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Article

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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Uncovering the dark side of leadership: How exploitative leaders fuel unethical pro-organizational behavior through moral disengagement

Saad Basaad¹, Saleh Bajaba^{2*} and Abdulrahman Basahal³

Abstract: This study presents a new mechanism for how exploitative leadership could influence unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). This study examines how exploitative leadership affects followers' moral disengagement from the perspective of social cognitive theory. In addition, it demonstrates how exploitative leadership directly impacts UPOB and how moral disengagement plays a mediating role. The survey collected data from 208 Saudi employees, and hypotheses were tested with hierarchical regression. The results show that exploitative leadership was positively related to UPOB, and moral disengagement fully mediated this relationship. This study suggests managers can take steps to mitigate the negative effects of exploitative leadership that cause moral disengagement and undesirable work behavior. The authors discuss the findings, contributions, limitations, and future directions.

Subjects: Leadership; Human Resource Management; Organizational Studies

Keywords: exploitative leadership; moral disengagement; unethical pro-organizational behavior; social cognitive theory

1. Introduction

Abuse of authority (B. Tepper, 2000), despotism (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), and hubris (Sadler-Smith et al., 2016) are just a few examples of the different forms of harmful leadership that have been the subject of a significant amount of study over the past few decades. However, exploitative leadership is a more common and highly self-interested form of leadership behavior that encompasses the most significant characteristics of dark leadership types (Bajaba et al., 2022). These types of destructive leadership styles typically involve prioritizing objectives that are at odds with those of the company and/or detrimental to the people who follow them (Krasikova et al., 2013; A. Bajaba et al., 2023). Despite its prevalence and importance, this form of leadership has yet to receive much research (Schmid et al., 2017).

Both in the organizational sciences (M. Mitchell et al., 2015) and the broader psychological literature (G. P. Goodwin, 2015; G. Goodwin et al., 2014), researchers have observed a tendency for individuals who act unethically to be perceived less positively than individuals who act ethically (Berry et al., 2005; G. P. Goodwin, 2015; Sackett & Harris, 1984; Sackett & Wanek, 1996). For instance, when workers engage in unethical behavior, they are frequently reprimanded (Bauman et al., 2016; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990), shunned (Feinberg et al., 2014), and sometimes even

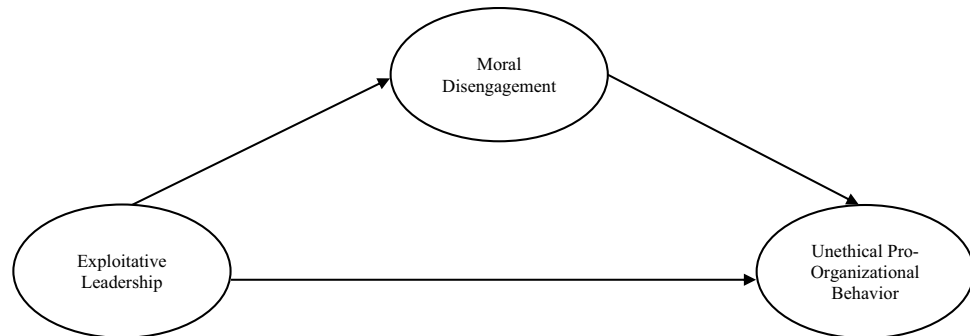
terminated from their positions. Research conducted by Brown et al. (2005) found that employees who acted ethically were seen as stronger leaders and higher achievers than their peers (Gatewood & Carroll, 1991). In most cases, employees engage in unethical behavior to improve their situation and, thus, their outcomes. For instance, they deceive their coworkers to cover up their mistakes, steal supplies from their offices to avoid having to buy the supplies themselves and lie to their managers about how well they are performing to receive pay raises, promotions, and other benefits. It is easy to see why unethical activity on the part of employees would be seen as negative behavior when considering these self-centered examples of unethical behavior. However, unethical behaviors taken by employees can also be driven by a desire to benefit their companies. Umphress and Bingham (2011) refer to this phenomenon as unethical pro-organizational (UPOB). Misrepresenting the truth to make one's organization appear more favorable is one example of UPOB. Other examples include inflating the quality of an organization's products or services to consumers and keeping unfavorable information about the organization hidden from the public (Umphress et al., 2010). At its foundation, UPOB is characterized by an inherent conflict between the performance of an organization and its ethical ideals, with the latter being compromised to prioritize the former. This raises the question of whether UPOB could, under some conditions, be regarded as a favorable behavior.

Despite these factors, no research has determined how and when exploitative leadership may affect UPOB. Exploitative leadership and UPOB are burgeoning study fields with a pressing need for additional experiments. In addition, the literature in both fields has several similar theories and variables, such as social cognitive theory, social exchange theory, and moral disengagement construct (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2021). In other words, the authors consider moral disengagement as a mediator between exploitative leadership and UPOB research areas. If the upcoming results are significant, the authors must use different theories and constructs from exploitative leadership and vice versa. It is of the utmost importance to address this research gap because UPOB drives employees to participate in unethical activities only to satisfy their own selfish interests (Seuntjens et al., 2019), harm competitors (Kilduff et al., 2016), or retaliate against the organization (Cohen et al., 2012). Through the lens of social cognitive theory, this study aims to investigate the indirect effect of exploitative leadership on UPOB through moral disengagement. According to social cognitive theory, unethical behavior arises from a cognitive process known as "moral disengagement." This cognitive process involves deactivating morals, which can lead to unethical actions (Bandura et al., 1996). Considering that an exploitative leader is, in essence, a type of salient stressor in the workplace (Schmid et al., 2017), victims who feel exploited by their leaders may disengage morally and engage in UPOB.

In a nutshell, this study aims to analyze the influence of exploitative leadership on UPOB. Specifically, the authors intend to investigate, from the standpoint of social cognitive theory, the impact of exploitative leadership on moral disengagement, the impact of moral disengagement on UPOB, the direct impact of exploitative leadership on UPOB, and the mediating role of moral disengagement on the indirect relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB. Figure 1 illustrates the research model that was used.

Due to its findings, this research adds to the existing body of knowledge in several ways. First, the findings of this research contribute to the body of knowledge on the effects of exploitative leadership and broaden the present understanding of the antecedents of UPOB by providing evidence that exploitative leadership is a contributing factor to UPOB. Second, this research's findings shed light on how exploitative leadership is linked to UPOB by revealing the mediation role played by moral disengagement when seen through the context of social cognitive theory. The literature has been enriched with new depth and findings because of the similarities between the two disciplines in their theories and variables. This brings us to our third contribution, combining exploitative leadership and UPOB as research areas that will create future research opportunities.

Figure 1. The hypothesized model.



2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior

The seminal research conducted by Umphress and Bingham (2011) forms the foundation for UPOB. In their definition, it refers to actions intended to enhance an organization's or its members' efficiency (e.g., leadership) while violating key social norms and laws. This UPOB paradigm relies heavily on the presence of two components. The Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPOB) framework is primarily based on the presence of two essential elements. Firstly, UPOB contravenes hypernorms, which refer to universally recognized standards of ethical conduct assessed concerning justice, law, or commonly accepted social norms. This deviation from hypernorms renders UPOB unethical, as described by Umphress and Bingham (2011). Employee conduct is regarded as unethical if it violates absolute societal standards, also known as hypernorms, rather than regional standards, such as those established by the company as its norms (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Second, UPOB is considered pro-organizational behavior because it is carried out voluntarily to assist or benefit the organization and (or) its members rather than being directed by superiors or indicated in formal job descriptions. This makes UPOB an example of pro-organizational behavior (Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Umphress et al., 2010). UPOB applies to both acts of omission (such as withholding unfavorable information about the organization and its products/services) and acts of commission (such as promoting false positive information about the organization and its products/services) (Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Umphress et al., 2010).

UPOB has been linked to several social and cognitive theories, such as social learning (e.g., Miao et al., 2020), social identity (e.g., Naseer et al., 2020), social exchange (e.g., Babalola et al., 2020), and social cognition (e.g., Valle et al., 2019). Social and cognitive moral transitions are the backbone perspectives explaining the occurrence of UPOB (Mishra et al., 2021). Most UPOBs studies have measured it as a consequence, trying to discover the triggering factors and the only bright leadership styles that were studied with UPOB, such as transformational leadership (Effelsberg & Solga, 2015, Graham et al., 2020; Effelsberg et al., 2014) and ethical leadership (Miao et al., 2020). It is clear that dark leadership should take part in the UPOB literature.

The multifaceted dimensions of unethical leadership fall short of fulfilling the work-related needs of subordinates, encompassing critical elements like respect, honesty, personal security, and fairness. Such deficiencies impinge upon personal dignity and suppress opportunities for growth, a perspective underscored by Hodson (2001) and Sturm and Dellert (2016). Mackey et al. (2017) underscore the individual's role in generating various emotional disturbances that compound the issue. This, as Pelletier (2010) suggests, can trigger imbalances within the workplace milieu. It follows that subordinates may be led to question their own competencies and expertise, according to Harvey et al. (2007) and Schyns and Schilling (2013), thereby risking a decrease in self-esteem. Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2021) further highlight that diminished satisfaction in personal growth underpins the negative repercussions of unethical leadership on subordinates' intentions to stay with an organization.

Contrastingly, ethical leaders, as characterized by Bedi et al. (2016), prioritize their followers' development, fostering job satisfaction and eliciting a ripple of beneficial consequences (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2011). Within such an environment, a climate of accountability could potentially buffer against the adverse impact of unethical leadership, preserving subordinates' inclination to remain in their roles and mitigating related turnover outcomes. Moreover, a responsible work atmosphere could help employees feel less vulnerable to the detriments of unethical leadership, thereby curbing emotional exhaustion, depression, and anxiety (Mackey et al., 2017, 2021). However, there's a caveat that supervisors may not always accurately embody organizational values, thus inadvertently prompting employees to promote the organization's interests via unethical pathways, such as Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPOB) (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Finally, one might postulate that organizational leaders, for instance, CEOs, can engender a work environment conducive to fostering employee accountability (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). This could potentially boost job satisfaction and stimulate employees' desire to contribute meaningfully to the organization's success, possibly through the manifestation of UPOB.

2.2. Exploitative leadership and moral disengagement

Several researchers are looking into the mechanisms of influence that affect exploitative leadership. However, most previous studies have focused on the affective pathways (Guo et al., 2021) and relational attachment (Wang et al., 2021). Less focus has been placed on cognitive mechanisms, particularly moral ones, which may explain why exploitative leadership is connected to UPOB. These mechanisms may provide some answers, and this research gap is one that the current study aims to attempt to close.

According to the social cognitive theory, moral disengagement is characterized by several cognitive rationalization mechanisms that enable individuals to participate in unethical behavior while distancing themselves from their morals (Bandura, 1999). Specifically, these cognitive reasoning systems can be broken into three distinct groups (Bandura et al., 1996). The first strategy is to reframe unethical behavior so that it may be justified; the second is to misrepresent or cover up the consequences of unethical activity as well as the responsibility for it; and the third strategy is to stigmatize those who are on the receiving end of unethical behavior (Chen et al., 2016). Since these defenses are designed to make unethical action acceptable, academics have frequently conceptualized moral disengagement as a single overarching phenomenon (Moore et al., 2012).

Previous studies have shown that moral disengagement is an important psychological mechanism through which morally questionable leadership influences subordinates' unethical behavior (e.g., Valle et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). According to Valle et al. (2019), for instance, abusive supervision can lead to moral disengagement among workers, which in turn might lead to illegal or unethical action on the part of those workers. According to Cheng et al. (2021), moral disengagement has also been shown to result from exploitative leadership. Furthermore, studies on the effects of exploitative leadership have mostly concentrated on the emotional dimensions of the phenomenon (e.g., Guo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Employees' ethical or unethical behavior can be attributed to the leader and the individual traits of the employees. This suggests that an unethical leader has the potential to impact the unethical behavior of employees, as evidenced by the unethical behavior of employees influenced by unethical leaders (Al Halbusi, Alhaidan, et al., 2023). Motivating moral identity in subordinates is more likely to occur when ethical leaders emphasize the ethical aspects of their subordinates' selves. This alignment of moral identity with the leader's traits can result in subordinates more readily adopting and internalizing the leader's cues and characteristics and subsequently applying them in the workplace (Al Halbusi, Alhaidan, et al., 2023).

The behavioral responses of individuals to their personal experiences vary widely, as established in the research conducted by M. S. Mitchell and Ambrose (2007), B. J. Tepper et al. (2009), and Holtz and Harold (2013). Some individuals may resort to unethical behavior as a retaliatory response to

mistreatment, while others may perceive such actions as morally reprehensible (Al Halbusi, Ruiz-Palomino, et al., 2023). Individuals fortified by a robust moral identity tend to exhibit less propensity to react with unethical conduct in response to perceived mistreatment. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that responses are not homogenous across individuals within identical circumstances (Al Halbusi, Ruiz-Palomino, et al., 2023).

The moral identity of an individual is intrinsically linked to their upbringing, development, social environment, and evolving sense of self, shaping their perception of selfhood. Al Halbusi, Ruiz-Palomino, et al. (2023) uncovered a significant interplay between ethical leadership and the ethical climate within an organization, which subsequently exhibits a positive correlation with the ethical conduct of its employees. Thus, leaders who exemplify ethical values inherently influence the ethical ambiance of their organizational environment. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Exploitative leadership is positively related to moral disengagement.

2.3. UPOB and moral disengagement

In earlier investigations, the social cognitive theory was utilized to investigate the root causes of UPOB (Moore et al., 2012). According to this theory, moral disengagement is a mental process that involves the deactivation of morals, which results in an unethical action. This concept has been criticized for failing to adequately explain unethical behavior's nature (Bandura et al., 1996). As a critical cognitive process in the development of UPOB, moral disengagement has been identified as a means by which individuals circumvent moral standards to strip morality from harmful action and their responsibility for it (Valle et al., 2017). The empirical evidence indicates that moral disengagement is a crucial factor in explaining various unethical behaviors seen in the workplace (e.g., Moore et al., 2012). Employees who identify with their organizations tend to reinterpret UPOB as a moral act that is essential for the organization's general welfare (Chen et al., 2016). The performance of immoral or deviant actions can be explained by a lack of self-regulation, namely the ability to block or override motivational drives (Lee et al., 2017). In addition, research has shown that some personality features can accurately predict an individual's propensity toward moral disengagement (e.g., Egan et al., 2015). Identification with the in-group also reduces employees' perceived obligation to the well-being of members of the out-group; consequently, highly identified employees are less likely to be reluctant to engage in UPOB (Chen et al., 2016).

Because they regard UPOB as an ego defense strategy that enables them to maintain their inflated self-concepts, employees with a strong sense of psychological entitlement are likelier to participate in UPOB (Lee et al., 2017). Similarly, persons with a sense of entitlement have a firm but the probably unfounded perception that they are entitled to more than others (Lee et al., 2017). In addition, workers exposed to political surroundings at work have the impression that other organization members are engaged in political activities (such as favoritism and manipulating the company's policies). Because of this, workers switched their own moral self-restrictions and adopted UPOB as a feasible approach to surviving in such situations (Valle et al., 2017). In summary, neutralization can be understood as a cognitive process that obscures, neglects, or dismisses the moral or ethical imperatives linked to an action. As described by Umphress and Bingham (2011), this process facilitates positive social exchange relationships and organizational identity, ultimately leading to Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPOB). Thus, the authors hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Moral disengagement is positively related to UPOB.

2.4. Exploitative leadership and UPOB

An exploitative leader is inherently self-serving and sees followers as a tool to achieve their goals. Williams (2014) described self-serving leadership conduct as when leaders wield their influence solely for their own gain. When there is a direct link between a leader and a follower, the exploitative behavior of a leader can manifest itself in many different ways. Schilling (2009) found descriptions of specific exploitative behaviors, such as leaders acting egotistically and influencing people for their own benefit and exerting pressure on and overburdening followers. Other exploitative behaviors include leaders overburdening followers and influencing people for their own benefit (Schmid et al., 2017).

Previous studies have utilized social cognitive theory to identify UPOB roots. It has been established that moral disengagement is a key cognitive process through which UPOB occurs (Mishra et al., 2021). Moral disengagement refers to a collection of mechanisms that allow individuals to bypass moral standards, effectively detaching morality from harmful actions and absolving themselves of responsibility for such behavior, as described by Valle et al. (2019). Moral disengagement is a cognitive process that includes the deactivation of moral self-sanctions and thus leads to immoral action, as proposed by this hypothesis (Bandura et al., 1996). This theory has been employed in many studies to determine the characteristics of employees that contribute to their participation in UPOB. For instance, a prior study established the cascade effect of supervisors' engagement in UPOB on the UPOB participation of their subordinates (Fehr et al., 2019). How role models (supervisors) carry out their responsibilities is the primary way subordinates acquire the knowledge necessary to perform appropriately in the workplace (Fehr et al., 2019). However, this research has concentrated on identifying predictors based on situations and attitudes. There currently needs more evidence to suggest that individual qualities play a role in predicting UPOB. Castille et al. (2016) suggested that those high in the "dark" attribute of Machiavellianism are more ready to engage in UPOB.

Hypothesis 3. Exploitative leadership is positively related to UPOB.

2.5. The mediating role of moral disengagement

According to the findings of previous studies, moral disengagement is a critical psychological process responsible for morally dubious leadership's effect on subordinates' unethical behavior (e.g., Valle et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). This was found to be the case in several of the researchers' studies. For instance, Valle et al. (2017) discovered that abusive supervision could encourage employees' moral disengagement, which in turn spurred employees' deviant behaviors. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2018) found that moral disengagement played an essential and mediating role in the relationship between narcissistic supervision and employees' deviant behavior.

Hypothesis 4. Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

The present investigation is quantitative and causal in nature. For the purposes of this study, data were gathered from 208 employees working in Saudi Arabian organizations belonging to both the public and private sectors. The questionnaires were filled out by the respondents themselves (self-administered). In order to evaluate hypotheses, hierarchical regression analysis and the bootstrapping methodology were utilized. In the current study, a non-probability convenience sample technique was adopted because official statistics on the total number of employees in Saudi Arabia were unavailable.

3.2. Participants

An online survey was conducted with full-time employees from both public and private sectors across Saudi Arabia as participants. The survey method enabled us to collect data from a diverse sample, facilitating the generalization of our findings to a wider population. This approach allowed us to efficiently gather substantial information while maintaining participant anonymity and promoting candid responses. To protect their privacy, participants' responses were collected and analyzed anonymously, with all data treated with the utmost confidentiality. We ensured that all participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Furthermore, the collected data is securely stored and will be maintained in compliance with relevant data protection regulations.

The outcome of our data collection efforts yielded 212 completed surveys from individuals representing diverse regions throughout Saudi Arabia. After using the listwise deletion approach to deal with missing data, the final sample size is 208. Because the authors anticipate that the data will be missing totally at random and that they will have sufficient statistical power, the authors decided to utilize this strategy (Newman, 2014). According to the recommendations made by J. F. Hair et al. (2019), the minimum sample size should be at least 120 observations, and the recommended ratio is 15 observations for each variable. The sample size has been adjusted so that it complies with these recommendations. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to more than 40 years old, and 86.1% were male, while only 13.9% were female. Table 1 contains an overview of the responder profiles.

3.3. Measurements

Given that all items used in the present study were initially developed in English, the authors translated them into Arabic using the translation-back translation procedure suggested by Brislin (1980). All measures were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) unless otherwise stated.

Exploitative leadership was measured with Schmid et al. (2017) 15-item scale. Sample items include "My leader takes it for granted that my work can be used for his or her personal benefit" and "My leader sees employees as a means to reach his or her personal goals." UPOB was measured using Umphress et al. (2010) 6-item scale. Sample items include "I misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good" and "I exaggerate the truth about my organization to help the organization." Moral disengagement was measured by Moore et al. (2012) 8-item scale. Sample items include "Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it" and "Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials a bit." The authors controlled for employee demographics, including gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age, education, and work experience (in years). For more information about the measures used, see Appendix A.

3.4. Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 28. Furthermore, a test was conducted via the PROCESS macro (v3.4) with the bootstrap sampling method (sample size = 5000) to assess the interaction effect; in addition, the authors generated asymmetric 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the interaction effect as proposed by Hayes (2022). We employed hierarchical regression and the survey method for several reasons. The hierarchical regression allowed us to analyze the unique contributions of each predictor variable while controlling for the influence of other variables (J. F. Hair et al., 2019). This approach enabled us to assess the incremental variance explained by each variable, thereby providing more in-depth insights into the relationships between the studied factors.

4. Results and hypothesis testing

To investigate the possibility of common method bias (CMB), Herman's single-factor test (Harman, 1976) was conducted. In the context of this test, a significant CMB is indicated by the presence of

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Variables	Frequency (N = 208)	Percentage (%)
Age		
20 to 29	127	61.1
30 to 39	67	32.2
40 and above	14	6.7
Gender		
Male	179	86.1
Female	29	13.9
Education		
High school graduate	43	2.7
Bachelor's degree	129	62.0
Graduate degree	36	17.3
Work experience		
Less than a year	43	2.7
1–3 years	64	3.8
4–10 years	77	37.0
More than 11 years	24	11.5

a single factor that emerges from the factor analysis or one general component that accounts for most of the covariance among the variables (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The items in the questionnaire were subjected to a factor analysis using principal component analysis with varimax rotation, which revealed the existence of eight different factors with eigenvalues that were more than 1.0. These factors are responsible for a 64.15% variance in the data. In addition, the first element, the largest factor, only accounts for 28.21% variance, a substantial amount lower than the minimum threshold of 50% required to test for CMB using Harman's single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2012). CMB is of low relevance and is therefore unlikely to bias the interpretation of the data in this study because more than one factor emerges. No general factor explains most of the total variation (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, simple correlations between the variables were investigated to see whether or not they were inflated (see Table 2). The degree to which the observable variables were correlated fell within the acceptable range. Because of this empirical proof, as well as the coherence of findings, theoretical argument, and past study, it is possible to rule out any concerns regarding the CMB.

The authors eliminated potential CMV risks by taking various preventative measures, including an official CMV examination. The question order was counterbalanced with antecedent, consequence, and control variables dispersed throughout the instrument. The instrument used the "please respond with strongly disagree" question to identify careless responding. In order to use the marker variable technique (Rönkkö & Ylitalo, 2011), the authors randomized the order in which survey items were presented to each respondent; the question order was counterbalanced with antecedent variables, consequence variables, and control variables dispersed throughout the instrument; and the instrument that measures an individual's thoughts regarding the color blue was selected to serve as the marker variable. The statement "I prefer blue to other colors" is one example of an item that can be used to measure affinity for the color blue (Miller & Simmering, 2022). The marker variable was included in the questionnaire, which consisted of seven items that measured one's perspective on the color blue. A Likert scale with five points was utilized for the items. Partial correlation was performed without the control of the marker variable, as well as with the control of the marker variable. According to the findings, there is no change in the importance of the relationship between the variables, regardless of whether or

not they were controlled, and one's attitude toward the color blue, which suggests that there is no CMV.

The reliability test was conducted to ensure the consistency and stability of the measures used in our research. The results of the study variables are presented in Table 3, including their reliability, convergent and discriminant validity results. We experienced some relatively low item loadings for moral disengagement and deleted three items (items 8, 7, and 6). However, each of our targeted constructs had acceptable reliability (J. F. Hair et al., 2017); exploitative leadership [0.60, 0.86], moral disengagement [0.63, 0.70], and UPOB [0.62, 0.70]. Moreover, both Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability (ρ_a) were above 0.70. For all items except moral disengagement (0.66); also supportive, the heterotrait-monotrait values (see Table 3) were below the most restrictive threshold of 0.85 (J. F. Hair et al., 2017). The authors also used the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which is one of the most popular techniques. For convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) for exploitative leadership was greater than 0.50 (0.63) (J. F. Hair et al., 2017). However, moral disengagement and UPOB resulted below the threshold (0.42). Table 3 shows that the square root of the AVE for each variable was greater than its associated inter-correlations, which is supportive of discriminant validity (J. F. Hair et al., 2017).

Table 4 presents a comprehensive analysis of the hypotheses. The results confirm the first hypothesis, indicating that exploitative leadership serves as a positive predictor of moral disengagement in Model 2 ($b = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$). This finding supports Hypothesis 1, suggesting a significant relationship between exploitative leadership and moral disengagement. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that moral disengagement acts as a positive predictor of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPOB) in Model 5 ($b = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$), which supports Hypothesis 2. This result highlights the influential role of moral disengagement in predicting UPOB. Moreover, the data reveal that exploitative leadership positively predicts UPOB in Model 4 ($b = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), substantiating Hypothesis 3. This finding emphasizes the direct impact of exploitative leadership on UPOB.

To assess Hypothesis 4, which explores the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB, we utilized Hayes' (2013) PROCESS add-on. The results suggest that moral disengagement indeed fully mediates this relationship ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% BCa CI [0.01, 0.12], excluding 0). Consequently, Hypothesis 4 is supported, highlighting the important mediating role of moral disengagement between exploitative leadership and UPOB (see Figure 2). In summary, the analysis presented in Table 4 provides a robust evaluation of the hypotheses and sheds light on the complex relationships among exploitative leadership, moral disengagement, and UPOB.

Figure 2. The unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between exploitative leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior through moral disengagement (N = 208).

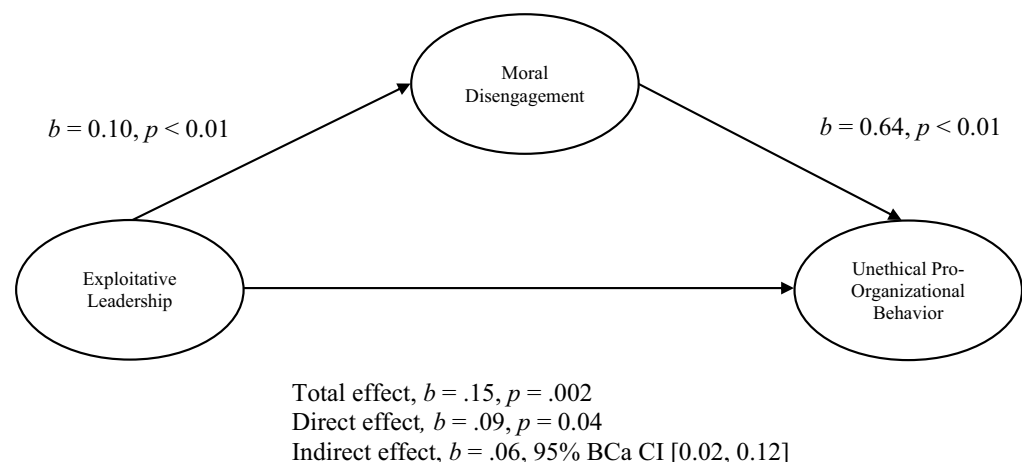


Table 2. Reliability, convergent and discriminant validity results

Variables	CR (rho_a)	CA	AVE	1	2	3
1. Exploitative Leadership	0.96	0.96	0.63	0.79	0.25	0.25
2. Moral Disengagement	0.66	0.66	0.42	0.20	0.65	0.73
3. UPOB	0.73	0.73	0.42	0.22	0.52	0.65

Notes: N = 208, *|t| ≥ 1.65 at p 0.05 level; **|t| ≥ 2.33 at p 0.01 level; ***|t| ≥ 3.09 at p 0.001 level. UPOB= Unethical pro-organizational behavior; Below the diagonal are the values of the Fornell-Larcker. Above the diagonal are the values of the heterotrait—monotrait ratio (HTMT). CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR (rho_a) = Composite reliability. AVE = Average variance extracted. The square root of AVE boldly highlighted on the diagonal.

5. Discussion

Despite expanding studies concentrating on exploitative leadership and UPOB, scholars have researched the two disciplines separately and have not paid much attention to the probable link between them. To bridge this gap, the present study investigated how, when, and why exploitative leadership leads to UPOB, using the lens of social cognitive theory. Workers exposed to political surroundings at work are under the impression that other members of the organization are engaged in political activities (Valle et al., 2019). In line with this expectation, empirical data demonstrated that exploitative leadership is positively related to moral disengagement. When followers are exposed to exploitative leaders, they are in a mindset transition, which ends with moral disengagement. Moreover, the authors found that moral disengagement was positively related to UPOB.

Consequently, employees must disable their own moral self-sanctification and adopt UPOB as a realistic survival strategy to thrive in such situations (Valle et al., 2019). Similarly, exploitative leadership is positively related to UPOB. Exploitative leadership is a negative stressor in the workplace, which can deplete employees' valued resources. To protect their residual resources, UPOB may be considered a coping method for exploitative leadership. In addition, the data demonstrated that moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB. This finding is not surprising because it is consistent with the underlying logic of social cognitive theory (Bandura et al., 1996). When confronted with a threatening or actual loss of resources, individuals experience moral disengagement, which inspires them to engage in UPOB.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The implications of the research can be broken down into four points. First, this research contributes to the growing but still relatively small body of knowledge on exploitative leadership by introducing a new employee outcome known as UPOB. An increase in scholarly focus has been paid to the effects of exploitative leadership by linking exploitative leadership to employees' behavioral and attitude outcomes (Schmid et al., 2017, 2018). For example, Schmid et al. (2017) found that exploitative leadership was associated with decreased levels of job satisfaction and emotional commitment, as well as greater levels of burnout and work deviance. Schmid et al. (2018) discovered that exploitative leadership benefits the likelihood of employees leaving their jobs. However, to our knowledge, the influence of UPOB's exploitative leadership has been largely ignored. As a result, by establishing a connection between exploitative leadership and UPOB, the research not only expands the scope of previously published work on exploitative leadership but also satisfies the demand made by Schmid et al. (2017) for additional empirical research that can shed light on the exploitative leadership area. In addition, the research contributes to the existing canon of UPOB literature by investigating the origins of UPOB from the perspective of dark leadership. Second, this research contributes to the knowledge of the underlying mechanisms that underlie the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee outcomes by providing evidence that moral disengagement plays a role in mediating this relationship. Previous studies have investigated the immediate impact that exploitative leadership might have (e.g., Schmid

Table 3. Correlation analysis

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Exploitative Leadership	2.70	1.10	—	0.20**	0.22**	0.002	-0.09	0.01	0.08
2. Moral Disengagement	2.20	0.77	0.20**	—	0.52**	-0.11	-0.14*	-0.02	-0.13
3. UPOB	2.33	0.82	0.22**	0.52**	—	-0.07	-0.08	-0.02	-0.08
4. Age	1.50	0.62	0.00	-0.11	-0.07	—	0.31**	0.43**	0.60**
5. Gender	0.14	0.34	-0.09	-0.14*	-0.08	0.31**	—	0.27**	0.08
6. Education	1.97	0.61	0.01	-0.02	-0.02	0.43**	0.27**	—	0.34**
7. Work Experience	2.40	0.94	0.08	-0.01	-0.08	0.60**	0.08	0.34**	—

N = 208. Note: UPOB = Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior; SD = standard deviation. Gender: 0 = Male, 1 = Female; Work Experience (in years); Education: 1 = High School graduate, 2 = Bachelor's degree, 3 = Graduate degree. Below the diagonal are correlations among the constructs; Above the diagonal are the correlations after controlling for the marker variables (attitude towards the color blue). ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Summary of the hierarchical regression results (unstandardized coefficients)						
Variables	Moral Disengagement		Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Constant	2.13**	1.82**	2.5**	2.1**	1.3**	1.15**
Age	-0.02 (.15)	-0.01 (.11)	-0.01 (.12)	-0.002 (.12)	-.00 (.11)	0.002 (.11)
Gender	-0.33 (.16)	-0.29 (.16)	-0.19 (.18)	-0.15 (.18)	-0.02 (.16)	-0.003 (.15)
Education	0.09 (.09)	0.09 (.09)	.04 (.11)	0.04 (.10)	-0.01 (.09)	-0.01 (.09)
Work Experience	-0.11 (.07)	-0.12 (.07)	-.06 (.08)	-0.08 (.08)	-0.01 (.07)	-0.02 (.07)
Exploitative Leadership		.12** (.04)		.15** (.05)		0.09 (.04)
Moral Disengagement					0.53** (.07)	0.51** (.07)
R ²	0.04	0.08	0.01	0.06	0.25	0.26
ΔR ²	-	0.04	-	0.05	0.19	0.10
F	1.98	3.26**	0.62	2.50*	13.33**	11.34**
df	203	202	203	202	202	201

N = 208. Note: Gender: 0 = Male, 1 = Female; Work Experience (in years); Education: 1 = High School graduate, 2 = Bachelor's degree, 3 = Graduate degree; Std. error is reported between parentheses.

**p < .01

*p < .05

et al., 2017, 2018). Surprisingly, however, much less focus has been placed on the underlying influence mechanism associated with exploitative leadership. The authors developed the concept of moral disengagement as a vital mediating role in the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB, drawing on social cognitive theory as the primary source of inspiration. The findings demonstrated that exploitative leadership contributed to increased employee moral disengagement, which led to UPOB. This finding aligns with previous research by Zhang et al. (2018), which demonstrated that moral disengagement played a crucial mediating role in the relationship between narcissistic supervision and employees' deviant behavior. In addition, the research findings revealed that social cognitive theory was a suitable framework for explaining the influencing process of exploitative leadership. This helped shed light on the moral disengagement that exploitative leadership relies upon to link to employee results. This study supports previous findings that leadership influences employees' behaviors and performance (Fuller et al., 2022; Malibari & Bajaba, 2022).

5.2. Practical implications

This study's findings have several different applications in the real world. First, the research results demonstrated that exploitative leadership could result in UPOB. As a result, businesses have a greater need to devote more time and energy to the task of reducing the prevalence of exploitative leadership. For instance, when selecting and promoting managers, companies should prefer individuals for leadership positions with low levels of selfish intendancies and characteristics of their dark side. Such candidates are less likely to act in self-interest (e.g., narcissism and Machiavellianism). In addition, to forestall extremely self-serving actions on the part of leaders, they are strongly advised to participate in leadership development programs that emphasize more accurate knowledge of one's interdependence with other people. Second, the authors discovered that a lack of moral engagement also affected the Development of UPOB. Therefore, managers are responsible for being concerned about their employees' morals at work. For instance, to assist its members in better avoiding UPOB, organizations should create a friendly working atmosphere and give interventions that promote good morals. To be more specific, businesses should consider offering their staff members employee health programs and psychological consultation services to assist them in releasing negative emotions, replenishing personally valuable resources, and improving their ability to cope with adverse events. Third, managers should pay great attention to the recruitment process with the assistance of personality evaluation tools to identify positive candidates in social exchange while considering morals and ethics. In addition, it is recommended that managers provide training and exceptional mentoring for employees who are positive in social exchange but morally disengaged. This is done to assist these employees in developing positive social cognition of others and comprehend that not all pro-organizational behaviors are ethical.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

The research contains a few limitations that should be considered in subsequent investigations. The first restriction on their application is the inability to generalize the findings to different settings. The Saudi Arabian workers that are employed full-time make up the sample. The generalizations of the findings are restricted due to the single social environment. As a result, the authors strongly recommend that similar research be conducted in diverse cultural settings using samples from a wide range of industries in the years to come. The design of the research itself is the subject of the second constraint. Even though the authors collected the data over five weeks to determine the causality of the variables, the claimed causal links cannot be guaranteed due to the correlational nature of the data. Because of this, it would be preferable for future studies to utilize either a longitudinal or experimental design to reexamine the findings' causality. Third, potential boundary conditions for the influence of exploitative leadership may include the relationship between the leader and the subordinates (e.g., leader-member exchange) and (e.g., organizational politics) moderators. Fourthly, it is noteworthy that the Average Variance Extracted for variables such as moral disengagement and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior does not meet the optimal threshold of 0.50. Although these preliminary findings are promising, they signal the need for caution and further verification. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future research endeavors to replicate this study. In doing so, these

subsequent studies would not only reinforce the robustness of our current results but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between these constructs.

6. Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, exploitative leadership appears to be a factor in employees' moral disengagement, which leads to an increase in UPOB. The authors investigated the effect of exploitative leadership on UPOB by applying the causal reasoning perspective of the social cognitive theory. Specifically, the authors focused on the underlying mechanism of moral disengagement to mediate the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB. Our findings provide significant contributions to the existing body of research on exploitative leadership and UPOB and suggest potential avenues for future research.

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Disclosure statement

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

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request https://osf.io/3gvrj/?view_only=472a24a9c3aa4de092e5a8be04e12ec2.

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Appendix A: Measurement scales and sources

Exploitative leadership:	
Measurement Items	Source
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Takes it for granted that my work can be used for his or her personal benefit. (2) Sees employees as a means to reach his or her personal goals. (3) Values the achievement of his or her own goals over the needs of the employees. (4) Puts me under pressure to reach his or her goals. (5) Increases my workload without considering my needs in order to reach his or her goals. (6) Does not consider my workload when new tasks need to be assigned. (7) Gives me tedious tasks if he or she can benefit from it (8) Does not give me opportunities to further develop myself professionally because his or her own goals have priority. (9) Gives me boring routine tasks when he or she can benefit from it. (10) Uses my work to get himself or herself noticed. (11) Passes the team's work off as his or her own. (12) Uses my work for his or her personal gain. (13) Plays my colleagues and me off against each other to reach his or her goals. (14) Manipulates others to reach his or her goals. (15) Does not hesitate to manipulate or deceive employees in order to reach his/her goals. 	Schmid et al. (2017)
Moral disengagement:	
Measurement Items	Source
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about. (2) Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it. (3) Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials a bit. (4) People shouldn't be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do. (5) People can't be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too. (6) Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal. (7) Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt. (8) People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves. 	Moore et al. (2012)

(Continued)

UPOB:	
Measurement Items	Adopted From
(1) I misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good. (2) I exaggerate the truth about my organization to help the organization. (3) I withhold negative information about my organization to benefit the organization. (4) I downplay a mistake made by the organization to avoid damaging the organization's image. (5) I engage in "questionable" behavior to benefit the organization. (6) I conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization.	Umphress et al. (2010)
Attitude toward color blue:	
Measurement Items	Source
(1) Blue is a beautiful color. (2) Blue is a lovely color. (3) Blue is a pleasant color. (4) The color blue is wonderful (5) Blue is a nice color. (6) I think blue is a pretty color (7) I like the color blue.	Miller and Simmering (2022)