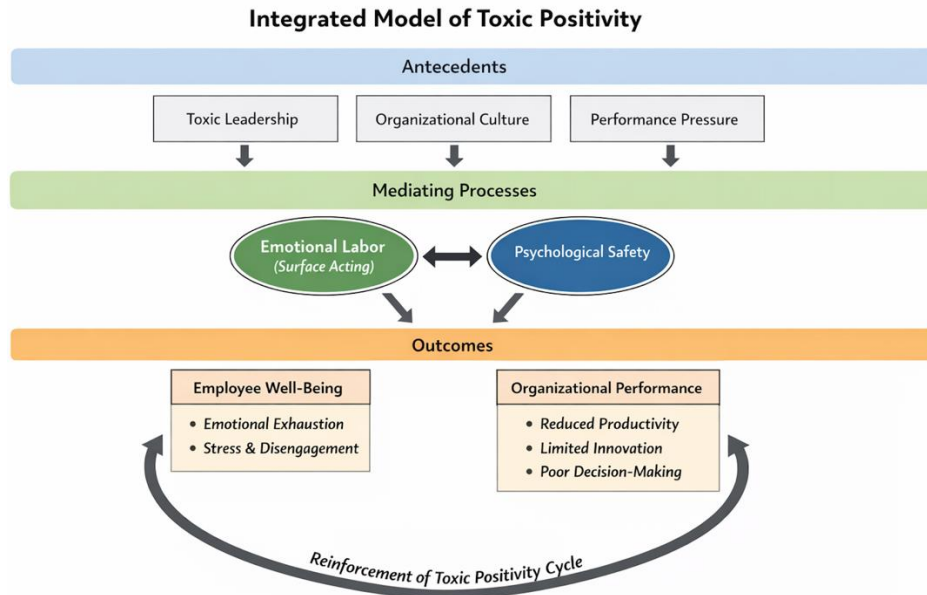


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework
 Source: Own elaborate (2026)

At the mediating level, the framework points to emotional labour (particularly surface acting) and psychological safety. The Emotional Labour Theory describes how employees regulate their mood to meet job demands, which may result in surface acting when genuine emotion conflicts with the need to be amenable. This emotional dissonance is one of the main ways toxic positivity affect people. Psychological safety determines whether employees are able to express authentic feelings or have to stifle them. The result is where the internalization of toxic positivity norms occurs in environments perceived with low psychological safety, which has emotional labouring costs that percolates down communication channels to those around them.

At the outcome level, toxic positivity has important negative consequences for both individuals and organizations. On one hand an emotional exhaustion, well-being degradation, stress and disengagement among employees, on the other diminishing performance of organizations including lower productivity, limited innovation and more risky decision making. This results in the suppression of negative feedback and stifling organizational learning and adaptive capacity. The framework is coupled with a negative feedback loop, whereby the same outcomes reinforce toxic leadership, cementing rigid norms and ongoing toxic positivity. This multi layered model can help make sense of the disjointed concepts such as toxic leadership, emotional labour and psychological safety and highlights that toxic positivity is a systemic issue which needs interventions at multiple levels; from developing leaders through to cultural change and redesigning structures.

5. Discussion

Previous researchers confirm decisively that toxic positivity is more than a personality quirk it is an organizational construct multiplied in leaders' practices, cultural norms and structural pressures across the workplace. Consistent with previous academic studies around toxic leadership and workplace landscapes, this review highlights that often the most pervasive organizational expectation of endless positivity stifles authentic emotional expression. Thus, this inhibition perpetuates the prevalence of emotional labour and surface acting (e.g., Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Skogstad et al. (2017), and Laguda (2021). This finding adds greatly to the literature, indicating that positivity can be subtly developed into a rigid and coercive norm by organizations and eventually acts as an emotional controlling mechanism ultimately requiring employees to repress their authentic selves which contributes towards employee disengagement. Additionally, this research nicely contributes to the literature by fusing together multiple intellectual perspectives — in particular emotional labour, psychosocial safety climate, and toxic leadership into a more holistic view of toxic positivity. The results indicate that toxic positivity supports a multilevel mechanism, whereby leadership behaviours and the broader organizational culture intertwine to influence emotional expectations. Such expectations, in accepting fashion trickle down as their significant influence on the emotional regulation of employees and psychological outcomes. So as stated in located research studies like Kwan et al. (2016) under environments of low psychological safety, individuals are less likely to speak up and hence suppress their emotional feelings. (2016), Sjöblom et al. (2022), and DeOrsey & Agars (in press, 2024). Through the synthesis of these theoretical lenses, this study develops a more nuanced conceptualization that tightly binds personal feelings with larger organizational processes, thus contributing to the growth of knowledge in this realm.

Moreover, the results reveal a counterintuitive relationship—between positivity and performance. Though traditional management theories champion the benefits of developing positive organizational climates, this review makes a powerful case that high — or forced — positivity actually can have negative outcomes. Through the work of Rasool et al, there can be these negative impacts such as emotional exhaustion, well-being and lower organizational performance. (2021), Wang et al. (2020), and Zhou et al. (2020). Such a paradoxical state accentuates the need for a critical reappraisal of the positivity movement in organizational studies, as we argue that developing employee well-being is more about achieving balance and authenticity rather than a simplistic multi-dimensional approach to engagement. In detail, the avoidance of negativity can severely undermine critical thinking, subvert constructive feedback systems, and curtail organizational learning around the challenges posed by a nuanced environment demanding adaptability.

Finally, this study highlights the need to contextualize toxic positivity in different organizational settings. The review convincingly illustrates that while the expressions of toxic positivity differ between industries — healthcare, hospitality, education and so on — the mechanisms are alarmingly the same: forced politeness takes precedence over real emotional truth. Spotting this fine nuance adds another unique contribution to the growing body of work on workplace well-being by suggesting that high-performance organizations are not exclusively built upon positive

environments, rather healthy outcomes demand the introduction of psychologically safe and emotionally inclusive cultures. In summary, this rich and multi-faceted discussion propels theoretical as well as practical comprehension forward by framing toxic positivity as a pressing but under explored threat to contemporary organizations that merits further empirical clarification and considered organizational response.

6. Conclusion

This research offers a comprehensive and detailed synthesis of the emerging connotation of toxic positivity in a range of organizational environments, highlighting its essential quality as an organic and multifactorial evolutionary process vs merely being representative of individual disposition. The results highlight, that toxic positivity is tightly linked to the context of leadership practices, organizational culture and structural pressures where these three factors together reinforce emotional conformity but at the same time restrain authentic and honest expression of emotions. So, while positivity is widely praised as one of the most important forces behind improved performance and well-being, a one sided application that does not consider negative aspects can become - paradoxically - detrimental to the very factors it aims to uplift such as psychological safety or employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. Therefore, the study concludes that to arrive at sustainable organizational performance, there is a requirement of balanced emotional climate, which can properly hold both positive and negative emotions.

Theoretically, this study is significant for synthesizing multiple hitherto disparate literatures—especially emotional labour theory, psychosocial safety climate and toxic leadership—into a much more coherent conceptualization of toxic positivity as an implicit form of organizational crime. Framed as a multilevel construct operating at different levels of analysis — spanning antecedents, processes and outcomes — toxic positivity offers yet another potential extension of existing organizational behavior schemas, along with a new way to think about work-related emotions. Additionally, it adds to the growing discussion regarding the positive psychology "dark side," questioning the presupposed notion that positivity has no negative effects in any context.

Some may advocate for organizations to understand that deep meaning lies in-encouraging organizational features that are supportive of this in-trait and its behavioural manifestations than providing cosmetic positivity. Leaders should receive training that not only enables them to identify the potential hazards created by the imposition of positivity, but which actively promotes an environment conducive to dialogue, constructive feedback, and emotional inclusivity. Organizational policies and well-being initiatives should be carefully crafted to walk the fine line between optimism and realism, so employees feel validated in their experiences rather than pressured to conform.

This work opens up exciting avenues for future research. Such is the importance of empirical studies in proving/disproving our suggested conceptual model and understanding how toxic positivity takes shape across different cultural groups and industries. Future studies should also

focus on creating measurement scales, designing intervention strategies and assessing longitudinal effects to have a deeper understanding of how toxic positivity develops over time which will strengthen the overall understanding of this seminal, underexplored phenomenon in modern organizations.

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