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Destructive leadership behaviors among heads of departments in higher education: perceptions of subordinates in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Although the phenomenon of destructive leadership is ubiquitous and its negative impact on the higher education (HE) sector is global, it is still an area underexplored, and the few studies on it focus attention predominantly on the HE context of the developed world. This study used the HE context of Ghana as an example of a developing country to determine, from subordinate perceptions, the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among heads of departments (HoDs). Five hundred and forty-six respondents from 180 higher education institutions across the country were involved in a cross-sectional survey based on a modified version of the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ). The research found that although subordinates generally thought the behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE were destructive, the perceptions varied significantly according to the type of institution. Also, subordinates' statuses and demographics influenced how they perceived the destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs. Furthermore, gender, age, and years of employment significantly varied with the perceived prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HEIs. The research mainly recommended a more nuanced approach to dealing with the phenomenon of destructive leadership so that the public and private dichotomy in the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors in global HE may be addressed.

KEYWORDS

Destructive leadership; heads of department; higher education; subordinates

Introduction

Leadership has been an area of research interest for many scholars in recent years, perhaps due to its crucial role in organizational success. Although this is the case, the literature is replete with studies on the positive or brighter side of leadership, relegating to the background the negative or darker side of the concept described as destructive leadership. Erickson et al. (2015) attribute the situation to traditionally, the quest of organizations to improve their performances through effective leadership. The use of destructive leadership in this research is consistent with Einarsen et al.'s (2007) claim that it '... is the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor, or manager that

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violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being, or job satisfaction of subordinates' (p. 208). This definition means that occasionally acting incompetent or exhibiting bullying and malicious behaviors does not make a leader destructive; the person is destructive only if the behaviors is 'volitional, systematic, and repeated over a long time' (Erickson et al., 2015, p. 8).

Destructive leadership may be verbally or physically exhibited and could be an active or a passive behavior (Klaus & Steele, 2020; Krasikova et al., 2013). Many terms have been used in the literature to describe destructive leaders, some of which include bullies, tyrants, narcissists, abusive, bad, and toxic (Aravena, 2019; Green, 2014; Kellerman, 2004; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Pelletier et al., 2019; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013). The rest are evil, callous, incompetent, intemperate, rigid, and insular (Erickson et al., 2015; Fors Brandebo et al., 2016; Klaus & Steele, 2020). Although the definition of destructive leadership sets the parameters of the behaviors of leaders that could be considered ruinous, its notion and application are problematic because a leader's failure to execute a positive and effective leadership action in moderation may become excessive to subordinates and descend into the realm of destructive leadership. The real issue hereof is when and how leaders can determine the sufficiency of their behaviors to avoid 'trespassing'; a situation Erickson et al. (2015) describe as the dilemma of knowing enough has become too much. A further issue about the definition is the challenge of precisely identifying who a destructive leader is. The situation is so because a leader's negative (or destructive) behaviors may be repetitive yet not across all areas of their performance to deserve the description destructive leader (Erickson et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2014). Despite the weaknesses of the definition, it guides us with two important criteria to use to identify a destructive leader. The first is whether the leader's actions or inactions are detrimental or likely to be harmful to followers/subordinates, and the second is whether the fellow's actions or inactions are detrimental or likely to be harmful to the organization whose course they must promote (Black, 2015; Wooldridge, 2011).

This research focused on destructive leadership in a developing country because, although the phenomenon was undisputedly ubiquitous and had a global negative impact on the higher education (HE) sector, it was still an area underexplored, and the few studies on it focused attention predominantly on the HE context of the developed world (e.g. Aasland et al., 2010; in Norway; Erickson et al., 2015; in Australia; Klaus & Steele, 2020; in the US: Ryan, 2018, in Australia), and up to the time of conducting this research, it appeared the HE sector of the developing world had only one study conducted by Shishigu et al. (2015) using an Ethiopian context. Given that the developed and the developing worlds had socio-cultural differences (Branson et al., 2016), it was unclear whether the HE sector in the two worlds had comparable destructive leadership experiences. This paucity of information created a knowledge vacuum in the extant literature necessitating the current research to fill the gap using the HE context of Ghana. The motivation for choosing the context of Ghana stemmed from our experience of destructive leadership in one of the country's HE institutions which ignited our curiosity to find whether the phenomenon was pervasive in all other HE institutions. Based on the motivation, the research was conducted as an exploratory investigation to determine, from subordinate perceptions (i.e. lecturers, ancillary staff, and students), the prevalence

of underexplored destructive leadership behaviors, as noted by Shaw et al. (2011), among heads of department (or middle-level leaders) in Ghanaian higher education institutions (HEIs). It specifically sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among HoDs in Ghanaian HE, considering specific behaviors associated with generic management incompetence, political behaviors, bullying, personal behaviors, and managing subordinate performance?

RQ2: How different are subordinate perceptions of destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian public HEIs from those in private HEIs?

RQ3: What is the relationship between the statuses of subordinates (i.e. academic staff, non-academic staff, or students) and the perceived destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE?

RQ4: What is the relationship between key demographic variables (i.e. sex, age, and years of employment) and perceived destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE?

This research is necessary given that HE institutions in Ghana, and indeed those in the larger world, are currently confronted with increased marketization and global competition to attract local and international students and improve or maintain status in the world rankings of HE institutions (McCaffery, 2018). The prevalence of destructive leadership is likely to derail institutional efforts at meeting quality assurance standards to achieve fame and a positive reputation. The research is also significant because it is expected to reveal the need for further research on the issue in the country.

Perceptions about destructive leadership in higher education (HE)

The introductory section has already explained aspects of the leader's behaviors that may be considered destructive. Destructive leadership is a common phenomenon in every human institution, including HE (Erickson et al., 2015; Powers et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2021). Varied reasons have been ascribed as to why many people in leadership positions engage in behaviors that qualifies under the banner of destructive leadership. However, Erickson et al. (2015, p. 18) assert that the reasons have more to do with 'systemic issues rather than simply a small number of rogue individuals'. Quite often, organizational leaders engage in destructive behaviors because of the impression that it is not possible to use legitimate means to achieve personal goals such as career advancement, promotion, and financial gains (Ryan, 2018).

Furthermore, some leaders' evil and callous behaviors toward specific subordinates happens because they feel their positions are threatened by the subordinates whom they perceive are more qualified. This inferiority complex may push such leaders to do anything possible to eliminate the perceived contenders (Ryan, 2018). Again, leaders who show interest in negative information some subordinates give about others behave in a way that is not only harmful to their victims but detrimental to the course of the

organizations they serve (McCaffery, 2018). In addition, the lack of systems in place in most organizations to identify and eliminate destructive behaviors allows the phenomenon to fester (Erickson et al., 2015).

The last few decades have witnessed a growing interest in research on destructive leadership in organizations, perhaps because of the perceptions about its ruinous impact on subordinates and the entire organization. On the individual level, destructive leadership behaviors have been found to compel subordinates to exhibit negative attitudes toward leaders, including defiance. This situation makes it difficult for the leader to influence the work behaviors of the subordinates needed to help the organization achieve its mission and vision (Erickson et al., 2015; Pawlowska et al., 2010). Destructive leadership has been blamed for employees' anger, bitterness, and frustration (Erickson et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Such negative emotions of subordinates cause psychological stress, including low morale and motivation for work leading to a high likelihood of absenteeism, tardiness, and attrition in most worse cases (Erickson et al., 2015; Green, 2014; Shaw et al., 2014). Destructive leadership has also been noted for causing distrust, cronyism, nepotism, and negative political climate among employees (Aasland et al., 2010; Erickson et al., 2015). In addition, for fear of being punished disproportionately, employees working under destructive leadership climates mostly avoid risk-taking even if it will result in positive outcomes (Erickson et al., 2015). The combined effect of destructive leadership on employees has a ripple effect on the organization because of the lack of efficient use of time and the high cost of replacing employees who leave. Again, it is perceived that the prevalence of destructive leadership in an organization also makes it difficult for the organization to attract and recruit new employees and develop a performance appraisal for them (Erickson et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2014). However, Klaus and Steele (2020) examined whether the demographic background of employee subordinates correlated with their perceptions of destructive leadership behaviors of supervisors. The study found that key variables such as highest level of education, age, employment status, and the number of years working with supervisors were not significantly associated with their perceptions of supervisors' destructive leadership behaviors.

Theoretical framework: the theory of dysergy (ToD)

The Theory of Dysergy (ToD) informed this study. The term 'dysergy' was first proposed by Ryan et al. (2021) as a framework to understand the prevalence of destructive leadership in organizations. Ryan et al. describe dysergy as the opposite of synergy, which refers to a whole being more than the sum of its constituents. In a synergistic organization, the combined interactions of people create a system whose effect is greater than the effect that would have resulted from summing individual effects – a situation Ryan et al. describe as emergence. However, in a dysergistic organization, because the whole is lesser than the sum of its parts, the reverse occurs, giving rise to 'a fractured and weakened culture of subverted and perverted norms in which individuals may feel devalued and unable to thrive personally and professionally' (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 75). Arguing from a dysergistic theoretical perspective, the notion of dysergy constructs the whole as a curtailment, thus losing the status of being 'more' than the total of its units.

Dysergistic leadership within the education sector negates the overarching goal of education to encourage high performance based on moral principles (Ryan et al., 2021). It, instead, creates an environment where education institutions fail to serve the best interests of individuals within them (Ryan et al., 2021). Dysergistic environments promote leaders' self-interests and personal well-being instead of working in synergy with subordinates to avoidable conflicts and substandard performance that ultimately undermine an organization's broader interest (Ryan et al., 2021). Framing this research around a dysergistic theoretical framework was apt because it affords the opportunity to critically analyze the leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE from a dysergistic perspective. The analysis is necessary because of Ryan et al.'s argument that dysergistic mind-sets of educational leaders often engender 'negative empowerment and undesirable goal displacement' (p. 75).

Methods

This exploratory study was based on the quantitative cross-sectional survey design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The approach and design align with the post-positivist philosophy of research which emphasizes objectivity and universal reality in conducting research. The philosophy, however, debunks the notion of absolute certainty because of the tendency of researchers' values and knowledge to influence their observations (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The sample was broad and heterogeneous, comprising academic and non-academic staff as well as students from all 180 HEIs across Ghana (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2021) because of the intention to collect and analyze diverse opinions on the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among heads of department (middle leaders) in the Ghanaian HE context. Given the diverse nature of the participants, the research was conducted without a specific criterion for sampling institutions and subsequent selection of participants. All HEIs in Ghana were therefore considered study sites, and all academic and non-academic staff and students at the time of conducting the research qualified as participants subject to availability and willingness to participate. Participants were contacted via institutional e-mail listservs created by staff and student associations. Taking into consideration the huge number of memberships of the associations, it was projected that invitations would be sent to over 22,000 recipients thus, making it possible to perhaps generalize to the entire population of academic and non-academic staff and students in HEIs in Ghana.

The instrument used for data collection was a modified version of the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ) created by Shaw et al. (2011), which was later improved upon by Klaus and Steele (2020) to guarantee a more precise measurement of destructive leadership behaviors. The new version is based on factor analysis of 22 behaviors items examined under five classifications of destructive leadership – generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, personal behaviors, and bullying (Klaus & Steele, 2020) (see Table 1). As done by Klaus and Steele (2020), we also included five demographic items in the version we used in Ghana. We, however, used the five-point Likert scale instead of the six used by the authors because the evidence in the literature suggested that the five-point scale was simpler to use (Bouranta et al., 2009). The scale was in the following order: Strongly Disagree-1; Disagree-2; Don't Know-3; Agree-4; and Strongly Agree-5. Klaus and Steele's version

Table 1. Categories and corresponding behaviors of destructive leadership.

Category	Corresponding Destructive Leader Behaviors
Generic Management Incompetence	Make significant decisions without information Ineffective at negotiation Unable to deal with new technology and change Ineffective at coordinating and managing Fail to seek appropriate information Act in an insular manner Communicate ineffectively Exhibit a lack of skills to do their job Unable to prioritize and delegate Unable to understand a long-term view Unable to make an appropriate decision
Managing Subordinate Performance	Micro-manage and over-control Unclear about expectations Unable to develop and motivate subordinates
Political Behaviors	Play favorites Tell people only what they wanted to hear
Personal Behaviors	Lie or engage in other unethical behaviors Act inappropriately in interpersonal situations Engage in behaviors that reduce their credibility Exhibit inconsistent and erratic behaviors Unwilling to change their mind
Bullying	Act in a brutal or bullying manner

we adopted has yielded an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.98, and the reliability for each of the sub-scales, or categories of destructive behaviors ranged from .724 to .968. However, the instrument was subjected to a further reliability test to ascertain its suitability for the Ghanaian context because of the socio-cultural differences between the contexts of the two research studies. The results of the reliability test for the Ghanaian context showed an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.98, and the reliability for each of the sub-scales, or categories of destructive behaviors ranged from 0.712 to 0.978.

The researchers and four research assistants used approximately eight months to complete the data collection exercise. To ensure ethical compliance, the researchers applied and obtained ethical clearance from one of the universities' ethical committee for the humanities before commencing the fieldwork. Participation in the research was also voluntary, and withdrawal was possible at any stage. The participants' anonymity was ensured by concealing their identities. At the end of the data collection exercise, 1,123 recipients took part in the research. However, 546 respondents completed the instrument in its entirety, and only the data from these respondents were analyzed.

While we do not intend to assert that our sample was representative of any of the cohorts of subordinates, we argue that the ratings of middle leaders in Ghanaian HEIs by the respondents depict the prevalence of destructive leadership in Ghanaian HEIs in contemporary times. Of the 546 respondents, 263 (48.2%) were males and 283 (51.8%) were females. The respondents' average age ranged between 30 and 59 years. Among them, 38.8% identified themselves as students, while approximately 30.6 percent declared their status as academic staff. Another 30.6 percent disclosed that they were non-academic staff such as department secretaries, drivers, and cleaners. Furthermore, about three-quarters of respondents (73.8%) identified themselves as staff or students of public universities, while 26 percent (269) came from private/independent universities. The participants' length of service ranged between nine months and 30 years.

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Simple descriptive statistics were used for the univariate and ANOVA and Independent Samples *t*-test were used for the mean comparison of destructive behaviors analyses based on working status, type of institution and other demographic variables

Results

RQ1: What is the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among HoDs in Ghanaian HE, considering specific behaviors associated with generic management incompetence, political behaviors, bullying, personal behaviors, and managing subordinate performance?

To answer this question, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the 22 items measuring the destructive behaviors of leaders. This was measured on a five-point Likert scale, with two extremes being 1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree. The results of the composite mean ratings are presented in [Table 2](#). The overall mean score recorded was 3.80 (SD = 0.43), suggesting that respondents perceived their HoDs as destructive.

In terms of the generic management incompetence of HoDs, a mean score of 3.83 (SD = 0.37) was recorded, suggesting that respondents agreed with the view that their HoDs exhibited the behaviors at work. This is also reflected in the mean ratings for the individual items measuring generic management incompetence (see [Table 2](#)).

Similarly, the results show that based on managing subordinate performance, HoDs somewhat demonstrated destructive behaviors ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.69$). For example, respondents somewhat agreed with the view that their HODs are unable to develop and motivate subordinates ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.02$) and micro-managed and over-controlled their subordinates ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.24$).

The data further reveal that when respondents were asked to indicate the destructive leadership behaviors of their HODs based on political behaviors, the mean score obtained from their responses was ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.78$), implying that they agreed with the view that their HODs were destructive in terms of their political behaviors. For example, respondents agreed that their HoDs told people only what they wanted to hear ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.78$).

Regarding the personal behaviors of HoDs, a mean score of 4.01 (SD = 0.57) was recorded, giving the impression that respondents perceived HoDs to be destructive. For instance, respondents agreed that their HODs acted inappropriately in interpersonal situations ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.94$) and engaged in behaviors that negatively affected their credibility ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.95$). Another important result shown in [Table 2](#) is that respondents, on average, agreed ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.18$) that their HODs exhibited destructive leadership behaviors such as bullying.

RQ2: How different are subordinate perceptions of destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian public HEIs from those in private HEIs?

To understand how similar or different subordinates' perceptions were about the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among HoDs in Ghanaian public and private HEIs, an independent samples *t*-test was used to examine the mean difference

Table 2. Respondents' mean scores for destructive behaviors of HODs.

Behaviors Category	HOD Behaviors	Mean	SD
Generic management incompetence Mean (3.83) SD (0.37)	My Head of Department makes significant decisions without information	3.96	0.83
	My Head of Department is ineffective at negotiation	4.07	0.50
	My Head of Department is unable to deal with new technology and change	3.96	0.60
	My Head of Department is ineffective at coordination and management	3.95	0.70
	My Head of Department fails to seek appropriate information	4.01	0.61
	My Head of Department acts in an insular manner	3.58	1.07
	My Head of Department communicates ineffectively	4.01	0.71
	My Head of Department exhibits a lack of skills to do their job	3.72	1.11
	My Head of Department is unable to prioritize and delegate	3.76	0.89
	My Head of Department is unable to understand a long-term view	3.62	1.07
Managing subordinate performance Mean (3.68) SD (0.69)	My Head of Department is unable to make an appropriate decision	3.52	1.22
	My Head of Department micro-manages and over-controls	3.63	1.24
	My Head of Department is unclear about expectations	3.55	1.26
Political Behaviors Mean (3.85) SD (0.78)	My Head of Department is unable to develop and motivate subordinates	3.86	1.02
	My Head of Department plays favorites	3.80	1.30
Personal behaviors Mean (4.01) SD (0.57)	My Head of Department tells people only what they want to hear	3.91	1.04
	My Head of Department lies or engages in other unethical behaviors	3.95	1.23
	My Head of Department acts inappropriately in interpersonal situations	4.01	0.94
	My Head of Department engages in behaviors that reduce their credibility	4.17	0.95
Bullying Mean (4.04) SD (0.98)	My Head of Department exhibits inconsistent and erratic behaviors	3.98	1.16
	My Head of Department is unwilling to change his/her mind	3.95	0.87
	My Head of Department acts in a brutal or bullying manner	4.04	0.98
Overall destructive leadership behaviors Mean (3.80) SD (0.43)			

among the various categories of destructive behaviors across the two types of HEIs. The results in [Table 3](#) show that the generic management incompetence behaviors of HODs significantly varied in terms of the type of institution ($t = > -3.26, p = 0.001$). Respondents from private or independent HEIs ($M = 3.92, SD = 0.79$), for example, recorded higher mean scores compared to those from public HEIs ($M = 3.80, SD = 0.41$).

With regards to HoDs' management of subordinate performance, the results in [Table 3](#) show that type of institution has a significant association with how HODs managed their subordinates' performance ($t = > -9.80, p = 0.001$). Again, higher mean scores were relatively recorded among respondents from private HEIs ($M = 4.01, SD = 0.32$) than their colleagues from public HEIs institutions ($M = 3.56, SD = 0.75$).

Also, there were statistically significant differences in mean scores recorded between personal behaviors as a destructive leadership behaviors and institution type ($t = 6.43, p = 0.001$). Respondents from public HEIs relatively recorded higher mean scores ($M = 4.10, SD = 0.57$) than those from private institutions ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.50$), suggesting subordinates' perceptions of HoDs' destructive leadership behaviors were higher in public HEIs than in public HEIs. Regarding bullying as destructive behaviors, the results show that respondents from public HEIs recorded higher mean scores ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.12$) compared to those from private HEIs ($M = 3.58, SD = 1.19$), and this explains why there was

Table 3. Independent samples *T*-test comparing means of destructive leadership behaviors of HODs based on the type of institution.

Behaviors Category	Type of Institution	N	Mean	SD	Independent Samples Test	
					Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means
Generic management incompetence	Public	403	3.80	.41	F = 49.15, $p = 0.001$	t = -3.26, $p = 0.001$
	Private/independent	143	3.92	.19		
Managing subordinate performance	Public	403	3.56	.75	F = 153.8 $p = 0.001$	t = -9.80, $p = 0.0001$
	Private/independent	143	4.01	.32		
Political	Public	403	3.88	.78	F = .292, $p = 0.59$	t = 1.22, $p = 0.22$
	Private/independent	143	3.78	.80		
Personal Behaviors	Public	403	4.10	.57	F = 7.63, $p = 0.006$	t = 6.43, $p = 0.001$
	Private/independent	143	3.77	.50		
Bullying	Public	403	4.06	1.14	F = 114.7, $p = 0.0001$	t = 1.21, $p = 0.23$
	Private/independent	143	3.99	.08		

a statistically significant association between the two variables ($p < 0.05$). Conversely, the mean differences in perceived destructive leadership of HODs associated with the political behaviors of HoDs ($p > 0.05$) were not significantly associated with the type of institution.

RQ3: What is the relationship between the statuses of subordinates (i.e., academic staff, non-academic staff, or students) and the perceived destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE?

A one-way ANOVA was used to compute the mean differences (see Table 4). The results indicate that the mean difference in HoDs' destructive leadership in terms of generic management incompetence ($p < 0.01$), managing of subordinate performance ($p < 0.01$) political ($p < 0.01$), and political behaviors ($p < 0.01$) and bullying ($p < 0.01$) significantly varied with the statuses of respondents. Given that there were statistically significant relationships between the various categories of destructive behaviors and subordinates' statuses, a posthoc pairwise comparison was computed using Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) (see Table 5).

The results show that, in terms of generic management incompetence, there is a statistically significant difference in destructive leadership behaviors by HoDs reported by academic staff ($p < 0.05$) and non-academic staff ($p < 0.05$) and among students ($p > 0.05$). In terms of managing subordinate performance, there was no significant association between how students and academic staff perceived this as a destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs ($p > 0.05$). Also, statistically significant variations in mean scores were reported across the various subordinate statuses of respondents when the destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs associated with bullying was examined using Fisher's LSD (see Table 5). For example, Table 4 shows that generally, non-academic staff's responses produced the highest mean score compared to those of academic staff and students across the various dimensions associated with destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs.

RQ4: What is the relationship between key demographic variables (i.e., sex, age, and years of employment) and perceived destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE?

Table 4. Comparison of means of destructive leadership behaviors of HODs based on subordinates' statuses using ANOVA.

Behaviors Category	Working Status	N	Mean	SD	ANOVA
Generic management incompetence	Academic staff	167	3.72	0.27	F(1, 544) = 10.60, p = 0.0001
	Non-academic staff	167	3.94	0.24	
	Student	212	3.84	0.47	
Managing subordinate performance	Academic staff	167	3.44	0.80	F(1, 544) = 48.47, p = 0.0001
	Non-academic staff	167	4.13	0.37	
	Student	212	3.51	0.62	
Political behaviors	Academic staff	167	3.74	0.93	F(1, 544) = 1.52, p = 0.218
	Non-academic staff	167	3.94	0.67	
	Student	212	3.87	0.73	
Personal Behaviors	Academic staff	167	4.05	0.66	F(1, 544) = 36.34, p = 0.0001
	Non-academic staff	167	4.09	0.44	
	Student	212	3.91	0.58	
Bullying	Academic staff	167	4.05	1.28	F(1, 544) = .524, p = 0.470
	Non-academic staff	167	4.14	0.74	
	Student	212	3.97	0.86	

Table 5. Post-Hoc analysis of destructive leadership behaviors based on subordinate statuses.

Dimensions	Subordinate status	Subordinate status	Mean Difference	P value
Generic management incompetence	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	-22*	.000
		Student	-0.12*	.001
	Non-academic staff	Academic staff	.22*	.000
		Student	.11*	.004
	Student	Academic staff	.12*	.001
		Non-academic staff	-0.11*	.004
Managing subordinate performance	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	-0.69*	.000
		Student	-.070	.268
	Non-academic staff	Academic staff	.69*	.000
		Student	.62*	.000
	Student	Academic staff	.07	.268
		Non-academic staff	-0.62*	.000
Political behaviors	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	-0.21*	.013
		Student	-. 13,140	.104
	Non-academic staff	Academic staff	.21*	.013
		Student	.08	.315
	Student	Academic staff	.13	.104
		Non-academic staff	-.08	.315
Personal Behaviors	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	-.045	.463
		Student	.14*	.019
	Non-academic staff	Academic staff	.05	.463
		Student	.18*	.002
	Student	Academic staff	-0.14*	.019
		Non-academic staff	-0.18*	.002
Bullying	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	-.09	.402
		Student	.08	.425
	Non-academic staff	Academic staff	.09	.402
		Student	.17	.092
	Student	Academic staff	-.08	.425

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 6 shows the comparison of mean scores of the various destructive leadership behaviors based on the sex, age, and years of employment of respondents. Independent samples *t*-test and ANOVA were used to determine the significant differences in mean scores across the various key demographic variables. The results show that, except for generic management incompetence, sex significantly varied with the various dimensions of destructive leadership behaviors. For instance, although both males and females

generally agreed that the various dimensions of HoD destructive leadership behaviors existed, males recorded higher mean scores in terms of perceived HoDs destructive leadership behaviors associated with managing subordinate performance ($M = 3.85$ vs 3.52), political behaviors ($M = 4.00$ vs 3.71), personal behaviors ($M = 4.05$ vs 3.98) and bullying ($M = 4.21$ vs 3.89).

From the data, age significantly varied with the destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs associated with generic management incompetence ($P < 0.01$), managing subordinate performance ($P < 0.01$), political behaviors ($P < 0.01$), and personal behaviors ($P < 0.01$) and bullying ($P < 0.01$). Whereas respondents above 50 years were somewhat undecided ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.65$) that HoDs were destructive in terms of managing subordinate performance, those across the various age cohorts indicated that the HoDs were destructive (see Table 6). Compared with the other age cohorts, respondents who were between the ages of 41 and 45 years recorded a higher mean score ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.34$) when asked to rate the destructive leadership behaviors associated with their HoDs personal behaviors. Also, though respondents within the various age cohorts generally agreed that HoDs were destructive in terms of bullying, those above 50 years relatively recorded a low mean score ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.89$) compared with those below 50 years.

There was no significant mean difference between years of employment and perceived destructive leadership behaviors associated with the political behaviors of HoDs ($p > 0.05$) and bullying ($p > 0.05$). However, perceived destructive leadership behaviors associated with generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, and personal behaviors of HoDs significantly varied with respondents' years of employment. For example, respondents who had worked for 21–30 years recorded higher mean scores based on their perceptions regarding the destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.25$) and generic management incompetence ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.76$).

Discussion

This research primarily examined how subordinates in HEIs in Ghana perceived the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among HoDs in Ghanaian HE. The study found that, generally, respondents perceived that their HoDs exhibited destructive

Table 6. Comparison of destructive leadership behaviors and respondents' key demographic variables.

Background characteristics		N	Generic management incompetence	Managing subordinate performance	Political behaviors	Personal behaviors	Bullying
Sex	Male	263	3.85 (0.27)	3.85 (0.72)**	4.00 (0.59)**	4.05 (0.58)	4.21 (0.96)**
	Female	283	3.81 (0.44)	3.52 (0.63)**	3.71 (0.90)**	3.98 (0.56)	3.89 (0.98)**
Age	30-35	119	3.77 (0.27)**	3.69 (0.62)**	3.63 (0.81)**	3.71 (0.49)**	4.04 (1.05)**
	36-40	73	4.07 (0.29)**	3.61 (0.81)**	4.29 (0.66)**	4.09 (0.54)**	4.34 (1.11)**
	41-45	71	3.88 (0.23)**	4.33 (0.61)**	3.99 (0.52)**	4.68 (0.34)**	4.34 (0.48)**
	46-50	119	3.86 (0.57)**	3.60 (0.55)**	3.90 (0.77)**	4.05 (0.49)**	4.03 (1.07)**
	Above 50	164	3.73 (0.25)**	3.48 (0.65)**	3.73 (0.83)**	3.88 (0.53)**	3.80 (0.89)**
Years of Employment	0-10	190	3.79 (0.25)**	3.93 (0.69)**	3.77 (0.73)	4.06 (0.65)**	4.15 (0.89)
	11-20	72	3.84 (0.23)**	3.28 (0.63)**	3.86 (0.81)	3.90 (0.47)**	3.83 (1.53)
	21-30	72	4.19 (0.76)**	3.91 (0.60)**	4.03 (0.99)	4.28 (0.25)**	4.19 (0.76)

***The mean difference is significant at the 0.01 level.

leadership behaviors. Specifically, respondents perceived that HoDs were destructive based on their generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, personal behaviors, political behaviors, and bullying. It is necessary to highlight this finding because although it affirms the results of many earlier studies such as Green (2014), Hollis (2015), Mourssi-Alfash (2014), and Ryan (2018), it opposes a most recent study by Klaus and Steele (2020) using a US context.

Again, from a dysergistic theoretical perspective, the finding suggests that the institutions where the research took place were a whole that was lesser than the sum of its parts (see the section on the theoretical framework). Assuming this was the case, it means the HoDs were likely to fail in their leadership obligation to serve the best interests of their subordinates. In Ryan et al.'s (2021) view, such leaders tend to promote self-interests and personal well-being, relegating to the background synergistic working relationships with subordinates that could inure to their collective good. Ryan et al. describe such a situation as a reversal of emergency. If an organization fails to encourage emergency, subordinates may feel discredited and unappreciated—a situation that does not make them flourish in their occupation (Ryan et al., 2021).

Analyzing aspects of the data based on private and public HEIs is noteworthy given the fact that both operate within different governance structures, and the situation could occasion the existence of destructive behaviors. Again, because private HEIs in the country are predominantly profit-driven, they often focus on high work turnout than employees' welfare (Armah, 2017). However, considering that the goal is profit maximization, the customers' (in this case, the students) views on destructive behaviors may vary since they are considered junior members of the university community. This phenomenon could also exist in public HEIs; however, in most cases, the reverse rather exists, especially where non-academic staff and students bear the brunt of the destructive leadership behaviors of their HoDs. For example, the results show that the type of institution significantly varied with destructive leadership behaviors associated with generic management incompetence. The results also show that respondents from private HEIs recorded higher mean scores than their colleagues from public HEIs when examining destructive leadership behavior associated with managing subordinates' performance. This outcome suggests that although HoDs in both private and public HEIs were largely thought to be destructive in managing subordinate performance, the perception was higher in the former than in the latter. The situation was so probably because the public HEIs had instituted more effective systems to identify and eradicate leadership behaviors that are inimical to their growth and development, as noted by Erickson et al. (2015). Addressing the issue of destructive leadership in HE is important because aspects of the literature note that it discourages new employees from seeking to join affected institutions (Green, 2014; Shaw et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it is clear from the results that destructive leadership behaviors associated with bullying significantly varied among private and public HEIs. Again, higher mean scores were recorded among respondents from public HEIs than among their colleagues from private HEIs. Bullying could stymie effective collaboration and teamwork within such institutions and further derail the progress of the department and the institution as a whole (Aasland et al., 2010; Erickson et al., 2015). According to Armah (2017), unilateral decision-making is more associated with middle leaders in public HEIs in Ghana than those in the private sector. They do so without recourse to followers, and

bullying is often used as a tool to stifle dissenting views. Therefore, it is not surprising that this current study uncovered that bullying significantly varied among private and public HEIs.

Using subordinates' statuses to explore the HoDs' destructive leadership behavior in the Ghanaian HE system gives a better picture of the nature of the phenomenon, as experienced by different categories of subordinates. The study shows that subordinates' statuses significantly varied with the destructive leadership associated with generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, and bullying. The study further reveals that, compared to the other statuses of subordinates, non-academic staff recorded higher mean scores across all the various dimensions of destructive leadership. This finding is noteworthy as it highlights how different categories of subordinates perceived the phenomenon based on personal experiences. For example, although all the categories of subordinates agreed that their HoDs were bullies, the non-academic staff cohort strongly agreed that HoDs exhibited that behaviors. This finding is interesting because HoDs in Ghanaian HE are part of the academic staff and selected from that cohort. Therefore, the non-academic staff presumably cannot be 'threats' to HoDs as they do not aspire to occupy their position. This assertion is corroborated by Ryan (2018), who argues that some leaders behave negatively toward specific subordinates because of the fear that they may lose their positions to the subordinates whom they perceive are more qualified.

Another notable finding of this study was that gender of subordinates significantly varied with the perceived prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors. Compared with previous studies, this aspect of the results affirms Klaus and Steele's (2020) finding on gender. It, however, contradicts Thrash's (2012) and Sypawka's (2008) earlier findings on the same variable. Given that males recorded higher mean scores than females, it probably means that more males might have either witnessed or directly experienced these destructive leadership behaviors than females.

Age also significantly varied with the perceived pervasiveness of destructive leadership behaviors. This shows that the age of subordinates plays a crucial role in how they perceive the leadership behaviors of leaders. This revelation appears to buttress an old Ghanaian adage that the older people are, the more experiences in life teach them to tolerate and endure the negative behaviors of others. Furthermore, years of employment significantly varied with the perceived prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors, suggesting that the longer subordinates stay in the Ghanaian HE system, the more likely they are to experience the phenomenon of destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs.

Conclusion and recommendation for future research

This research examined destructive leadership behavior among heads of departments (or middle-level leaders) in HEIs in Ghana. It also compared the differences in subordinates' experiences of destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs between public and private HEIs in the country. Furthermore, the research examined the association between working statuses of subordinates and the prevalence of specific categories of behaviors associated with HoDs' generic management incompetence, political behaviors, bullying, personal behaviors, and managing subordinate performance in Ghanaian HE. Lastly, it assessed the association between demographic variables such

as sex, age, and years of employment and the perceived prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors associated with HoDs' generic management incompetence, political behaviors, bullying, personal behaviors, and managing subordinate performance in Ghanaian HE. The research found that generally, although subordinates thought the behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HE was destructive, the perceptions varied significantly according to the type of institution. Also, subordinates' statuses and demographics had a significant association with how they perceived the destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs. Besides, gender, age, and subordinates' years of employment significantly varied with the perceived prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors of HoDs in Ghanaian HEIs.

The findings have implications for policy and practice in global HE because no matter how minimal destructive leadership is, it can be detrimental to institutional growth and development. The prevalence of destructive leadership is likely to ruin the efforts of stakeholders to meet quality assurance standards within these institutions and achieve positive results. Within the governance structure of the HE system, there is the need to institute measures to address the menace of destructive leadership. In particular, the private and public dichotomy in the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to dealing with the phenomenon of destructive leaders in HE.

Principally, the major limitation of this research is its adoption of only the quantitative approach in exploring destructive leadership behaviors in Ghanaian HEIs. This constraint does not provide an in-depth appreciation of why destructive leadership behaviors exist and how they affect HE, especially in the Ghanaian context. Therefore, future research may adopt the mixed method approach so that through individual interviews, the qualitative aspect may explore the reasons working statuses of subordinates significantly vary with middle leaders' destructive leadership behaviors associated with generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, personal behaviors, political behaviors, and bullying.

Disclosure statement

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

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