

SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

Understanding Workplace Toxicity

A Netnographic Study of How Individuals Interpret, Cope with, and Seek Support for Toxic
Workplace Experiences

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Abstract

Toxic workplaces have received increased attention in line with an increased focus on employee well-being and the psychosocial work environment. The complexity of the phenomenon, in combination with its negative impact on both individuals and organizations, makes it an important subject to investigate. Recent research shows that a toxic work environment is the strongest predictor of employee turnover, which further highlights the need to understand how such environments affect individual well-being and professional sustainability. Despite this attention, challenges remain in understanding how toxic workplaces are experienced, interpreted, and defined by individuals in practice.

This study examines how individuals describe, interpret, and cope with experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions, and how Reddit functions as an online forum for support and meaning-making. A qualitative netnographic approach was used, with Reddit selected as the empirical context due to its anonymous, user-generated, and naturally occurring discussions about workplace experiences.

The empirical data consists of comments from Reddit discussions in which users describe experiences of toxic workplaces. The study focuses on users' own descriptions and interpretations, rather than objectively determining whether a workplace was toxic. The data was analyzed through inductive thematic analysis, where recurring patterns were identified from the empirical material and organized into three main themes: how toxic workplaces are defined, how users describe coping strategies, and how Reddit functions as a supportive and meaning-making environment.

The findings show that users describe toxic workplaces at individual, relational, and organizational levels. Toxicity emerges through bodily and emotional impact, destructive everyday interactions, and organizational conditions. The findings also show that Reddit functions as an environment where users receive emotional support, practical advice, and collective help in interpreting, coping with, and preventing toxic workplace conditions.

The study concludes that toxic workplaces should be understood as an experience-based and socially interpreted phenomenon, rather than solely through predefined research categories. Reddit, as an online forum, plays an important role in enabling support, coping strategies, and collective meaning-making around experiences that may otherwise be difficult to express.

Key words: Toxic workplaces; workplace toxicity; netnography; Reddit; online forums; coping strategies; social support; collective meaning-making; psychological work environment.

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List of Abbreviations

TMSC	Transactional Model of Stress and Coping
EVLN	Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect Model
SST	Social Support Theory
SET	Social Exchange Theory
COR	Conservation of Resources Theory
HR	Human Resources

1. Introduction

The global labor market has undergone significant transformations in recent years, with the phenomenon known as “The Great Resignation” forcing organizations to re-evaluate the primary drivers of employee retention. While financial compensation has historically been viewed as a central predictor of turnover, Sull, Sull, and Zweig (2022) found that toxic corporate culture was the strongest predictor of employee turnover and 10.4 times more influential than compensation in predicting whether an employee would leave their organization. This highlights the importance of the psychological work environment for both individual well-being and organizational sustainability.

Questions concerning employee well-being and the psychosocial work environment have therefore gained increasing importance, particularly in relation to destructive work environments that previous research has described as toxic workplaces. These workplaces have, for example, been described through destructive leaders, managers, and organizational cultures that negatively affect employee well-being and organizational performance (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007), and have been operationalized through behaviors such as bullying, harassment, disrespect, and exclusion (Anjum et al., 2018). Such environments have been linked to negative consequences for both individuals and organizations, including stress, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, decreased productivity, and weakened psychological safety (Anjum et al., 2018; Crisan et al., 2026).

Previous research has also shown that toxic work environments may involve a combination of harmful leadership behaviors and organizational conditions, including hostility, favoritism, ostracism, authoritarian control and lack of support (Khasawneh et al., 2024). Taken together, previous studies show that toxic workplaces constitute a complex and significant phenomenon with consequences that extend beyond the individual’s experiences and affect organizational relations and working life more broadly.

At the same time, it remains less clear how toxic workplaces should be understood and delimited from the perspectives of individuals themselves. Although the concept is often used in previous research, it has frequently been defined through predetermined categories of behaviors and

outcomes. While such research has contributed important knowledge, it may also limit the understanding of how individuals themselves experience, interpret, and define toxicity in practice.

1.1 Research Gap and Problem Statement

Building on the background outlined above, the central research gap concerns how toxic workplaces are understood from the perspective of individuals themselves. Previous research has identified important behaviors, outcomes, and organizational conditions associated with toxic workplaces, but less attention has been paid to how individuals describe, interpret, and make sense of such experiences in their own words and in naturally occurring social contexts.

This is important because experiences of workplace toxicity may be subjective, context-dependent and socially negotiated. What individuals understand as toxic may not always correspond directly to predefined categories (Khasawneh et al., 2024; Anjum et al., 2018). As a result, existing research may overlook how individuals themselves define the boundaries of toxic workplaces and how these understandings are shaped through interaction with others.

Online forums provide a relevant context for addressing this gap, as they allow users to anonymously share personal workplace experiences, respond to others, and collectively discuss whether certain situations should be understood as harmful, unacceptable, or toxic (Costello et al., 2017). Furthermore, these digital spaces function as informal support systems where individuals share and validate different coping mechanisms, turning their personal experiences into shared strategies for dealing with a toxic workplace (Prescott et al., 2017). In this study, Reddit is used as the empirical context because it offers anonymous, user-generated, and naturally occurring discussions about workplace experiences. However, limited research has examined how individuals interpret and cope with toxic workplace experiences in such naturally occurring Reddit discussions.

This thesis therefore addresses the following overarching problem: How do individuals describe, interpret, and cope with experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions?

1.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how individuals describe, interpret, and cope with experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions. The study aims to analyze how Reddit functions as an arena for meaning-making, where individuals both receive and provide responses to workplace-related experiences.

By focusing on naturally occurring Reddit discussions, the study examines how understanding of toxic workplaces are formed through users' own descriptions and interactions. This allows the study to explore how workplace toxicity is made sense of in a social digital context.

The study is theoretically relevant because it contributes to knowledge about how toxic workplaces are socially interpreted and collectively discussed. It is practically relevant because individuals' interpretations of workplace toxicity may influence how they act, for example by seeking support, adapting their behavior, or leaving the workplace.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the identified research gap, the following research questions are formulated:

1. How do individuals describe and interpret experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions?
2. What coping strategies do individuals describe when managing toxic workplace experiences?
3. How does Reddit, as an online forum, function as a space for support, validation, and collective meaning-making regarding toxic workplace experiences?

Together, these research questions are designed to address the identified research gap by capturing toxic workplaces as described, interpreted, and coped with by individuals themselves. The first question focuses on how individuals describe and make sense of workplace toxicity beyond predefined analytical categories. The second question examines how individuals respond to and cope with such experiences in practice. The third question extends the analysis to the role of Reddit as an online forum, by exploring how this platform may provide support, advice, and

shared interpretation. In this way, the questions complement each other by moving from individual descriptions, to coping and management, and finally to the social and interactive role of Reddit discussions.

1.4 Demarcations

In line with the study's purpose and interpretive approach, this study is delimited to examining narratives written exclusively from an employee perspective, with the purpose of understanding the subjective experience of a toxic work environment. Through a hermeneutic approach, the focus lies on how individuals personally assign meaning to their situation, rather than determining the objective status of a workplace (Allwood & Erikson, 2017).

The study is delimited to Reddit as the empirical context, focusing on its combination of anonymity, user-generated discussions, and reflective narratives. This means that the study does not aim to examine online workplace discussions across digital platforms, but specifically how toxic workplace experiences are described, interpreted, and responded to in Reddit discussions.

Furthermore, leadership and management are treated as crucial environmental factors rather than subjects for personality or trait-based analysis. While we recognize that leadership styles and managerial traits are significant, this study does not evaluate or analyze leadership or managerial actions in themselves. Instead, leadership and management are analyzed only in relation to the specific incidents described by users. The analytical focus is strictly dedicated to how employees perceive these actions as toxic and how they subsequently cope with them.

We have specifically demarcated the study to exclude the psychological motivations or “the why” behind a perpetrator's actions. Instead, our analytical focus remains on the impact these actions have on the employee. We understand that a lot of how an action is perceived can be related to the perceived intent of the perpetrator, however since we cannot verify any intent as we only have the employee's perspective we can only speculate and therefore chose to not focus on this. By concentrating on the perceived effects rather than the perpetrator's intent, we aim to capture the lived experience of the workplace from the employee's perspective.

The thesis is further delimited from organizational theory discussions regarding profit targets or structural efficiency. Instead, the focus is placed on the psychosocial work environment and the employee's affective appraisal. While we acknowledge that cognitive and rational processes are inherently involved in interpreting workplace dynamics, our analytical emphasis is on the emotional impact, such as experiences of insecurity, shame, and diminished self-esteem. By prioritizing the affective dimension, we aim to capture the lived experience of toxicity, which often precedes or bypasses purely rational evaluation.

Regarding how employees manage toxic workplaces, the study focuses on psychological and social coping strategies rather than legal or formal complaint processes. This includes how employees try to protect their self-image, make sense of their experiences, and seek support from others. Formal processes, such as HR or grievance procedures, are only discussed when they are relevant to how employees experience the situation, for example through feelings of isolation, distrust, or betrayal.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into six main chapters. Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the literature review and the theoretical framework. The chapter outlines the central concepts that form the basis of the study, including toxic workplaces, coping strategies, and online forums as arenas for meaning-making and support. It also presents the theoretical intersections that guide the study's analytical framework.

Chapter 3 presents the study's methodological framework and research design. Here, the netnographic approach, the study's hermeneutic epistemology, the procedures for data collection and data analysis, the quality of the study, ethical considerations, and the use of AI tools are introduced.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical results of the study. Here, the data collected from Reddit is organized and analyzed with regard to the study's research questions, with a focus on how toxic workplaces are described, interpreted, and coped with by individuals in Reddit discussions.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to previous research and the theoretical framework. The discussion is structured around the study's three main themes: definitions of toxic workplaces, coping strategies, and the role of Reddit as an online forum.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusion of the study. The chapter summarizes the central findings and answers the research questions, before outlining the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

The thesis concludes with a reference list and Appendix A.

2. Literature review

The following chapter establishes the theoretical foundation necessary to analyze how individuals interpret, cope with, and seek support for experiences of toxic work environments. As illustrated in the conceptual model (see Figure 1), the analysis is structured around three central analytical areas in relation to the research questions: toxic workplaces (2.1), coping strategies (2.2), and online forums (2.3).



Figure 1. Conceptual model of the literature review and theoretical intersections

The first circle, toxic workplaces, addresses how the phenomenon has been defined in previous research. The second circle, coping strategies, focuses on various psychological and social coping mechanisms relevant for this study. The third circle, online forums, concerns digital environments as arenas where individuals share experiences, seek support, and collectively create meaning around their experiences.

In addition to these three separate areas, the model also highlights their mutual overlaps and how these overlaps form the basis of a coherent analytical framework. The overlap between toxic workplaces and coping strategies clarifies how individuals manage concrete experiences of toxic work environments. The overlap between toxic workplaces and online forums addresses how such experiences are expressed and discussed in digital contexts. Finally, the overlap between coping strategies and online forums highlights how support, advice, and coping strategies are developed through interaction with others. All three circles and their overlaps are addressed in this chapter and form the foundation for the study's subsequent analysis.

2.1 Toxic Workplaces

Previous research has examined toxic workplaces through several related perspectives, including destructive leadership, harmful workplace behaviors, organizational culture, psychological safety, and employee well-being. Together, this research shows that toxic workplaces are complex environments where individual experiences, interpersonal relations, leadership practices, and organizational structures interact.

A central contribution of previous research is the identification of behaviors and conditions commonly associated with toxic workplaces. These include bullying, harassment, ostracism, incivility, authoritarian control, lack of support, and destructive organizational cultures (Anjum et al., 2018; Khasawneh et al., 2024; Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). Previous studies have also linked toxic work environments to consequences such as stress, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, lower productivity, weakened psychological safety, and negative health outcomes (Anjum et al., 2018; Crisan et al., 2026).

The concept of toxic workplaces has been defined in different ways across previous research. Appelbaum & Roy-Girard (2007) conceptualize toxic workplaces as environments shaped by organizational “toxins”, including toxic leadership, organizational cultures, and structural conditions. From this perspective, toxicity is not limited to isolated interpersonal conflicts, but is connected to broader organizational patterns that affect employee well-being and organizational performance.

Other studies define toxic workplaces through specific behavioral dimensions. Anjum et al. (2018) for example, identify bullying, ostracism, harassment, and incivility as central dimensions of toxic workplace environments. These behaviors capture different ways in which employees may experience exclusion, disrespect, hostility, or social harm in the workplace. By identifying such dimensions, previous research has contributed to a more systematic understanding of what toxic workplaces may consist of.

Research has also linked toxic workplaces to psychological and health-related outcomes. Crisan et al (2026) for example, examine toxic work environments in relation to psychological safety, perceived support, job satisfaction, and burnout. Their findings show that lower psychological safety and reduced support are associated with increased burnout and negative health outcomes. This highlights that toxicity is not only expressed through harmful behaviors, but also through the absence of conditions that allow employees to feel safe, supported, and able to function sustainably at work.

Qualitative research has further contributed by showing how toxic leadership can take different forms. Khasawneh et al. (2024) identify types of toxic leadership such as authoritarian behavior, harassment, and manipulative conduct. This research shows how toxicity can be enacted through leadership practices and everyday interactions, as well as through broader organizational conditions.

Taken together, previous research shows that toxic workplaces can be understood as environments characterized by harmful behaviors, destructive leadership, weak support structures, and organizational conditions that negatively affect employees. This body of research

provides an important foundation for the present study, which examines how individuals describe and interpret such experiences in naturally occurring Reddit discussions.

2.2 Coping Strategies

To manage environmental pressures and interpersonal strain, individuals employ various coping strategies that function as cognitive and behavioral tools for handling stressful demands. These responses can change over time, depending on the individual's available resources and the specific situation. By categorizing these adaptive behaviors, the following sections clarify how individuals either seek to directly modify the source of stress or prioritize the regulation of the emotional impact triggered by their surroundings.

2.2.1 Revised Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC)

Within the field of organizational psychology, coping is understood not as a static trait but as a continuous process shaped by the interaction between a person and their environment. According to the foundational framework established by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), this process begins with a primary appraisal, where the individual evaluates the significance of a situation for their own well-being, categorizing it as irrelevant, benign, or a stressful threat. This is followed by a secondary appraisal, where individuals evaluate the resources available to manage the stressor. This evaluation drives their coping mechanisms, where they make adjustments to handle demands that threaten to exceed their resources. These efforts generally serve two major functions, namely to regulate distressing emotions and to alter the underlying workplace dynamics causing the stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, contemporary research proposes a revised transactional model that challenges the notion of primary appraisal as a purely cognitive process. In this revised framework, primary appraisal is predominantly affective rather than cognitive, functioning as an “affective barometer” rooted in the body's core affect. This affective appraisal constantly evaluates the balance between environmental demands and an individual's perceived reserve capacity (Steffen & Anderson, 2025).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) originally distinguished between two primary coping functions: problem focused coping, aiming at managing the stressor directly and emotion focused, aiming at regulating the resulting emotional distress. Within this original framework, avoidance coping,

such as distancing or escape, was often viewed as a sub-dimension of emotion-focused coping. This is because it aims to mitigate immediate distress by separating the individual from the stressor, rather than addressing the underlying conflict (Endler & Parker, 1990).

However, subsequent research and the development of the Multidimensional Coping Inventory (MCI) by Endler and Parker (1990) led to the recognition of avoidance-oriented coping as a separate and independent third category. This distinction is based on the understanding that avoidance is a fundamental strategy on its own. It typically manifests through either distraction, where individuals engage in alternative tasks, or social diversion, which involves seeking out others to avoid the problem (Endler & Parker, 1990). In modern organizational research, this three-dimensional model offers a detailed look at how people navigate complex environments. It highlights how avoidance often becomes a primary, yet ultimately harmful, defense against chronic stress.

Furthermore, contemporary research builds on the original model by highlighting the role of meaning-based resources and a person's desire to support others. Specifically, meaning-based thinking fosters positive reappraisal, which is an emotion regulation strategy where individuals reframe negative experiences to find positive meaning. This shift often serves as a foundational step toward actively re-engaging with the stressor (Kaveh et al., 2023).

Finally, when environmental demands consistently exceed an individual's reserve capacity or interpersonal trust is compromised, the coping process may manifest in defensive or self-protective forms (Muhammad et al., 2026). Mechanisms such as defensive silence or intentionally hiding and hoarding knowledge can emerge as coping strategies to manage perceived pressure and safeguard remaining personal resources (Muhammad et al., 2026). These defensive actions show that when active problem solving is perceived as impossible, individuals may resort to withdrawal or behavioral disengagement to maintain psychological stability (Muhammad et al., 2026).

2.2.2 Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect (EVLN Model)

The exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (EVLN) model provides a theoretical framework for understanding how employees navigate organizational dysfunction and dissatisfaction (Dolev et al., 2021). It originates from Hirschman's (1970) work, where the primary mechanisms for signaling dissatisfaction were exit, voice, and loyalty. Farrell (1983) later expanded the model to include "neglect" to capture the subtle behavioral changes, such as withdrawals and reduced effort. Farrell (1983) also provided an empirical foundation showing that these behaviors cluster along two primary axes: the level of active versus passive, and constructive versus destructive impact on the organization.

Exit is defined as an active yet destructive response, encompassing both actual resignation and the initial cognitive withdrawal that occurs when other ways to fix the situation seem exhausted (Rusbult et al., 1988). Longitudinal research by Withey and Cooper (1989) confirms that exiters are primarily driven by a rational calculation of costs and efficacy, they leave when the cost of staying is high and the perceived effectiveness of changing the situation is low. In contrast, voice serves as an active-constructive response through which individuals attempt to address their dissatisfaction. This can involve dialogue, whistle-blowing, or proactive problem-solving (Farrell, 1983). However, empirical studies suggest that voice is the most difficult response to predict, as its success is highly dependent on whether management is perceived as receptive (Withey & Cooper, 1989).

Loyalty represents a passive-constructive stance. Here, individuals choose to endure unfavorable conditions quietly, remaining supportive of the organization because they optimistically believe that things will eventually improve (Farrell, 1983; Hirschman, 1970). However, the definition of loyalty has been a subject of academic debate. Withey and Cooper (1989) found through qualitative interviews that what is often measured as loyalty more closely resembles "entrapment" or resignation, staying because of high sunk costs rather than genuine affective commitment. Finally, neglect manifests as a passive-destructive strategy where an individual allows their work performance to decline through absenteeism, reduced effort, or chronic disengagement. These behaviors typically serve as a secondary signal to management that underlying organizational instability exists (Dolev et al., 2021).

Research on voice within the EVLN model has further distinguished between “considerate voice”, which aims at collaborative problem-solving, and “aggressive voice”, which is driven by a desire to win confrontations regardless of long-term organizational health (Vantilborgh, 2015). How individuals choose these behavioral responses is rarely a reflexive action. Instead, their choices are shaped by a complex mix of cognitive and affective appraisals (Dolev et al., 2021). This can be conceptualized through a “hot and cool” response system: immediate experiences of personal violation and anger often trigger “hot” impulsive reactions such as aggressive voice or exit, whereas a gradual erosion of trust typically results in “cool”, passive withdrawal, such as neglect (Vantilborgh, 2015). With a “hot” response, a “noisy exit” is common. Individuals utilize their voice one final time, often through a resignation letter or public confrontation, to signal systemic issues, protect remaining colleagues, and reclaim their professional dignity before leaving (Dolev et al., 2021).

Additionally, research highlights the role of intentionality, suggesting that employee responses exist on a spectrum. These range from deliberate, pre-planned actions to unintentional impulsive outbursts that occur when self-regulation is depleted (Dolev et al., 2021). Rather than a collection of static choices, the EVLN model is increasingly viewed as a dynamic and evolutionary process. Employees may initially remain loyal. However, if their dissatisfaction continues or their attempts at voice are ignored, they often drift into neglect before ultimately choosing to exit (Dolev et al., 2021). These decisions depend heavily on social information processing. Within this process, social cues and peer interactions combine to shape a collective perception of the climate, which in turn guides how employees respond (Muhammad et al., 2026).

2.2.3 Social Support Theory & Social Exchange Theory

Social support theory (SST) focuses on the exchange of resources between at least two individuals where the purpose is to enhance the recipient's well-being (Yin et al., 2018). The theory describes individuals' experiences of perceived social support and is based on the assumption that an individual's health and ability to manage stress are directly linked to their social networks and the resources these networks provide (Yin et al., 2018). Within SST, there

are five main dimensions of social support: informational support, emotional support, instrumental support, esteem support and companionship (Lin et al., 2021).

Informational support consists of offering advice, guidance, suggestions or factual input to help the recipient solve problems and reduce uncertainty (Lin et al., 2021). Emotional support centers on expressing empathy, care, trust, and encouragement, aimed at reducing stress and mitigating negative emotional states (Lin et al., 2021). Instrumental support means the provision of concrete, tangible assistance or material resources, such as financial aid, time, or direct labor, to help individuals complete specific tasks. Esteem support focuses on validating the recipient's emotions, helping to bolster their self-esteem and sense of competence. Companionship is about fostering a sense of belonging within a collective of individuals who share common interests or life circumstances, thereby providing a vital foundation for social integration and community (Lin et al., 2021). A theoretical tension within the research concerns the distinction between perceived support, which is the subjective belief that assistance is available, and received support, which is the actual exchange of resources (Lin et al., 2021). However, empirical research frequently emphasizes that the subjective experience of being cared for has the most significant impact on well-being, rather than the objective quantity of assistance received (Yin et al., 2018).

Within SST, social resources act as a vital buffer against stress, protecting individuals from the negative effects of stressful events (Yin et al., 2018). The buffering effect is based on the assumption that being part of a supportive social network can mitigate the psychological and physiological toll of high-pressure environments (Yin et al., 2018). By providing essential resources at the critical moment, social support can shift an individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation, transforming a perceived threat into a manageable challenge (Yin et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of these resources is highly dependent on the source of the support, as different providers offer specialized types of aid (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Empirical studies by Zhang and Liu (2022) suggest that peers or colleagues are often more effective in providing emotional support, as shared lived experiences facilitate deep empathy and the creation of social bonds (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Ultimately, these supportive interactions drive

meaningful changes in behavioral outcomes (Lin et al., 2021). Specifically, a supportive social climate encourages higher levels of self-disclosure, as individuals feel safe to share personal information and feelings when they perceive a high net benefit from the exchange. This openness, in turn, strengthens relationship commitment and fosters long-term engagement which leads to desirable outcomes such as continuous knowledge sharing within the collective (Lin et al., 2021).

For understanding human behavior within social resource exchange activities, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) is dominant (Zhao & Du, 2018). SET suggests that human interaction is guided by an internal assessment of costs and rewards. Within this framework, individuals engage in social transactions with the aim of optimizing personal gains while reducing potential drawbacks (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Unlike rigid economic transactions, social exchanges are inherently open-ended and lack formal contracts. Instead, they are anchored in the norm of reciprocity, where the broad expectation of future returns transforms one-time interactions into long-term social relationships (Ye et al., 2015).

The components of social exchange are primarily divided into two categories: rewards (benefits) and costs. In social exchange, rewards often go beyond material gains to include psychological assets. Empirical research divides these into three primary dimensions: a sense of belonging, which connects an individual's identity to the group, reputation, which involves social status and self-worth derived from one's perceived competence and value to the collective. Conversely, costs are the negative outcomes that discourage social interaction (Zhao & Du, 2018).

Empirical evidence suggests that when the net benefits of an interaction are perceived as high, individuals develop a sense of relationship commitment. This psychological attachment acts as a stabilizing force, motivating individuals to maintain the connection even when confronted with difficulties (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Within this framework, SET explains why self-disclosure occurs. Individuals are more likely to share personal insights and experiences when they feel the resulting supportive climate outweighs the risk of being vulnerable (Lin et al., 2021). SET has also become a prominent framework for understanding knowledge contribution. Within this context, empirical research suggests that individuals share knowledge voluntarily when they

expect reciprocal returns, such as future information access (Ye et al., 2015). However, if the perceived costs, such as time or effort, outweigh these benefits, the motivation for knowledge exchange is significantly reduced (Zhang & Liu, 2022; Zhao & Du, 2018).

2.2.4 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory suggests that individuals are motivated by a core need to acquire, maintain, and protect what they value. These "resources" are generally organized into four types: physical objects, personal traits such as self-esteem, social conditions, and personal energies like time or expertise (Hobfoll, 1989). Within this framework, psychological stress typically surfaces in three scenarios: when resources are threatened, when they are actually lost, or when an individual invests their assets without seeing an expected return (Azizah et al., 2025; Bansal et al., 2026). A defining principle of the theory is that resource loss is disproportionately impactful, the psychological toll of losing a resource far outweighs the satisfaction of gaining an equivalent one. This imbalance forces individuals to act as strategic self-managers, navigating their environment to avoid "loss spirals" where an initial deficit triggers a chain reaction that rapidly depletes remaining resources and heightens vulnerability (Abdelghani et al., 2025).

According to the COR theory, coping is conceptualized as the dynamic management of one's psychological capital. When faced with high demands, individuals must decide whether to risk their remaining assets to secure new ones or to adopt a defensive posture to halt further drainage. This strategic preservation often manifests as specific behaviors designed to "freeze" energy loss (Bansal et al., 2026). For example, "quiet quitting", limiting effort to the bare minimum, is interpreted here as a proactive defense mechanism to safeguard remaining self-efficacy and vitality (Azizah et al., 2025). Similarly, "grey rocking" involves maintaining emotional neutrality to act as a strategy for affective attenuation, thereby conserving psychological energy during interpersonal strain. Seen through this lens, behavioral withdrawal is not a lack of motivation, but rather a functional, restorative phase necessary for self-preservation (Bansal et al., 2026).

2.2.5 Theoretical interplay SET, SST, and COR

The combined application of SST, SET, and COR creates a multi-dimensional framework that explains how people manage social connections, handle high-pressure situations, and build loyalty toward social groups (Ye et al., 2015).

SST provides the structural foundation by defining social interaction as a deliberate exchange of assets, such as information or empathy, specifically intended to improve a person's quality of life. In practical terms, this support functions as a psychological shield against external pressures. By offering assistance at critical moments, social support can fundamentally reshape how a person perceives a crisis, transforming a situation that initially feels like a threat into a challenge they feel equipped to manage (Yin et al., 2018).

SET offers a process-oriented perspective, suggesting that these interactions are managed through a personal cost-benefit evaluation (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Within this system, social support is categorized as a mental reward that people actively seek (Zhao & Du, 2018). Individuals are motivated to engage with a collective because they anticipate receiving benefits, such as expert guidance or emotional care, and feel governed by a norm of reciprocity that encourages them to contribute back to the group (Ye et al., 2015).

COR theory adds motivational depth by illustrating why these assets are so vital for mental stability. It argues that humans are driven to gather and safeguard "resource caravans," which are clusters of mutually reinforcing assets like social ties, self-confidence, and personal energy. A core premise of COR theory is that the psychological distress triggered by resource loss is felt much more intensely than the satisfaction of gaining an equal one. This imbalance can trigger loss spirals, where one deficit leads to another, eventually causing total burnout. In this context, the social support identified by SST serves as a crucial reservoir that prevents these spirals and protects a person's remaining psychological capital (Pertiwi et al., 2024).

Ultimately, these frameworks function as a unified system: COR identifies the underlying drive to protect one's well-being, SST specifies the particular resources (support) used to achieve that

protection, and SET provides the evaluative mechanism of mutual exchange that keeps the social connection viable over time (Ye et al., 2015; Pertiwi et al., 2024).

2.3 Online Forums

Collective discussions have long been a central method for exchanging opinions and making joint decisions (Medvedev et al., 2019). Online forums provide digital environments where individuals, often without prior relationships, gather to discuss shared interests, exchange experiences, and respond to one another. These environments are characterized by user-generated content, text-based interaction, and naturally occurring dialogue, making them valuable contexts for studying social interaction and collective behavior (Costello et al., 2017; Medvedev et al., 2019).

Unlike traditional data collection methods, online forum data often consists of spontaneous expressions rather than responses shaped by predefined research instruments. This makes online forums particularly relevant for studying how individuals describe personal experiences, emotions, and interpretations in their own words (Costello et al., 2017). For this study, online forums are therefore important not only as a source of empirical material, but also as social environments where experiences can be shared, discussed, and collectively interpreted.

2.3.1 Online Forums in Previous Research

Previous research has used online forums to study a wide range of social, emotional, and behavioral phenomena. Online forums and digital support groups have been shown to provide environments where individuals can connect with others who share similar experiences or challenges. In this sense, these forums may function as accessible and cost-effective spaces for obtaining support, advice and validation (De Choudhury & De, 2014).

The support provided in these environments can be both informational and emotional. Prescott et al. (2017) distinguish between directive and non-directive support. Directive support involves offering concrete advice or recommendations, whereas non-directive support involves sharing personal experiences, empathy, or understanding without necessarily telling the recipient what to do.

Online forums also constitute rich sources of user-generated content, enabling the study of behavioral patterns, emotional states, and psychological well-being at scale. A key advantage of this data is its accessibility, as well as the possibility of capturing self-expressed emotions and experiences that may differ from data produced through more structured methods such as interviews or surveys (Bhatt et al., 2026).

2.3.2 Online Disinhibition Effect

Researchers, clinicians, and everyday users have long observed that individuals tend to express themselves differently in digital environments compared to face-to-face interactions. They may become more open, less restrained, and more willing to express emotions and opinions that they would not normally express offline. Suler (2004) describes this as the “online disinhibition effect”.

Disinhibition can take two forms: “benign disinhibition” and “toxic disinhibition”. Benign disinhibition refers to individuals sharing highly personal aspects of themselves, such as emotions, fears, and desires, and may also involve expressions of unusual kindness, generosity, or support. Toxic disinhibition, in contrast, involves aggression, harsh criticism, or hostility that individuals might not express in offline settings (Suler, 2004).

The online disinhibition effect can be explained by several features of digital environments. There are primarily six of them that often interact to weaken psychological barriers: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination and minimization of status and authority (Suler, 2004). Dissociative anonymity separates the individuals online actions from their offline identities which minimizes their vulnerability because of the anonymity. The invisibility in terms of not being able to see facial expressions or other physical cues can help the individual where social feedback might hold them back in offline settings. Additionally, asynchronicity removes the pressure of immediate responses, allowing users to share heavy thoughts and then step away. Internally, solipsistic introjection can make users experience that the online dialogue is more of a voice inside their head which makes it feel more like a private monologue which encourages them to open up further. This is also

further reinforced by dissociative imagination, the user views the online world as separate from the real world and therefore the everyday social norms do not apply. Finally, the minimization of authority creates a perceived "level playing field". Without indicators of status like dress or body language, users feel safer speaking out against power structures (Suler, 2004). Together, these conditions can make online forums especially relevant for studying sensitive or stigmatized topics, where individuals may be more willing to express personal experiences and emotions (Suler, 2004; Prescott et al., 2017).

2.3.3 Online-based versus Offline-based Support

Online-based support differs from offline-based support in several ways. A central distinction is that online communication often involves fewer visible social cues, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and disability. This can make it easier for individuals who might not otherwise meet to interact, exchange experiences, and support one another (Prescott et al., 2017).

Digital environments also enable anonymity, which can encourage individuals to share experiences that may feel difficult to communicate in face-to-face settings. Online support is also accessible across geographical boundaries and can be available regardless of time and location, making it different from many traditional support resources (Prescott et al., 2017).

2.3.4 Reddit as an Online Forum

Reddit, launched in 2005, is a platform for content sharing and community-based interaction. It has grown into one of the most widely used social media platforms globally, ranking as the 12th most used platform in 2025, with over 600 million monthly active users (We Are Social, DataReportal & Meltwater, 2025). As a global platform, Reddit includes users from a wide range of national and cultural contexts.

The platform allows users to engage in discussions on a wide range of topics, where they share opinions, experiences, and requests for support or information, often in the form of detailed personal narratives (Adams, 2022). Its structure allows users to submit posts containing a title, an external link, or self-generated content, which other users can vote on and comment on. The platform's voting system allows users to upvote or downvote posts and comments, while

comments are organized in a tree-like structure that reflects reply relationships. This structure enables the analysis of both individual expressions and interaction patterns (Medvedev et al., 2019). To actively participate by posting or interacting with content, users must create an account, while reading discussions is generally possible without registration (Anderson, 2015).

The platform also has general terms and conditions that users must accept and follow to be able to interact on the platform. The rules, for example, forbid users from spreading hate, bullying, or the share of others personal information. Employees of Reddit enforces these rules and a breach of them can lead to the account being shut down (Reddit, n.d.).

Reddit is divided into subreddits, which are user-created communities organized around specific topics. These communities often develop their own norms, language, and rules, making Reddit a rich environment for studying social and communicative processes. Unlike traditional social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Reddit is structured around following content rather than individuals, contributing to a more content-centric interaction model (Medvedev et al., 2019).

Although other platforms with similar functionalities exist, such as Hacker News and Slashdot, Reddit has gained a central role in research. A key reason is its large volume of user-generated text and interaction data. Previous studies have used Reddit data to examine user behavior, discussion dynamics, community structures, and social organization. For example, Derczynski and Rowe have used Reddit comments to study named entities in online text, while Horne and Adali have examined how news articles in the subreddit r/worldnews affects their popularity (Medvedev et al., 2019).

A central aspect of Reddit is its capacity for anonymity. Through the use of pseudonymous usernames, and, in some cases, throwaway accounts, users can discuss sensitive or stigmatized topics more openly than they might in offline contexts or on platforms connected to real identities (De Choudhury & De, 2014).

2.4 Intersection: Toxic Workplaces & Coping Strategies

The intersection of toxic workplaces and coping strategies reflects a dynamic process where individuals balance the tension between a harmful organizational environment and their personal well-being (Dolev et al., 2021). This interaction is shaped by how employees perceive and emotionally respond to a work environment that jeopardizes their personal and professional well-being.

Within the context of a toxic workplace the EVLN model is effective in categorizing employee behaviors along two axes: constructive versus destructive and active versus passive behaviors. However, employee reactions are rarely driven by rational choice alone. Instead, it depends on their personal reserve capacity, the internal store of mental and physical energy required to manage workplace pressure. Within toxic organizational environments, this reserve capacity can be rapidly drained, leading the affective barometer to signal persistent threat even in response to minor stimuli. This heightened emotional state can cloud objective judgment, causing employees to view even neutral or ambiguous cues as signs of a toxic environment (Steffen & Anderson, 2025).

Through the lens of COR theory, workplace toxicity represents a persistent stressor that depletes essential resources like energy, time, and self-esteem. When employees encounter actual or threatened resource loss, they enter a "resource loss spiral," where the initial loss of resources sets off a chain reaction, leaving the individual increasingly vulnerable. In this context, coping strategies serve as a vital defense against further resource loss. While individuals may initially rely on proactive strategies, such as remaining loyal while awaiting positive change or using their voice to advocate for improvement, these responses are difficult to maintain. Over time, workplace toxicity erodes the mental and emotional energy required to sustain such efforts (Bansal et al., 2026)

As toxicity persists and resources diminish, coping often shifts toward more defensive and withdrawal-oriented patterns. One such pattern is grey rocking, an affective mitigation strategy where employees maintain intentional emotional neutrality and low reactivity to prevent conflicts from escalating with toxic actors (Bansal et al., 2026). This deliberate detachment

allows employees to maintain professional functionality while establishing the emotional boundaries needed. Similarly, quiet quitting serves as a proactive defense mechanism where employees limit their effort to the bare minimum to protect their remaining self-efficacy and mental health when they perceive that the organization has failed its obligations (Azizah et al., 2025)

The interaction between a toxic work environment and coping strategies is therefore not a static event, but a dynamic process driven by the continuous drainage of personal resources (Bansal et al., 2026). This transition from trying to change the environment (active-constructive) to merely surviving it (passive-destructive), through strategies like grey rocking or quiet quitting, marks a critical shift. If the organization fails to address the toxicity, the exhaustion of these defensive mechanisms may contribute to burnout and, in some cases, exit (Bansal et al., 2026).

Consequently, coping in toxic environments should be understood as a process of progressive withdrawal. The choice of strategy serves as a direct indicator of both the severity of organizational dysfunction and the individual's remaining psychological capacity (Bansal et al., 2026).

2.5 Intersection: Toxic workplaces & Online Forums

The intersection between toxic workplaces and online forums is central to this study because experiences of workplace toxicity may be difficult to express openly in offline contexts.

Individuals may fear retaliation, reputational damage, disbelief, or professional consequences when discussing negative workplace experiences. Online forums can therefore provide a space where such experiences are expressed outside the immediate control of the organization and the power relationship between employer and employee (Suler, 2004; Costello et al., 2017).

In Reddit discussions, users are not only able to describe experiences of toxic workplaces, but also receive responses from others. These responses may include emotional validation, practical advice, comparisons with similar experiences, or collective assessments of whether a situation should be understood as toxic (De Choudhury & De, 2014; Prescott et al., 2017). This makes Reddit relevant not only as a source of individual accounts, but also as a context where workplace toxicity is collectively interpreted and discussed (Medvedev et al., 2019).

Therefore, the intersection between toxic workplaces and online forums lies in the possibility of studying how sensitive workplace experiences are expressed, shared, and negotiated (Costello et al., 2017; Suler, 2004; Prescott et al., 2017). This provides a foundation for examining how individuals describe, understand, and cope with experiences of toxic workplaces in their own words and in interaction with others (De Choudhury & De, 2014; Medvedev et al., 2019).

2.6 Intersection: Coping Strategies & Online Forums

The intersection of coping strategies and online forums creates a space where users can freely share advice and find emotional relief. Online forums serve as accessible, 24-hour social support systems where the primary form of coping occurs through the dynamic exchange of information and emotion (Zhao & Du, 2018).

The online disinhibition effect, and specifically the benign disinhibition allows individuals to reveal secret emotions, fears, and wishes that they might ordinarily withhold in face-to-face settings (Suler, 2004). In this safe environment, simply writing down and sharing their personal stories becomes a way to cope, offering a way to work through difficulties as users process internal struggles by putting experiences into words (Prescott et al., 2017).

SST, as previously outlined in this thesis, can in digital contexts be understood through the concept of “online social support”. In online forums, this is manifested through individuals both providing and receiving support via digital platforms, both via informational and emotional support (Prescott et al., 2017). Prescott et al. (2017) further categorize these interactions as being either directive (explicitly suggesting what to do) or non-directive (sharing personal experiences to offer empathy without giving direct advice). This communication between peers facilitates normalization which helps individuals to know that they are not alone which reduces stigma and isolation associated with their personal stressors (Prescott et al., 2017).

The role of supportive users in online forums can also be understood in relation to Appelbaum & Roy-Girard’s (2007) concept of “toxin handlers”. In organizational contexts, toxin handlers are individuals who attempt to reduce others’ psychological suffering by listening, offering support,

and absorbing or redirecting harmful messages. Although the concept was originally developed in relation to organizations, it can be useful for understanding how some online forums take on similar supportive roles. By validating others' experiences, reframing harmful workplace situations, and offering advice, these users may help buffer the emotional impact of toxic workplace experiences. At the same time, this role may also be emotionally demanding, since repeatedly engaging with others' distress can be a burden for those providing support.

Empirical research shows that these environments enable multiple forms of support, particularly emotional support in the form of empathy and validation, as well as informational support through advice and the exchange of experiences (De Choudhury & De, 2014). This highlights the role of online forums not only as communication platforms but also as social support systems where individuals can cope with personal challenges through interaction with others.

The relationship between coping and online forum engagement is further explained by SET and COR theory. Through SET the engagement can be understood through the individuals weighing the benefits of participation such as the sense of belonging or self recognition against the costs which may include the cognitive effort or the emotional pain of recalling traumatic experiences (Zhao & Du, 2018). When the perceived benefits of social support outweigh these costs, the user commits to the community as a consistent coping mechanism (Zhang & Liu, 2022).

Online forums can also serve as a key resource that may reduce further resource loss. By receiving validation and informational resources from other users when the need is highest the users can protect their remaining psychological capital and prevent the onset of burnout (Zhang & Liu, 2022).

This intersection is defined by a reciprocal healing process, where individuals initially seeking support often transition into providers of assistance. This helper therapy principle suggests that the responder's experience of helping others also gives them their own therapeutic benefits which can reinforce their own resilience and sense of control (Prescott et al., 2017).

2.7 Analytical Framework

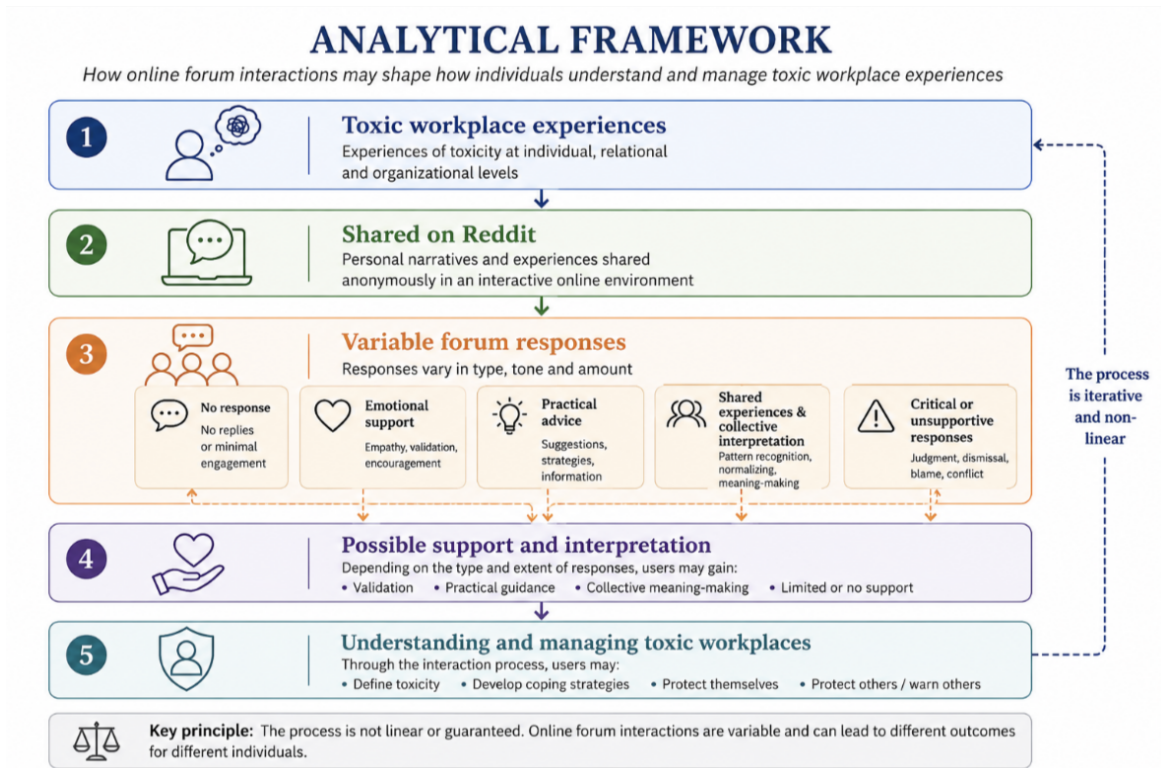


Figure 2. Analytical framework of the study

Figure 2 illustrates the analytical framework guiding the study. The model shows how experiences of toxic workplaces are first articulated through users' personal narratives on Reddit, and how these narratives may then be responded to, interpreted, and developed through interaction with other users.

The framework connects three analytical dimensions: how toxic workplaces are defined, how users cope with such experiences, and how Reddit functions as an online forum for support and meaning-making. Reddit is therefore not treated only as a source of data, but also as an interactional context where experiences of toxicity may be validated, challenged, or transformed into shared knowledge.

The model also recognizes that Reddit discussions vary in the type and extent of responses they generate. Some posts receive extensive emotional support, practical advice, and collective interpretation, while others receive fewer or less supportive responses. The analytical focus is therefore not only on whether support is present, but also how different forms of interaction shape the way toxic workplace experiences are understood and coped with.

The framework should not be understood as a strict chronological or predetermined model. Instead, it functions as an analytical logic for understanding how individual experiences, coping strategies, and Reddit-based interactions are connected in the study.

3. Method

This chapter details the methodological framework and epistemological approach adopted in the study. It also presents the procedures for data collection and data analysis, discusses the quality of the study, and outlines the ethical considerations guiding the research process.

3.1 Netnography

The methodological framework for this study is netnography, a qualitative research approach adapted to the study of social interaction in digital environments. Rooted in traditional ethnography, netnography enables researchers to study online communities, user interactions, and digital traces in their natural context. The digital traces of user interaction can provide insights into behavioral patterns, emotional states and community dynamics (Bhatt et al., 2026).

Netnography is especially relevant when studying sensitive or stigmatized topics, since anonymity online may make participants more open than in personal interviews (Costello et al., 2017). Since toxic workplaces are a sensitive subject, employees may enter a “lockdown mode” where they are cautious to act and may refuse to speak up in traditional research settings due to fear of retaliation or the oppressive nature of the environment (Khasawneh et al., 2024).

By utilizing netnography, this study was able to access experience-based and self expressed narratives from users discussing toxic workplaces and how they support one another. Such insights may be difficult to obtain through traditional methods due to social pressure and

constrained communication (Khasawneh et al., 2024; Bhatt et al., 2026). Platforms like Reddit facilitate the emergence of collective thinking within a group, where social structures shape how individuals express their emotional distress (Bhatt et al., 2026). These digital environments function as "topic-based communities" where shared meanings and norms are negotiated in real time (Medvedev et al., 2019).

The methodological strengths and limitations of netnography, including platform bias, self-reported data, unverifiable user identities, and researcher reflexivity, are discussed further in Section 3.6.

3.2 Epistemology

Because this study explores how Reddit users understand and cope with toxic workplace experiences, a hermeneutic epistemology is particularly appropriate. Such experiences are subjective and grounded in personal interpretation, making a hermeneutic approach suitable for studying how individuals understand, describe, and give meaning to their experiences (Allwood & Erikson, 2017).

Within a hermeneutic perspective, interpretation is shaped by the researcher's own background, assumptions, and pre-understanding (Allwood & Erikson, 2017; Lammi, 2026). Gadamer's idea of a "horizon of understanding" emphasizes that interpretation always takes place from a particular standpoint, rather than from a neutral position (Mason & May, 2019). These pre-understandings may influence both the formulation of research questions and the interpretation of the empirical material (Allwood & Erikson, 2017). In this study, this means that the analysis of Reddit posts and comments is shaped by the researchers' interpretive position, while also being continuously challenged and refined through engagement with the empirical material.

In practice, the analytical process can be understood through the "hermeneutic circle", where understanding develops through a continuous movement between parts and whole (Allwood & Erikson, 2017). In this study, this meant moving between individual Reddit comments, broader discussion threads, emerging themes, and the wider context of toxic workplaces. Through this

iterative process, individual expressions were interpreted in relation to broader patterns in the data, while the overall understanding of the phenomenon was continuously refined.

This epistemological position also means that findings should be understood as context-dependent interpretations rather than universal or entirely objective truths (Allwood & Erikson, 2017). The study seeks to generate knowledge about how toxic workplace experiences are articulated, interpreted, and coped with in Reddit discussions. In this way, the hermeneutic approach aligns with the study's netnographic design and its focus on meaning-making in naturally occurring digital interactions (Costello et al., 2017).

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected from Reddit. Since Reddit is an international platform, the collected data is not limited to a specific country, but reflects a broader range of experiences of toxic workplaces. This means that the findings should be understood as contextually diverse rather than tied to a single labor market or cultural setting.

Reddit was selected because it enables the observation of social interaction in naturally occurring online environments (Costello et al., 2017). Users can also share experiences anonymously, which is especially valuable when studying sensitive topics such as toxic workplace environments.

Interaction on Reddit is regulated through both platform-wide policies and community-specific rules (Reddit, n.d.) which shape how content is produced and shared. These structures mean that Reddit data is not entirely unrestricted, but is shaped by platform rules, moderation, user-driven mechanisms such as upvotes and downvotes. The methodological implications of these platform dynamics are discussed further in Section 3.6.

Relevant posts were identified using the search term "toxic workplaces". To ensure the collection of "deep data", content rich in context and personal meaning, the selection followed Kozinets' (2010) requirements for data to be relevant, active, and interactive as well as substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich. Only posts containing detailed personal narratives and community

interaction were included, as these provide the thick description necessary for qualitative trustworthiness (Kozinets, 2020). Conversely, posts that were very brief, lacked engagement, or consisted of memes and images were excluded to ensure data-richness (Kozinets, 2010, 2020).

The final dataset consisted of 112 main posts and 1,914 associated comments, all of which were collected and analyzed. These constituted the empirical data of the study.

The study was limited to posts published within the past year, as of April 13, 2026. Reddit was chosen over platforms such as Glassdoor or Vault because Reddit's anonymous and dialogue-driven structure was considered more suitable for analyzing both individual narratives and interaction between users. The methodological implications of using Reddit and the search term "toxic workplaces" are discussed further in Section 3.5.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common methods for analyzing qualitative data and aims to "identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) in data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2017). This study is based on Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis, which is theoretically flexible and can be combined with both inductive and deductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

In this study, thematic analysis was conducted inductively. This means that the codes and themes were not predetermined before the analysis began, but were developed through close engagement with the empirical material. The Reddit posts and comments were first read openly in order to identify recurring expressions, meanings, and patterns. Initial codes were then created from the data and later grouped into broader themes and refined. Although the themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to previous research and the study's theoretical framework, the coding process itself was grounded in the empirical material. Since thematic analysis is theoretically flexible, this does not mean that the analysis is non-theoretical. Rather, thematic analysis does not prescribe a specific theoretical starting point, while still requiring reflexivity regarding the assumptions that shape analysis and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Thematic analysis was suitable for this study because it can address different types of research questions, including questions concerning people's experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon, as well as questions about how a phenomenon is constructed in a specific context. The method is also applicable to different types of qualitative data, including extensive text-based material (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2017). Since this study is based on Reddit posts and comments, thematic analysis made it possible to analyze both how individuals describe experiences of toxic workplaces and how these experiences are discussed, interpreted, and given meaning in interaction with others.

The analysis was conducted through Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (see figure 3).

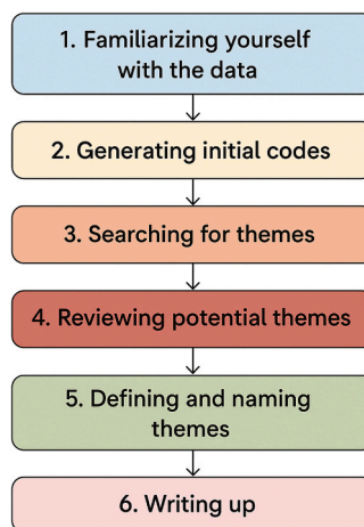


Figure 3. Six steps of thematic analysis Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)

Initially, a deeper understanding of the data was created through repeated readings of posts and comments, where initial reflections and ideas were noted. Thereafter, a systematic coding was conducted where relevant text segments were assigned descriptive codes based on their content and meaning.

In the next step, it was examined how these codes could be grouped into broader themes, which symbolized recurring patterns in how individuals described, interpreted and coped with their experiences of toxic workplaces. These themes were examined and adjusted regularly to ensure that they were internally coherent and clearly distinguished from each other.

Furthermore, the themes were defined and named, with a focus on presenting a coherent understanding of the data. In this process, an overall narrative was also developed which enabled an analysis of how experiences of toxic workplaces are expressed and given meaning in Reddit discussions. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of these themes, which constitute the foundation for the study's empirical results and further interpretation.

The study does not aim to determine whether a workplace is “objectively toxic” according to a fixed checklist. Instead, the analysis focuses on users' own descriptions and interpretations of experiences they perceive as toxic. The data is therefore treated as expressions of meaning-making rather than as objective verification of workplace conditions.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

A fundamental part of research is conducting it with ethical awareness in order to ensure fairness, transparency, and respect for participants, while maintaining the integrity of the research process (Bhatt et al., 2026). Within internet-mediated research, Adams (2022) highlights three ethical concerns: informed consent, anonymity, and the management of sensitive information.

Following Roberts (2015) and Eysenbach and Till (2001), consent can be waived in non-intrusive internet research when the data is anonymized at an early stage and no harm is posed to participants. In this study, informed consent was not obtained from individual users, as the data consisted of publicly available Reddit posts and comments. However, the study recognizes that publicly accessible data may still be experienced as private by users, particularly when sensitive workplace experiences are discussed. To respect this environment and avoid influencing the discussions, a passive analysis (lurking) was conducted, meaning that we

observed existing interactions without participating in the communication (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

The sensitivity of the content was also considered. The study recognizes that individuals sharing narratives of toxic workplaces may be in vulnerable situations, and anonymity was therefore treated as an ethical priority. To do so any personal identifiers such as usernames, gender or specific geographical locations were systematically removed. Reddit users also use pseudonyms, and their offline identities are not known to the researchers. The protection of third parties was also important, including organizations, managers, and colleagues mentioned in the posts. Since the narratives may include potentially damaging descriptions or accusations of harmful behavior, all names of companies and individuals were removed, as well as other information that could make them identifiable. This was done to reduce the risk of reputational harm and legal consequences for parties who could not provide their own version of events.

Another central ethical priority was mitigating the risk of digital traceability in line with the importance of anonymity. Eysenbach and Till (2001) warn that quoting the exact words of a participant (verbatim) may compromise confidentiality, as they can be searchable and traced back to the original user. To reduce this risk, “cloaking” was used, meaning that quotes were paraphrased rather than presented verbatim while preserving their original meaning (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). This measure was crucial because exact phrases from online forums may be listed by search engines and could expose a user’s profile or post history.

The use of data was also conducted in accordance with the platform’s publicly available policies and terms of use (Reddit, n.d.), ensuring that no data was accessed or used in violation of user agreements. Finally, as the study is grounded in an interpretive approach, the researchers had an ethical responsibility to represent users’ experiences as accurately and respectfully as possible, while acknowledging that the analysis remains an interpretation of publicly available online narratives.

3.6 Quality of the Study

Since this study is based on qualitative, interpretive, and netnographic research design, the quality of the study is discussed in relation to transparency in the research process, credibility of interpretation, reflexivity, and awareness of methodological limitations. The study does not aim to produce statistically generalizable findings, but rather to provide a grounded and context-sensitive understanding of how individuals describe, interpret, and cope with experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through repeated readings of the Reddit posts and comments, inductive coding, and continuous comparison between codes, themes, and empirical examples. The analysis was based on recurring patterns across a large dataset rather than on isolated examples. Both authors were involved in discussing and refining codes and themes, which helped reduce the risk that the findings reflected only on researcher's interpretation. This is also in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on the importance of researcher reflection and transparency in thematic analysis.

At the same time, the credibility of the findings must be understood in relation to the nature of Reddit data. The material consists of self-reported experiences that cannot be independently verified and may therefore involve selective representations. The employer's perspective is not available, and it is also not possible to verify user identities or determine whether all accounts reflect real workplace experience. This means that the data cannot be treated as objective accounts of workplace conditions. However, this is consistent with the study's hermeneutic approach, where the focus lies on how experiences are articulated, interpreted, and given meaning rather than on their objective validity (Allwood & Erikson, 2017).

The study's transparency is strengthened by providing a detailed description of the research process. The method chapter describes the choice of Reddit as empirical context, the use of the search term "toxic workplaces", the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final dataset, and the steps of the thematic analysis. The analysis chapter also presents the coding structure and coding frequencies in order to make the analytical process more visible to the reader. A full context of frequencies and the specific content of each subtheme is also available in appendix A. However,

since thematic analysis is interpretive, another researcher may not produce identical themes. The aim is therefore not exact replicability, but transparency and coherence in how the analysis was conducted.

A methodological strength of netnography is that it provides access to a large volume of naturally occurring data and makes it possible to study niche or geographically dispersed groups that may be difficult to reach through traditional fieldwork (Costello et al., 2017). By observing interactions as they occur spontaneously online, the study also minimizes the observer effect that may arise in face-to-face research settings where participants may adapt their responses to the researcher's presence (Costello et al., 2017). At the same time, the large volume of user-generated data creates analytical complexity. While it provides a rich empirical foundation, it also requires systematic coding and careful interpretation in order to identify meaningful patterns without oversimplifying the data (Bhatt et al., 2026).

Reflexivity was central to the quality of the study. In netnography, the researcher acts as an online interpreter of existing digital traces, which requires awareness of how the researcher's own background and assumptions may shape the interpretation of the material (Hanell & Severson, 2023). Since both authors have an academic background in human resources and management, there is a risk that the data could be interpreted through assumptions related to our previous knowledge. To address this, we engaged in reflexive discussions throughout the research process, questioned emerging interpretations, and compared them with the empirical material.

Several biases must also be considered. First, the use of the search term "toxic workplaces" may have resulted in a dataset dominated by users who already framed their experiences as toxic. This may have caused the study to miss relevant discussions where similar experiences were described using other terms. However, attempts to use related search terms led to substantial overlap, as Reddit's search function also captured relevant keywords embedded in subreddit descriptions and thread explanations. Expanding the search further would therefore have created a considerably larger and less manageable dataset without necessarily adding new analytical

dimensions. The search term should therefore be understood as both practical delimitation and a potential source of selection bias.

Reddit's platform dynamics may also have influenced the data. Online forums are shaped by platform-specific structures, user-generated content, and community interaction, which influence how discussions develop and which perspectives become visible (Costello et al., 2017; Medvedev et al., 2019). Platform-wide policies, subreddit rules, moderation practices, upvotes, downvotes, and community expectations may affect which posts and comments receive attention and how users formulate their experiences. These dynamics may strengthen the credibility of expressed experiences through social validation within each community, but not through formal verification. At the same time, they may also amplify certain narratives while marginalizing others. Online communities may also involve co-rumination, where repeated negative experiences are reinforced through collective discussion, or groupthink, where consensus is prioritized over divergent perspectives (Bhatt et al., 2026; Medvedev et al., 2019). For this reason, the data is treated as situated online meaning-making rather than as direct access to objective workplace realities.

The choice of Reddit rather than platforms such as Glassdoor or Vault also affects the character of the data. Reddit's anonymous and dialogue-driven structure made it suitable for studying interaction, support, and collective meaning-making. In contrast, review-based platforms are often structured around more static evaluations of employers and provide less opportunity for extended peer-to-peer discussion. At the same time, choosing Reddit means that the findings reflect the norms, affordances, and user culture of this specific platform, rather than online workplace discussions in general.

A final quality consideration concerns the use of paraphrased quotes. As discussed in the ethical considerations, paraphrasing was used to reduce the risk of digital traceability and protect user anonymity. This strengthens the ethical quality of the study, but it also means that the excerpts presented in the analysis are not exact word-for-word quotations. To address this, the paraphrased quotes were kept as close as possible to the original meaning while removing or altering details that could make users traceable. This approach is consistent with ethical concerns

in internet-mediated research, where exact quotations may make participants searchable and compromise anonymity (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Overall, the quality of this study lies in its transparent research process, large and relevant dataset, inductive coding, collaborative interpretation, and reflexive awareness of methodological limitations. The findings should be understood as context-dependent interpretations of Reddit discussions rather than statistically generalizable conclusions about all toxic workplaces.

3.7 Use of AI Tools

In this study, AI-based tools, specifically ChatGPT and NotebookLM, were used as supportive instruments during the research and writing process. The use of AI was limited to assisting with specific tasks and did not replace the author's own analysis, interpretation, or critical reasoning.

AI tools were primarily used for language-related support, including translation between English and Swedish, as well as refining phrasing and improving clarity in written sections. In addition, AI was used to generate preliminary summaries of academic articles in order to facilitate an initial overview of the literature. These summaries served only as a starting point and were subsequently reviewed, verified, and interpreted by the authors.

Furthermore, AI was used to assist in identifying relevant sections within academic texts to use as a starting point of the reading, thereby supporting the efficiency of the literature review process. Visual elements, such as conceptual figures included in the study, were also generated with the assistance of AI tools.

All AI-generated outputs were critically evaluated, and validated by the authors to ensure accuracy, relevance, and alignment with the study's purpose. Consequently, all final interpretations, analysis, and conclusions presented in this study are solely the responsibility of the authors.

4. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the empirical data collected from Reddit. The three main themes were developed inductively from the empirical material and are presented in relation to the study's research questions. The first theme, defining toxic workplaces, examines how users describe and make sense of workplace toxicity at individual, relational, and organizational levels. The second theme, coping strategies, focuses on how users describe ways of managing toxic workplace experiences before, during, and after exposure to such environments. The third theme, the role of Reddit as an online forum, analyzes how Reddit functions as a space for emotional support, practical advice, and collective meaning-making.

The three main themes were developed inductively from the empirical material rather than being predetermined before the coding process. After the coding process, the themes were organized in relation to the study's research questions in order to structure the presentation of the analysis.

Figure 4 provides an overview of the coding structure and shows how often each code occurred across the collected comments. The frequencies show which codes appeared most often in the collected Reddit comments, but they should not be interpreted as statistically representative of toxic workplaces in general. Since comments often contained several relevant dimensions, a single comment could be assigned more than one code. For full context of frequencies and the specific content of each subtheme, see appendix A. Together, the themes and coding frequencies show how toxic workplaces are described, coped with, and collectively interpreted in Reddit discussions.

Furthermore, findings will be presented below in quotation marks. However, as noted in subchapter 3.5 and 3.6 about quality and ethical consideration, the excerpts presented in quotation marks are paraphrased versions of the original posts and comments to protect user privacy, but are formatted as quotations for reader readability.

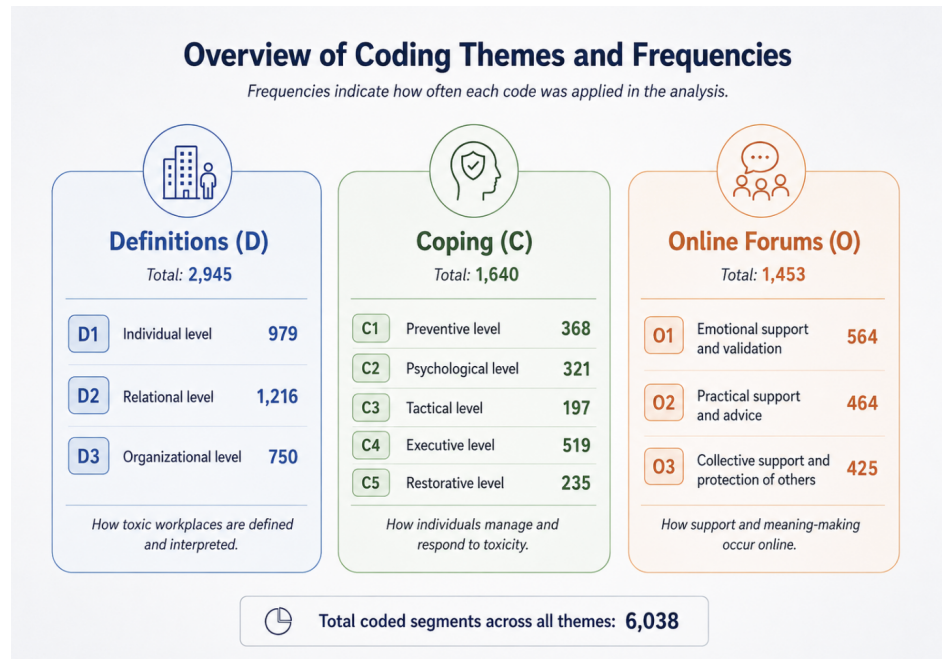


Figure 4. Overview of coding structure and code frequencies

4.1 Main theme 1: Defining Toxic Workplaces

The first main theme consists of three analytical levels; individual, relational, and organizational levels. These levels show whether toxicity was primarily described through personal and emotional consequences, interpersonal dynamics, or broader organizational structures and practices, as illustrated in Table 1 below. For full context of the analytical process, frequencies, coding structures, sub-codes and empirical examples see appendix A.

Table 1. Coding structure for defining toxic workplaces

Code	Level	Core description
D1	Individual Level	Work-life imbalance, lack of respect and appreciation, workplace anxiety, and work dominating personal life.
D2	Relational Level	Family-like culture traps, workplace gossip, information withholding, public reprimands, and blame-shifting.
D3	Organizational Level	Role overload, micromanagement, unrealistic demands, lack of organizational support, and high staff turnover.

4.1.1 Individual Level

At the individual level, users described toxic workplaces as something that affected them personally and emotionally. Comments about anxiety before work, poor work-life balance, lack of respect, lack of appreciation, and the feeling that work had taken over their lives show that toxic workplaces were experienced as affecting individuals' well-being, self-esteem, and daily life.

A recurring expression of this was that the negative impact of work extended beyond working hours. For example, one user writes: *“Realizing that I spent half of my weekend filled with stress and anxiety about having to go back to work on Monday morning”*. Another user similarly describes a workplace that *“had no respect for after hours or weekend boundaries”*. These comments show how toxicity is not only experienced during working hours, but also intrudes into the individual's private life and limits the possibility of recovery. The lack of respect for personal time also suggests a broader lack of appreciation for the individual as a person beyond their work role. Therefore, the workplace can be understood as toxic not only because of specific actions, but because of the long-term strain it creates for the individual.

Furthermore, one user writes:

“I survived 3 years in a place that made me feel invisible. The day I stopped trying to prove my worth to people who'd already decided not to see it, I started spending that energy on getting out instead”.

This shows how toxicity at the individual level is not only about temporary dissatisfaction, but about a gradual depletion of personal resources.

Moreover, another user writes: *“I've been in a toxic environment. It's called toxic for a reason, it truly destroys you from the inside both physically and mentally”*. This description captures the core of how toxicity is understood at the individual level: as an experience that affects the whole individual, not only their performance or satisfaction at work. Here, toxicity appears as

something more than a collection of negative workplace behaviors; it is described as a process that gradually harms the body, psyche, and self-esteem.

Overall, the individual level shows that users define toxicity through its consequences for everyday life, emotional well-being, bodily strain, and self-worth. Rather than describing toxicity only through specific workplace behaviors, users often make sense of it through how the workplace affects them personally over time.

4.1.2 Relational Level

At the relational level, users describe toxic workplaces through social relationships. Comments about workplace gossip, exclusion from information, lack of respect, social exclusion, public scolding, and being thrown under the bus describe how toxicity is experienced in environments where everyday interactions are characterized by distrust, exclusion, humiliation, and competition.

For example, one user writes:

“Yup. Have not experienced a non toxic workplace yet or a workplace where your coworkers aren't CONSTANTLY competing with you. It is the norm because unfortunately, most people lack emotional intelligence which puts everyone in danger”.

The comment suggests that toxicity is understood as a recurring and almost normalized feature of working life, rather than as an exception connected to a single workplace. By describing constant competition between coworkers, the user presents the workplace as an environment where relationships are characterized by distrust and uncertainty. The phrase *“puts everyone in danger”* further reinforces the image of the workplace as socially and emotionally unsafe. The comment shows toxicity as a broader climate in which competition and a lack of emotional capacity affect the individual's sense of safety and well-being.

Furthermore, another user writes:

“Biggest red flags: Upper management treats lower management like garbage in front of the newly hired employee. Or, that same upper management treats the new possible employee with an authoritarian and unpleasant demeanor during the job interview. If you see those signs you are on the door of a toxic workplace”.

The comment suggests that users describe toxic workplaces through authoritarian behavior, being thrown under the bus, and public scolding.

This is also reflected in another user’s description: *“For me, it was when my manager literally blamed me for something that was completely out of my control, right in front of the whole team”*. Here, toxicity is described through public blame and humiliation. The issue is not that the employee is blamed, but that this happens in front of others, making the interaction socially exposing. This shows how toxic relations can be created through situations where power is exercised publicly and where the individual’s dignity and sense of safety are undermined.

A very frequently recurring description of toxic workplaces concerns “family-like” workplace culture. This does not reflect “family” in a positive sense, but rather workplaces that use the family metaphor to create loyalty, blurred boundaries, and feelings of guilt. For example, one user writes: *“The moment we are a family, I am out. My past experience used that as code for abuse and overwork.”* When users describe family-like workplace cultures as toxic, this can be understood as critique of relational norms where loyalty and personal sacrifice are expected, but where support, respect, and exchange are lacking.

Overall, the relational level shows that users define toxic workplaces through everyday interactions where trust, respect, and safety are undermined. Toxicity is described through concrete situations, such as being excluded, publicly criticized, undermined, or forced into competition with coworkers. This shows that toxicity is created and maintained through everyday relationships in the workplace.

4.1.3 Organizational Level

At the organizational level, users describe toxic workplaces as environments where toxicity is embedded in structures, organizational conditions, and management practices. Comments about unrealistic demands, lack of support, high employee turnover, multiple roles, micromanagement, and unclear responsibilities point to toxicity as an organizational pattern. Rather than being understood only as individual experiences or relational conflicts, toxicity is described as something that is created and maintained through the way the organization functions.

For example, one user writes:

“I started a job after 1 year of unemployment and it's been 11 months since I started. It's just as toxic as my old one. I got no training and my boss makes my manager review every piece of work I do and I have no autonomy on explaining my work”.

This comment shows how toxicity at the organizational level can emerge through a combination of insufficient support and excessive control. The user describes not receiving adequate training, while every task is reviewed and the opportunity to explain or take responsibility for their own work is limited. Therefore, the toxicity does not lie solely in the actions of an individual manager, but in an organizational way of working where the individual is both left without resources and controlled in detail.

Furthermore, one user writes:

“I've experienced almost every one of these. Especially the fake praise for overwork while getting zero support when I struggled. Took me way too long to realize it wasn't normal”.

This comment shows how toxicity can arise when an organization encourages overwork through praise, while concrete support is lacking when the individual begins to struggle with their workload. This combination makes overwork appear normal, and even desirable, within the organization, while the individual's need for support disappears. The fact that the user did not

understand that this was abnormal until after a long time shows how organizational norms can contribute to the normalization of toxicity.

High employee turnover is very often described by users as a sign of organizational toxicity. One user describes this as “*Noticing a high turnover rate very quickly*”. Users describe how many employees leave the workplace, or how new employees quit quickly, which makes turnover appear as a recurring organizational pattern rather than an isolated event. In this way, high turnover becomes a signal that toxicity may be embedded in the organization’s structure, culture, or management practices.

In summary, the organizational level shows that users define toxicity as embedded in how the workplace is structured and managed. Unrealistic demands, lack of support, excessive control, unclear roles, and high employee turnover are described as recurring organizational patterns that make toxicity persistent over time.

4.2 Main theme 2: Coping Strategies

The second main theme consists of five coping stages: preventive, psychological, tactical, executive, and restorative. These stages show how coping was described across different phases of toxic workplace experiences, as illustrated in Table 2 below. For full context of the analytical process, frequencies, coding structures, sub-codes and empirical examples see appendix A.

Table 2. Coding structure for coping strategies

Code	Stage	Core description
C1	Preventive Stage (Before)	Relying on intuitive risk assessment, scrutinizing corporate branding, observing staff behavior and body language, and using interviews to screen employers.
C2	Psychological Stage (During)	Practicing emotional detachment (grey rocking), withdrawing extra effort to conserve energy (quiet quitting), and establishing strict professional boundaries.
C3	Tactical Stage (During)	Maintaining a systematic paper trail to counter

		gaslighting, engaging strategically with HR or unions, and utilizing employment contracts to assert legal rights.
C4	Executive Stage (Exit)	Executing planned job transitions, resigning immediately due to severe health tolls, and engaging in coordinated departures or transparent exit signaling.
C5	Restorative Stage (After)	Seeking psychological rehabilitation, obtaining validation and leveraging past experiences to calibrate future workplace boundaries.

4.2.1 Preventive Stage (Before)

At the preventive stage, users describe coping as something that begins before entering a workplace. Rather than only responding to toxicity after it occurs, users describe strategies for identifying warning signs during recruitment and job search processes.

Many users emphasize the importance of trusting one's "gut feeling" and employing pattern recognition during recruitment. One user explains that their mind has *"developed a pattern recognition"* for toxicity that is hard to describe on paper, but is triggered by a manager's "vibe" or the team's hesitant body language. Another user describes the physical workplace and employees' behavior as warning signs: *"Silence. I avoid silence. Always look at the staff... when a place is silent, people are stiff, it usually means things aren't comfortable"*. Other users similarly emphasize intuition, for example through advice such as: *"Your gut always knows first, ALWAYS listen to your gut"*.

Users also encouraged others to use the job interview to "cross examine" the workplace. In this context, employee turnover becomes a preventive indicator rather than only an organizational symptom. Users gave tips on what to ask, employee turnover and how they handle conflict being the most prominent ones, and how to interpret the answers. For example, one common strategy that appeared was to ask in interviews how long team members have been there, a lack of mid-senior staff is seen as a sign that *"the culture is so corrosive that people flee faster than recruitment can keep up"*. Another user suggests asking specifically *"why the person I'm replacing left"*, noting that vague or critical responses are major warning signs. Another user

expressed that how they answer questions also serves as a critical indicator saying that a major red flag is *“high turnover that they casually laugh off during the interview”*. This indicates that they don't even take the issue seriously and the chance of change happening is low.

Another recurring preventive strategy is the skeptical interpretation of "family" rhetoric during recruitment. While “family-like” culture was described earlier as a part of how users define toxic relational environments, it also appears here as something users learn to recognize in advance. Users note that bragging about being described as a "family" during recruitment often *“translates to no boundaries and guilt trips when you try to take your time off”*. The "we are family" talk is described as a *“loyalty trap”* where professional boundaries are blurred to make it harder for employees to demand respect or fair working hours.

The data also showed that users frequently identify specific phrases in job advertisements and interviews as coded signals for a toxic culture. For example, the sentence *“ready to hit the ground running”* is interpreted as a lack of training combined with unrealistic expectations. Another example that stood out was requirements for a "real go-getter" since it is seen as a way to normalize "limitless work" and taking responsibility for tasks outside of one's role. One of the most frequently expressed was the phrase *“we wear a lot of hats around here”* which they identified as a code for being totally disorganized and expecting long hours and weekend work.

4.2.2 Psychological Stage (During)

At the psychological stage, users describe coping strategies aimed at protecting themselves while still remaining in the toxic workplace. These strategies involve emotional distancing, reduced engagement, and attempts to limit exposure to toxic interactions.

One frequently mentioned strategy was grey rocking, understood here as a form of emotional self-protection through *“practised disengagement”* or a *“minimisation of contact”* intended to prevent others from provoking the reaction they are seeking. They advise individuals in toxic situations to *“not show emotion back”*, *“not stand out in any way”*, and *“do not say more than you need to”*. The goal is to become *“so uninteresting, neutral, and boring that they get no emotional response from you”*. Another user captures the logic behind this strategy by stating:

“Don’t give them the satisfaction/power they’re yearning for; you starve them”. Together, these comments show how grey rocking functions as emotional self-protection, where users attempt to reduce the power of toxic interactions by withholding emotional availability.

Another recurring coping strategy was quiet quitting, understood here as a form of reduced emotional and work-related investment used to preserve energy in a toxic work environment. Users describe this not as laziness, but as a necessary survival skill and a form of self-respect. One user explains: *“Quiet quitting mentally while updating your resume is basically a survival skill at that point”*. The strategy involves to *“care 50% less about whatever they say”* and stop trying to fix the organizational failure by yourself: *“Stop taking upon yourself to fix the dynamic”* and refusing to continue *“walking on eggshells every day”*.

Another coping mechanism to stand out was to draw a sharp line between the work role and the private self. Users emphasize viewing the job as a tool: *“treat this job as a short-term situation”* and see it as a financier of future freedom while planning an exit. This requires a mental separation: *“Implement an internal separation... your employment is a transaction, not an identity”*. Users encourage each other to lower their emotional investment and direct their energy elsewhere. They also encourage setting boundaries such as *“blocking the owner when off the clock”* and *“limit exposure... to stop you getting pulled in”* to negativity loops.

Lastly, users described tactics to shut out the negative environment and create a mental barrier. By shutting the environment out using small rituals like listening to music and trying to ignore the surroundings they aim to remain a bystander, one user described it as *“You stay sane by refusing to become part of it”*.

4.2.3 Tactical Stage (During)

When navigating a toxic work environment, individuals' coping strategies frequently extend beyond internal, purely psychological defense mechanisms. This subtheme highlights how employees shift from simply enduring the stress to taking practical, strategic steps to protect their well-being and take back control over their situation.

A primary tactical response identified is moving away from verbal conversations to written communication. Users emphasize the necessity of self-preservation through logging: *"Oh, and document... I'm creating a paper trail and documenting patterns....just in case"* and *"do everything via email so you have documentation"*. The documentation serves as a "reality anchor" to maintain the individual's perception of the truth when management denies past events. Some users go further and are encouraging others to save the documentation privately: *"Keep separate documentation in your own files... because one day you might not have access to it"*. The goal is to move from "he-said-she-said" to objective facts: *"Having actual receipts changed EVERYTHING"*.

Another reason expressed for this is so that the blame can't be shifted in a later stage. Users describe using technical tools and specific communication routines to secure that the context of the communication is captured and saved. For example, the practice of making sure that what was said orally becomes written down in a follow up email: *"Follow up important conversations with casual 'just to confirm' emails that recap what was discussed and any deadlines mentioned"*.

The data further illustrates that speaking up is rarely encouraged by users. One user writes: *"It's always been like this. We just didn't talk about it. If you did and the boss heard about it, you were out of a job"*. This illustrates how users often describe that attempt of speaking up often leads to retaliation or termination rather than organizational improvement.

The shared experiences of the users also highlights a profound distrust of Human Resources with users advising others to view the department as a tactical hurdle rather than a source of support. HR is described as a corporate shield: *"HR will not defend you, they are there to protect the C-suite and shareholders"* and that reporting a manager can often *"paint a target on your back"*. Reporting to HR is suggested only as a tactical move to create a counter-record: *"They already have their bs paper trail on you so get yours!"*. By doing this it will create a "legal shield" against future retaliation.

A final element of this subtheme involves using contractual and statutory rights to draw a hard line against unreasonable demands. Users describe a shift toward a purely transactional mindset, where the employment contract is no longer viewed as a bond of loyalty, but strictly as a legal agreement that defines what they will and will not do. Advice such as *"don't ask for leave, tell them you aren't in... Read your contract and do just what you need"* illustrates how formal rules can become a protective boundary against unreasonable demands.

Overall, formal and tactical self-defense shows how users attempt to regain control by turning uncertain or verbal experiences into documented, structured, and defensible forms of evidence.

4.2.4 Executive Stage (Exit)

When users described the work environment as no longer possible to endure or change, exit emerged as a central coping strategy. In these cases, leaving the workplace was not always presented as an immediate decision, but often as something that had to be planned, timed, and balanced against financial and practical constraints.

A prominent strategy found is treating the resignation as a professional project rather than an emotional impulse, often driven by the need for financial stability. A lot of users expressed a want to leave the workplace but they were in need of financial stability and couldn't resign before securing another job. Other users then encourage them to *"Start looking quietly while keeping your current job for financial security"*. They emphasized the shift from wishing to leave to active execution: *"Treating the exit like a project with milestones instead of just a wish"*. Users also encourage others that having a plan serves as a source of resilience: *"Working on an exit strategy gives you some light at the end of the tunnel"*. Others said that what had helped them was to set a personal threshold: *"Set a personal threshold... like 2 to 3 more hostile incidents... so the decision is rule based instead of emotional"*. The main idea was to avoid feeling trapped by setting clear boundaries, which actively helped people overcome the feeling of being completely powerless.

However, many users also expressed that in some cases they couldn't make a strategic exit, they just had to get out. One user described physical and panic-driven reactions to the environment: *"I*

emailed my resignation this morning through stifled gags and a panic attack". Other users recount reaching a sudden limit: *"I just packed my stuff and left... I just couldn't deal with the disrespect anymore"*. This kind of exit is however also legitimized by other users that encourage them by saying for example: *"A choice for your well-being is never a wrong decision"*.

In the final act of leaving, users describe using the formal resignation process to reclaim their narrative or signal the systemic issues they are leaving behind. A common tactic is the noisy exit, where the truth is finally spoken: *"I wrote a scathing exit letter... specifically calling out my boss by name as the reason I was leaving"*. Collective action is also used to maximize impact: *"We're planning on giving notice hours apart just to make it extra painful to our boss"*. Others however advise a calm exit to prevent retaliation: *"Just lie through your teeth - 'it's been a pleasure working with you'... don't say anything that might provoke retaliation"*.

The data also shows that once the decision is made, the individual mentally checks out even before the final physical exit. They describe the liberating effect of this mental shift: *"I feel lighter... the decision was instant but the execution took patience"*.

4.2.5 Restorative Stage (After)

The last subtheme within coping appeared since a lot of the support and tips given was after an individual had left the toxic workplace. The focus shifts from survival and exit to the long-term restoration of the individual's psychological and professional identity.

Users describe a state of emotional exhaustion following them leaving: *"In the first two or three weeks after I quit, I was so exhausted I was sleeping 14-15 hours a day"*. The recovery process is characterized by a gradual return to a baseline state of well-being: *"It took about 6 months before I felt like I had my life back"*. Others emphasize the depth of the damage, noting that *"It took me about 2 years to recover emotionally/from burnout"*.

A central theme in the data is the realization of how the toxic environment fundamentally altered the individual's perception of normal professional behavior. One user reflects on the internalised conditioning: *"It wasn't just about quitting the job, it was about finally seeing how much I had*

been programmed to 'take it' no matter what". The process of healing is described as "dismantling those factory settings they install in us". Individuals recount the loss of self that occurred during employment in the toxic workplace: "Toxic doesn't always roar. Sometimes it whispers until you forget who you were before". Recovery involves reclaiming one's identity from the requirement to constantly please someone who can't get pleased: "I feel like myself again, not like someone trying to appease someone else who never gets enough".

The narratives highlight how physical symptoms that were frequently dismissed while on the job become undeniable evidence of both the initial toxicity and the body's gradual recovery. Users report the sudden cease of stress-induced illness: *"My migraines have come to a screeching halt. It's been great!"* Others describe how they crash when the survival adrenaline disappears: *"It felt like being a hamster on a wheel then all of a sudden just crashing because the adrenaline is not there".*

After leaving the toxic workplace individuals use online communities to reframe their experiences, moving from a sense of personal failure to a realization of systemic dysfunction. Users often describe a period where they finally accept that their stress reactions like frustration or shutting down were normal responses to an abnormal environment. The exit is retrospectively validated as the only rational choice: *"When I finally left mine, almost immediately my life improved. My only regret is not doing it sooner".* Users find satisfaction in seeing the organization's subsequent failures, viewing it as a confirmation of their own value: *"When you leave and the house of cards falls, it's proven that you were the foundation, not the problem".* They expressed that to share their experiences both reduced their isolation and acted as warnings to others. Responses such as *"I don't feel so alone after reading that"* and *"hearing your experience makes me feel less insane"*.

Finally, the users expressed that their recovery process also involved reframing their negative experiences as lessons learned for the future. They describe how to use it as a guide to set uncompromising boundaries in new roles. One user noted that *"every toxic experience has calibrated your inner compass... your future health depends on you refusing to settle for anything less"*. They report having a heightened ability to recognize red flags early, such as *"authoritarian*

managers" or "family rhetoric," promising themselves never to "*set themselves on fire*" for a job again.

4.3 Main theme 3: The Role of Reddit as an Online Forum

The third main theme consists of three forms of Reddit-based support: emotional support and validation, practical support and advice, and collective support and protection of others. These different stages show how Reddit functioned as an interactional space where users responded to, interpreted, and supported experiences of toxic workplaces, as illustrated in Table 3 below. For full context of the analytical process, frequencies, coding structures, sub-codes and empirical examples see appendix A.

Table 3. Coding structure for the role of Reddit as an online forum

Code	Stage	Core description
O1	Emotional Support and Validation	Validating shared realities, reducing emotional isolation through empathy, normalizing psychological distress, and celebrating successful workplace exits.
O2	Practical Support and Advice	Providing actionable documentation guides, survival and disengagement strategies, rights-based navigation, tactical HR management, and peer-recommended external resources.
O3	Collective Support and Protection of Others	Identifying early toxicity warnings, decoding corporate rhetoric, and facilitating peer job referrals.

4.3.1 Emotional Support and Validation

At this stage, Reddit functions as an environment where users offer emotional support and validation to each other's experiences. This does not only mean that users express sympathy, but that the forum helps users have their perceptions of reality confirmed, feel less alone, understand their reactions as reasonable, and process guilt, shame, and uncertainty. In this way, Reddit functions as a place where individual experiences of toxic workplaces receive social confirmation through responses from other users.

The emotional support in the data emerges through naturally occurring dialogues. This is made visible in the data through the fact that users not only share their own experiences, but also respond to others' stories with recognition, empathy, and validation.

For example, one user writes: *"Same thing happens to me!!!"*, which is one of many similar comments. Although such a comment is short, it fulfills an important function by showing that the original user's experience is not unusual. Through recognition, the individual experience is transformed into a shared experience, which can reduce the feeling of loneliness.

Users also share their own experiences or give reassurance by saying that they understand what others are going through. For example one user writes: *"I'm sorry it happened to you too but it's been comforting to know others have been through this"*. In the data, it becomes clear through comments like *"Thank you everyone for taking the time to respond"* that users experience relief and comfort when their own experiences are reflected in others' stories.

Users also encourage and congratulate other users when they consider leaving or have already left a toxic workplace. Comments such as *"quit and move on"*, *"NEVER be afraid to quit a Toxic job"* and *"First of all, congratulations for leaving that shithole!"* function as supportive affirmations that validate the decision to leave. The congratulatory tone also reframes resignation as an achievement rather than a failure. Users often cheer each other on, explicitly describing the act of leaving not as a failure, but as a necessary form of self-protection

A further form of emotional support concerns recovery after leaving a toxic workplace. Users frequently share detailed personal timelines to illustrate that the emotional and physical consequences of toxicity often persist long after departure. For example, one user writes:

"It took 6 months just to start to feel normal, 1 year mark mostly ok. 2 year mark 100% good to go. Took another 6 months post 2 years to fully feel confident again".

This comment shows that users do not only confirm that a workplace can be toxic, but also that the consequences of such an experience can remain for a longer period of time. By describing

recovery as a slow and often difficult process, these comments provide reassurance that continued feelings of for example exhaustion or emptiness are legitimate and expected reactions. These interactions serve to validate the individual's recovery path as a reasonable response to an abnormal workplace, rather than framing the impact as a personal failure.

In summary, emotional support and validation show that the significance of Reddit as an online forum does not only lie in users being able to express their experiences, but also on how these experiences are received and confirmed by others. Through recognition, empathy, and shared stories, individual accounts can be transformed into socially validated and collectively understood experiences. In these dialogues, responders frequently reassure the user that their emotional and physical reactions to toxicity are reasonable and legitimate.

4.3.2 Practical Support and Advice

At this stage, Reddit functions as an informal advisory environment, where users help each other move from feeling and uncertainty to concrete actions. Practical support and advice show how Reddit functions as a place where users transform experiences of toxic workplaces into concrete coping strategies. Users therefore not only confirm each other's feelings, but also provide action-oriented advice on, for example, documentation, HR, boundary-setting, digital protection, job searching, and strategies for reducing exposure to toxicity.

While documentation was also identified as an individual coping strategy in section 4.2.3, the focus here is different. In this section, documentation is analyzed as a form of practical support, where Reddit users advise one another on how to act in difficult workplace situations.

A recurring form of such advice concerns moving from verbal interactions to written communication. Users frequently emphasize documentation as a way to make uncertain and "difficult-to-prove" situations more concrete and manageable. For example, one user writes: *"Documentation is the key, document every conversation over an email or a teams chat. Toxic managers are scared of documentation"*. The comment highlights how users encourage each other to establish a paper trail in order to create control and preserve evidence in environments where management and colleagues are perceived as unreliable or untrustworthy.

Practical support on Reddit often appears as action oriented advice. In the data, this is not only about giving general encouragement, users recommended specific steps for managing toxic environments, such as communicating in writing, avoiding unnecessary conflict, setting boundaries, looking for a new job, and using strategies such as grey rocking and quit quitting. Furthermore, users frequently encourage each other to actively look for new jobs, framing the physical exit as a necessary practical solution. Through these interactions Reddit functions not only as a place for venting, but also as an environment where coping strategies are recommended but also explained and legitimized through the collective experiences of other users.

Several pieces of practical advice further concern protecting the user from further harm. For example, one user gives following advice:

“Don't spend any extra energy on them. When you have a firm offer which you have accepted, write out your letter of resignation, offer them two weeks notice, and state when your last day will be before transitioning to your new career. All this in one letter. Do not state that you are uninterested in any "counteroffers." You deny those later”.

The comment illustrates how users provide concrete, step-by-step advice for managing the exit process. Rather than only encouraging the user to leave, the response outlines how the resignation should be communicated and how further involvement with the workplace should be limited. In this way, practical support appears as advice aimed at reducing further exposure to the toxic environment and helping the user maintain control during the exit process.

Advice regarding the prioritization of mental health over professional loyalty is also a recurring element in the forum's practical support. The data illustrates how users encourage each other to view well-being as a non-negotiable asset, often by contrasting temporary financial loss with permanent psychological damage. For example, one user writes:

“No job is worth your peace. You can recover from being broke, but recovering from burnout and emotional damage, that stuff takes forever. At the end of the day, you've got to

protect your sanity. Money comes and goes, but peace of mind, once that's gone, it's hard to get back".

This type of interaction combines practical guidance with emotional validation, framing the decision to leave not just as a career move, but as an essential act of long-term self-preservation.

In summary, practical support and advice show that Reddit functions as an informal knowledge resource where users help each other translate experiences of toxicity into concrete coping strategies. Through advice about documentation, boundary-setting, HR, job searching, and exit, Reddit offers not only support, but also possibilities for action. This shows how Reddit can function as an alternative support system when users experience formal organizational resources as insufficient, unreliable, or difficult to use.

4.3.3 Collective Support and Protection of Others

At this stage, Reddit functions as a collective protection mechanism. This is not only about supporting the individual user, but about how users collectively try to protect others from ending up in similar situations. By sharing warning signals, decoding employers' language, warning about specific behaviors, and sometimes helping others move on to new workplaces, users create a collective knowledge base about how toxic workplaces can be identified and avoided.

A recurring example is that users share what they describe as "red flags" related to recruitment and interview situations. For example, one user writes: *"No respect for your appointment time. Unprofessional behavior during the interview"*. Such comments function preventively, as previous experiences are transformed into warning signs that others can use to evaluate potential employers.

The data also illustrates how users act as proactive risk assessors. For example, one user highlights passive-aggressive communication, sarcasm, and poor communication skills as early warning signs:

“When communication styles are underdeveloped. Words and tone are passive aggressive. Sarcasm is used to get point out dissatisfaction or mistakes. This communication style (or lack of) is an early red flag!”.

This comment and many other shows how users identify and share interpretations of subtle cues that function as early warning signs of toxicity. Further, expressions such as “fast-paced environment”, “we are a family”, and “many hats” are consistently identified by the users as coded signals for underlying systemic issues like understaffing, blurred boundaries, or unrealistic demands for loyalty.

Elaborating further on the use of family metaphors, users often share a deep skepticism. One user writes: *“The moment we are a family, I am out. My past experience used that as code for abuse and overwork”*. Similarly, the requirement to wear “many hats” is frequently decoded as a term for a permanent lack of resources: *“AKA 'you'll be doing the job of multiple people for the salary of one, if even that'”*.

Through these interactions, Reddit functions as a space where users transform individual, often confusing social encounters into shared knowledge, helping others recognize dysfunctional patterns before they are fully exposed to harmful workplace conditions. Through this shared decoding, individual experiences are transformed into collective meaning-making. Reddit therefore functions as a place where users collectively create shared knowledge about how toxicity can be recognized before it is experienced directly.

In summary, collective support and protection of others show that the significance of Reddit as an online forum extends beyond individual support and practical advice. By sharing warnings signals, interpreting organizational language, and warning others, users create a collective knowledge base about toxic workplaces. Reddit therefore functions not only as a place for processing already experienced toxicity, but also as a preventive environment where users attempt to protect others from being exposed to similar workplace conditions.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the study's purpose, research questions, previous research, and theoretical framework. The discussion is structured around the three main themes identified in the analysis: definitions of toxic workplaces, coping strategies, and the role of Reddit as an online forum. Together, these themes show how toxic workplace experiences are not only described as individual problems, but also interpreted through social relations, organizational conditions, coping processes, and Reddit-based interaction.

The chapter first discusses how users define toxic workplaces at individual, relational, and organizational levels. It then discusses how users describe coping strategies before, during, and after exposure to toxic workplace environments. Finally, it discusses how Reddit functions as a space for emotional support, practical advice, and collective meaning-making. In doing so, the chapter highlights how Reddit, as an online forum, contributes to shaping how individuals understand, cope with, and communicate experiences of workplace toxicity.

5.1 Definitions of Toxic Workplaces

The fact that descriptions of toxic workplaces at the individual level are directly connected to individuals' well-being, self-esteem, and everyday life can be understood in relation to what was previously described as affective appraisal (Steffen & Anderson, 2025). At the individual level, toxicity therefore does not appear merely as a rational or objectively defined problem, but as something that is felt in the body and affects the individuals' emotional state. The workplace is experienced as threatening, draining, or difficult to recover from, even before the user necessarily formulates the situation through established concepts such as bullying, harassment, or destructive leadership.

This means that individuals may experience feeling unwell because of the work environment without immediately being able to identify, name, or explain exactly what causes it. Toxicity may therefore first appear as a feeling of worry, exhaustion, discomfort, or bodily strain, before it is later interpreted as an expression of more specific workplace problems. This is methodologically important, as such experiences are not always easy to capture through research designs where individuals are asked to describe or categorize their experience based on predefined questions. In

Reddit discussions, however, users can formulate their experiences more spontaneously and closely to lived experience, which makes it possible to capture expressions of toxicity that are not necessarily yet fully rationalized or conceptually clarified by the individual themselves. In this way, the data highlights the value of studying toxic workplaces through individuals' own descriptions rather than solely through predefined concepts and categories.

At the same time, these descriptions align with previous research linking toxic work environments to stress, burnout, and reduced well-being (Anjum et al., 2018; Crisan et al., 2026). However, the data nuances this research by showing how such consequences are expressed close to lived experience, for example through worry, exhaustion, and the feeling that work affects even the time that formally lies outside the workplace. In this way, toxicity is made visible as something that does not only occur at the workplace, but also follows the individual into their private life and limits the possibility of recovery. This is also organizationally relevant, as a work environment that affects individuals' recovery and well-being may risk contributing to longer absence, reduced sustainability at work, and increased employee turnover.

Descriptions of poor work-life balance, emotional exhaustion, reduced self-esteem, anxiety before work, and lack of appreciation can also be understood through Conservation of Resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989). From this perspective, toxicity can be analyzed as a process of resource loss, where the individual gradually loses important resources such as energy, time, self-esteem, and emotional stability. This reinforces the understanding of toxic workplaces as environments that do not only create temporary discomfort, but slowly drain the resources individuals need in order to function sustainably.

At the relational level, the data shows that users describe toxic workplaces as environments where everyday interactions are characterized by distrust, exclusion, humiliation, and competition. This can be related to previous research in which toxicity is understood through behaviors such as bullying, ostracism, harassment, and incivility (Anjum et al., 2018). However, the data contributes to a more concrete understanding of how such broad categories are expressed in practice. Concepts such as bullying and harassment may include many different types of behaviors, but in users' descriptions they become visible through concrete actions, such

as being excluded from information, publicly criticized, undermined, or forced into competition with colleagues. In this way, the data may help make toxicity more recognizable, both for individuals trying to understand their own experiences and for organizations needing to identify problematic social patterns in the work environment.

The relational level can also be understood in relation to psychological safety, where a lack of safety means that individuals do not experience the work environment as safe for openness, cooperation, or vulnerability (Edmondson, 1999). In relation to toxic work environments, previous research has shown that low psychological safety may be associated with increased stress, reduced support, and negative health outcomes (Crisan et al., 2026). The result therefore shows that psychological safety should not be understood as an abstract organizational ideal, but as something that is created or broken down through everyday interactions between people.

When users describe authoritarian behaviors, being overruled, and public scolding, this can be related to previous research on destructive and manipulative leadership (Khasawneh et al., 2024). In the data, however, these behaviors do not appear as abstract leadership categories, but rather as concrete relational experiences where power is exercised through everyday interactions. This shows that destructive leadership should not only be understood as a leadership style, but also as something experienced through specific situations in which employees lose influence, safety, or dignity.

At the organizational level, toxicity is described as something embedded in structures, organizational conditions, and management practices. This can be connected to Appelbaum & Roy-Girard's (2007) understanding of organizational "toxins", where toxicity is not only located in individuals, but emerges as a result of the organization's culture, leadership, and structure. At the same time, the data shows how these organizational toxins are realized through, for example, micromanagement, lack of support, unclear roles, unrealistic demands, and high employee turnover. Micromanagement can be understood in relation to destructive leadership (Khasawneh et al., 2024), but at the organizational level it also appears as a management practice that limits autonomy and creates constant control. This systemic perspective helps explain why individual coping mechanisms often feel insufficient. When toxicity becomes embedded in how an

organization functions or executes its strategy, the environment essentially becomes "unfixable" from the employee's perspective. Under these conditions, leaving the organization emerges as the only truly rational choice left (Bansal et al., 2026; Dolev et al., 2021).

Overall, the discussion of the first main theme shows that users' definitions of toxic workplaces cannot be limited to isolated behaviors or formal research categories. Instead, toxicity emerges as a multi-level phenomenon that affects the individual's body and emotional life, is created through everyday relationships, and is maintained through organizational structures and management practices. This contributes to previous research by clarifying how broad concepts such as bullying, harassment, destructive leadership, and organizational toxicity are experienced and given meaning in practice.

The result also has further practical relevance. For organizations, this means that toxicity should not only be identified through formal complaints or clearly delimited incidents, but also through recurring patterns in everyday work life: lack of recovery, withholding of information, public humiliation, lack of support, unclear roles, and high employee turnover. Understanding toxicity in this way can help organizations detect problems earlier and develop more concrete initiatives to strengthen psychological safety, support, and sustainable working conditions.

However, one final thing to have in mind is that the findings may be clouded by the user's potential heightened emotional state. Due to them potentially existing within the toxic environment over a long time, their reserve capacity could be drained and leading to their affective barometer to signal threat and seeing the toxicity more widespread than it is (Steffen & Anderson, 2025).

5.2 Coping Strategies

In line with previous research by Bansal et al. (2026), our thematic analysis demonstrates that coping extends beyond a reactive process to existing toxicity. Instead, it operates as a proactive defense mechanism where individuals evaluate potential risk factors during the recruitment phase to protect their future psychological capital. From another theoretical perspective, this proactive screening is linked to the TMSC model which suggests that primary appraisal is an

affective process rather than a strictly cognitive one (Bansal et al., 2026). Consequently, the "gut feeling" described by users functions as an internal affective barometer, they evaluate the balance between the environmental demands and their reserve capacity. Crucially, this affective warning system triggers a transition into a more active, problem-focused coping strategy grounded in COR theory. By asking questions regarding turnover and conflict management early on, individuals attempt to perform a resource inventory of the workplace and avoid ending up in an environment where the risk of a resource loss spiral is high (Bansal et al., 2026).

For the individual, this knowledge can be of practical help since it validates that a "gut feeling" during recruitment is not merely nervousness or anxiety but a valid concern. This can empower candidates to treat interviews as a cross-examination to avoid toxic environments and look out for their own well-being. Also, understanding that certain phrases like "hit the ground running" or "we are family" are often coded signals for a lack of boundaries allows the individual to protect their future psychological capital by simply choosing to not enter. For organizations and HR divisions these insights also demonstrate that toxic workplace cultures cannot be masked by superficial corporate branding. The data demonstrates that job seekers engage in collective vetting by decoding "corporate speak" and sharing systemic risk indicators. Consequently, organizations showing destructive behavioral patterns can face immediate penalties in the talent market through candidate withdrawal. While organizations may attempt to adapt superficially by changing or removing specific "buzzwords" from job advertisements, it fails to address the root environmental issues. Because these forums continuously keep engaging in these discussions about "corporate speak" and behavioral patterns, the new ways of phrasing job advertisements will quickly be decoded, even if employers switch to different buzzwords, users will still recognize and expose the underlying toxic behavior.

The empirical findings regarding how employees cope with ongoing workplace toxicity also align with the concept of affective attenuation. By choosing to maintain emotional distance and minimizing personal sharing with toxic actors, individuals strategically use their emotional intelligence to preserve psychological energy that would otherwise be consumed by conflict (Bansal et al., 2026). Through the lens of COR theory, this behavior should not be misinterpreted as a lack of motivation, but rather as a functional phase necessary for self-preservation (Azizah et

al., 2025). This defensive state can be described as entering a “lockdown mode” (Khasawneh et al., 2024). By externalizing the toxic behaviors, individuals remind themselves that the mistreatment is a reflection of the perpetrator rather than their own worth, thereby protecting their self-esteem. Consequently, this cognitive reframing helps prevent a resource loss spiral by protecting the individual's self-esteem (Abdelghani et al., 2025).

In a practical sense, the value of these findings lies in providing a realistic blueprint for active psychological and professional self-defense while remaining within a hostile work environment. For the individual, this knowledge normalizes and legitimizes strategies that are often wrongly stigmatized as disengagement or a lack of professionalism. Understanding "lockdown mode" as a functional phase of self-preservation allows employees to intentionally practice emotional detachment without experiencing personal guilt.

A distinct strategy identified in the empirical data also involves the systematic gathering of objective documentation as a means of self-defense. This aligns with COR theory where “truth” and “evidence” are treated as vital resources necessary to stop a resource loss spiral (Bansal et al., 2026). In an environment characterized by gaslighting, defined by users as institutional reality-distortion, objective data functions as a "reality anchor". This anchor protects the individual's self-esteem and professional dignity from being diminished by a perpetrators contradictory instructions or false accusations. Within TMSC, this strategic documentation shifts the focus to a secondary appraisal process (Steffen & Anderson, 2025). When individuals evaluate their available resources, they appraise formal systems, such as Human Resources (HR), not as supportive assets, but rather as strategic tools leveraged to secure an outcome they want. Ultimately, this behavior reflects a form of controlled resistance where the formal contract becomes a protective wall against the diminishing of personal resources (Azizah et al., 2025). An interesting finding in the data was also that it was rarely encouraged to speak up, which aligns with the EVLN model's description of “Voice” as an active-constructive but risky response. This could be due to unpredictability of it, like previous studies show it is the most difficult response to predict since it is very dependent on if the management is perceived as receptive (Withey & Cooper, 1989). Users warned that speaking up was risky and that it, in their experience, rarely led to a favorable outcome.

For the individual, this is a valuable coping mechanism to not lose their perception of things. In environments where gaslighting is frequently used the individuals perception of reality is systemically undermined and by having objective facts on how things actually were, it provides a concrete method to build psychological resilience. This helps individuals maintain their perception of objective reality and avoid internalizing self-doubt. This not only helps the individual's psychological well-being but also levels the power dynamics when it is not word against word with their employer and can help them in the future if they decide to try and speak up. Furthermore, by adopting a strictly transactional view of their employment contract it empowers individuals to establish boundaries. The cynical view on HR however might pose challenges for organizations. If employees don't feel safe taking anything up with HR in fear of retaliation the companies will never know for example something is going on in a team before it might be too late and an employee has left the job. This could pose a risk for the organization to keep and attract talent.

The findings in the empirical data about staying not of will but rather due to the cost of leaving being too high is in line with loyalty in the EVLN model, and specifically the re-conceptualization of loyalty as "entrapment." The narratives illustrate that what is a passive-constructive wait for improvement is often a state of staying due to high sunk costs, such as financial survival, rather than a genuine affective commitment. By treating their exit like a planned project, employees practice a form of "strategic loyalty". They endure difficult conditions not because they expect things to improve, but because staying a bit longer is a practical necessity to secure their next step (Withey & Cooper, 1989).

This behavior illustrates a core principle of COR theory. Rather than allowing their remaining energy to be entirely consumed by a destructive environment, individuals act as pragmatic self-managers (Bansal et al., 2026). Consequently, they actively refuse to sacrifice their own well-being to satisfy organizational demands. Instead, they carefully ration their remaining reserve capacity to quietly find another job and "quiet quit" (Steffen & Anderson, 2025). In practice, individuals treat the toxic workplace as a financial sponsor for their transition while redirecting their psychological resources toward securing a healthier professional future.

However, as described in the data some couldn't make a strategic exit, they just needed to get out. Theoretically, this aligns with the TMS model, where the primary appraisal is predominantly affective (Steffen & Anderson, 2025). When the workplace threatens their well-being, an immediate exit becomes the only rational choice, with or without a future plan. Some also felt the need to let the workplace know why and who was responsible for their exit and within the EVLN model, this represents a noisy exit. They try to use their voice a final time to protect others and restore professional dignity (Dolev et al., 2021).

One way to understand the differences, how some could make a strategic exit while some just had to get out, could be through the “hot and cool” response system in the EVLN model. If an employee has been in the toxic workplace where the trust has gradually diminished it triggers the “cool” response, they can have a more passive withdrawal and make a strategic exit whereas an employee that experiences a sharp and sudden violation that triggers a “hot” impulsive response just leaves on the spot (Vantilborgh, 2015).

In a practical context, these findings help to see reasons behind employee turnover, offering critical insights into how individuals navigate the economic and psychological realities of leaving a toxic workplace. For the individual, this knowledge normalizes the complex economic dependency that often forces employees to remain in toxic environments. A lot of users said to others that they should just quit right away if it is that bad, that it wasn't worth it, but a lot of other users said that they didn't have the opportunity to and felt ashamed for not standing up for themselves. By re-conceptualizing loyalty as structural entrapment rather than genuine commitment, it removes the self-blame associated with staying. It instead provides individuals with a framework to view their temporary endurance not as passive submission, but as a calculated, transactional phase. They can also practically utilize this mindset to emotionally disengage, “quiet quit”. Conversely, for those who just couldn't take it anymore and did not make a “strategic” exit, the findings validate that an immediate, unplanned exit (noisy exit) is legitimate too and is a good protective response to systemic trauma. For organizations these insights provide a warning not to only look out for complaints or loud disapproval but also see disengagement as a loud warning that something is not right. Only because an employee remains

silent or does not leave it does not mean that they are satisfied, organizations must look beyond surface-level turnover indicators and critically evaluate whether their cultural environment is actively fostering hidden disengagement.

Furthermore, the empirical data highlights the critical phase of long-term psychological reconstruction following after leaving the toxic workplace. The individuals need to recalibrate their affective barometer after being in a constant “fight or flight” mode which is in line with the TMS model (Steffen & Anderson, 2025). These shared experiences also highlight Reddit as a space for collective meaning-making and social validation (Costello et al., 2017). Within these digital communities, peer interaction directly facilitates the normalization of trauma (Prescott et al., 2017). Within the context of SST, this represents the transition from seeking support to providing it, often referred to as the helper therapy principle (Prescott et al., 2017). Ultimately, this shift demonstrates the practical application of positive reappraisal and meaning-based resources, where individuals transform systemic trauma into a protective resource of wisdom that prevents future resource loss (Kaveh et al., 2023).

In a practical context and for the individual, this knowledge provides a realistic framework for the post-employment healing process, validating that leaving a toxic environment is merely the first step toward recovery. It prevents individuals from expecting an instant emotional recovery and feeling shame if they are not instantly okay after getting out of a toxic workplace. This insight also normalizes the need for professional psychological support, such as therapy, and helps the individual to not feel alone. Furthermore, understanding the meaning of Reddit as a digital peer space enables individuals to utilize the Reddit platform not only as a platform for venting but as an intentional tool for collective meaning making. By transitioning from a recipient of support to a provider of guidance, individuals can use their experiences to help others and at the same time heal themselves.

5.3 The Role of Reddit as an Online Forum

Reddit functions as an interactional environment where users share, interpret, and respond to experiences of toxic workplaces. In the data, this becomes visible when individual narratives receive social confirmation through responses from other users. This can be connected to

Costello et al (2017), who describe online forums as environments where users spontaneously express personal experiences and perspectives. The data therefore shows that Reddit does not only function as a data source, but also as a social environment where experiences are received, confirmed, and given meaning.

This collective meaning-making may also be understood through social information processing, where the peer interactions on Reddit contribute to shaping shared perceptions of whether a workplace should be understood as toxic (Muhammad et al., 2026). These collective interpretations may also influence the type of guidance users receive. Depending on how the situation is interpreted, other users may encourage loyalty, voice, or exit in line with the EVLN model (Dolev et al., 2021). In this way, Reddit interactions can shape not only how users understand their experiences, but also which responses appear legitimate or possible.

The congratulatory interactions on Reddit can further be understood as a form of esteem support, where the community validates the individual's emotions and bolsters their sense of competence (Lin et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2018). By reframing exit as an achievement rather than failure, Reddit may help users overcome the “loyalty trap” or the sense of “structural entrapment” (Withey & Cooper, 1989; Dolev et al., 2021). Through the lens of COR theory, such affirmations can serve to stop a resource loss spiral by providing immediate social validation (Hobfoll, 1989; Pertiwi et al., 2024). This collective reframing transforms what may otherwise be experienced privately as failure or defeat into a socially validated act of self-protection and professional dignity. This counters the isolation often described by the individuals and in that sense Reddit provides a supportive environment (Dolev et al., 2021; Prescott et al., 2017).

The fact that the users keep engaging with one another and offer support can also be understood through SET theory, where social exchanges are connected to the norm of reciprocity. Users help and engage with others taking the time to read and respond, sharing their knowledge, since they expect the same back if they would need it in the future (Ye et al., 2015). The supportive climate can also explain why the self-disclosure occurs in line with SET, users seem to feel that the risk of being vulnerable is worth it (Lin et al., 2021).

How Reddit users, and maybe primarily the most active ones, voluntarily listens and offers support to others they could also be seen as digital toxin handlers (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). How they listen and validate other users' feelings by providing esteem support and reframe toxic messages making the recipient feel that they are not in the wrong seems to be a critical buffering function for a lot of the users.

However, all users did not get the same amount of responses. In line with SST the received support varied and could impact the feeling of support and confirmation (Lin et al., 2021). At the same time, previous empirical research has confirmed it is the perceived support that has the most impact on well-being rather than the number of responses given (Yin et al., 2018). Therefore, it might be argued that the number of received support is secondary to the overall supportive climate of the platform. This can also imply that the value of a Reddit thread can extend beyond the active participants in a thread. For the users only reading different threads, they see others receive validation and practical advice and that can reinforce the subjective belief that support is available if needed (Yin et al., 2018).

This can further be connected to previous research showing that online forums can function as environments where individuals come into contact with others who have similar experiences and where emotional support can emerge (De Choudhury & De, 2014). In relation to toxic workplaces, this becomes particularly significant, as such experiences can often be difficult to share in offline contexts. For example in the workplace, individuals may be afraid of consequences for example being questioned, distrusted, or professionally affected. In private contexts, it may at the same time be difficult to explain the situation to people who lack similar experiences. Reddit therefore offers an alternative support environment where individuals from the beginning seek out conversations where others discuss similar problems. In this way, Reddit functions as a low-threshold environment for support, particularly when formal or close support structures are experienced as unavailable, insufficient, or risky.

The findings also illustrate that Reddit functions as a unique environment for social support, which can be analyzed through the lens of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). The presence of benign disinhibition in the data explains why users feel safe enough to move beyond

superficial complaints and instead disclose deeply personal trauma and vulnerability (Suler, 2004; Zhang & Liu, 2022). This radical openness is likely driven by dissociative anonymity and solipsistic introjection, they feel safe disclosing personal trauma which in its turn gives the deep empathy and collective validation shown in the data (Suler, 2004; Zhang & Liu, 2022).

Furthermore, the minimization of authority on Reddit explains why employees, who in their physical workplaces might be in a “lockdown mode” due to fear of retaliation, dare to speak up and criticize power structures. This is because the indicators of status are removed which transform the power dynamic and enable users to reframe their experiences from a position of perceived equality (Suler, 2004; Khasawneh et al., 2024). The platform’s asynchronicity further supports this since the user can disclose heavy emotional burdens and then close Reddit without having to deal with an immediate response like they would have to in an offline setting. In line with COR theory this also protects their psychological resources since they don't also have to spend more resources on handling an immediate response. This way, the user can express and handle their trauma while at the same time “freezing” further energy loss (Hobfoll, 1989; Bansal et al., 2026). This sense of safety is often also reinforced by dissociative imagination, the users feel like they don't have to take all social cues in real life into consideration which might make them open up further. The findings therefore not only make Reddit methodologically relevant, but also shape the support process itself by enabling users to disclose sensitive workplace experiences and receive responses from others. However, while the online environment facilitates vital social support through benign disinhibition, it also activates toxic disinhibition. This is important to have in mind when interpreting the empirical findings, since it suggests that the predominantly negative tone of the discussions on the platform might be a direct byproduct of how Reddit itself works, rather than an objective reflection of workplace reality (Suler, 2004; Bhatt et al., 2026).

Further, the emotional support also appears as non-directive support, where users share their experiences or show that they understand. This type of response can be understood in relation to Prescott et al. (2017), who describe non-directive support as a form of support where sharing experiences can be meaningful in itself. In the data, this becomes clear through users experiencing relief and comfort when their own experiences are reflected in others’ stories. This is also in line with previous empirical studies that shows that peers or colleagues often are better

able to provide emotional support in contrast to formal sources since sharing the same lived experiences allows for a deeper level of empathy and helps build stronger social connections (Zhang & Liu, 2022). This is particularly significant in situations where the individual is not ready, does not have the opportunity, or lacks the energy to act practically on their situation. In such cases, the value of support may lie in someone listening, validating, and showing recognition, rather than offering a concrete solution.

At the same time, the data shows that Reddit does not only offer emotional support, but also practical support and advice. Here, Reddit functions as a place where users transform experiences of toxic workplaces into concrete action strategies. This can be understood as informational support within SST, where users offer advice, guidance, and practical knowledge that can help the recipient reduce uncertainty and make decisions (Lin et al., 2021). Unlike emotional support, which primarily concerns validation, recognition, and comfort, practical support becomes particularly significant in situations where the individual needs to orient themselves in what can actually be done.

This practical support can also be understood as directive support, where users provide concrete recommendations about what another person should do in a difficult situation (Prescott et al., 2017). This was visible when users advised others to document conversations, communicate in writing, avoid unnecessary conflict, set boundaries, search for new employment, or use strategies such as grey rocking and quiet quitting (Azizah et al., 2025; Bansal et al., 2026). Such advice does not only provide possible actions, but also explains and legitimizes coping strategies through the collective experiences of other users. In this way, Reddit does not only function as a place for venting, but also as an environment where difficult workplace experiences are translated into practical courses of action.

Practical support should not, however, be understood as more important than emotional support, but rather as a complementary function. When validation and recognition are not enough to manage work-related strain, action-oriented advice can help create orientation, control, and possible ways forward. This shows how Reddit combines emotional and practical forms of

support: users both reassured that their experiences are avoided and offered concrete strategies for managing or leaving the toxic workplace.

The practical advice can further be understood in relation to coping theories. Documentation and strategic communication can be understood as problem-focused coping, as they aim to manage or reduce the consequences of the problem itself (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Grey rocking can be understood as a form of avoidance or emotion-regulating coping, where the individual attempts to reduce emotional exposure when interacting with toxic individuals (Endler & Parker, 1990). Quiet quitting can be interpreted as a resource-preserving strategy, where the individual limits their work effort in order to protect energy and well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). Advice about looking for a new job or resigning can, in turn, be connected to exit as a coping strategy (Rusbult et al., 1988).

From the perspective of COR theory, advice about not spending more energy on the workplace and prioritizing mental health over financial stability can be interpreted as an attempt to protect the user's remaining resources, such as time, energy, and emotional stability (Hobfoll, 1989; Pertiwi et al., 2024). Mental health within COR theory is framed as an irreplaceable resource essential to halting a resource loss spiral (Hobfoll, 1989; Azizah et al., 2025). The advice is therefore not only about leaving the workplace, but about doing so in a way that minimizes further resource loss. By justifying leaving the workplace it facilitates a secondary appraisal where the workplace is re-categorized from a source of income to a threat against the individual's psychological capital (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Steffen & Anderson). In this way, Reddit functions as a practical advisory environment where other users help the individual reduce continued exposure to the toxic environment (Prescott et al., 2017).

Reddit can also function as a collective protection mechanism, where users share warning signs, decode employers' language, warn about specific behaviors, and sometimes help others move on to new workplaces. This can be connected to Medvedev et al. (2019), who describe collective discussions as central to the exchange of opinions and shared assessments. In the data, this is shown through users collectively identifying patterns and warning signs of toxicity.

Collective support can therefore be understood as a combination of informational support and companionship. Users share knowledge that can help others identify and avoid toxic workplaces, while the forum also creates a sense that users belong to a larger collective with similar experiences. This can be connected to SST, particularly the dimensions of companionship and informational support, where support concerns both practical knowledge and a sense of belonging to a group with shared experiences (Lin et al, 2021). This shows that the significance of Reddit as an online forum does not only lie in supporting individuals after they have experienced toxicity, but also in creating a collective knowledge base that can help others recognize and avoid similar workplace conditions in the future.

However, while the findings illustrate that Reddit functions as a vital support system, the results also point to the complexity of digital peer-interaction. That negative narratives are most prevalent in the data and can be understood through the lens of co-rumination as previously mentioned. When individuals keep going back to the negative experiences within the forum, there is a risk that the narratives become amplified and it creates a more one-sided, darker representation of reality (Bhatt et al., 2026).

Together, this shows that Reddit should not be understood as a passive platform for experience-sharing, but as an active social environment where users collectively interpret, cope with, and attempt to prevent workplace-related toxicity. In relation to the purpose of the study, this means that Reddit does not only constitute an empirical context for studying individuals' descriptions of toxic workplaces, but also forms part of the meaning-making around the phenomenon itself. Reddit thereby contributes to shaping how individuals understand their experiences, which strategies they perceive as possible, and how knowledge about toxic workplaces circulates between users.

The interactions on Reddit also show how COR, SST, and SET intersect. COR identifies the users' need to halt their resource loss and protect their well-being while SST specifies the emotional and informational support they use as a shield. SET acts as a balancing force where the norm of reciprocity ensures that this exchange of support remains sustainable and consistent within the community (Ye et al., 2015; Pertiwi et al., 2024). This interplay explains why Reddit

becomes more than just a place to vent, it turns into a digital safety net where users help each other rebuild their psychological strength.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how individuals describe, interpret, and cope with experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions, and how Reddit functions as an online forum for support and meaning-making. The study was guided by three research questions: (1) How do individuals describe and interpret experiences of toxic workplaces in Reddit discussions? (2) What coping strategies do individuals describe when managing toxic workplace experiences? (3) How does Reddit, as an online forum, function as a space for support, validation, and collective meaning-making regarding toxic workplace experiences?

Overall, the findings show that toxic workplaces are understood as lived, interpreted, and socially negotiated experiences. Users describe toxicity at individual, relational, and organizational levels, while coping is described as a process that unfolds before, during, when leaving, and after exposure to toxic work environments. The findings also show that Reddit functions as more than a platform for sharing experiences, it becomes an interactional space where users receive support, exchange advice, and collectively make sense of workplace toxicity. The following sections present the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to research on workplace toxicity by showing how existing behavioral categories can be complemented with an experience-based perspective. While previous research has defined toxicity through dimensions such as bullying, ostracism, harassment, and incivility (Anjum et al., 2018), the findings show how users often describe toxicity through emotional, bodily, relational, and organizational consequences. This suggests that toxic workplaces can be understood not only as a set of predefined behaviors, but also as experiences that are interpreted and negotiated through interaction with others.

The study also contributes to the COR theory by showing that coping with toxic workplace experiences can be understood as a staged and progressive process. The findings show how users describe strategies before, during, when leaving, and after exposure to toxic work environments. This extends the relevance of COR theory by illustrating how individuals attempt to protect, preserve, and restore resources across the full timeline of toxic workplace exposure, including the recovery phase (Bansal et al., 2026), which has received less attention in previous research.

The findings also further confirm how loyalty may appear less as genuine commitment and more as structural entrapment within the EVLN model when individuals remain in toxic workplaces because the cost of leaving is too high (Withey & Cooper, 1989). Exit, in turn, appeared both as a planned strategy and as an immediate response when continued exposure was no longer perceived as possible.

Finally, the study contributes to research on online forums by showing how Reddit, as an online forum, functions as an arena for support, meaning-making, and collective interpretation, which extends previous research on online forums as spaces for user-generated interaction and social support (Costello et al., 2017; De Choudhury & De, 2014; Prescott et al., 2017). Furthermore, while previous research has used SET, SST, and COR to study knowledge contribution online (Ye et al., 2015) and knowledge hiding at work (Pertiwi et al., 2024), this study applies this framework to how people collectively process workplace trauma online. The findings suggest that when combined with the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), the reciprocity described in SET becomes emotionally restorative. In this anonymous environment, individuals are able to rebuild their own sense of self partly by helping others (Prescott et al., 2017).

The study also suggests that the intersection between SST, SET, and COR may be relevant not only during toxic workplace exposure, as emphasized by Pertiwi et al. (2024) and Bansal et al. (2026), but also after leaving. The findings indicate that digital peer interaction may function as a post-exit resource that helps individuals process experiences, rebuild self-understanding, and protect remaining psychological resources (Yin et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2015; Pertiwi et al., 2024), as well as recalibrate their affective barometer after prolonged workplace-related stress (Steffen & Anderson, 2025). However, the study also nuances the role of such forums by identifying the

risks of co-rumination and groupthink, further reinforcing that the insight that data from Reddit should be viewed as situated online meaning-making rather than a direct access to objective organizational truths (Bhatt et al., 2026; Medvedev et al., 2019)

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings have practical implications for both individuals and organizations. For individuals, the study shows that feelings of discomfort, exhaustion, or uncertainty may be meaningful signals of workplace toxicity, even before they can be clearly named. Recognizing these affective responses as valid may help individuals trust their own assessments earlier and avoid interpreting workplace-related distress as personal weakness.

The findings also suggest that individuals may benefit from paying attention to warning signals during recruitment. Phrases such as "family culture", expectations to "wear many hats", vague descriptions of responsibilities, or signs of high turnover were interpreted by users as possible indicators of toxic workplace conditions. This suggests that job applicants may use interviews not only to present themselves, but also to critically assess the work environment they are considering entering.

For individuals already in toxic workplaces, the study shows that strategies such as emotional distancing, grey rocking, quiet quitting, documentation, boundary-setting, and strategic exit planning may function as forms of self-protection. These strategies should not automatically be understood as laziness, disengagement, or lack of professionalism, but may instead reflect attempts to preserve remaining emotional and psychological resources.

For individuals who have left a toxic workplace, the findings also indicate that recovery should be understood as a gradual process. Recognizing that recovery may take time can help reduce unrealistic expectations of immediate improvement and lessen feelings of self-blame after leaving. The findings also suggest that Reddit, as an online community, may provide validation, practical guidance, and a sense of shared experience for individuals who lack support elsewhere.

From a managerial and organizational perspective, the findings indicate that toxic workplace conditions may not always become visible through formal complaints. Employees may remain silent due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in HR, or uncertainty about whether their experiences will be taken seriously. Organizations should therefore pay attention to recurring patterns such as high turnover, disengagement, lack of psychological safety, unclear roles, and repeated signals of exhaustion or mistrust.

The findings also suggest that managers and organizations cannot rely solely on employer branding or positive cultural language to attract and retain employees. Since users collectively share warning signals and decode organizational language online, unresolved workplace problems and ways to hide may circulate beyond the organization and affect its ability to retain and keep talent. Finally, the deep distrust of HR expressed in the data suggests that organizations should critically evaluate whether their reporting structures are experienced as safe, credible, and independent enough for employees to use before problems result in burnout or turnover.

6.3 Limitations

While this study has provided insights into subjective experiences of toxic workplaces and coping mechanisms, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of the search term “toxic workplaces” means that the material primarily captures negative and distress-oriented narratives. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as representative of all workplace experiences, but as accounts from users who already frame their experiences through the concept of toxicity.

A further limitation of the study is that it is based on self-reported data. The events described cannot be independently verified, and the employer’s perspective, users’ identities, and demographic background are not available. This limits the possibility of assessing intent, context, or alternative interpretations of the situations described. It also means that we cannot with certainty know that every user describing an event is an employee. However, the large number of posts and comments strengthens the study by allowing recurring patterns to be identified across many independent accounts.

Another limitation is that Reddit as a platform may shape the data. The voting system, community norms, anonymity, and risk of co-rumination or groupthink may amplify certain narratives while marginalizing others. Although the study has tried to mitigate this by including comments regardless of netvotes, the findings should still be understood as situated online meaning-making rather than objective representations of workplace realities.

While there also is a risk that some posts are driven by personal grudges, choosing Reddit over platforms like Glassdoor or Vault mitigates this bias to some extent. Since users on Reddit rarely name specific companies or individuals, anyone seeking direct vengeance against a former employer would logically choose platforms designed specifically for company reviews, where their complaints would directly impact the organization's reputation.

Furthermore, the passive netnographic approach made it possible to observe naturally occurring discussions without influencing them, but it also meant that follow-up questions could not be asked. This limited the possibility of clarifying ambiguous statements or validating interpretations directly with users.

Additionally, the application of COR theory in this study is conceptual rather than measurable. Since the study does not quantitatively track changes in specific resource levels, conclusions about resource loss spirals are based on qualitative interpretation of users' narratives rather than direct measurement.

Finally, the study is shaped by its interpretive and hermeneutic approach. The findings are researcher-created interpretations influenced by the authors' pre-understandings and theoretical framework. To strengthen trustworthiness, themes were discussed jointly and checked against the empirical material throughout the analytical process. Nevertheless, alternative interpretations may be possible.

6.4 Future Research

Future research could develop the findings of this study in several ways. First, longitudinal studies would be valuable for examining how individuals' coping strategies and recovery

processes develop over time after leaving toxic workplaces. Since the findings indicate that recovery may continue long after exit, future research could explore how workplace toxicity affects long-term well-being, identity, and career decisions.

It would also be valuable if future studies combined netnographic analysis with qualitative interviews. Interviews would make it possible to ask follow-up questions, clarify ambiguous experiences, and examine how Reddit-based support influences individuals' offline decisions and coping processes.

Further, future research could explore demographic, cultural, and institutional differences in how toxic workplaces are perceived and coped with. Since this study was based on Reddit data from an international platform and did not collect demographic information, it could not analyze how factors such as national labor laws, cultural norms, gender, age, industry, or professional position shape experiences of toxicity, coping strategies, or the use of online support. This would be particularly relevant for examining whether individuals choose silent strategies, such as quit quitting, or more confrontational strategies, such as voice or noisy exit.

Additionally, it would be interesting to examine organizational and managerial perspectives. Since this study focused on users' own descriptions, it could not investigate how managers, HR representatives, or organizations interpret the same situations. Such research could provide a more complete understanding of how toxic workplace dynamics develop, persist, or are addressed. Given the distrust of HR expressed in the data, future studies could also examine whether independent reporting channels, whistleblowing systems, or other forms of organizational support are perceived as safer and more credible by employees experiencing toxic workplace conditions.

Finally, future studies could examine toxic workplaces in remote and hybrid work contexts. Digital work environments may change how toxicity is expressed, for example through digital surveillance, micromanagement, blurred work-home boundaries, or more easily documented communication. Understanding how employees manage emotional distance and self-protection in remote settings would therefore be an important area for further research.

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Appendix A: Overview of thematic analysis

This appendix presents the complete coding structure used in the thematic analysis, including sub-codes, example expressions from the empirical data, code frequencies, and an illustration of the analytical process. All excerpts presented in quotation marks are paraphrased versions of the original Reddit posts and comments to protect user anonymity, as described in Section 3.5 and 3.6.

A.1 Coding structures, sub-codes and empirical examples

The table below presents the full coding structure across the three main themes. Each code is described in terms of its analytical focus, the sub-codes identified through inductive coding, and a representative paraphrased quote from the empirical data. As previously mentioned, a single comment could be assigned more than one code since it can contain multiple descriptions fitting different codes.

Code	Theme	Stage	Sub-codes	Example expressions
Theme 1: Defining Toxic Workplaces (D) → Total coded segments 2 945				
D1	Individual Level	Toxicity is described through personal and emotional consequences.	No work-life balance; Lack of respect; Lack of appreciation; Anxiety before work; Work takes over personal life	“After all those year's of anxiety I figured it out.”
D2	Relational Level	Toxicity described through social relations and interactions between individuals.	Family; Gossiping; information gatekeeping; Public call out; Thrown under the bus	“If there's a lot of gossiping around you”
D3	Organizational Level	Toxicity described through structures, demands, management and organizational	Many hats; Many roles; Micromanaging; Control need; Unrealistic demands; Lack of support in	“No defined roles. “We all do everything here””

		conditions.	work tasks; High personal turnover	
Theme 2 Coping Strategies (C) → Total coded segments 1 640				
C1	Preventive Stage (Before)	Before: Proactive risk identification during recruitment phase	Trust gut feeling; Pattern recognition; Red flags; Interview as cross examination; Aggressive marketing of culture using words like “family”; Body language; Dead behind the eyes; avoiding eye contact	“I always ask in interviews how long each team member has been working in said team. It is very telling!”
C2	Psychological Stage (During)	During: Emotional distancing and boundary setting	Grey rocking; Quiet quitting; Professional isolation; Do not take it personally; Drawing a clear line between work and private self	“Honestly, quiet quitting is just self-respect at this point. If the vibe is off, you shouldn't burning yourself out for it.”
C3	Tactical Stage (During)	During: Formal and evidence based self preservation	Systematic documentation; Save private proof; Strategic communication with HR; Assert ones contract right	“Start documenting every interaction with your supervisor immediately, even brief conversations. Write down dates, times, what was said, and any witnesses. Also,

				send follow-up emails after verbal conversations like "Just to confirm our discussion about X today" to create a paper trail."
C4	Executive Stage (Exit)	Exit: Strategic or immediate exit of the workplace	Search job quietly; Save up money; Treating the resignation as a methodological project; Leave immediately for you health; Symbolic justice; Shed light on the issues	"Start job searching quietly now, set yourself a deadline to be out."
C5	Restorative Stage (After)	After: Long term psychological reconstruction and identity reclaiming	Seek counseling; Understand it was an environmental issue and not you; Validation through others; See it as a valuable lesson for the future to not be in the same situation again.	"It wasn't just about quitting the job, it was about finally seeing how much you had been programmed to 'take it' no matter what. The process of healing is like dismantling those factory settings they install in us. Your important task now is to leave the blame with them and reclaim your

				identity ”
Theme 3 The role of online forums (O) → Total coded segments 1 453				
O1	Emotional Support and Validation	Forum as a space for empathy, validation and reducing isolation	Confirming the perception of reality; You are not the problem; You are not alone; I hear you; Been through the same; Good of you to leave; It is normal in that environment; Healing takes time	“This is me right now. I am sorry this happened to you. But it makes me feel better knowing I am not alone.”
O2	Practical Support and Advice	Forum as informal advisory environment with directive, action oriented support	How to document; Grey rocking; Quiet quitting; Guidance of your rights; Union contact; Warnings and advice about HR; Questions to ask to reveal toxic workplaces; Separate work phone and private one; Support groups	“Consult with a local community based organization that offers free legal consultations... Become familiar with various employee protected laws... this paper trail will save you”
O3	Collective Support and Protection of Others	Forum as collective protection mechanism, warning, decoding and guiding others	Red flags; Referrals; Decoding corporate speak	"Check out my new community... Your experience can protect someone else from going through the

				same thing"
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A.2 Code frequencies

The table below shows the total number of coded segments for each code across the full dataset of 112 main posts and 1,914 comments. Frequencies indicate how often each code was applied in the analysis. Since a single comment could be assigned more than one code, the total number of coded segments (6 038) exceeds the number of comments in the dataset.

Code	Description	Total
D1	Individual Level	979
D2	Relational Level	1 216
D3	Organizational Level	750
C1	Preventive Stage (Before)	368
C2	Psychological Stage (During)	321
C3	Tactical Stage (During)	197
C4	Executive Stage (Exit)	519
C5	Restorative Stage (After)	235
O1	Emotional Support and Validation	564
O2	Practical Support and Advice	464
O3	Collective Support and Protection	425
	Total coded segments	6 038

A.3 Illustration of analytical process

The table below illustrates how the thematic analysis moved from raw empirical data to codes and themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. A comment is taken as an example and by following the steps it shows how it got its final coding.

Step	Phase of analysis	Analytical Output & Application to the Example
1	Familiarization	Raw data: "A micro manager. You can sense it during

		an interview. You can smell them from a mile away.” Initial reflection: Micromanaging and the perception that you can feel it very early has come up often
2	Initial coding	The raw data was assigned descriptive codes such as: micromanagement , interview intuition , and early warning signs .
3	Searching for themes	Looking at the whole initial coding of the dataset and seeing what seems to be connected or similar and grouping them together. This comments initial coding seemed to be groupable with initial coding of unrealistic demands, lack of support.
4	Reviewing potential themes	Looking at the initial grouping making sure every quote fits with the theme and that it isn't an overlap. Changing quotes that are wrong and looking if something in the dataset is missing in the potential themes.
5	Defining & naming themes	The excerpt was ultimately connected to both C1 Preventing Coping and Risk Identification , because it described recognizing warning signs during recruitment, and D3 Organizational Level , because micromanagement was interpreted as an organizational condition associated with toxicity: “A micro manager. You can sense it during an interview. You can smell them from a mile away.”
6	Writing up	The final themes were used to structure the analysis and discussion, where the excerpt contributed to the interpretation of both preventive coping and organizational toxicity.

Note: All excerpts presented in quotation marks are paraphrased to protect user anonymity (see Section 3.5 and 3.6). The analytical process was iterative rather than linear. Codes and themes were reviewed and refined continuously throughout the analysis.