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TOXIC LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF MACHIAVELLIANISM – A PILOT STUDY AMONG WORKING STUDENTS

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to examine the phenomenon of toxic leadership through the lens of Machiavellianism and to investigate how Machiavellian-oriented behaviors are manifested and perceived within organizations operating in Poland.
Design/methodology/approach: A pilot study was conducted among 128 working students. The research employed a survey method using a questionnaire that included a Machiavellian leadership scale. This approach enabled the analysis of both managers' self-assessments and employees' perceptions of these behaviors.
Findings: The results indicate that toxic tendencies rooted in Machiavellianism occur at a moderate level; however, their intensity varies across specific dimensions of the construct and depending on the respondents' perspective.
Research limitations/implications: The study was pilot in nature and involved a limited, specific group of respondents, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand the sample and incorporate additional qualitative methods to deepen the analysis.
Practical implications: The findings may serve as a valuable source of insight for organizations in identifying subtle manifestations of toxic leadership. Understanding the mechanisms of Machiavellian leadership may contribute to fostering healthier workplace relationships, improving employee well-being, and promoting more ethical management standards.
Originality/value: The article contributes a novel perspective to the study of toxic leadership by linking it with the concept of Machiavellianism and highlighting differences in its perception from the viewpoints of managers and employees.
Keywords: toxic, Machiavellian, leadership.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Leadership is widely recognized as a fundamental force shaping employees' attitudes, behaviors, and overall functioning within organizations. For decades, leadership research has predominantly focused on identifying styles and behaviors associated with effectiveness, ethical conduct, and organizational success. Consequently, the mainstream literature has emphasized constructive leadership approaches and their beneficial outcomes for employees and organizations alike.

More recently, however, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the darker side of leadership, seeking to understand dysfunctional, unethical, and destructive leader behaviors and their consequences (Büyükyılmaz, Kara, 2024), which are far from a marginal phenomenon. Early estimates indicated that nearly three out of ten leaders may exhibit toxic leadership patterns (Veldsman, 2012), while later findings revealed that up to 56% of employees reported working under leaders whose behavior contributed to an unhealthy work environment (Lazarczyk, 2017).

The growing scholarly interest in toxic leadership stems from its profound and wide-ranging negative consequences. Destructive leader behaviors have been shown to undermine employee loyalty, motivation, productivity, health, and overall well-being (Kilic, Gunsel, 2019; Labrague et al., 2021), job satisfaction and work motivation (Labrague et al., 2021; Wolor et al., 2022), psychological well-being (Kilic, Gunsel, 2019), organizational commitment (Kilic, Gunsel, 2019; Brouwers, Paltu, 2020; Eris, Arun, 2020), organizational citizenship behavior (Behery et al., 2018), individual and organizational performance (Kilic, Gunsel, 2019), as well as increased turnover intentions (Hattab et al., 2022). These findings position toxic leadership as a critical organizational risk factor rather than an isolated leadership failure.

Despite the expanding international body of literature, research on toxic leadership remains unevenly distributed across cultural and national contexts. Most empirical studies are conducted in Anglo-Saxon or non-European settings, while research situated in Central and Eastern Europe - and particularly in Polish organizations - remains limited. Leadership behaviors perceived as toxic may be shaped by national culture, organizational norms, historical legacies, and value systems, yet these contextual determinants are rarely incorporated into empirical models. Another underexplored issue is the discrepancy between leaders' self-perceptions and employees' evaluations of leader behavior. International studies suggest that toxic leaders often lack self-awareness, but empirical evidence comparing self-assessments and subordinate perceptions remains scarce - particularly in Poland. Moreover, demographic factors such as gender and age, which may influence both the manifestation and perception of toxic behaviors, have received limited systematic attention in prior research (Gupta, Chawla, 2024).

In response to these gaps, this study addresses the following research questions: What is the prevalence and intensity of toxic leadership behaviors in Polish organizations? To what extent do leaders' self-assessments of toxic leadership differ from employees' evaluations of their leaders' behaviors? Are there significant differences in the manifestation of toxic leadership behaviors with respect to leaders' gender and age? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on toxic leadership and to provide empirically grounded insights relevant to the Polish organizational context.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the theoretical foundations and key conceptualizations of toxic leadership. The second section presents the research methodology, including the sample and measurement instruments. The third section reports the empirical findings. The fourth section discusses the results, and finally, the article concludes with implications for theory and practice, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

2. Literature background

The term toxic has been widely used in the leadership literature to describe a broad range of dysfunctional, destructive, and harmful leader behaviors. Toxic leadership is an umbrella concept encompassing many "bad" leadership styles, such as abusive supervision, destructive leadership, exploitative leadership, despotic leadership, narcissistic leadership, pseudo-transformational leadership, authoritarian leadership, and unethical leadership (Rhodesly et al., 2025). Although the concept is frequently invoked, its meaning varies across studies, reflecting different theoretical perspectives and levels of analysis. Toxic leadership can be viewed as a multidimensional construct. As a result, scholars have proposed multiple definitions of toxic leadership that emphasize personality traits, behavioral patterns, intentionality, and organizational consequences. The following analysis synthesizes key definitions from the literature to clarify the core attributes and dimensions of toxic leadership.

Scholarly literature conceptualizes toxic leadership through a recurring set of destructive personality traits exhibited by leaders. Researchers emphasize characteristics such as an egoistic attitude, a strong self-centered orientation, aggressiveness, despotism, poor temperament, and the sustained display of hostility and obstructive behavior toward followers, all of which fall within the scope of toxic leadership (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Whicker (1996) highlights personality-related determinants of toxic leaders, such as maliciousness, manipulativeness, narcissistic self-focus, and a tendency to demean others. In this perspective, toxic leaders not only prioritize their own interests but also systematically undermine the work environment through negative and harmful interactions with subordinates. The literature also highlights traits

such as unfaithfulness, neuroticism, and persistent aggressive behavior as further components that intensify the destructive nature of toxic leadership (Badar et al., 2023).

Toxic leadership can be understood as a persistent pattern of destructive leadership behaviors that exert a harmful impact on both employees and organizational functioning. In general terms, a toxic leader may be described as "a manager who bullies, threatens, and shouts" (Reed, 2004), though contemporary research emphasizes that toxicity extends beyond isolated behaviors to form a coherent and identifiable pattern. Wilson-Starks (2003) conceptualizes toxic leadership as a process of "poisoning" the organization through excessive control that suppresses autonomy, creativity, and innovation, while Reed (2004) emphasizes that toxicity often results from the cumulative effect of demotivating behaviors that gradually deteriorate organizational climate. Toxic leadership is widely defined as a form of negative or ineffective leadership in which a leader engages in systematic and persistent destructive behaviors that can harm both employees and the organization (Webster et al., 2016). Schmidt (2008) associates five personality traits with toxic leadership behaviors: self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, authoritarianism. Authoritarian leadership, in particular, involves attempts to exert excessive authority and control over subordinates to the extent that leaders seek to dominate all aspects of work processes (Dobbs, 2014; Schmidt, 2014).

Toxic leadership is characterized not only by the presence of destructive behaviors but also by their intentional and enduring nature, which clearly differentiates toxic leaders from those whose harmful impact may be inadvertent (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Erickson et al. (2015) argued that leadership behavior can be classified as toxic only when it is intentional, consistently patterned, and sustained over an extended period of time. This emphasis on intentionality underscores that toxic leadership is not accidental but reflects a deliberate and persistent pattern of harmful conduct toward followers. However, research shows that although the intentions of toxic leaders may be relatively less harmful, their behaviors can still be detrimental to the organization (Milosevic et al., 2020).

Toxic leadership processes are broadly understood as patterns of destructive consequences that produce serious and long-lasting harm to individuals and organizations, and even to wider social systems (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). At the individual level, exposure to toxic leadership has been consistently associated with adverse job-related outcomes, including reduced job satisfaction and engagement, withdrawal behaviors, diminished performance, lower motivation, poor morale, absenteeism, and turnover intentions (Hadadian, Sayadpour, 2018; Morris Jr, 2019). At the organizational level, toxic leadership contributes to deteriorating work conditions, quality problems, and compromised safety standards (Smith, Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Zaabi et al., 2018). Moreover, such leadership can shape and reinforce a toxic organizational culture, creating an environment in which similarly destructive leaders are more likely to emerge over time (Erickson et al., 2015; Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

The literature portrays toxic leadership as a multidimensional construct encompassing a wide range of behavioral and personal characteristics and their influence on employees and organizations. Padilla et al. (2007) argue that toxic leadership should be recognized as a distinct constellation of destructive traits and behaviors that predictably and deliberately harm subordinates. Another research emphasises negative behaviors, such as micromanagement, bullying, jealousy, narcissism, unethical conduct, unfair treatment, and incompetence (Magwenzi, 2018). Expanding this view, Lipman-Blumen (2005) proposes a multidimensional framework for understanding toxic leaders, highlighting the intentionality and intensity of their toxicity as well as the various forms of destructive behavior and dysfunctional personal qualities they exhibit.

The above analysis of the presented approaches reveals several shared elements of toxic leadership, including the abuse of power, excessive control, narcissistic self-orientation, and a consistently negative impact on subordinate morale and organizational climate. While some approaches emphasize personality traits and intentionality (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla et al., 2007; Whicker, 1996), others focus on behavioral patterns, cumulative effects, and structural mechanisms of control (Dobbs, 2014; Reed, 2004; Schmidt, 2014; Wilson-Starks, 2003). These differences underscore that toxic leadership is not a single behavior but a complex, multidimensional construct that requires an integrated perspective encompassing individual characteristics, leader-follower interactions, and organizational context.

3. Research methods

The study followed a quantitative research approach and was designed as a pilot study conducted on a small research sample. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire survey, which allowed for the standardized measurement of respondents' perceptions and traits. The primary aim of the pilot was to provide preliminary insights before large-scale data collection. A non-probability sampling strategy combining purposive and convenience sampling was applied. The research sample consisted of 128 respondents, all of whom were university students. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adult, full-time working students, ensuring that respondents had direct experience of organizational contexts and leadership practices (Tab. 1). Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary, and all participants provided their informed consent prior to taking part.

The study employed measurement instruments consistent with the scale proposed by Dahling et al. (2009). The scale was measured as a multidimensional construct of Machiavellian leadership, encompassing amoral manipulation, a desire for status, a desire for control, and distrust of others. The individual items of the constructs were adapted according to the respondent type - for managers, for example, phrased as "I am willing…," and for employees

as "My manager is willing…". The items were operationalized using a Likert-type response format. The selected scale has demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties in prior research (Dahling et al., 2009).

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	N = 128	%
Age	18-25 years	59	46%
	26-35 years	56	44%
	36-50 years	13	10%
Gender	Female	59	46%
	Male	69	54%
Job experience	Less than 1 year	7	6%
	1-3 years	49	38%
	4-10 years	53	41%
	11-20 years	13	10%
	more than 20 years	6	5%
Position	Non-managerial employee	95	74%
	Manager/ Leader/ Supervisor	33	26%

Source: own study.

Table 1 shows that most respondents were aged 18-35 (90%), with only 10% between 36 and 50. The sample included slightly more men (54%) than women (46%). Most participants had 1-10 years of experience (79%), while smaller groups reported longer or very short tenure. The majority (74%) held non-managerial positions, and 26% occupied leadership roles.

4. Research results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for four dimensions of Machiavellian leadership as assessed by employees (N = 95) and by managers themselves (N = 33): amorality, desire for control, desire for status, and distrust of others. Overall, employees tended to rate their managers higher on most Machiavellian dimensions than managers rated themselves, except distrust of others, where assessments were very similar. Employees rated managers higher in amorality (M = 2.57, SD = 1.57) than managers rated themselves (M = 1.58, SD = 0.84), suggesting workers see more questionable behavior than managers admit. For desire for control, managers' self-ratings were higher (M = 3.63, SD = 1.16) than employees' assessments (M = 3.12, SD = 1.49), and the same pattern appeared for desire for status (managers: M = 3.56, SD = 1.23; employees: M = 2.98, SD = 1.58). Ratings of distrust were nearly identical (employees: M = 2.65, SD = 1.50; managers: M = 2.56, SD = 1.05), showing shared perceptions. In all dimensions, respondents used the full scale (1–5), indicating honest answers and clear differences in leadership behaviors. Cronbach's alpha values for employees indicate good internal consistency across all constructs (α ranging from 0.79 to 0.94). In the managers' group, the reliability coefficients are lower, which is likely due to the smaller sample size.

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics of Machiavellian leadership

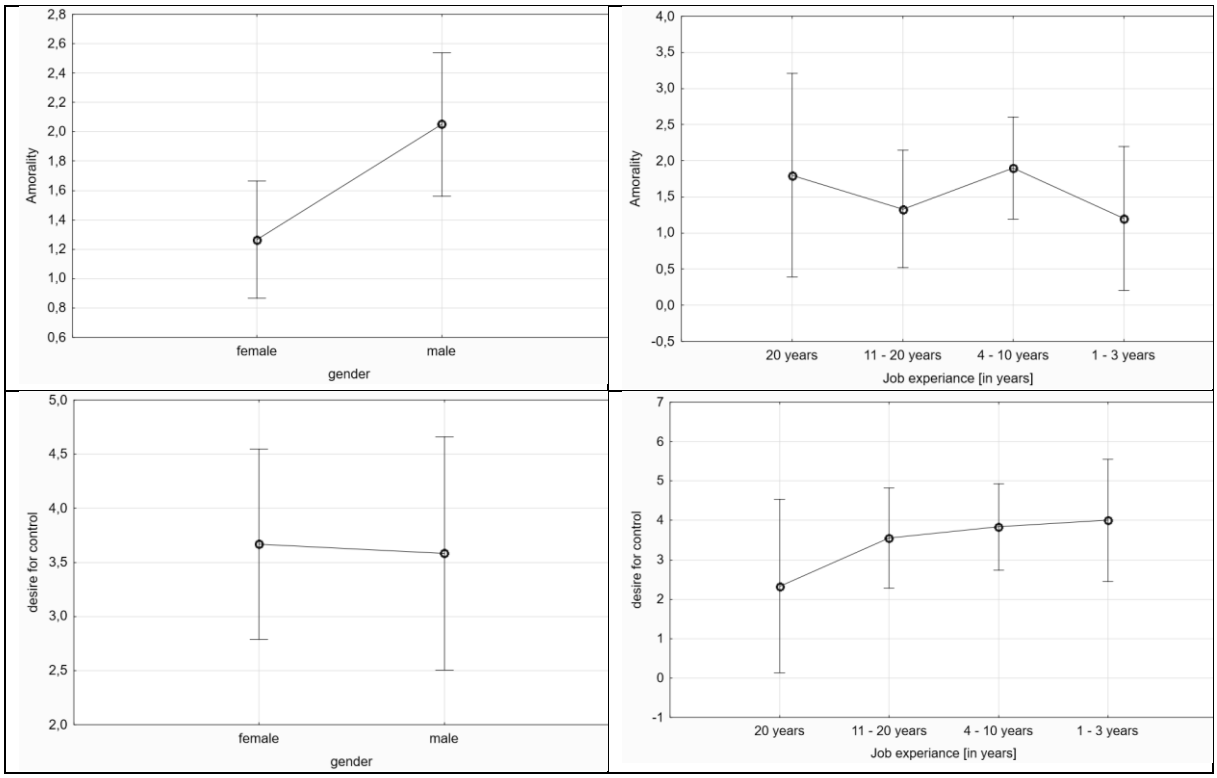
Constructs	Employees N = 95					Managers N = 33				
	M	**SD**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**α**	**M**	**SD**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**α**
(1) amorality	2.57	1.57	1	5	0,94	1.58	0,84	1	5	0,72
(2) desire for control	3.12	1.49	1	5	0,79	3.63	1.16	1	5	0,70
(3) desire for status	2.98	1.58	1	5	0,85	3.56	1.23	1	5	0,75
(4) distrust of others	2.65	1.50	1	5	0,90	2.56	1.05	1	5	0,69

Note: M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Min. – minimum value, Max. – maximum value.

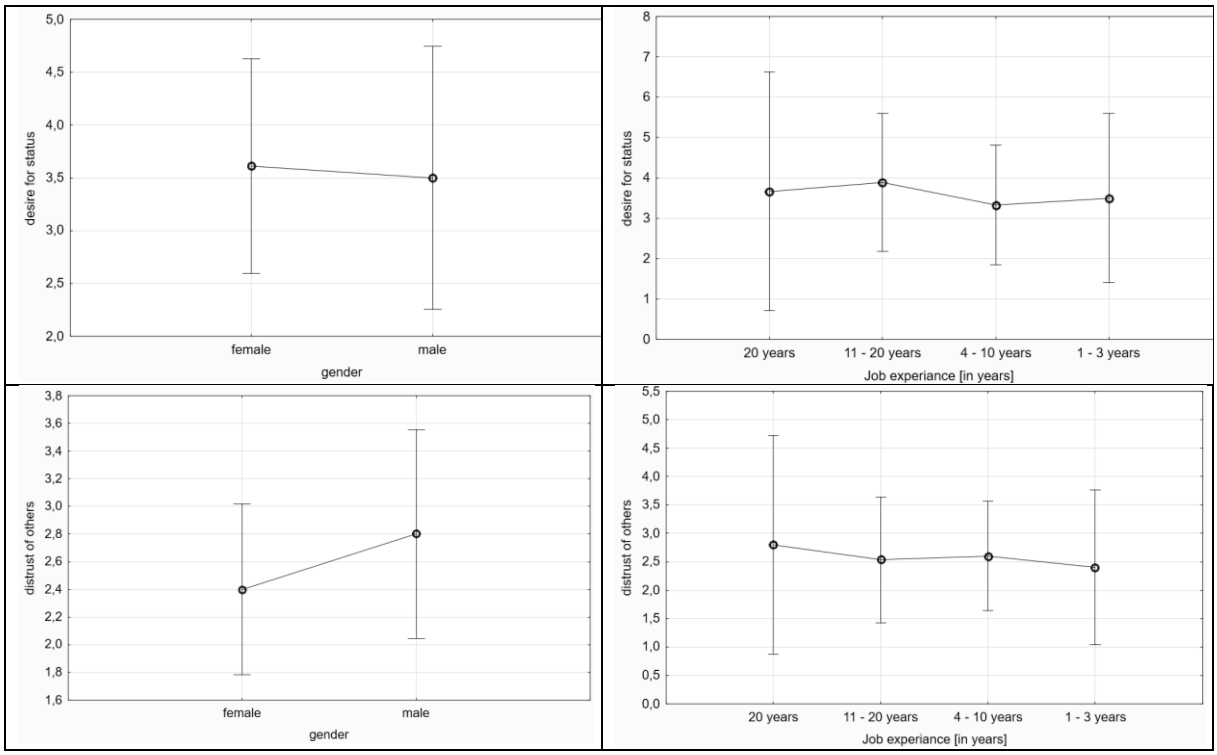
Source: own study.

Next, the analysis of differences was conducted using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Table 3 shows that the only significant difference concerns amorality by gender ($p < 0.05$): male managers rated themselves higher than female managers. No significant gender differences appeared for desire for control, status, or distrust ($p > 0.05$). Job experience did not produce significant differences in any dimension ($p > 0.05$). Although small variations in mean scores are visible across gender and experience groups, they are inconsistent and statistically insignificant, indicating similar self-assessments of Machiavellian traits among managers.

Table 3.
Differences in self-assessed Machiavellian leadership dimensions by gender and job experience



Cont. table 3.



Source: own study.

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide an interesting insight into how Machiavellian leadership behaviors are manifested and perceived in Polish organizations, as well as how differently they are evaluated depending on the perspective of the respondent. Overall, the findings suggest that toxic, Machiavellian-oriented tendencies are present at a moderate level, but their intensity varies across dimensions and between employee and manager assessments.

A particularly noteworthy pattern concerns managers' self-evaluations across the four dimensions. Managers rated themselves relatively low in terms of amorality and distrust of others, while at the same time clearly rating themselves higher on desire for control and desire for status. This pattern may indicate that managers are more willing to acknowledge traits that can be interpreted as professionally justified, or even desirable in leadership roles, such as striving for control and status, while being less inclined to attribute to themselves traits that are socially undesirable or morally questionable, such as amorality or distrust.

At the same time, the results raise an important theoretical question: although desire for control and desire for status are treated as elements of Machiavellian behavior, it is not entirely clear why these dimensions are so strongly stigmatized. From the perspective of motivational theories, the need for power is considered a strong and legitimate driver of behavior (McClelland), while status is closely related to respect, prestige, and recognition, consistent

with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In this context, striving for control and status may not necessarily be inherently toxic, but rather become problematic only when combined with manipulative or amoral tendencies. This interpretation is supported by the observation that a leader driven by self-interest and a clear focus on power or status may, paradoxically, serve the needs of their organization and subordinates more effectively than leaders guided primarily by idealistic or altruistic motives (Davis, 2015). Such a leader tends to assess organizational realities with greater pragmatism and clarity, prioritizing what is necessary for stability and performance (Davis, 2015). This can suggest that Machiavellian traits do not always translate directly into harmful or destructive leadership practices.

The differences between managers' and employees' assessments further emphasize the importance of perspective in studying toxic leadership. Employees appear more sensitive to behaviors related to amorality and manipulation, while managers emphasize aspects linked to authority and achievement. This perceptual gap suggests that certain leadership behaviors may be rationalized differently depending on whether they are experienced from the position of authority or subordination. Moreover, another research suggests that followers possess greater agency than has traditionally been acknowledged - they not only withdraw their support from toxic leaders but also actively attempt to reduce their influence by developing workarounds and learning adaptive strategies (Milosevic et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

The findings indicate that toxic, Machiavellian-oriented leadership behaviors occur at a moderate level in Polish organizations, meaning they are neither marginal nor extreme but remain a noticeable part of managerial practice. The dimensions of these behaviors vary in prominence, indicating a nuanced pattern across control, status orientation, distrust, and moral flexibility.

At the same time, a clear discrepancy emerges between leaders' self-assessments and employees' evaluations of the same behaviors. Managers tend to perceive themselves as less prone to morally questionable and manipulative actions, while employees more readily identify such tendencies in their leaders. Conversely, leaders report a stronger need for control and status than employees attribute to them. This divergence highlights perceptual gaps between leaders' self-perceptions of their conduct and subordinates' perceptions of it, underscoring the importance of multi-source assessment in research on toxic leadership.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this pilot study. First, the research was conducted with a relatively small sample, which limits statistical power and restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, all participants were university students, which means the sample was relatively homogeneous. This homogeneity may limit

the variability of experiences and perspectives represented in the data, which could influence the scope and applicability of the conclusions. Next, the use of a non-probability sampling strategy (purposive and convenience sampling) further limits the representativeness of the sample and prevents the generalization of the findings to the broader population of Polish employees and managers. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of common method bias. Therefore, the results should be treated as exploratory and indicative.

Future research should build on the exploratory nature of this pilot study by extending the analysis to larger and more diverse samples in order to strengthen the psychometric verification of the measurement tool. In particular, assessing the reliability and validity of the scale on a broader research sample would allow for more robust confirmation of its usefulness in studying Machiavellian leadership behaviors. Further studies should also verify the observed patterns related to gender and age in the context of Machiavellian tendencies, as these relationships require confirmation in more representative populations. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine whether the desire for status and control should always be interpreted as inherently Machiavellian and negative. Under certain organizational conditions, these traits may relate to effective leadership rather than toxic behavior. Future research could compare them with indicators of employee and managerial performance and engagement to determine whether some Machiavellian traits may contribute to positive outcomes depending on context and intensity.

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