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Dangaiso, Phillip, Towo, Tendai, Nyagadza, Brighton, Manyangara, Masimba E., Nedure, Tendai and Ncube, Caret N. (2026) Predicting generation Z co-worker incivility from the lens of the dark triad: do gender differences matter? Cogent Business & Management, 13 (1).

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Cogent Business & Management

ISSN: 2331-1975 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/oabm20

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To cite this article: Phillip Dangaiso, Tendai Towo, Brighton Nyagadza, Masimba E. Manyangara, Tendai Nedure & Caret N. Ncube (2026) Predicting generation Z co-worker incivility from the lens of the dark triad: do gender differences matter?, Cogent Business & Management, 13:1, 2650835, DOI: 10.1080/23311975.2026.2650835

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2026.2650835

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COGENT BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT
2026, VOL. 13, NO. 1, 2650835
https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2026.2650835

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Predicting generation Z co-worker incivility from the lens of the dark triad: do gender differences matter?

Phillip Dangaiso[a], Tendai Towo[b], Brighton Nyagadza[c,d], Masimba E. Manyangara[a], Tendai Nedure[e] and Caret N. Ncube[f]

[a]Department of Marketing, Chinhoyi University of Technology, City of Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe; [b]Department of Banking and Finance, Bindura University of Science Education, City of Bindura, Zimbabwe; [c]Business, Management and Health Studies, York St John University, City of London, England, United Kingdom; [d]Korea University Business School, Korea University, City of Seoul, Republic of South Korea; [e]Department of Economics, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, City of Bindura, Zimbabwe; [f]Department of Statistics and Operations Research, National University of Science and Technology, City of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

Extant literature confirms that uncivil employee behaviours lead to counterproductive working environments. This study examines whether the dark triad is associated with co-worker incivility among the Generation Z food service employees. Further, we also examine if there are significant gender differences on the effects of machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy on uncivil behaviours. Person-administered questionnaires were delivered in fast-food restaurants (SMEs) in three Zimbabwean cities. The study obtained 315 valid responses that were used to estimate model parameters in AMOS. The results show that machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy were all positively and significantly associated with co-worker incivility. Using multi-group analysis, the effects of machiavellianism and psychopathy on co-worker incivility were stronger in males than female employees while narcissism confirmed to have stronger effects on female than male employees. Although these traits exist in all humans by varying degrees, this study recommends that service providers should adopt personality assessments to enhance service quality. This paper also demonstrates that understanding the psycho-social traits of employees can be a strong impetus for nurturing a harmonious workplace. Moreover, managers of high contact services could leverage gender-responsive work design, on-boarding and training programmes to counter-manage incidences of potentially gender-skewed behavioural dispositions such as co-worker incivility.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 November 2025
Revised 17 March 2026
Accepted 22 March 2026

KEYWORDS
Dark triad; co-worker incivility; generation Z; psychology and marketing

JEL CODE
D91; J16; M12

SUBJECTS
Social Psychology; Work & Organizational Psychology; African Studies; Gender Studies

1. Introduction

Workplace incivility is a low-intensity deviant behavior that harms the target through violation of norms of mutual respect. While it remains a persistent vice, it is an undesirable workplace phenomenon. Maladaptive behaviours towards co-workers (Ahmad et al., 2025; Lata & Chaudhary, 2020; Oyet et al., 2019) and even customers (Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024; Gustiawan et al., 2023) have been extensively examined in previous studies. Despite the popularity, co-worker incivility remains a vice in the workplace due to its negative effects on organisational climate, employee relationships, customer experience, productivity, service quality and overall organisational performance (Grandey et al., 2004; Gustiawan et al., 2023; Schilpzand et al., 2016). The concept of the dark triad was first introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002), consisting of three socially aversive personality traits (i.e. narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy). Although their degrees largely vary, these traits negative influence a person's perceptions, attitudes and relationships with others, particularly co-worker interactions in the organisational context. While researchers have attempted to link

CONTACT Phillip Dangaiso phillipdangaiso@gmail.com Department of Marketing, Chinhoyi University of Technology, City of Chinhoyi, P Bag 7724 Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe

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personality constructs and co-worker incivility in service industries, most studies on co-worker incivility were drawn to established firms in Western economies (Lee & Kim, 2022; Modic et al., 2018; Roth & Klehe, 2025). Given that, the present study largely focused on Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the context of an underdeveloped Zimbabwean economy. The main objective of this study was to examine the intersection of the dark triad personality traits, gender diversity and co-worker incivility in the fast-food restaurant service industry in Zimbabwe, focusing on the Generation (Gen) Z cohort.

Born between 1997-2012 (Krishna & Agrawal, 2024; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015), the Gen Z workforce is arguably the most topical revelation of the 21st century workplace. While contrasting behavioural perspectives have been suggested in recent literature (Krishna & Agrawal, 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Niu & Yang, 2022; Wang et al., 2021), they remain the future of work. Being the youngest demographic segment, their work engagement is often crippled by their impulsivity (Jang et al., 2025; Lensen et al., 2025). Divergent scholars contend that regardless of these shortcomings, the Gen Z segment can be very innovative, entrepreneurial, tech-savvy and solution-oriented (Lensen et al., 2025). Despite these dichotomous perspectives, the Gen Z have potential to become critical employees, executives and even founders of disruptive startups due to their advanced digital orientation and entrepreneurial acumen (Lee et al., 2024). Given this, organisations may need to reinvent themselves to buttress these generational endowments by crafting informed managerial interventions that enhance organisational harmony, productivity, customer satisfaction and brand image.

In Zimbabwe, while general unemployment rate is at 21.8% (ZIMSTAT, 2022), most Gen Z adults' resort to preoccupation in fast-food restaurants, informal trading, small-scale mining, agribusiness processing and entrepreneurial start-ups (Mukucha, 2022). SMEs have exponentially expanded due to the closure of established multinational food companies prior to the economic downturn in 2008 (Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024; Dangaiso et al., 2024). Conceptually, SMEs are categorised as business enterprises ranging between 1 to 500 employees (Mukucha et al., 2023). Despite their recent boom, most of these fast-food SMEs have unstandardised food quality, poor customer service, low-tier service quality and untrained to semi-skilled frontline employees (Mukucha & Jaravaza, 2022). Indications that uncivil co-worker interactions and subsequent interpersonal conflict during service encounters have been previously explored in recent Zimbabwean empirical studies (e.g. Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024; Mukucha, 2022). Although the relationship between the dark triad and counterproductive work behaviours has been examined, most studies focused on large firms in well-resourced Western economies and broader employee demographics, hence their findings cannot be generalised to Gen Z employees especially in SMEs of critically under-resourced firms in subsistence markets.

Furthermore, marketing literature has mainly focused on the application of services marketing theoretical lens to view stressful encounters. Vastly empirically examined theories are the emotional labor theory, Stressor-Stress-Outcome (SSO) framework and the emotional contagion theory. These theories emerged from service dramaturgy employed in service delivery during interactions between contact employees and guest customers (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Bitner et al., 1994; Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024). Studies investigating the interplay personality traits, gender diversity and counter productive work behaviours in the small scale fast-food SMEs in developing economies are very limited. Moreso, the Gen Z are a unique demographic cohort that has not been empirically explored in this area, despite the widely established consensus about their unconventional workplace behavioural dispositions. To bridge this empirical gap, the present study evaluates relationships between the dark triad traits and co-worker incivility in the fast-food restaurant industry in Zimbabwe. Further, the paper examines if gender diversity has differential effects on the relationships between these personality characteristics and maladaptive work behaviours.

The study attempted to answer the following research questions;

RQ1: Does the dark triad traits influence co-worker incivility among urban Gen Z fast-food service employees in Zimbabwe?

RQ2: Does the influence of dark triad traits on co-worker incivility vary by gender among urban Gen Z fast-food service employees in Zimbabwe?

The significance of this study stems from its practical and theoretical contributions. The research enlightens human resource managers and supervisory service managers in diverse service industries of

the necessity of understanding the underlying human personality traits in key decisions such as staffing, training and development, rewarding, and termination in corporate organisations. Further, because most boundary spanning jobs are often lowly paid, physically and mentally demanding, stressful and often leading to burnout and job-stress (Bacile et al., 2018; Bamfo et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022), this research sheds light on the need to develop strategy frameworks for contact staff in the fast-food industry of developing markets. The current study highlights key psychological traits that are inevitable and hence an impetus to draw comprehensive frameworks of managing Gen Z frontline employees in the fast-food businesses. Furthermore, the study enables managers to deepen their understanding of gender dynamics, as a proxy for designing more informed recruitment, training and conflict resolution decision frameworks. Theoretically, this study contributes by extending empirical research that integrates psychological and marketing perspectives in the harmonisation of organisational interactions in high contact service industries. Given that the dark triad has had limited application in mainstream services marketing literature, this study advances the integration of interdisciplinary theoretical lens to manage service delivery. The study also sheds greenlight on how service marketers can harness a deeper understanding of underlying personality and gender dynamics to leverage effective managerial interventions that improve service performance in subsistence markets. The subsequent sections of the paper cover literature review, methodology, results, implications and conclusions.

1.1. Theoretical foundations

This study is underpinned by two dominant theories in organisational psychology, thusthe dark triad personality theory (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and the SSO framework (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). The dark triad theorises the inherent existence three distinct but inter-related personality traits in human nature. These are narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy. Individuals who exhibit narcissistic tendencies often look for grandiosity, personal admiration and lack of empathy towards others (Modic et al., 2018). They are often self-centred and chase personal glory at the expense of teamwork. Although narcissistic workmates may show selfish nature, they can bring positive outcomes for the organisation. Secondly, people with machiavellian traits exhibit deceptive, cunning, often manipulative behaviours that may involve coercion to achieve personal goals (Ma et al., 2026). Such individuals lack transparency and seek to trick team members into falling prey to their manipulative tactics, awarding them personal credit. Lastly, a psychopath exhibits lack of empathy, impulsivity and anti-social behaviours. A psychopath may also show lack of regard for other team members' feelings and rights, show callousness and high deal of person-to-person aggression (McLarty et al., 2023). This theory underpins the study as it provides the three constructs underlying dark triad traits as proposed predictors of uncivil co-worker behaviours.

Secondly, this study borrows its theoretical lens from a well-grounded framework in literature on boundary spanning interactions – the Stressors-Stress-Outcome (SSO) framework (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). The SSO framework espouses that stress evoking work environments trigger chronic physical and mental effects on the worker that may eventually culminate in venting behaviours and burnout. This study argues that chronic levels of manipulation, coercion, disregard for co-workers' credit, lack of empathy and grandiosity in the work environment could trigger dissent, job stress and inter-personal conflict (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). Thus, we propose that dark triad related behaviours are associated with co-worker incivility. Thus, the SSO framework provides the theoretical reference that underpins the co-worker service interaction phenomenon investigated in this paper.

1.2. Development of hypotheses

Employee incivility is the act of discharging unwelcome attitudes and behaviours between employees working under one workstation or department or even across departments (Bacile et al., 2018; Bamfo et al., 2018). Any rude, impolite or uncivil behaviour shown towards another employee amounts to employee incivility. Such behaviors include making sarcastic comments, ignoring, personally attacking fellows, lack of mutual respect, demeaning and treating colleagues in impolite, rude, disrespectful and discourteous ways. Without effective interventions, this may degenerate into rage, bad mouth or attempted assault towards a member of the same organisation (Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024). Employee

incivility has also been conceptualised as co-worker incivility – a persistent vice to organisational culture, productivity and harmonious work environments (Bani-Melhem et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2017). Although customer incivility has been the most researched value co-destructive behaviour (Lee & Kim, 2022; Torres et al., 2017), incivility towards other employees causes equally dysfunctional, even long-lasting counter-productive consequences (Khalid et al., 2024). This study focuses on uncivil employee behaviours towards other employees (co-workers), hence co-worker incivility.

1.2.1. Machiavellian personality and co-worker incivility

Individuals that are high in machiavellianism are more inclined towards moral disengagement and are eager to pursue self-interests without self-censure, using dishonesty to maintain status (Cohen, 2016; Malik et al., 2024). Machiavellianism is characterised by socially unacceptable and unethical behaviours that include misanthropic beliefs and cynicism, aggressiveness, selfishness, lying, exploitation of others and manipulation (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Empirical studies have shown that machiavellianism has emerged as the most significant predictor of instigated workplace incivility which has been linked to organizational theft, uncooperative leadership, and interpersonal counterproductive workplace behaviours such as maltreatment of colleagues and workplace bullying (Ahmad et al., 2025; Lata & Chaudhary, 2020). In-order to have their way, Machiavellians parade immoral behaviours towards their stakeholders and co-workers and causing social damage to their associates (Baheer et al., 2023; McLarty et al., 2023). Literature has also identified a strong and positive relationship between Machiavellianism and deviations from structural norms, hunger for status and authority and economic opportunities (Oguegbe, 2016; Roth & Klehe, 2025; Varshney, 2023). Thus, in the context of Gen Z employees in fast-food SMEs in Zimbabwe, this study proposed that;

H_1: Machiavellian personality positively and significantly influences co-worker incivility among Gen Z food service staff.

1.2.2. Narcissistic personality and co-worker incivility

Narcissists are self-centred and continually seek the attention and admiration of others (Hmieleski & Lerner, 2016). They have a grandiose sense of entitlement, an insatiable need for self-admiration, and lack empathy for others. They are characterised by excessive ambitions, arrogance, a demanding attitude and a tendency to dominate (Baka, 2018; Kay & Arrow, 2022). Srirejeki et al. (2023) attest that narcissists' drive to uphold magnified self-views pushes them to ignore ethical norms and they tend to perform impulsively, making impulsive decisions that lead to counterproductive workplace behaviours. Studies reveal that narcissistic traits run counter to the desirable personality in the workplace and are directly linked to workplace incivility creating a hostile work environment that affects their co-workers' performance (Himes et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2025; Modic et al., 2018). Abdul-Mohsin et al. (2024) found that higher levels of narcissistic rivalry are correlated with increased intentions to leave the organisation. Empirical studies have shown that narcissists often participate in deviant workplace behaviours such as fraud, bullying, and white-collar crimes (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Amos et al., 2024). Narcissistic behaviours and fraudulent motives are strongly and positively correlated with fraud risk analysis and unethical financial behaviour (Abdul-Mohsin et al., 2024). Hence, in Gen Z employees in fast-food SMEs in Zimbabwe, the present study predicted that;

H_2: Narcissistic personality positively and significantly influences co-worker incivility among Gen Z food service staff.

1.2.3. Psychopathy and co-worker incivility

Psychopathy is the most severe of the triad and is a personality disorder that is divided into primary and secondary psychopathy (Roth & Klehe, 2025; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Individuals with primary psychopathy lack guilt or remorse and cunningly execute their behaviour while those with secondary psychopathy are habituated by external causes, such as abuse, that trigger impulsive, hostile, and unhinged emotional reactions (Dåderman & Ragnestål-Impola, 2019; Srirejeki et al., 2023). Individuals with heightened psychopathic levels seem to be charming and convincing, with high intellectual capabilities on first impression but have no concern about the impact of their actions on others

(Lilienfeld et al., 2015; Schilbach et al., 2020). Empirical literature highlights the damaging effects that psychopathic tendencies have through work behaviour extremities such as intimidation, manipulation or coercion instigating conflicts, reduced wellbeing among colleagues, and diminished organizational productivity (Blickle & Schütte, 2017; Islam et al., 2025; Walker & Jackson, 2017). Studies have also shown that personnel working with colleagues who display psychopathic personalities are more disposed towards lower job gratification and employee distress, facing work-family conflict, and tend to leave the organization (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016; Roth & Klehe, 2025). Building on the foregoing discussion, in the context of Gen Z employees in fast-food SMEs in Zimbabwe, this study hypothesised that;

H_3: Psychopathy personality positively and significantly influences co-worker incivility among Gen Z food service staff.

1.2.4. Dark triad personality, gender diversity and co-worker incivility

Research has shown that levels of the dark triad personality vary across gender with males often reporting higher scores (Czibor et al., 2017) (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason & Ferrell, 2016). Jonason et al. (2012) found that men scored higher on machiavellianism and psychopathic traits than women did, and men were more likely to use the hard tactics of manipulation and threats on colleagues to build alliances. Hyde and Grieve (2018) also found that females were less likely than males to engage in malicious and disingenuous emotional manipulation in the workplace. In another study by Jonason and Sherman (2020), in North and Southern American samples, men were more inclined towards narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy than women were, whereas in Asian samples men were not statistically characterised by those traits. Social role theories suggest that these gender differences are created by the presence of gender inequalities in one's local culture as well as the social, political and economic development of their country (Douglass et al., 2023). In societies facing greater economic challenges such as wealth inequalities, women are more likely to exhibit the dark traits to gain access to economic resources (Luo et al., 2023). Given the tentative evidence in these diverse contexts, this study predicted that;

H_{4a}: The positive influence of machiavellianism on co-worker incivility is stronger in males than females among Gen Z food service staff.

H_{4b}: The positive influence of narcissism on co-worker incivility is stronger in males than females among Gen Z food service staff.

H_{4c}: The positive influence of psychopathy on co-worker incivility is stronger in males than females among Gen Z food service staff.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model for the study.

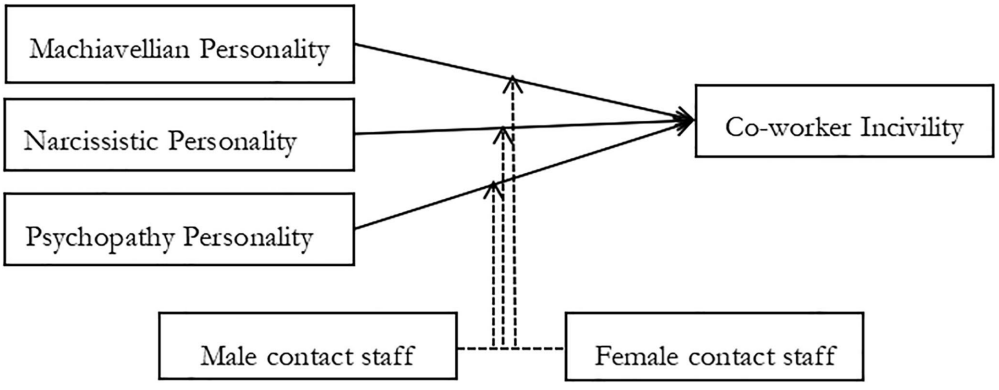

Figure 1. Theoretical model.
Source: Authors' own construction (2025).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study area

The study was conducted in three Zimbabwean cities, Harare, Bulawayo and Bindura. Primarily, Harare is the capital city with a fast-growing fast food restaurant industry of both well-established brands and small-scale fast-food outlets. Secondly, Bulawayo is the main industrial hub of the country, as well as the second largest city of Zimbabwe with a vibrant fast-food service industry. Third, Bindura is a relatively smaller city, a provincial mining capital of Mashonaland Central province with more than 15 well-established fast-food providers. With renowned fast-food providers exponentially expanding at the turn of the decade, scores of small-scale fast-food businesses have also been mushrooming in the city. The expansion of fast-food markets in Zimbabwean cities has been attributed to fast growing informal economy and the closure of giant food service multinational firms during the hyper inflationary era of pre-2009 (Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024). Most Gen Z young adults secure demand for short to medium term labour in these fast-food firms receiving huge demand in fast-food products.

2.2. Design, population and sampling

The purpose of the study was to evaluate relationships between the dark triad personality traits and co-worker incivility and examine whether there were significant gender differences on those proposed causal effects. A positivism philosophy informed the adoption of a quantitative research approach and a causal explanatory design to test research hypotheses. The study targeted Gen Z food service frontline staff employed in fast-food retail outlets Harare, Bulawayo and Bindura. More so, five outlets were sampled in Bindura, ten in Harare and six in Bulawayo. Combined, 21 fast-food outlets provided Gen Z frontline staff employed on short, medium and long-term employment. Due to operational constraints in obtaining a reliable sampling frame across multiple fast-food providers, convenience sampling was used to obtain data through a person-administered questionnaire survey. According to Nunkoo (2018), convenience sampling ensures sample representativeness and reduce respondents' bias for high or low response rates. This study selected Gen Z employees deployed in food preparation, billing, payment, food delivery, hygiene services and service site security. This sample is illustrative of Gen Z employees in urban Zimbabwean fast-food SMEs and not all Gen Z workers. The sample size was determined using the item-to-response ratio. According to Hair et al. (2019), ratios between 1:10 and 1:20 suffice in studies employing SEM. Based on 17 items and 315 responses, this study had an item-to-response ratio of 1:18, hence this requirement was satisfied.

2.3. Instrumentation

The measurement scales that were used in this research were adopted from literature – see Table 2: Psychometric properties of the measurement model. The constructs for the study were adapted from Khalid et al. (2024), citing the validated instrument by Jonason and Webster (2010). All constructs were measured on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The measurement instrument was adopted in English Language, which is also the official language of instruction in the Zimbabwean educational and corporate sectors. Three experts (professors) were selected to assess the content validity, and they approved the instrument. A pilot test was conducted with 15 participants at two fast-food outlets in the city of Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe. To enable inclusion of the targeted personality traits, the questionnaire also included filter items after demographic items. The validated measurement items of each construct had high construct reliability scores above 0.7, confirming adequate internal consistency. To reduce common methods bias, the items for both predictor and criterion variables were randomised and the construct labels were removed during the design stage.

2.4. Data collection procedure and ethics

This study was conducted in compliance with the ethics of scientific research. The study was approved by the ethics committee of Chinhoyi University of Technology and reg. no: CUT/SEBS/5/3/25-004, dated

05/03/2025. Further, the approval of the fast-food service providers was sought prior to soliciting data from their employees. Compliant to the Declaration of Helsinki, these participants signed written informed consent before providing their responses. The participants were also educated that participation was voluntary and withdrawal from the study was also free. If distress arose on sensitive questions, safeguarding protocols such as participant withdrawal, constant support, providing clear reporting lines and a referral pathway for counselling services and post-survey debriefing were included during the design stage. In addition, the rights to confidentiality and privacy of participants were respected before, during and after the data collection phase. The study employed self-reports that measured respondents' own personality traits and behavioral dispositions towards their co-workers. We used personally administered questionnaires that were collected after at least a week. Data was collected from 5 May 2025 to 14 May 2025.

2.5. Data analysis methods

Data capturing, curation and analysis was conducted from 10 June 2025 to 4 July 2025. To test the suitability of the proposed model, we used Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in AMOS. This followed a two-step analysis procedure – measurement model assessment through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and structural model evaluation in SEM (Anderson & Gerbin, 1988). We employed Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to assess convergent validity whilst discriminant validity was examined by comparing construct correlations against the square roots of AVE (Hair et al., 2019). The Heterotrait Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations also examined discriminant validity of constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach alpha and composite reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). This study used absolute and incremental fit indices to evaluate the suitability of the CFA and SEM models. These were the ratio of chi square to degrees of freedom (x^2/df), Standardised Root Mean Residual (SRMR), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). Further, Harman's single factor test was used to detect any incidences of common methods variance (CMV) (Podsakoff et al., 2012). At 5% significance level, p-values below 0.05 denoted statistically significant relationships in SEM. Further, we used multi-group analysis to examine the differential effects of gender on the relationships between the dark triad traits and co-worker incivility.

3. Data analysis and results

3.1. Demographic profile

The results in Table 1 show that male participants (159: 50.5%) marginally more than their female counterparts (156: 49.5%). Secondly, the Gen Z sample was dominated by the 16-20 age group (147: 46.67%), while the 26-28 cohort had the least participants (47: 14.92%). As shown in Table 1, 40.31% (127) of the sample had the modest working experience (0-2 years) and 55.56% (175) had only worked in the fast-food industry for 3-5 years, highlighting that most Gen Z employees are relatively less experienced in the corporate environment. While authors caution data collection from a developing economy, the income distribution in Table 1 shows that most boundary spanning jobs such as fast-food restaurant staff are lowly paid as 33.33% (105) earned between USD$1 and USD$250 while 63.17% (199) earned between USD$251 and USD$500. In addition, the present data also indicates that most frontline food service employees did not enrol for university education, with ordinary (133: 42.22%) and advanced level (124: 39.37%) graduates comprising 81.59% of the participants. In terms of workstation design, only 12.06% (38) confirmed that they work in isolated workstations while 51.43% (143) and 36.51% (115) were part of self-managing and directly supervised teams, respectively. This confirms the task inter-relatedness common in fast-food settings, suggesting the critical role of systematically managed interactions in high contact service industries. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.

3.2. Assessment of the measurement model

The study employed the two-step procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbin (1988) to generate findings – Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for assessment of the measurement model and Structural

Table 1. Demographic profile.

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	159	50.50
	Female		49.50
		156	
Age (years)	16–20	147	46.67
	21–25		38.41
	26–28	121	14.92
		47	
Education	No formal education	7	2.22
	Ordinary level		42.22
	Advanced level	133	39.37
	Bachelor's degree		16.19
	Master's degree and above	124	0
		51	
		0	
Income (USD)	$1–250	105	33.33
	$251–500		63.17
	$501–750	199	3.50
	$751 and above		0
		11	
		0	
Employment experience (years)	0–2	127	40.31
	3–5		55.56
	Over 5	175	4.13
		13	
Workstation design	Independent workstation	38	12.06
	Self-managing teams		51.43
	Directly supervised teams	162	36.51
		115	

Source: Primary data (2025).

Table 2. Psychometric properties of the measurement model.

Construct/observed items	Loading	AVE	MSV	CR	CA
Machiavellian Personality		0.778	0.592	0.933	0.933
MARC1: I tend to manipulate others to get my way	0.883				
MARC2: I have used deceit or lie to get my way	0.838				
MARC3: I have used flattery to get my way	0.907				
MARC4: I tend to exploit others towards my own goal	0.897				
Narcissistic Personality		0.668	0.538	0.909	0.908
NARC1: I tend to want others to admire me	0.851				
NARC2: I tend to want others to pay attention to me	0.833				
NARC3: I tend to seek prestige or status	0.825				
NARC4: I tend to expect special favors from others	0.858				
NARC5: I feel more special than my workmates/peers	0.712				
Psychopathy Personality		0.761	0.592	0.940	0.934
PSYCH1: I tend to lack remorse	0.848				
PSYCH2: I tend to be unconcerned with the morality of my actions	0.904				
PSYCH3: I tend to be callous or insensitive to my workmates/peers	0.854				
PSYCH4: I tend to be cynical to my workmates/peers	0.807				
PSYCH5: I tend to lack empathy towards my workmates/peers	0.943				
Co-worker Incivility		0.714	0.605	0.882	0.877
CWIN1: I tend to rage with a team member over a work issue	0.860				
CWIN2: I tend to scold a workmate when they err on my work	0.835				
CWIN3: I tend to verbally confront a workmate to get my way	0.839				

Notes: Loading = Standardised Factor Loading; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; CA = Cronbach Alpha; CR = Composite Reliability.
Source: Primary data (2025).

Equation Modelling (SEM) for evaluating proposed causal relationships. The measurement model was checked for validity and reliability through several procedures. Firstly, we checked unidimensionality of factor loadings to ascertain the magnitude of variance between the latent constructs and the observed variables. As shown in Table 2, the modest standardised factor loading was 0.712 on item NARC5 while

Table 3. Discriminant validity: Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Construct	1	2	3	4
Machiavellian Personality (1)	**0.882**			
Narcissistic Personality (2)	0.538	**0.817**		
Psychopathy Personality (3)	0.770	0.567	**0.872**	
Co-worker Incivility (4)	0.721	0.734	0.778	**0.845**

Notes: Square roots of AVEs are in bold on the diagonal; construct correlations are below the diagonal.
Source: Primary data (2025).

Table 4. Discriminant validity: HTMT criterion.

Construct	1	2	3	4
Machiavellian Personality (1)				
Narcissistic Personality (2)	0.749			
Psychopathy Personality (3)	0.815	0.783		
Co-worker Incivility (4)	0.822	0.858	0.810	

Source: Primary data (2025).

the strongest was 0.943 on item PSYCH5. According to Kline (2023), a threshold of 0.7 confirms sufficient shared variance. All factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Secondly, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to examine the convergence of items on a particular latent factor. The lowest AVE was 0.668 on narcissism and the highest was 0.778 on machiavellianism. Based on Hair et al. (2019) threshold of at least 0.5, the AVEs demonstrated adequate extracted variance. Satisfaction of these conditions meant that convergent validity was present. To examine discriminant validity, the criteria set by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was used – the square roots of the AVEs were all greater than the correlations between any pair of variables in the model – see Table 3. Furthermore, the AVEs were also greater than the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) values for all constructs. For completeness, the HTMT assessment (Hair et al., 2019) also confirmed that all values in the matrix were below the recommended threshold of HTMT0.90 as shown in Table 4. Satisfaction of these three conditions confirmed that discriminant validity was present (Hair et al., 2019). Construct reliability was assessed using composite reliability and Cronbach alpha, using a lower limit of 0.7. The values shown in Table 2 confirm that scale reliability was present, with values all above 0.7. Further, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) procedure also confirmed that of all the four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the total variance. In addition, the results of Harman's single factor test showed that the one-factor CFA model obtained a very bad fit (x^2/df = 13.12; RMSEA = 0.196; GFI = 0.544; RMR = 0.163; CFI = 0.703; NFI = 0.687; TLI = 0.660) compared to the original four-factor CFA model (x^2/df = 2.64; RMSEA = 0.051; GFI = 0.854; RMR = 0.07; CFI = 0.943; NFI = 0.912; TLI = 0.931), thus this study had no common methods bias problems. Table 2 illustrates the psychometric properties of the measurement model.

3.3. Structural equation modelling and hypothesis testing

The results of SEM showed sufficient evidence of a good fitting model (x^2/df = 2.64; RMSEA = 0.051; GFI = 0.854; RMR = 0.07; CFI = 0.943; NFI = 0.912; TLI = 0.931). According to Kline (2023), the model obtained a good fit. The three hypotheses (H1-H3) were statistically significant, supporting proposed relationships. Machiavellian traits ($\beta = 0.198$, $p = 0.002$), psychopath traits ($\beta = 0.397$, $p < 0.001$) and narcissistic traits ($\beta = 0.403$, $p < 0.001$) all had positive effects on co-worker incivility in the context of Gen Z food service frontline employees. Figure 2 shows the SEM path diagram while Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the SEM path diagram for male and female employees (respondents), respectively.

Multi-group analysis testing gender effects on the relationship between the dimensions of the dark triad and co-worker incivility (H4a-H4c) produced interesting findings. Hypothesis H4a proposed that the positive influence of machiavellian traits on co-worker incivility is stronger in male than female employees. The results indicate males ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$) had a stronger and significant path than females ($\beta = 0.090$, $p < 0.05$). As a result, H4a was supported. Further, H4b predicted that males had a stronger path on the link between narcissistic traits and co-worker incivility in Gen Z food service employees. The results show that females ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < 0.001$) had a stronger impact compared to their male

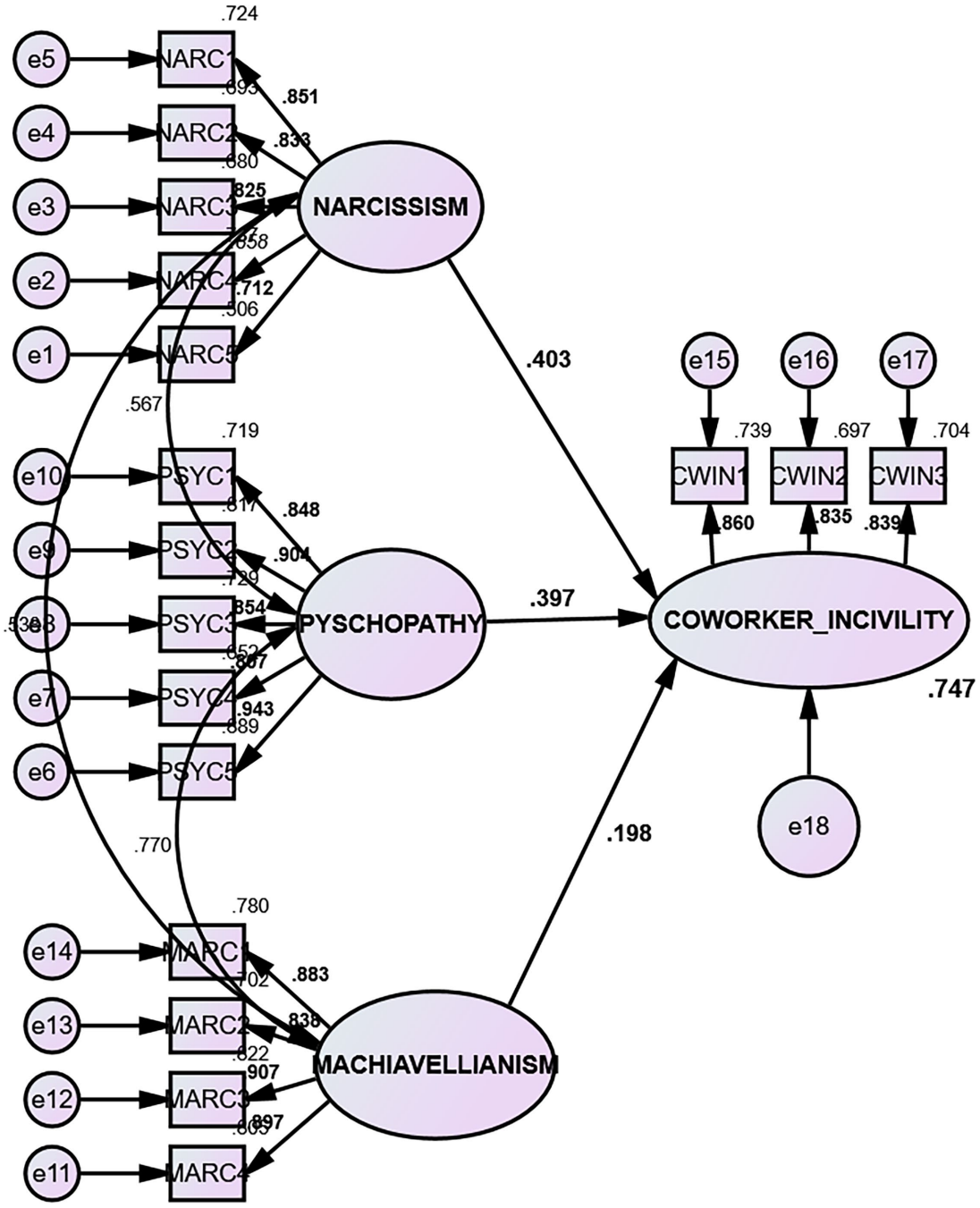

Figure 2. Structural model for the combined sample.
Source: Research data (SPSS AMOS) (2025).

counterparts (β = 0.350, $p < 0.001$), hence, H4b was not supported. The ultimate hypothesis (H4c) proposed that the influence of psychopathy on co-worker incivility was stronger in male than female Gen Z employees in the food service industry. This hypothesis (H4c) was supported, as males (β = 0.418, $p < 0.001$) confirmed to have a much positively stronger influence than females on this hypothesised effect. In terms of predictive strength, the model for males (R^2 = 0.838) was the strongest, followed by the model for the combined sample (R^2 = 0.747) and the modest strength was the females' model (R^2 = 0.639). These results also show empirical support the proposed hypotheses, supporting that male employees displaying dark triad traits had high propensity to cause co-worker incivility. However, with an exception for narcissistic traits that were dominant in female than male employees. Table 5 shows the results of hypothesis tests (H1-H3) and Table 6 illustrates the outcomes of multi-group analysis (H4a-H4c) on significant paths, predictive strength and model fit.

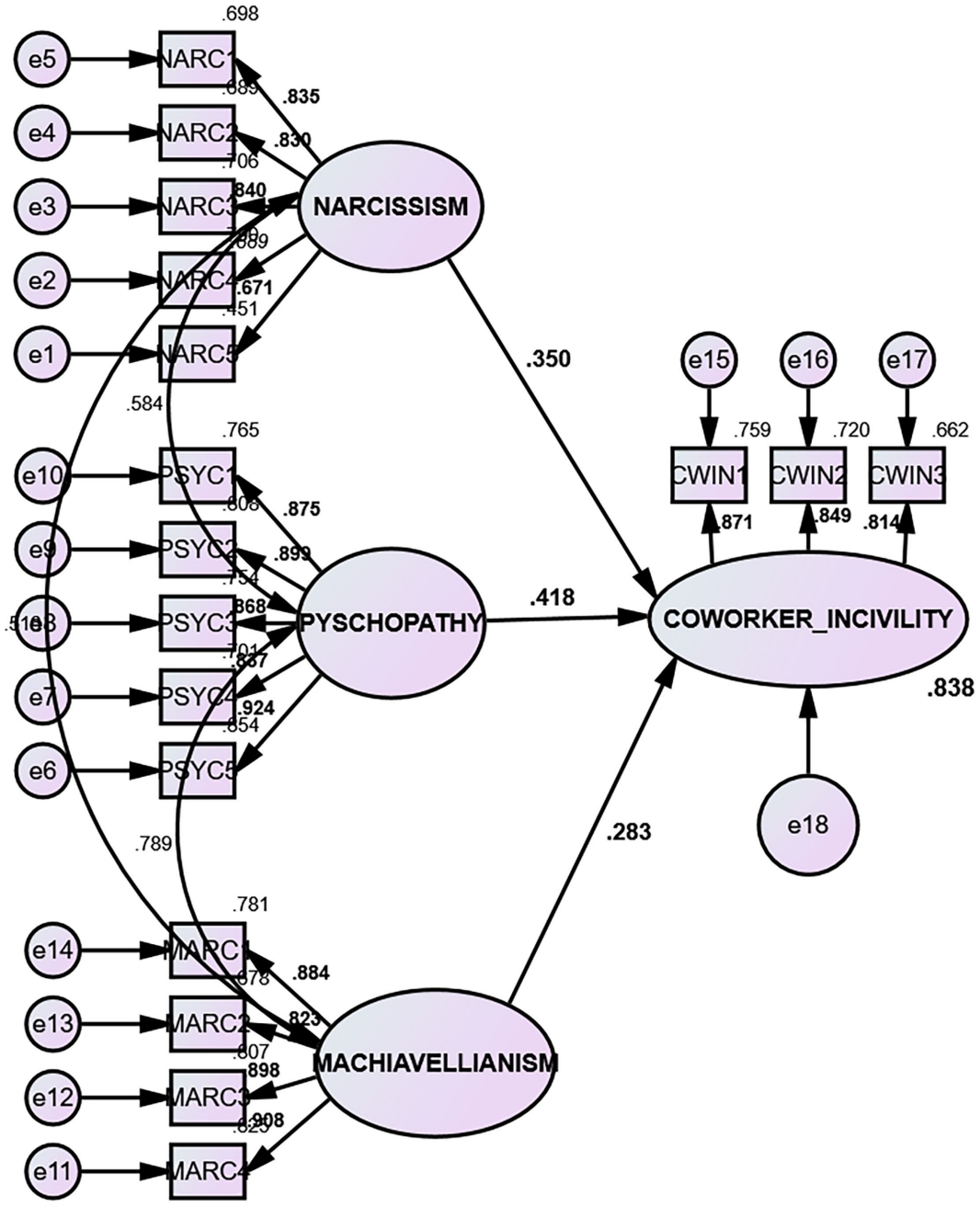

Figure 3. Structural model for male employees.
Source: Research data (SPSS AMOS) (2025).

3.4. Discussion of findings

The current study examined the predictive power of the dark triad traits on co-worker incivility, deepening an understanding of how the dark triad shapes counterproductive work behaviours in the fast-food service industry in a developing economy, focusing on the Gen Z employees (born 1997-2012). Using, SEM in AMOS, the findings of the study revealed positive and significant effects of machiavellian (H1), narcissistic (H2) and psychopathy (H3) on uncivil workplace behaviours. H1 was subsequently supported, confirming that manipulative and self-centred tendencies are more likely to erode workplace harmony and collegial interactions. Previous works also show that machiavellianism was associated with deviation from structural norms and opportunism (Islam et al., 2025; Varshney, 2023), maltreatment of colleagues (Ahmad et al., 2025; Baka, 2018) and counterproductive work behaviours (DeShong et al., 2015; Lata &

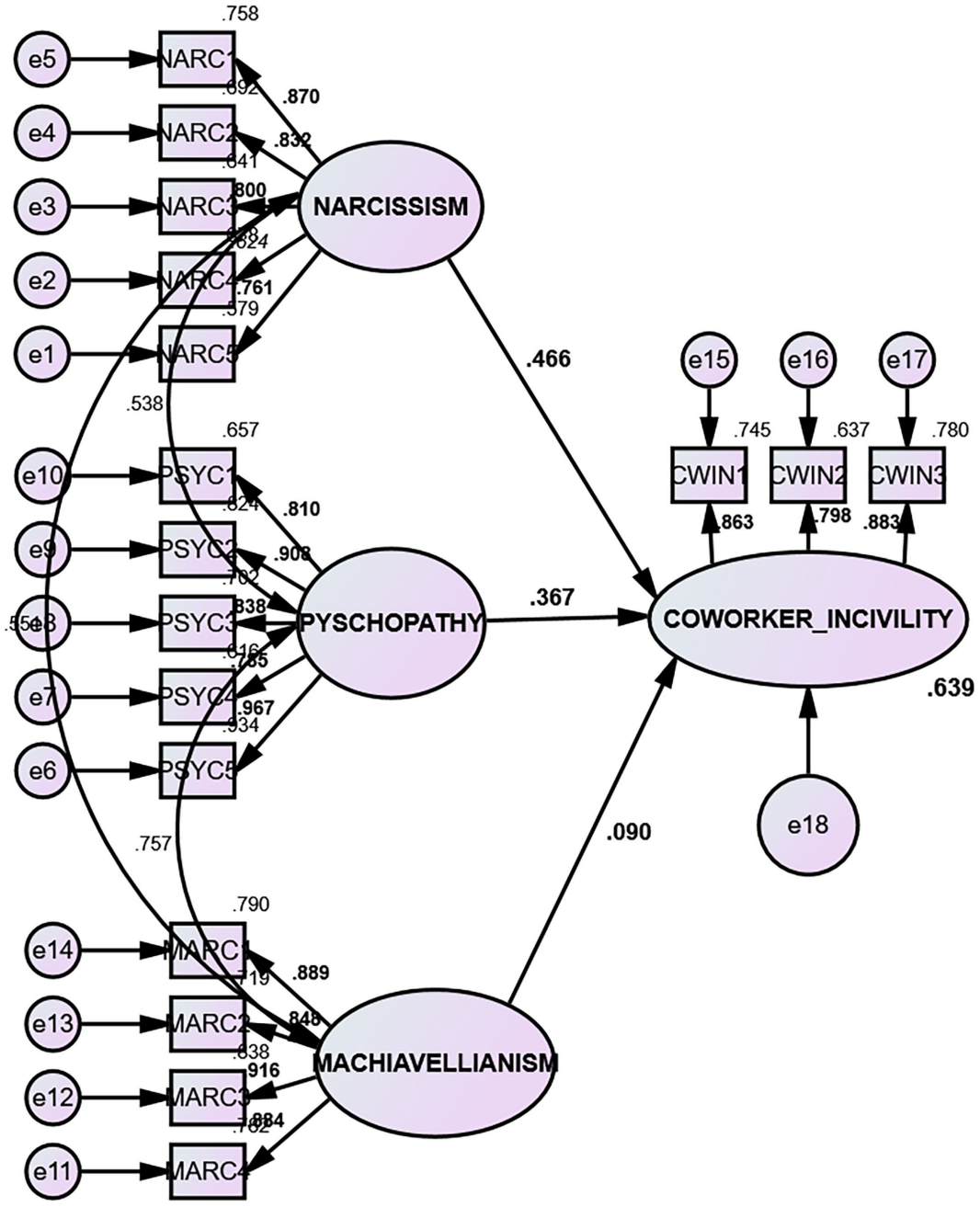

Figure 4. Structural model for female employees.
Source: Research data (SPSS AMOS) (2025).

Table 5. Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis/causal path	Standardised estimate	*t*-statistic	*p*-value	Result
H1: MARCH CWIN	0.198	3.050	0.002	Supported
H2: NARC CWIN	0.403	7.375	***	Supported
H3: PSYCH CWIN	0.397	5.909	***	Supported

Notes: *** = $p < 0.001$.
Source: Primary data (2025).

Chaudhary, 2020). The positive influence of narcissistic traits on co-worker incivility meant empirical support for H2. This supports prior claims linking the maladaptive personality trait to impulsivity and counterproductive work behaviours (Himes et al., 2021; Modic et al., 2018), turnover intention (Ahmad et al., 2025; Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024) and hostile environment for other employees (Modic et al., 2018; Roth & Klehe, 2025). Furthermore, the relationship between psychopathy and co-worker incivility was positive

Table 6. Multi-group analysis.

Relationship/parameter	Theoretical model tested for full sample (n = 315)	Theoretical model tested for female students (n = 159)	Theoretical model tested for male students (n = 156)
X^2/df	2.64	2.64	2.64
CFI	0.943	0.943	0.943
Model R Square/R^2	0.747	0.639	0.838
Significant paths	3	2	3
MARCH → CWIN	0.198	0.090	0.283
NARC → CWIN	0.403	0.466	0.350
PSYCH → CWIN	0.397	0.367	0.418

Notes: Path coefficients are standardised estimates.
Source: Research data (2025).

and significant, influencing support for H3. Previous research shows that heightened levels of psychopathy are associated with intimidation and coercion (Lilienfeld et al., 2015; Malik et al., 2024), workplace conflict (Walker & Jackson, 2017) and reduced well-being of team members (Kay & Arrow, 2022). While literature suggests that psychopathy is the strongest predictor of co-worker bullying (Boddy & Taplin, 2017), our findings show that narcissism was the most severe in effect, suggesting that strong uncivil tendencies towards other employees were more pronounced in covertly self-centred Gen Z employees than those displaying more overt impulsivity. This could be partially explained by the decision affect theory (Mellers et al., 1997), suggesting that the emotional impact of a negative outcome is explained by initial expectation, thus, a harmful behaviour is stronger in effect when it is less anticipated. The present phenomenon suggests that more research is still needed on the intersection of dark triad, co-worker incivility, gender diversity among diverse sectors, generational cohorts and economic contexts.

Moreover, this study examined the proposed influence of gender differences on the relationships between the three dark triad traits on co-worker incivility. The results from multi-group analysis show that machiavellian and psychopathy were stronger in male than female employees, influencing support for H4a and H4c. Further, the effects of narcissism were stronger in females than males, leading to rejection of H4b. Although there is very limited previous evidence on these results, a study by Jonason et al. (2012) reported stronger incidences of machiavellian and psychopathy in males than female participants in the context of psychology students at a South Eastern United States university. In contrast, Jonason and Sherman (2020) reported that all three dark triad traits were statistically significant in North America and South America while the results were not significant in Asian samples, implying that these effects may significantly vary by regional cultural context, industry, socially constructed thought processes, dominant socialisation, organisational culture, norms and values. In Zimbabwe, our findings could be explained by resource constraints (H4b), in line with Luo et al. (2023) who emphasised that women tend to be narcissistic in under-resourced economic contexts to gain access to resources. In addition, Douglass et al. (2023) also suggested that social roles may also account for these gendered discrepancies in the influence of personality on organisational dynamics.

Overall, our findings reinforce that maladaptive personality traits could be detrimental beyond an individual influence but ripple outward to affect interpersonal interactions and organisational climate. Particularly noteworthy are gender-based differences in the examined relationships. While our results show that machiavellian and psychopathy traits were stronger in male over female employees, this nuanced pattern highlights that although the dark triad traits are universally dysfunctional, they manifest variably across demographic segments. For Gen Z male employees, the heightened influence of machiavellian and psychopathy could be suggestive of a more overtly aggressive expression of these traits, potentially linked to competitive behavioural tendencies in service contexts, especially within the youngest demographic cohort who have the modest working experience. Conversely, the stronger association between narcissistic traits and employee incivility among Gen Z female employees may highlight that self-enhancing or attention-seeking behaviours could translate into interpersonal conflict when enacted by younger and relatively less experienced female employees in these work environments.

Further, these gendered impacts add valuable insights to the understanding of workplace incivility by cautioning against managing dark triad personality traits as uniformly expressed across demographic cohorts. Instead, the findings call for a closer intersectional analysis of how personality, economic conditions and social identity interact to shape workplace interactions. In contexts like the fast-food service

industry with more diverse teams, higher stress levels and more frequent interpersonal interactions (Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024). Such characteristics could have more pronounced implications for relationship management and conflict resolution policies. From a managerial perspective, the present findings underscore the importance of incorporating personality assessment and behavioural observation into recruitment, on-boarding, training and supervisory practices. Identifying and managing employees with high dark triad tendencies may be critical in reducing workplace incivility and fostering a harmonious organisational environment. Furthermore, gender-responsive strategies to training, addressing how these characteristics may uniquely manifest in male and female employees, could enhance the effectiveness of these managerial interventions.

However, this study was not without limitations, the focus on Gen Z employees in a fast-food SMEs of a developing economy could imply contextual validity and generalisability constraints. In addition, the use of mono-quantitative approach limits evaluation of in-depth employee personality perspectives and the subsequent workplace dynamics. Alternative instruments used in measurement of the dark triad have also evolved as conceptual arguments advanced in literature, beyond what was adapted in the present research. Despite these shortcomings, the study contributes to a broader understanding of workplace incivility in developing economies, where structural stressors, critical resource constraints and cultural dynamics amplify the negative impact of these dysfunctional traits. By evaluating these relationships in a fast-food service context, this paper opens avenues for comparative studies across industries and socioeconomic contexts, drawing more tailored approaches to mitigation of workplace deviance and job-related stressors while enhancing employees' emotional well-being, service quality, team relationships, organisational productivity, and brand image.

4. Conclusions

Previous studies on the antecedents of co-worker incivility largely overlooked the influence of personality traits, specifically, the dark triad. The present study demonstrates the positive relationships between the dark triad and uncivil employee behaviours to other employees in the context of the fast-food SMEs of a developing economy. Furthermore, the study also provides evidence that the dark triad varies significantly by gender based on the findings obtained from the Gen Z employee cohort, this may vary in other demographic segments. Considering these findings, this study concludes that individual personality features are a major determinant of co-worker incivility and broadly, workplace behaviours. While literature supports that there are environmentally stimulated causes of counterproductive work behaviours such as jaycustomer behaviours, ineffective supervision, poor person-job-fit, inadequate resources and lack of training, the current study confirms how personality traits are associated with co-worker incivility. Although these traits exist in all humans by varying degrees, this study highlights actionable insights on how service managers can consciously track and mitigate extreme cases that can potentially harm organisational harmony, service quality, employee productivity, workplace relationships and brand image.

5. Theoretical implications

This paper adds significant theoretical insights on the link between personality traits and co-worker incivility. While many studies have investigated employee incivility to customers, this study provides empirical evidence on how the dark triad traits are associated with uncivil employee behaviours to other workers. Moreso, although the dark triad has been examined in a wide range of empirical studies, literature has limited evidence on the nexus between the dark triad and co-worker incivility. The theory has been mainly evaluated by researchers in psychology, human resources management and sociology. This study demonstrates the influence of the dark triad on workplace incivility in the food service industry in Zimbabwe. As a result, the current study shows how the dark triad theory can be applied in service marketing, particularly boundary spanning roles such as frontline food service roles. Further, this study provides additional evidence on the interaction between gender dynamics, dark triad personality and co-worker incivility tendencies.

Leaning to the Stressor-Stress-Outcome theory, critical stressors trigger employee job stress and uncivil behaviours. In this paper, the nexus between the dark triad and SSO framework manifests when an

employee is exposed to uncivil co-worker behaviours within a pre-existing stressful work environment. Thus, the zone of tolerance capsizes at a certain level of stressful exposure and this elicits a proportinate response to any emotional exposure, potentially causing conflict. Coupled with the dark triad and a highly impulsive generational cohort, reciprocal behaviours from the victims of workplace incivility could even be more pronounced, underscoring more careful investigation of these underlying features so that more nuanced perspectives are drawn. This study offers lens with which to view the nexus of maladaptive traits, stressful workplace dynamics and employee incivility.

Furthermore, the study also shows that in addition to the negative impact of dark triad on one's behaviour towards co-workers, the effects are not generic across generational cohorts and gender categories. In this study, we observe that although literature suggests that psychopathy has the most severe impact on workplace bullying behaviour, covert narcissism had strong effects on uncivil behaviours towards co-workers in urban Gen Z frontline employees. We situate this phenomenon in line with the lens of the decision affect theory – the effect of counterfactual thinking drawing covert self-centredness and overt impulsivity potentially explaining that paradox. In addition, multi group analysis shows that the effects of machiavellianism and psychopathy on co-worker incivility were stronger in males than female employees while narcissism confirmed to have stronger effects on female than male employees. These findings could be explained by resource constraints, suggesting that women tend to be narcissistic in under-resourced economic contexts to gain access to resources. Moreover, social roles could explain the gendered discrepancies in the impact of dark triad on interaction dynamics between Gen Z in Zimbabwe.

6. Managerial implications

Value co-destruction during service encounters remains one of the most counterproductive work behaviours in most high contact service industries. This study provides empirical evidence from the context of a developing economy that inherent personality traits have an influence on counterproductive employee behaviours such as co-worker incivility. Although there are organisational benefits that could be linked to dark triad traits, managers should be proactive by neutralising the negative impact through early detection and awareness, establishing strong organisational culture and ethical frameworks, structured employee monitoring and feedback system as well as implementing role design and task allocation. In the light of the present findings, managers need to be proactive on service management with frontline staff. Personality evaluations and aptitude assessments could help managers prioritise competencies and behavioural evidence while being mindful of how these traits manifest across genders and economic conditions is key. In addition, integrating playful approaches and friendly competitions can enhance work design to leverage employee interactions and optimise service delivery. Additional strategies of managing dark triad features could include incorporating coaching and behavioural mechanisms, promoting team cohesion, open communication, self-discipline, mentoring and pre-conflict management and training.

While machiavellian and narcissist traits may display marginally undesirable traits at the workplace, it is psychopathy that is strongly linked to workplace deviance in previous studies. Our findings also reveal that female Gen Z employees reflected agentic behaviours in resource constrained settings, suggesting that service managers in stressed economies may prioritise strategic staff deployment as guided by their resource allocation. Further, Gen Z managers in these economic contexts should consider less self-managing teams and more direct supervision work design for frontline roles to mitigate horizontal maladaptive behaviours. Managing an impulsive generational cohort calls for more careful management techniques that enhance strong collaborative relationships between frontline employees themselves and their managers. Personality and individual differences compound the complexities of managing a complex generational endowment who, in contrast have rich attributes such as tech savvy qualities and problem solving. Thus, managers need more nuanced perspectives in order to draw supervision models that are more appropriate for diverse personalities and demographic cohorts. To mitigate counterproductive work behaviours, managers may need to consider personality congruency, thus, understanding individual differences is imperative when managing high contact services such as fast-food restaurant businesses.

7. Limitations and future research directions

Although this study attempts to fill a critical empirical gap, the study had some limitations. First, the use of a mono-quantitative research approach means that the study could lack in-depth opinions on personality features and workplace behavioural dynamics. In addition, the instrument adapted from the dirty dozen scale, the study presents a limitation. Instruments later developed criticise its shortness while the conflation between machiavellianism and psychopathy has also been acknowledged as difficult to operationalise in previous research. Third, the study focused on the food service industry in a developing economy, limiting the generalisability of findings to other industries and economic contexts. Further, while convenience sampling was more practical, a limitation on generalisability is given. Future studies may adopt mixed methods, randomised selection of participants and more diverse samples to improve replicability and generalisability of findings. Moreover, designing comprehensive Gen Z customised personality management frameworks for optimisation of service quality and employee performance could significantly benefit firms in most high contact service industries in developing markets.

Acknowledgments

Phillip Dangaiso: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Software; Data curation; Formal analysis; Project administration; Writing- original draft; Writing- review and editing. **Tendai Towo**: Investigation, Resources; Methodology; Writing-original draft; Writing-review and editing. **Brighton Nyagadza**: Resources; Methodology; Project administration; Validation; Writing-review and editing. **Masimba E. Manyangara**: Investigation; Methodology; Resources, Project administration; Validation. **Tendai Nedure**: Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Validation. **Caret N. Ncube**: Investigation; Resources; Validation. All authors meet the ICMJE and COPE criteria for authorship. All authors agreed on the manuscript that was submitted for publication.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Phillip Dangaiso**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Tendai Towo**: Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Brighton Nyagadza**: Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Masimba E. Manyangara**: Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation; **Tendai Nedure**: Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation; **Caret N. Ncube**: Investigation, Resources, Validation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Phillip Dangaiso http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4495-0601
Tendai Towo http://orcid.org/0009-0006-5899-955X
Brighton Nyagadza http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7226-0635
Masimba E. Manyangara http://orcid.org/0009-0004-8449-9714
Tendai Nedure http://orcid.org/0009-0003-1167-4297
Caret N. Ncube http://orcid.org/0009-0006-8658-3340

Data availability statement

The data that supports the conclusions of this study will be shared upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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