Istanbul Management Journal

Research Article 🔓 **Open Access**

Not Quite My Tempo: Reframing Toxic Leadership Through Whiplash

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Abstract   Toxic leadership is increasingly recognised as a serious threat to psychological well-being and ethical culture within organisations. Characterised by manipulation, emotional abuse and coercive control, such leadership styles are often normalised in high-performance or results-driven environments. This study examines the portrayal of toxic leadership in the film Whiplash, focusing on the intense and damaging dynamic between a music instructor and a student. Using document analysis as a method, the research systematically analyzes selected scenes to identify key leadership behaviours and their psychological consequences, including anxiety, dependency, and identity fragmentation. The analysis draws on a multi-dimensional understanding of toxic leadership, emphasising patterns such as authoritarianism, verbal hostility, emotional unpredictability, and self-serving manipulation. The findings reveal that while toxic behaviours may be culturally rationalised as a means to achieve excellence, they ultimately undermine follower autonomy and mental health. The film's narrative offers a compelling case for reevaluating how leadership can be defined, enacted, and rewarded. Furthermore, the study highlights the potential of cinematic texts as reflective tools in leadership research and education.

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Not Quite My Tempo: Reframing Toxic Leadership Through Whiplash

In recent years, the study of leadership has expanded beyond the traditional notions of charisma and effectiveness to include its darker dimensions. Among these, toxic leadership has emerged as a critical field of inquiry because of its profound and often long-lasting effects on individuals and organisational systems (Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Schmidt, 2008). Toxic leadership involves sustained patterns of abusive, manipulative, and self-serving behaviour that exploits followers for personal or institutional gain, often under the guise of high standards or excellence. In terms of document analysis, several studies have used textual and narrative sources, including films and organisational documents, to examine leadership phenomena (Love, 2013; Özdemir & Ardıç, 2020; Lindebaum & Courpasson, 2019). These approaches offer valuable insights into the emotional and symbolic dimensions of leadership practices, especially in contexts where traditional empirical methods may fall short.

While empirical research has extensively documented the psychological and organisational consequences of toxic leadership—such as burnout, turnover, emotional exhaustion, and identity erosion—there remains a need for alternative methodologies that can illustrate the lived experience of such dynamics (Tepper, 2000; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Wolor et al., 2022). Film analysis has become an increasingly valuable tool in this regard, allowing researchers to explore leadership phenomena through rich narrative, visual metaphor, and emotional storytelling (Bumpus, 2005; Lindebaum & Courpasson, 2019).

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven document analysis of the film Whiplash (2014), which serves as a narrative text to explore the relationship between an aspiring jazz drummer and his authoritarian instructor. The purpose of this study is to explore how toxic leadership is depicted cinematically and what this portrayal reveals about followers' emotional and psychological toll. Using the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008) and the Toxic Triangle framework (Padilla et al., 2007) used analytical tools, the study identifies and interprets key scenes that exemplify the dimensions and outcomes of toxic leadership. By examining Whiplash through this theoretical lens, the research contributes to the growing literature on destructive leadership while demonstrating the potential of film as a reflective and pedagogical medium in management and organisational behaviour studies.

Literature Review

Toxic Leadership: Definitions, Dimensions, and Organisational Impact

Toxic leadership is now widely acknowledged as a distinct and harmful form of leadership that inflicts enduring damage on individuals, teams, and organisations (Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Schmidt, 2008; Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013). It is characterised by a persistent pattern of destructive behaviours and attitudes—including manipulation, emotional abuse, authoritarianism, and narcissism—often enacted under the guise of competence or charisma (Lipman-Blumen, 2006).

Although the term has been broadly used in both academic and non-academic discourse, early attempts to define it were vague or overly inclusive. For instance, Lipman-Blumen (2006) included in her typology not only abusive supervisors but also political, corporate, and religious leaders who used fear, manipulation, and control to sustain power. The defining characteristic of toxic leadership is the sustained psychological and professional harm it causes to followers, which distinguishes it from merely ineffective leadership—regardless of the leader's intentions or achievements (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013).

Later conceptual clarity emerged from empirical work such as Schmidt's (2008) Toxic Leadership Scale, which formalised five core dimensions of toxicity: (1) abusive supervision, (2) authoritarianism, (3) narcissism, (4) unpredictability, and (5) self-promotion. These traits distinguish toxic leaders from simply poor managers or unskilled supervisors.

These dimensions capture not only overtly hostile behaviours but also covert, psychologically destabilising patterns of interaction. Abusive supervision refers to sustained verbal hostility, belittling, and coercion that targets a subordinate's dignity and emotional security (Tepper, 2000). Authoritarianism involves rigid hierarchical control, where dissent is silenced and leader authority is absolute, often discouraging initiative or creativity (Padilla et al., 2007). Narcissism, marked by an inflated sense of self-importance, a strong need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, often leads to leadership behaviour that focuses more on the leader's personal image than on the well-being of others (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Unpredictability disrupts follower stability through inconsistent rules, erratic mood shifts, and sudden changes in expectations, fostering anxiety and learned helplessness (Schmidt, 2008). Lastly, self-promotion entails the leader's persistent efforts to claim disproportionate credit, manipulate perceptions, and construct a heroic narrative around their own actions (Pelletier, 2010). Together, these dimensions delineate a pattern of systemic harm that distinguishes toxic leadership from general incompetence or poor interpersonal skills.

Building on this typology, scholars across various studies have further elaborated recurring behavioural patterns that characterise toxic leaders. Across the literature, several consistent traits of toxic leaders have been identified:

- Abusive Supervision: Persistent verbal hostility, public ridicule, coercive control, and emotional manipulation (Tepper, 2000; Pelletier, 2010).

- Narcissism: An inflated sense of self-importance and deep need for admiration, often paired with low empathy (Wilson-Starks, 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 2006).

- Authoritarianism: Strict command-and-control behaviour, often dismissing dissent or critical thinking in subordinates (Ashforth, 1994; Padilla et al., 2007).

- Manipulative Communication: Withholding critical information, reframing destructive actions as noble or necessary, and scapegoating others (Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Pelletier, 2010).

- Verbal Abuse: Toxic leaders frequently engage in verbal aggression, including yelling, insults, and degradation, often under the guise of discipline. Labrague (2021) found a statistically significant correlation between toxic leadership and increased verbal abuse in healthcare settings, highlighting its impact on emotional distress and reduced job engagement. Octavian (2023) emphasised that verbal abuse is often strategic—public, intentional, and used to consolidate authority and suppress dissent.

- Public humiliation: Leaders ridicule or degrade subordinates in front of others. This tactic is not only demoralising but also designed to reinforce hierarchical dominance and obedience. As Pelletier (2010) reported, some organisations allowed public displays of employee mistakes (e.g., a "boo-boo board"), fostering chronic anxiety and the suppression of innovation. Ashforth (1994) and Reed (2004) further argued that public ridicule serves as a mechanism to instil fear, weaken team cohesion, and silence feedback. Lipman-Blumen (2006) added that this humiliation-reward cycle creates emotional dependency and normalises abuse as a leadership style.

These behaviours are not merely dysfunctional—they are often systemic and intentional. This distinguishes toxic leadership from incompetence or poor social skills. Public humiliation, a frequent tool of toxic

leaders, functions not only as corrective feedback but also as a method of dominance and emotional control. In higher education contexts, this tactic has been documented as a means to silence dissent, reinforce hierarchy, and isolate targets from peer support (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2019). To better explain the structural and contextual conditions under which such leadership can arise and persist, several theoretical models have been developed. One of the most widely cited frameworks is the Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al., 2007), which outlines three interactive elements necessary for toxic leadership to emerge:

• Destructive leaders (e.g., narcissistic, controlling),

• Susceptible followers (e.g., conformers or colluders) and

• Conducive environments (e.g., lack of accountability, high instability).

This model helps explain how toxic leadership persists even in organisations with strong stated values. For instance, environments that reward performance at all costs or lack feedback mechanisms are particularly vulnerable.

Another framework distinguishes toxic leadership from other "dark" styles such as abusive supervision or petty tyranny by emphasising intent and magnitude of harm (Krasikova et al., 2013; Milosevic et al., 2020). Volitional, goal-oriented behaviour that harms either individuals or organisational outcomes—or both marks toxic leaders (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013).

Given this deliberate and sustained nature of harm, it is not surprising that toxic leadership produces significant consequences at both individual and organisational levels. The consequences of toxic leadership are extensive and well documented in empirical studies. At the individual level, they include the following:

• Psychological distress and emotional exhaustion (Pelletier, 2010; Tepper, 2000),

• Low job satisfaction, commitment, and morale (Wolor et al., 2022),

• Increased turnover intentions and absenteeism (Rayner & Cooper, 1997; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

Toxic leadership also erodes trust, impairs team functioning, and reduces productivity. In extreme cases, it fosters counterproductive work behaviours, such as sabotage, withdrawal, and deliberate underperformance—often framed as a form of "revenge" or equity balancing (Aquino et al., 2001; Bies & Tripp, 1996). At the organisational level, the effects include increased legal and healthcare costs, damage to reputation, difficulty in attracting ethical talent, and reduced innovation and psychological safety across teams (Pelletier, 2010; Winn & Dykes, 2019; Wolor et al., 2022).

These findings show that toxic leadership is not simply a human resources issue—it poses a strategic and ethical risk to organisations. Its high prevalence in contemporary workplaces further exacerbates this concern. Recent studies—such as those by Life Meets Work (2017) and Wolor et al. (2022)—suggest that toxic leadership is alarmingly widespread. According to a global workplace survey, more than 30% of employees reported working under toxic managers, with effects that extended beyond direct targets to entire teams.

Taken together, the literature reveals that toxic leadership is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be dismissed as individual misbehaviour or poor managerial style. Rather, it represents a systemic challenge that undermines psychological well-being, ethical leadership principles, and long-term organisational sustainability. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms and outcomes of toxic leadership is essential not only for protecting employees but also for safeguarding institutional integrity and culture. To enrich this theoretical framework, this study employs a document-based visual analysis, treating Whiplash as a narrative representation of toxic leadership. This methodological choice allows for a deeper exploration

of the emotional, symbolic, and relational dimensions of toxicity—elements often underrepresented in traditional organisational research.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using document analysis, a widely accepted method in the field of organisational behaviour and leadership studies. In this context, film analysis serves as a tool to investigate complex human interactions, emotional responses, and leadership phenomena through rich visual and dialogic data (Love, 2013; Bumpus, 2005; Lindebaum & Courpasson, 2019).

The film selected for this study is Whiplash (Chazelle, 2014), which provides a compelling narrative for examining toxic leadership and its psychological effects on individuals in high-pressure performance environments. The film was chosen due to its intense depiction of a leader–follower dynamic and its thematic relevance to the literature on abusive supervision and stress-based leadership styles. The basic production details of the film are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Film Details

Film Title	Whiplash
Original Release Dates	16 January 2014 (Sundance Film Festival) / 10 October 2014 (USA)
Duration	1 hour 46 minutes
Language	English
Director	Damien Chazelle
Producer(s)	Jason Blum, Helen Estabrook, Michel Litvak, and David Lancaster
Screenwriter	Damien Chazelle
Leading Actors	Miles Teller (Andrew Neiman), J.K. Simmons (Terence Fletcher), Paul Reiser (Jim Neiman), Melissa Benoist (Nicole)

Research Design

The method employed in this study is document analysis, in which the film is treated as a narrative text and analysed through descriptive scene coding based on predefined theoretical constructs. The Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008) and related literature (e.g., Pelletier, 2010; Lipman-Blumen, 2006) were used to guide the categorisation of the leader's behaviours into specific toxic dimensions, such as abusive supervision, narcissism, and authoritarianism.

In addition, scenes involving the follower (Andrew) were analysed in terms of psychological outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and behavioural change, as discussed in contemporary empirical studies (e.g., Wolor et al., 2022; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The research was conducted in the following stages:

• Literature Review: An extensive literature review of toxic leadership was conducted, focusing on its dimensions, outcomes, and theoretical frameworks.

• Film Viewing: The film was viewed multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of character dynamics, emotional arcs, and key narrative sequences. This repeated viewing aligns with best practices in document and media analysis, in which immersion is essential for accurate interpretation (Love, 2013).

- Scene Selection and Coding: Scenes involving central characters (Fletcher and Andrew) were selected based on their relevance to toxic leadership dimensions. Both verbal and non-verbal elements—including tone, gestures, and contextual cues—were manually coded according to predefined categories derived from the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008).
- Interpretative Analysis: A theory-driven thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the coded scenes. This approach facilitates the identification of patterns, power relations, and psychological effects embedded in narrative texts (Bowen, 2009), allowing for a structured, conceptually grounded interpretation of leadership behaviour.

Methodological Justification

The use of document analysis as a qualitative research method allows researchers to examine texts—such as organisational records, speeches, or narrative media like films—for latent meanings, symbolic structures, and theoretical patterns (Love, 2013). In this study, the film is treated as a self-contained narrative document, where character interactions, dialogue, and visual sequences are systematically coded and interpreted through established leadership theories. As noted by Özdemir & Ardıç (2020) and Üstündağ (2021), film analysis—when framed as document analysis—enables scholars to connect abstract theoretical concepts with emotionally rich, contextually embedded representations of leadership behaviour. No historical or biographical validation of events is conducted; rather, the focus is on the film's symbolic and thematic portrayal of leadership dynamics.

Findings

A total of 12 key scenes were selected, coded, and categorised based on their relevance to toxic leadership dimensions and the psychological responses of the follower. These scenes were chosen through purposive sampling, focusing on moments where power dynamics, emotional manipulation, or abusive behaviours were most prominently displayed—consistent with theory-driven selection practices in qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The findings are illustrated in Table 2 and elaborated below through selected scene-based analyses.

Table 2

Coded Scenes and Toxic Leadership Dimensions

Scene No	Timecode (Approx.)	Scene Summary	The toxic leadership dimension
1	00:02:20	Fletcher auditions for Andrew for the first time	Authoritarianism
2	00:18:30–00:23:00	Fletcher Publicly Humiliates Metz in the U.S.	Public Humiliation
3	00:27:00–00:30:00	*"Not quite my tempo"* scene: verbal abuse and chair throw	Abusive Supervision
4	00:40:00–00:43:28	Folder lost, Carl humiliated, and Andrew replaced him.	Emotional Manipulation
5	00:42:40–00:46:50	Andrew defends Fletcher at dinner	Narcissism (internalised by follower)
6	00:47:3–00:50:30	Fletcher Quietly Replaces Andrew with Connolly in the Proposition:	Unpredictability
7	00:53:35–00:55:55	Fletcher plays Casey's Song and shares the story of Sean Casey's death	Emotional Manipulation

Scene No	Timecode (Approx.)	Scene Summary	The toxic leadership dimension
8	00:56:30–01:01:37	Fletcher subjects drummers to hours of abuse; Andrew bleeds but earns the part.	Physical and Verbal Abuse
9	01:05:00–01:10:00	Andrew crashes his car en route to performance, plays with a broken hand, and physically attacks Fletcher.	Extreme Pressure
10	01:19:00–01:22:41	Fletcher defends his abusive methods to Andrew by reframing cruelty as necessary for greatness:	Ideological Justification
11	01:30:50	Andrew is publicly humiliated after a failed solo; Fletcher dismisses him, "I assume you don't have it."	Strategic Sabotage
12	01:32:18–End	Andrew reclaims the stage and delivers a brilliant solo; Fletcher nods in approval—submission mistaken as triumph.	Trauma Bonding

Scene 1: *Prologue Scene: "Then Why Did You Stop Playing?"*

Toxic Leadership Dimension: Emergent Authoritarianism/Psychological Control

Follower Reactions: Anxiety, compliance, self-doubt

In a dim, nearly empty practice room late at night, Andrew is rehearsing alone as a tall man with all black steps enters. He removes his coat slowly and silently. This is Fletcher—stoic, unreadable, and immediately commanding figure. He does not raise his voice; instead, he uses calm, precise questions to assert his dominance and evaluate Andrew with cold detachment. A performance test framed as a psychological trap is presented.

FLETCHER: *What is your name?*

ANDREW: *Andrew Neiman, sir.*

FLETCHER: *What year are you?*

ANDREW: *first year, sir.*

FLETCHER: *Do you know who I am?*

ANDREW: *Yes…*

FLETCHER: *So, do you know I'm looking for players?*

ANDREW: *Yes.*

FLETCHER: *Why did you stop playing?*

(Andrew, flustered, tries to recover and starts playing again—fast fills, fast hands, showing off. But Fletcher cuts him off.)

FLETCHER: *Did I say to start playing again?*

ANDREW: *I thought— I'm sorry, I misun—*

FLETCHER: *I asked you why you stopped. Your version of the answer was to turn it into a wind-up monkey?*

ANDREW: *I—I stopped because—*

FLETCHER: *Show me your rudiments.*

(Andrew performs rolls and patterns.)

FLETCHER: *Double-time swing.*

(Fletcher claps, and Andrew follows. Fletcher claps faster.

FLETCHER: *No. Double it. Bop-bop-bop-bop-bop…*

(Andrew tried, but fails. Fletcher stops clapping abruptly.

(Andrew keeps playing until he hears the door close. Fletcher has left.

This scene masterfully establishes Fletcher's dominance not through aggression, but through precise emotional manipulation. His calm tone contrasts with his anxiety. The exchange is a test disguised as a conversation—each question tightens the psychological noose.

Fletcher's use of sparse language and abrupt corrections communicate judgement without offering clear feedback. Andrew's repeated "I'm sorry" and desperate efforts to highlight his immediate submission and emotional dysregulation. The sudden, silent exit is punishing through absence, reinforcing confusion and self-doubt. This is a classic example of what Lipman-Blumen (2006) calls "psychological priming for dependency" in toxic leadership: the leader destabilises the follower emotionally and then positions himself as the sole source of validation.

Scene 2: *"Metz, get the out": Public Humiliation as a Control*

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Authoritarianism, public humiliation, unpredictability

Follower Reactions: Fear, confusion, shame, and emotional suppression

Andrew enters the studio band for the first time and silently observes as Fletcher leads the group with hyper-focus and calculated aggression. He uses sexually explicit insults, targets individual musicians, and humiliates them in front of his peers. The most disturbing moment comes when Metz, a trombonist, falsely accuses him of playing out of tune—forcing him to admit guilt under pressure, only later to reveal that he was not out of tune at all.

FLETCHER: *"That is not your boyfriend's dick.' Do not come early."*

(Band plays. He paces. Then abruptly:)

FLETCHER: *"We have an out-of-tune player." Does the player want to reveal himself?"*

(Silence. Fletcher cuts the band off again.

FLETCHER: *"Either you know you're out of tune, and you're sabotaging my band—or you don't know, which is worse."*

(He zeroes in on METZ.)

FLETCHER: *"Tell me it's not you, Elmer Fudd."*

(Metz, trembling.)

FLETCHER (whispers): *"Do you think you're out of tune?"*

METZ: *"Y-yes."*

FLETCHER (shouting): *"Then why the FUCK didn't you say so?!"*

(He explodes for the first time, unleashing full verbal assault.)

FLETCHER: *"Your mind is on a fucking Happy Meal." Get the out."*

(Metz leaves, crying. Fletcher turns to the rest:

FLETCHER: *"For the record, Metz was not out of tune.' You were Wallach. But Metz did not know. Furthermore, that's bad enough."*

(He turns and looks directly at Andrew.)

This scene is a masterclass in performative cruelty: Fletcher employs sexually degrading language, ridicules appearance ("Elmer Fudd", "Happy Meal"), and exploits personal insecurity to reinforce his dominance. He weaponized silence and then volume, creating a whiplash effect in the band's emotional state —confusion, fear, and paralysis. Andrew, though not yet the direct target, internalises the message: *No one is safe*. In this case, perfection is expected. The fallibility is punished.

This aligns precisely with Schmidt's (2008) toxic leadership scale: authoritarianism, abusive supervision, and emotional unpredictability. It also reflects Pelletier's (2010) findings on toxic leaders who use scape-goating and public breakdowns to strengthen personal authority. This scene demonstrates how toxic leadership does not only harm the direct target (Metz) but also creates a culture of silence and fear in the entire group. Fletcher ensures that emotional safety is removed from the environment, and in its place, he instils vigilance, shame, and blind obedience. For Andrew, this is the moment he fully enters the toxic system —silent, terrified, but deeply motivated to gain Fletcher's approval.

Scene 3: *"Not My Tempo": Full Psychological Breakdown*

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Abusive supervision, verbal degradation, physical assault, and emotional manipulation

Follower Reactions: shock, freeze response, emotional breakdown, learned helplessness, identity erosion

During an early studio band rehearsal, Fletcher singles out Andrew for his tempo inaccuracies. The initial clinical correction quickly escalates into a full-blown psychological assault. Fletcher throws a chair at Andrew, slaps him repeatedly, hurls homophobic and deeply personal insults at him, and forces him to admit his emotional vulnerability in front of the entire band.

This is not a correction. It is a calculated destruction of ego under the guise of "discipline."

FLETCHER: *"Were you rushing or were you dragging?"*

(Andrew hesitates. Fletcher slaps him — once, twice, and three times.

FLETCHER: *"Start counting."*

(Andrew tries; Fletcher screams louder, faster, until Andrew mutters:)

ANDREW: *"Rushing…"*

FLETCHER: *"So you do know the difference!"*

(He mocks Andrew, berates him, calls him mentally disabled.)

FLETCHER: *"Is that a tear?' Do I look like a double rainbow to you?"*

(Andrew tries to hide his tears.)

FLETCHER: *"Say it.' Are you upset?"*

(Andrew whispers. Fletcher demands he scream:

ANDREW (yelling): *"I am upset!!!"*

FLETCHER: *"You are a worthless, friendless faggot-lipped little piece of shit…"*

This scene presents the most explicit and violent manifestation of Fletcher's toxic leadership, integrating nearly all the dimensions identified in the scholarly literature on destructive supervision. It begins with a shocking act of physical aggression, as Fletcher hurls a chair directly at Andrew's head, followed by repeated slaps during a forced tempo-counting ritual. These acts are compounded by sustained verbal and psychological abuse, including homophobic slurs, personal insults directed at Andrew's family background, mocking of his emotional vulnerability and a coerced public admission of distress. Fletcher's behaviour is marked by rapid shifts between calm interrogation and explosive rage, producing a state of emotional confusion that is deliberately weaponized to establish dominance. The humiliation reaches its peak as

Andrew, trembling and tearful, is forced to shout "I am upset" to the entire room under Fletcher's demand, effectively stripping away his emotional agency in front of his peers.

The scene aligns closely with Tepper's (2000) definition of abusive supervision as the sustained display of hostile behaviours—though here, the abuse crosses physical territory. Moreover, Fletcher's methods exemplify Pelletier's (2010) assertion that toxic leaders often rationalise cruelty by invoking ideals like greatness or excellence. For Fletcher, Andrew's psychological breakdown is not collateral damage—it is the very process by which he believes excellence is forged. Andrew's disintegration mirrors what Hadadian and Zarei (2016) define as emotional exhaustion and identity conflict among subordinates who have been exposed to abusive leadership.

Narratively, this moment is a critical turning point. From this scene onward, Andrew is no longer merely seeking approval; he becomes psychologically dependent on it. The mentor-mentee dynamic collapses into a cycle of coercion and submission, marking the transition from aspirational leadership to psychological captivity. In doing so, the film offers a sharp critique of how cultures of performance may confuse abuse with rigour and interpret personal collapse as the price of artistic excellence.

Scene 4: *"You'd Better Pray Your Memory Doesn't Fail"*

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Gaslighting, emotional manipulation, authoritarianism, verbal abuse, and scapegoating

Follower Reactions:

Carl: Humiliation, helplessness, withdrawal

Andrew: Eagerness to please, anxiety, and rising overidentification

As the band prepares for the competition, a folder containing the important charts is missing. Carl accuses Andrew of losing it. Fletcher, instead of calmly resolving the situation, responds with overt verbal abuse, mocking Carl with an ableist and humiliating language. When Carl admits he cannot play without sheet music because of a medical memory condition, Fletcher publicly ridicules him and essentially forces Andrew to take his place.

Andrew steps in—not just to help but to sense an opportunity to rise. He delivers a shaky but successful performance. Later, after the band wins first place, Fletcher gives an emotional speech, referring to the students as "his family"—framing abuse as care. However, when Carl's folder is found, it's revealed that neither he nor Andrew were at fault. Fletcher never apologises. The next day, Fletcher demotes Carl without explanation and reinstates Andrew. Carl is shocked and forced to leave the drum set. The decision is delivered without eye contact, discussion, or closure.

CARL: *"I can't go on-stage… I don't know the charts by heart."*

FLETCHER: *"What are you Sanjay Gupta?' Play the music!"*

(Carl panics. Andrew volunteers.)

FLETCHER: *"You'd better pray your memory doesn't fail you."*

(After the win:)

FLETCHER (to band): *"I treat them like my own kids. Meaning I terrorise them." (Laughter.)*

(Next day, to Carl:)

FLETCHER: *"Core only today. I cannot waste time with alternates." (Carl is dismissed.)*

This scene is a masterclass of subtle cruelty masquerading as opportunity. Fletcher does not raise his voice—instead, he operates with surgical precision, transforming a moment of logistical confusion into a carefully orchestrated public trial. When Carl nervously admits that he cannot perform without sheet music because of his cognitive condition, Fletcher seizes the chance to humiliate him in front of the group. His use of deeply ableist and dehumanising language—comparing Carl to a "retard with a calculator" and ridiculing his need for "visual cues"—reveals a toxic, zero-tolerance culture in which vulnerability is punished and not supported. In contrast, when Andrew volunteers to take Carl's place and manages to deliver a passable performance, Fletcher immediately reframes the situation as a personal triumph of talent and trust. His emotional speech after the band's victory, in which he compares his students to his "own kids" and admits to "terrorising them," is both manipulative and revealing. It masks structural abuse in the performance of paternalistic care, which Padilla et al. (2007) identified as the "benign façade" of toxic leadership. These events illustrate what Krasikova et al. (2013) and Pelletier (2010) describe as manufactured crises used by toxic leaders to test loyalty and consolidate power. The reward of praise is conditional, manipulative, and tied not to merit but to compliance under pressure.

Narratively, this moment marks a further erosion of moral clarity. Andrew steps in not because he is fully prepared, but because he has internalised the belief that Fletcher's approval is more valuable than personal readiness or peer solidarity. His complicity in Carl's removal signals a shift from idealism to self-preservation. Fletcher's version of success demands sacrifice—not just of time or energy, but of empathy and conscience. As such, this scene crystallises the emotional cost of surviving under toxic leadership: the quiet normalisation of harm in pursuit of validation.

Scene 5: *"I'd Rather Die at 34…" – Internalising the Narcissistic Standard*

Toxic Leadership Dimension: Narcissism (Internalised by follower)

Follower Reactions: Overidentification, moral rigidity, and social isolation

Andrew joins his family for dinner, where a casual conversation about his achievements turns subtly competitive. As his athletic cousins receive admiration and accolades, Andrew's attempts to share his accomplishments in Studio Band are met with condescension and misunderstanding. Frustrated, he erupts—defending not only himself but an ethos of success based on pain, sacrifice, and artistic transcendence. In doing so, he mirrors Fletcher's earlier justifications for cruelty and hardship as necessary for greatness.

ANDREW: "I'd rather die broke and drunk at 34 and have people at a dinner table somewhere talk about it than die rich and sober at 90 and have no one remember me."

ANDREW: "Charlie Parker didn't know anyone until Jo Jones threw a cymbal at his head."

ANDREW: "I prefer to feel hated and cast out." It gives me purpose."

(Later, citing Laszlo Polgar:)

ANDREW: "He got his daughters to practice chess before they could even talk.' All three were world champions."

This scene is quiet in tone but psychologically charged, revealing a deep shift in Andrew's internal world. His rigid posture, clipped tone, and unflinching eye contact reveal not only defensiveness, but also a growing ideological detachment from his family. The camera isolates him visually, placing a distance between Andrew and the rest of the dinner table, emphasising his emotional estrangement.

Andrew's defence of Jo Jones throwing a cymbal, an abusive moment Fletcher previously mythologised, reveals the extent to which he has internalised the logic of toxic mentorship. Padilla et al. (2007) describe in the Toxic Triangle framework that individuals have become conforming followers—someone who adopts the dysfunctional values of the toxic leader to gain proximity and perceived significance. No longer questioning Fletcher's methods, Andrew justifies them as necessary truths. This progression also reflects the identity-based followership outlined by Hadadian and Zarei (2016), in which the follower's personal identity is fused with the leader's vision. The result is moral rigidity, loss of autonomy, and withdrawal from social connectedness.

Narratively, the dinner scene marks a pivotal moment in Andrew's psychological transformation. He is no longer merely surviving under Fletcher's dominance; he is rationalising and defending it, even in spaces of intimacy and kinship. His desire for validation had eclipsed his need for belonging. In choosing Fletcher's brutal and isolating standard of success over the imperfect warmth of family, Andrew confirms his total ideological submission—an artist no longer just shaped by pressure but consumed by it.

Scene 6: "That's Not Quite My Tempo…" AGAIN.

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: *Unpredictability, Gaslighting, and Psychological Undermining*

Follower Reactions: *Disorientation, desperation, and loss of trust*

During a quiet rehearsal, Fletcher asks Andrew to run through a part at tempo 330. Andrew, nervous but focused, begins playing—only to be subtly cut off by Fletcher's familiar line: "That's not quite my tempo." Without raising his voice or displaying overt aggression, Fletcher replaces Andrew with Connolly, another drummer who delivers a flawless performance. Fletcher praises Connolly in front of Andrew, delivers a cold verdict—"Connolly, the chart's yours"—and walks away with no explanation.

Andrew, humiliated and confused, walks directly into Fletcher's office, insisting he can play the part. Fletcher screams "NOT NOW!" However, unexpectedly, Andrew notices that Fletcher's eyes are moist. For the first time, Fletcher appears emotionally vulnerable—his voice is shaken, and his expression is subtly painful. Andrew does not understand what he is witnessing, and the moment ends in eerie ambiguity.

FLETCHER: *"That's not quite my tempo…"*

FLETCHER (to Connolly): *"That was excellent'. This is the beauty of Studio Band—you come in an alternate, a minute later you're core."*

ANDREW: *"You're not serious."*

(Later, bursting in:)

ANDREW: *"I can play that part." You know I can—"*

FLETCHER (shouting): *"NOT NOW!"*

(Andrew notices: Fletcher's eyes are watering.)

This scene is quietly devastating, offering a masterclass in psychological destabilisation through subtle manipulation. Fletcher's tone remains calm and composed, but his actions carry a sharp psychological weight. By asking Andrew to play a difficult section and then immediately replacing him with Connolly—who performs flawlessly—Fletcher creates a gaslighting dynamic: Andrew is punished and displaced without having clearly failed. Fletcher's praise of Connolly, delivered with gentle authority in front of Andrew, reinforces the ambiguity. The effect is not open aggression but emotional invalidation. The cinematography

mirrors this confusion: Andrew is visually positioned between Connolly's relaxed presence and Fletcher's cold detachment. His rapid breathing and clenched body language convey his rising panic, while Fletcher's tranquil demeanour and, later, his unexpected tears invert the emotional logic of the scene. In this moment, Fletcher appears vulnerable, even wounded—but whether this display is authentic or another layer of manipulation remains deliberately unclear.

From a theoretical standpoint, the scene reflects what Schmidt (2008) defines as toxic unpredictability: leadership behaviour that destabilises followers by defying emotional expectations. Lipman-Blumen (2006) noted that toxic leaders often undermine psychological stability by blurring the boundaries between praise and punishment, closeness, and rejection. Andrew's urgent confrontation in Fletcher's office illustrates the attachment anxiety discussed by Hadadian and Zarei (2016), in which the follower becomes emotionally entangled in the leader's validation, needing it not just for performance but for personal coherence. Fletcher's visible emotion, whether genuine or performative, deepens this entanglement—giving just enough humanity to complicate Andrew's judgement of him. As a result, Fletcher simultaneously becomes an abuser and saviour in Andrew's perception.

Scene 7: "He Was a Beautiful Player"

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Emotional manipulation, a benign façade

Follower Reactions: Sympathy, silence, and emotional entanglement

In a quiet rehearsal room, Fletcher asks the band to set down their instruments. He plays a muted trumpet ballad—Sean Casey's song—on the CD player. As the music plays, Fletcher delivers a deeply emotional monologue about Sean, a former student who, according to him, was once overlooked but whom Fletcher believed in. He describes Sean's rise from near failure to first trumpet at Lincoln Centre, only to reveal that Sean died in a car accident the previous day. Fletcher's voice cracks. He is nearly cries. Then, without transition, he turns off the music and coldly announces: "*Caravan." From bar 142, please.*"

This scene is charged with performative sincerity. Fletcher appears vulnerable, open, and human. His voice wavers. His body was smaller. The story he tells is one of mentorships, belief, and tragic loss. However, the sudden shift back into rehearsal—"Caravan, bar 142"—strips the moment of authentic mourning and repositions it as a tool. This performance of grief reinforces his narrative: greatness requires suffering, and he alone can see and cultivate that potential.

This scene reflects what Padilla et al. (2007) identified as a benign façade—a leadership mask of care and vulnerability that conceals manipulative intent. Fletcher's storytelling builds emotional loyalty without offering relational reciprocity. Schmidt (2008) defined emotional manipulation as the use of feelings to control perceptions and behaviour; here, grief is deployed to reinforce Fletcher's power, not to process a loss.

The follower's response—silence, reverence, and compliance—suggests successful manipulation. In Hadadian and Zarei's (2016) framework, such moments deepen affective dependency. By revealing just enough vulnerability, Fletcher creates a sense of intimacy that strengthens students' emotional investment, especially for followers like Andrew who already perceive his approval as existentially meaningful.

Scene 8: "*Faster..Faster!!*"

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Abusive supervision, physical and verbal assault, emotional exhaustion, gaslighting, authoritarianism

Follower Reactions: Physical collapse, bloodied hands, obedience under duress, and emotional numbness

Following his emotional story about Sean Casey, Fletcher immediately pivots into a brutal "tempo test" with his three drummers: Andrew, Connolly, and Carl. At first, Fletcher appears calm and tentative—but quickly descends into uncontrolled rage. He cycles through the drummers for hours, screaming obscenities, hurling objects, and inflicting verbal and physical terror. His insults range from homophobic slurs to psychological attacks on family, masculinity, and worth.

FLETCHER: *"Maybe now's the time for Neiman to earn the part…"*
(Andrew's hope flickers—he grips his sticks, breathes in, prepares…)

FLETCHER (immediately after): *"No, I guess not.' Tanner."*
(An intentional whiplash—hope replaced by humiliation.)

FLETCHER: *"I will find my tempo out of one of you faggots if it takes me all goddamned night."*
(Rage, homophobia, and authoritarianism converge.)

FLETCHER (to Andrew): *"Not my fucking tempo!"*
(Degradation becomes rhythmic and ritualistic.)

FLETCHER: *"You hear me talking, cocksuckers?' You'd better start me for perfect 400s!"*
(Inhuman standards paired with obscene verbal abuse.)

(Later, Andrew back on the kit—bleeding, shaking, exhausted…)

FLETCHER: *"Speed up! God-fucking-damnit, I said SPEED UP!!!"*
(Repeated over and over in a frenzied crescendo.)

FLETCHER (beating cowbell): *"Don't stop!"*

FLETCHER: *"Do it!" Do it! Do it! One! One! One! One!"*

(Andrew misses one beat—Fletcher throws the floor tom into the wall.)

FLETCHER: *"KEEP PLAYING!!!"*
(Andrew obeys. Blood on his hands, his identity dissolving.)

FLETCHER (final line): *"Congratulations, Neiman." You earned the part."*
(Approval through annihilation—an indoctrinated victory.)

This sequence is the film's most visually and sonically overwhelming moment, when the emotional tension that has been building finally detonates. Through rapid-fire editing, extreme close-ups of Andrew's bloodied hands, sweat-drenched face and the cowbell striking inches from his head, the viewer is pulled into a sadistic endurance ritual that transcends pedagogy and enters the realm of psychological warfare. The soundscape becomes an assault in itself—ringing ears, relentless cymbals, and Fletcher's manic commands merge into a near-traumatic viewing experience. What initially seems like a rehearsal quickly reveals itself to be an orchestrated breakdown. Fletcher's earlier emotional bait—his teary monologue about Sean Casey —renders the brutality that follows even more disorienting, blurring the boundary between mourning and manipulation. His calculated use of repeated switches, invalidation, verbal degradation, and ultimately physical violence (such as hurling the floor tom across the room) systematically strips Andrew of his autonomy. Yet, Andrew does not cry, plead, or resist. He plays. Broken in body but trained in obedience, he

endures. Furthermore, when Fletcher finally delivers his perverse benediction— "Congratulations, Neiman. You earned the part."—it is clear that what Andrew has won is not approval, but submission.

The dynamics at play in this scene exemplify the full convergence of toxic leadership theories. Tepper's (2000) concept of abusive supervision is manifested in its most literal and extreme form. Schmidt's (2008) toxic leadership dimensions—authoritarianism, unpredictability, emotional abuse, and narcissism—are all simultaneously present, reinforcing the environment as one of coercive dominance rather than guidance. The escalation from psychological pressure to physical force marks a descent into what can only be described as organisational sadism, where the goal is not development but complete control. Andrew's response—driven not by passion but by desperation—reflects the emotional exhaustion and identity fusion described by Hadadian and Zarei (2016). He no longer plays for music, but for survival. Padilla et al.'s (2007) Toxic Triangle is also fully realised: a destructive leader, a psychologically vulnerable follower, and an enabling institutional context that prioritises prestige over well-being.

Scene 9: *"You're Done"*

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Extreme pressure, authoritarianism, emotional exhaustion, and psychological breakdown

Follower Reactions: Self-harm, dissociation, violent outbursts, and emotional collapse

As Andrew races to arrive on time for his critical performance, he crashes his car. Bleeding and with a visibly broken hand, he refuses medical help, retrieves his drumsticks from the wreckage, and runs three blocks to the concert hall. Stumbling onstage, he forces himself into the drummer's seat. Despite agonising pain, the mangled hand, and the band's disbelief, Andrew insists on playing. But the tempo collapses, the beat unravels, and the piece fails in front of the audience. Fletcher, calm and scathing, leans in and whispers: "You're done." Andrew, overwhelmed and broken, explodes. He knocks over the drums and physically tackles Fletcher on stage, screaming, before being dragged off by security, sobbing and bleeding. The total meltdown is

ANDREW (to truck driver): *"I must go, it's three more blocks."*

(Self-sacrifice overrides survival instinct.)

ANDREW: *"Get off the set."*

(Reclaims control momentarily—desperation framed as agency.)

FLETCHER (whispers): *"You're done."*

(The ultimate devaluation—cold, dismissive, lethal.)

(Andrew flips drums, tackles Fletcher, screams in rage.)

This is one of the most physically intense and emotionally catastrophic scenes in Whiplash. Andrew's decision to prioritise performance over his own life and body demonstrates the devastating power of internalised toxic leadership. When he arrives at the concert, the visual cues are unmistakeable: his hands are shaking, his shirt is soaked in sweat, and his left hand is useless. Still, he plays. But his agony manifests in the slow collapse of timing, precision, and control.

When Fletcher tells him "You're done," it is not a correction—it is a death sentence. The quiet insult unleashes a response shaped by long-standing emotional tension. Andrew's violent outburst—flipping

drums, charging at Fletcher—is not rebellion but rupture. The image of Fletcher being dragged offstage in tears while he remains untouched is the final proof of who holds power.

This scene marks the psychological breaking point of toxic leadership's impact. Fletcher's authoritarian control, paired with Andrew's identity fusion and escalating emotional dependency, culminates in a moment of physical self-harm and emotional collapse. What begins as overcommitment—racing to the performance despite a car crash—quickly reveals itself as what Lipman-Blumen (2006) terms "self-sacrificial loyalty," a hallmark of toxic leader-follower dynamics wherein high-achieving subordinates internalise their leader's demands at the expense of self-preservation. Andrew's refusal of help and determination to perform with a broken, bleeding hand demonstrate the complete disintegration of the boundaries between ambition and obedience. This moment also fully activates Padilla et al.'s (2007) Toxic Triangle framework: Andrew has become the conforming follower, Fletcher the destructive leader, and the institution—the Shaffer Conservatory—a passive enabler that fails to intervene. Thus, the scene transcends the logic of discipline or performance; it becomes a vivid example of organisational collapse, where the pursuit of excellence becomes indistinguishable from psychological destruction.

Scene 10: *"There Are No Two Words More Harmful Than 'Good Job"*

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: *Ideological justification, narcissism, grandiosity, instrumentalism*

Follower Reactions: *Moral absorption, ideological alignment, and conflicted admiration*

In a quiet jazz bar, Fletcher opens up to Andrew in an initially vulnerable, even reflective conversation. He claims he never wanted to be a performer, but rather a man who made a great artist, the mentor of the next Charlie Parker. Through storytelling, he reframes his abuse as a moral obligation to cultivate genius. The story of Jo Jones throwing a cymbal at Parker becomes his foundational myth: greatness, he argues, only emerges from adversity. *"There are no two words more harmful than 'good job,'"* he says, summarising his philosophy. When Andrew questions whether such tactics might scare off true talent, Fletcher dismisses the idea entirely: *"Because the next Charlie Parker would never be discouraged."* In this moment, Andrew appears captivated, not just by Fletcher's certainty, but by the clarity of his worldview.

This scene marks a pivotal transformation in the toxic leader–follower relationship: coercion gives way to ideological capture. Fletcher no longer relies on physical intimidation or verbal degradation; instead, he delivers a carefully crafted philosophy that frames cruelty as a moral duty. He embodies what Lipman-Blumen (2006) calls a narcissistic visionary—a leader very devoted to a transcendent mission that ethical boundaries are suspended in the pursuit of greatness. His belief that "there are no two words more harmful than 'good job'" encapsulates a worldview built on grandiosity and elitism, where suffering is reframed as a rite of passage, not a warning sign. This rhetorical strategy reflects what Krasikova et al. (2013) describe as the instrumentalization of followers—turning subordinates into tools for achieving abstract, often self-serving goals. In this logic, outcomes justify all means, and accountability becomes irrelevant.

Andrew's response in this moment aligns precisely with Padilla et al.'s (2007) description of "conformers" in the Toxic Triangle: followers who internalise the leader's ideology in search of purpose or identity. His prior trauma is not resolved, but the re-narrated pain becomes validation, and obedience becomes destiny. When Fletcher says, "I will never apologise for trying," it is not an act of self-defence, but a final renunciation of guilt, cloaked in the language of legacy. Andrew's reply—*"Who's your Charlie Parker?"*—reveals that he is no longer seeking safety or critique; he is seeking significance within the very system that broke him. Control, in this context, is no longer physical—it is cognitive, moral, and nearly irreversible.

Scene 11: *"I assume You Don't Have It": Public Defeat, Private Collapse*

Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Strategic sabotage, humiliation, public shaming, strategic undermining

Follower Reactions: Defeat, emotional collapse, public exposure

Andrew, having just attempted to follow Fletcher's unexpected tempo and piece changes, finishes playing alone. The last cymbal hit lingers, and then—nothing. Silence is deafening. No applause. No acknowledgement. Only a faint ripple of muted, reluctant clapping could be heard. The concert hall, filled with confusion and discomfort watches a young man unravel.

NARRATION: "No one here has ever seen a disaster quite like that before."

Fletcher walks calmly back towards Andrew. His demeanour is light and victorious. Andrew is sitting, devastated, with tears forming as he stares blankly into space. Fletcher leans in, softly—cruelly:

FLETCHER: "I assume you don't have it."

This moment represents the final stage of manipulative leadership: public humiliation follows private exploitation. Fletcher uses the stage not merely to test Andrew's limits but to obliterate his credibility. The act reflects a pattern of manipulative control that aligns with the dimensions of toxic leadership outlined by Schmidt (2008), particularly unpredictability and abusive supervision. It further echoes what later literature terms "strategic sabotage"—a deliberate tactic of setting up followers for failure and disowning them publicly (Pelletier, 2010). The cruelty lies not in overt aggression, but in precision: Fletcher withholds support, shifts expectations without warning, and, after Andrew's painful solo effort, delivers the cutting blow—"I guess you don't have it." It is not spoken in anger, but in judgement, finality, and utter dismissal. Lipman-Blumen (2006) emphasises that toxic leaders often build psychological dependency in their followers before orchestrating a betrayal to reassert dominance. Fletcher's line is the culmination of that pattern—quiet, devastating, and in full view of Andrew's peers, family, and an indifferent audience.

The public nature of this defeat magnifies its emotional and psychological cost. As Hadadian and Zarei (2016) noted, such invalidation—especially when preceded by conditional praise—can trigger identity confusion, emotional exhaustion, and long-term trauma in followers. Andrew, who sacrificed his health, relationships, and sense of self for Fletcher's approval, is left shattered, not just as a musician but as a person. Yet narratively, this scene is not merely an endpoint—it is a turning point. By stripping Andrew of all external validation, Fletcher inadvertently clears the stage for a new form of agency: one no longer built on obedience but on self-assertion. In this way, the moment of collapse becomes a silent catalyst for the film's final reversal, when Andrew, no longer seeking permission, reclaims his performance on his own terms.

Scene 12: *"Caravan" – The Illusion of Triumph*
Toxic Leadership Dimensions: Trauma bonding, manipulative reinforcement, and narcissistic validation
Follower Reactions: Self-erasure, identity fusion, and emotional detachment

After being publicly humiliated and dismissed with Fletcher's cold verdict—"I guess you don't have it"—Andrew initially exits the stage in defeat. However, moments later, as Fletcher launches into a piece Andrew has not rehearsed, he returns. Without cue or permission, he reclaims the tempo and launches into an electrifying, extended solo of "Caravan." The audience is being stunned. Fletcher is first livid and then visibly impressed.

This scene, visually and narratively, illustrates the culmination of Padilla et al.'s (2007) Toxic Triangle: Fletcher is the destructive leader, Andrew the conforming follower, and the jazz community—applauding

brilliance without asking what it cost—is the enabling context. The performance is not an act of artistic expression but an endpoint of identity erosion. Andrew is no longer playing to grow—he is playing to fulfil Fletcher's vision. As Pelletier (2010) argued, such followers experience emotional dissonance: a simultaneous sense of achievement and loss. This tension permeates the final scene—Andrew achieves artistic excellence, but not on his own terms.

Fletcher, in turn, embodies Lipman-Blumen's (2006) narcissistic visionary. He does not see himself as a mentor but as a creator of greatness justified in inflicting pain if it yields results. The faint smile he gives to Andrew is not pride—it is ownership. Andrew's transformation is his triumph.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Whiplash offers a vivid, multi-layered portrayal of toxic leadership as conceptualised in contemporary literature. Fletcher, the film's central authority figure, exhibits nearly all the major dimensions of toxic leadership—including abusive supervision, authoritarianism, narcissism, unpredictability, and manipulative rhetoric—as outlined in the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008) and theoretical frameworks such as the Toxic Triangle (Padilla et al., 2007).

These behaviours are not isolated incidents but form a consistent pattern of coercion and control, fitting Lipman-Blumen's (2006) definition of toxic leadership as a systemic abuse of power that damages individuals and institutional integrity. Fletcher's actions foster a high-performance environment driven not by mutual respect or ethical standards but by fear, humiliation, and dependency.

Psychological and Emotional Impacts on Followers

The psychological responses exhibited by Andrew—emotional breakdown, identity confusion, self-isolation, and eventual psychological collapse—are aligned with the known effects of toxic leadership in empirical studies. For example, Hadadian and Zarei (2016) highlight the direct correlation between toxic leadership and emotional exhaustion, a state that Andrew clearly enters at the film's midpoint. Similarly, Wolor et al. (2022) argued that abusive leadership reduces motivation and performance quality by inducing fear-based compliance, not inspiration.

One striking finding is how Andrew internalises Fletcher's worldview. He begins to echo his leader's ideals of greatness through suffering and superiority through exclusivity, echoing Lipman-Blumen's (2006) observation that toxic leaders often shape their followers' identities to mirror their own narcissistic values. Andrew's dinner table argument, in which he defends the idea that "it's better to die great than live mediocre," is a classic example of this ideological transfer.

Trauma Misrecognised as Triumph

The film's final act—the solo drum performance and Fletcher's appreciative nod—has often been interpreted as a moment of earned respect or mutual recognition. However, this study's analysis demonstrates that this moment reflects not resolution, but the climax of trauma bonding. The nod is not a redemption but a subtle reinforcement of the abusive dynamic.

This aligns with findings by Milosevic et al. (2020), who argue that toxic leaders often disguise control as mentorship and pain as growth. The leader-follower relationship becomes a site of emotional entrapment, wherein the follower equates suffering with self-worth.

Furthermore, Pelletier (2010) identifies emotional dissonance as a long-term consequence of toxic leadership—followers feel satisfaction and shame simultaneously. Andrew's final performance, achieved through bleeding hands and psychological pressure, exemplifies this duality: a performance of brilliance, fuelled by emotional devastation.

The Seductive Myth of "Toxic Excellence"

A broader implication of this analysis is the critique of a cultural narrative that glorifies suffering in pursuit of greatness. Fletcher is allowed to exist and thrive because his behaviour is framed as necessary for producing excellence. Lipman-Blumen (2006) noted that followers and institutions often enable toxic leaders due to their charisma, results-oriented facade, or perceived brilliance.

This is particularly relevant in high-performance domains such as music, sports, and finance, where abusive behaviours are normalised under the rhetoric of toughness and resilience. In Whiplash, Fletcher's toxicity is tolerated—and eventually rewarded—because it is seen as producing results, despite the evident psychological toll.

The discussion aligns with Winn and Dykes (2019), who warn against confusing output with ethical leadership and highlight the long-term harm of romanticising cruelty as "standards."

Theoretical Contribution and Reflection

By applying the toxic leadership framework to a cinematic text, this study contributes to leadership theory and qualitative methodology. This shows how film, as a cultural artefact, can serve not only as entertainment but also as a reflective medium for understanding complex interpersonal and organisational dynamics.

Moreover, the analysis confirms that toxic leadership is not always overt or extreme—it can be gradual, seductive, and even celebrated. This echoes Pelletier's (2010) concern that toxic leaders are often seen as misunderstood geniuses rather than dangerous manipulators.

Finally, the analysis invites reflection on what ethical leadership ought to be: leadership that does not trade psychological safety for productivity or manipulate others under the illusion of "pushing limits."

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Whiplash offers a powerful and nuanced cinematic portrayal of toxic leadership and its psychological consequences. Through the systematic document analysis of 12 key scenes, the film reveals all major dimensions of toxic leadership—abusive supervision, authoritarianism, unpredictability, narcissism, and manipulative justification—as identified in the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008) and related frameworks (Pelletier, 2010; Padilla et al., 2007). By interpreting the film as a narrative document, this research bridges cinematic representation and organisational theory, offering new insights into how toxic leadership is normalised, internalised, and rationalised in high-performance cultures.

Compared with the existing literature, the findings align with prior empirical studies showing that toxic leadership fosters emotional exhaustion, identity erosion, and trauma bonding among followers (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Wolor et al., 2022). However, Whiplash goes further by dramatising how these effects are morally justified and even celebrated in certain professional domains. This cinematic representation extends the understanding of how cultural narratives can shape and legitimise abusive leadership practices.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on a single film, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the interpretation of visual and narrative elements carries a degree of subjectivity, despite being guided by established theoretical constructs. Lastly, treating the film as a self-contained document means that historical or biographical information about the director, actors, or real-world parallels was not considered.

Future research could build on this study by analysing multiple films across genres or industries to explore whether different portrayals of leadership reinforce or challenge toxic norms. Additionally, integrating audience reception data—such as viewer interpretations or emotional responses—could enrich the understanding of how toxic leadership representations are internalised or resisted. Scholars may also compare cinematic portrayals of leadership with real-world case studies to better understand the interplay between narrative and lived organisational experience.

Ultimately, Whiplash serves as both a cautionary tale and a pedagogical resource. This illustrates that while toxic leaders may inspire short-term performance, they do so at the cost of psychological well-being, ethical integrity, and human dignity. As leadership scholars and educators, there is a pressing need to challenge cultural narratives that conflate cruelty with excellence and to promote leadership models grounded in empathy, accountability, and resilience.

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