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Exploitative Leadership and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior: The Full Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement

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Abstract

This research introduces an alternative explanatory pathway describing how exploitative leadership shapes unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). Using social cognitive theory as its foundation, the paper investigates the way exploitative leadership encourages moral disengagement among subordinates. It also clarifies both the direct influence of exploitative leadership on UPOB and the indirect mechanism through moral disengagement. Data were obtained from 208 Saudi workers, and the hypotheses were evaluated through hierarchical regression methods. Findings indicate that exploitative leadership significantly increases UPOB, while moral disengagement completely bridges this relationship. The study advises managers to adopt preventive strategies to limit the damaging outcomes of exploitative leadership that foster disengagement and counterproductive moral reasoning. The results, theoretical insights, constraints, and suggestions for subsequent studies are discussed in detail.

Keywords: Exploitative leadership, Moral disengagement, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Social cognitive theory

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Introduction

Over recent decades, substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to forms of destructive leadership, including abusive supervision [1], tyrannical control [2], and arrogant leadership tendencies [3]. Among these negative patterns, exploitative leadership represents a particularly self-serving style that consolidates many attributes of dark leadership behavior [4]. Such leaders tend to pursue personal gains that conflict with organizational objectives and often act to the detriment of their teams [5, 6]. Despite its practical relevance, empirical exploration of exploitative leadership remains limited [7].

In both organizational behavior [8] and psychological literature [9, 10], unethical conduct has consistently been evaluated more negatively than ethical behavior [11-13]. Employees engaging in immoral acts typically face disciplinary measures [14, 15], exclusion from peers [16], or dismissal. Conversely, ethically responsible workers are commonly viewed as capable leaders and high performers [17, 18].

Unethical actions often stem from personal motives, such as concealing errors, misreporting performance, or appropriating company resources for individual benefit. Yet, some unethical decisions arise from a desire to protect or advance the organization, even when these actions contradict moral norms. This type of conduct is identified as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB) [19]. Illustrations include distorting facts to improve the firm's image, exaggerating quality claims, or hiding damaging information from public scrutiny [20]. At its essence, UPOB reflects a conflict between ethics and performance, prioritizing the latter at the expense of moral standards. This raises a crucial issue: can UPOB, under certain circumstances, be perceived as constructive?

Nevertheless, the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB remains underexplored. Both topics are still evolving and share overlapping theoretical bases, including social cognitive theory, social exchange theory, and the moral disengagement construct [21, 22]. In this work, moral disengagement is positioned as the mediating element linking exploitative leadership and UPOB. Establishing this mediation would call for further integration of distinct theories and constructs to enrich understanding of leadership's darker sides.

Filling this research gap is vital since UPOB may push employees toward unethical decisions for self-interest [23], competitive harm [24], or even revenge against their employer [25]. From the standpoint of social cognitive theory, moral disengagement represents a cognitive mechanism through which individuals justify unethical behavior by suspending internal moral controls [26]. Given that exploitative leadership serves as a significant workplace stressor [7], subordinates who feel exploited are more likely to morally disengage and consequently participate in UPOB.

To summarize, the present research seeks to determine the effects of exploitative leadership on UPOB by examining: (1) the impact of exploitative leadership on moral disengagement; (2) the influence of moral disengagement on UPOB; (3) the direct path between exploitative leadership and UPOB; and (4) the mediating effect of moral disengagement within that pathway. The conceptual framework developed for this analysis is presented in **Figure 1**.

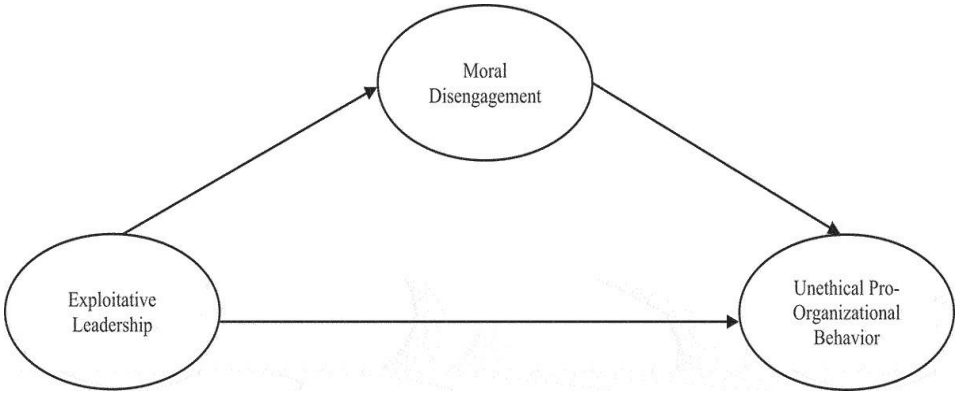

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The results of this study make several noteworthy contributions to existing scholarship. First, the research extends the understanding of exploitative leadership and its connection to unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB) by empirically confirming that exploitative leadership acts as a significant antecedent to UPOB. Second, the findings explain the underlying mechanism linking exploitative leadership and UPOB, identifying moral disengagement as a crucial mediating factor through the interpretive lens of social cognitive theory. The conceptual overlap between these two areas enriches existing literature and deepens theoretical integration. Third, by jointly examining exploitative leadership and UPOB, this research establishes a foundation for future explorations that connect both constructs in leadership and behavioral ethics studies.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Unethical Pro-organizational behavior

The concept of UPOB was initially articulated by Umphress and Bingham [19], who defined it as voluntary behavior performed to advance the interests or performance of an organization—or its representatives such as leaders—while simultaneously violating prevailing moral principles, societal norms, or legal boundaries. This framework relies on two fundamental features.

First, UPOB breaches hypernorms, which are universally accepted ethical standards anchored in justice, legality, or moral consensus. Such deviation renders these actions unethical because they conflict with absolute societal expectations rather than localized or organizationally defined norms [19]. Second, UPOB qualifies as pro-organizational because employees engage in it willingly to assist their organization or colleagues, independent of formal direction or job requirements. Consequently, it is categorized as a discretionary behavior intended to promote organizational well-being [19, 20]. These actions can involve omission, such as withholding negative information about the firm, or commission, such as deliberately overstating product quality or organizational achievements [19, 20].

UPOB has been examined within multiple social and cognitive theoretical frameworks, including social learning [27], social identity [28], social exchange [29], and social cognition [30]. These perspectives highlight that both social and cognitive mechanisms shape moral decision-making in the workplace [22]. Most empirical work treats UPOB as an outcome variable, exploring its precursors—most often associated with positive leadership styles, such as transformational [31-33] and ethical leadership [27]. However, given its behavioral complexity, the influence of dark leadership should also be incorporated into the UPOB research domain.

Forms of destructive leadership frequently fail to meet subordinates' fundamental work-related expectations, such as integrity, fairness, respect, and security. Such shortcomings undermine employees' dignity and limit opportunities for personal advancement [34, 35]. According to Mackey *et al.* [36], this failure often generates negative emotional responses that further deteriorate workplace balance [37]. Consequently, subordinates may begin doubting their own competence and self-worth [38, 39], resulting in reduced self-esteem. Ruiz-Palomino *et al.* [40] observed that frustration stemming from constrained personal growth mediates the link between unethical leadership and employees' declining intention to remain within the organization.

In contrast, ethical leadership, as described by Bedi *et al.* [41], emphasizes follower development, fosters higher job satisfaction, and triggers a cascade of positive outcomes [42]. Cultivating a climate of accountability may therefore counteract the detrimental effects of unethical leadership, preserving employees' organizational commitment and reducing turnover tendencies. Furthermore, a responsible and transparent organizational culture can alleviate employees' exposure to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depression that often stem from toxic supervision [36, 43]. Nevertheless, it is possible that certain supervisors may fail to model organizational ethics, unintentionally motivating subordinates to advance company interests through morally questionable means—specifically, UPOB [40]. Finally, senior leaders, including CEOs, play a vital role in cultivating an environment that enhances accountability and engagement [40]. Such conditions can elevate job satisfaction and strengthen employees' motivation to support organizational goals—sometimes even manifesting as unethical pro-organizational conduct.

Exploitative leadership and moral disengagement

A growing body of literature has explored how exploitative leadership shapes employee behavior. Yet, earlier investigations have largely emphasized emotional mechanisms [44] and relational attachment dynamics [45], leaving the cognitive domain, particularly moral cognition, comparatively underexamined. Understanding this dimension could clarify why exploitative leadership is linked to unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). Addressing this unexplored mechanism forms one of the core objectives of the present research.

Within the framework of social cognitive theory, moral disengagement represents a psychological detachment process whereby individuals justify unethical conduct and disconnect from personal ethical standards [46]. Bandura *et al.* [26] categorized these rationalizations into three main types: (1) reframing immoral acts as acceptable or necessary, (2) minimizing or obscuring both outcomes and responsibility, and (3) devaluing or shifting blame onto victims [47]. These mechanisms collectively enable individuals to perceive unethical acts as permissible, leading many scholars to conceptualize moral disengagement as a unified construct [48].

Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that moral disengagement functions as a psychological bridge linking unethical leadership to subordinates' deviant behavior [30, 49]. For example, Valle *et al.* [30] reported that abusive supervision triggers moral disengagement among employees, which subsequently promotes unethical or illegal acts. Similarly, Cheng *et al.* [21] confirmed that exploitative leaders tend to foster moral disengagement in followers. Nevertheless, most prior studies on exploitative leadership have continued to center on emotional responses, rather than on these cognitive moral processes [44, 45].

Employees' moral conduct may reflect both leader behavior and personal characteristics. Unethical leaders can indirectly cultivate unethical practices among followers, as employees often model the moral tone of their supervisors [50]. Conversely, ethical leadership strengthens followers' moral identity, aligning employees' internalized values with those expressed by their leaders. Such congruence leads subordinates to adopt and replicate ethical cues within their own roles [50].

Reactions to mistreatment are far from uniform. Prior work by Mitchell and Ambrose [51], Tepper *et al.* [52], and Holtz and Harold [53] suggests that while some individuals retaliate through unethical acts, others regard such responses as morally unacceptable [54]. Individuals with a stronger moral identity are typically less inclined to resort to immoral retaliation, although variations persist even under identical conditions [54].

An individual's moral identity develops through socialization, upbringing, environmental factors, and self-concept formation. Al Halbusi, Ruiz-Palomino, *et al.* [54] identified a meaningful interaction between ethical leadership and the organization's ethical climate, both of which positively influence employees' moral behavior. Consequently, leaders who embody ethical principles naturally foster an ethical environment that encourages corresponding employee conduct.

Hypothesis 1. Exploitative leadership positively predicts moral disengagement.

UPOB and moral disengagement

Research grounded in social cognitive theory has sought to explain the antecedents of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB) [48]. Within this perspective, moral disengagement refers to the temporary suspension of moral standards that allows individuals to commit unethical acts without self-condemnation. Although Bandura *et al.* [26] noted that the framework cannot fully capture the complexity of moral violations, it remains useful for illustrating how cognitive disengagement facilitates unethical behavior. Moral disengagement thus acts as a cognitive bypass, weakening moral self-regulation and separating

individuals' ethical principles from their actions [55]. Empirical findings consistently recognize moral disengagement as a central predictor of workplace misconduct [48].

Employees who feel deeply connected to their organizations may reinterpret unethical acts as serving collective goals, viewing UPOB as morally justified behavior intended to protect the organization [47]. Failures in self-control, or an inability to inhibit unethical impulses, further increase the likelihood of such acts [56]. Additionally, personality traits influence this tendency—certain dispositional factors can heighten susceptibility to moral disengagement [57]. Strong in-group identification can also narrow moral concern, leading employees to neglect the interests of outsiders and rationalize UPOB as beneficial for their group [47].

Employees with an inflated sense of entitlement are particularly prone to such reasoning. They view unethical pro-organizational actions as legitimate means to uphold their perceived self-worth [56]. These individuals often believe they deserve preferential treatment or advantages beyond others. Likewise, in politically charged workplaces, where favoritism or manipulation is perceived as common, employees may relax moral restrictions and adopt UPOB as a strategy for self-preservation [55].

In sum, neutralization represents a mental defense that masks or denies the ethical implications of an act. According to Umphress and Bingham [19], this process enhances perceptions of positive exchange and strengthens organizational identification, which, in turn, promotes unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Hypothesis 2. Moral disengagement is positively associated with UPOB.

Exploitative leadership and UPOB

Exploitative leaders are fundamentally self-centered, perceiving subordinates as mere instruments for achieving personal ambitions. Williams [58] defined this form of leadership as one where influence is exercised primarily for self-interest and personal advancement. When there is close interaction between leader and follower, exploitative behavior may surface in several manifestations. Schilling [59] identified such behaviors as including ego-driven actions, coercion, manipulation, and the excessive imposition of workloads on subordinates. Similarly, Schmid *et al.* [7] noted that exploitative leaders often place unfair demands on followers and use them as means to attain their own objectives.

Previous research grounded in social cognitive theory has examined the cognitive mechanisms underlying unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). One of the principal mechanisms identified is moral disengagement, a psychological process allowing individuals to rationalize and detach moral responsibility from unethical acts [22, 30]. According to Bandura *et al.* [26], moral disengagement occurs when moral self-regulation is temporarily deactivated, leading to behaviors that contravene ethical norms. Numerous studies have used this framework to explore how employees' traits and perceptions influence their participation in UPOB.

For example, Fehr *et al.* [60] observed that when supervisors themselves engage in UPOB, it creates a trickle-down effect, encouraging similar behavior among subordinates. Followers often model their leaders' behaviors, learning appropriate (or inappropriate) workplace conduct by example [60]. Nevertheless, most prior investigations have concentrated on situational and attitudinal antecedents, while limited evidence addresses individual personality characteristics as predictors of UPOB. Castille *et al.* [61] proposed that employees with elevated Machiavellian tendencies, a core trait within the "dark triad," exhibit a stronger inclination to commit UPOB.

Hypothesis 3. *Exploitative leadership is positively associated with UPOB.*

The mediating role of moral disengagement

Extant research consistently identifies moral disengagement as a pivotal psychological conduit through which unethical or self-serving leadership influences employees' deviant actions [49, 55]. For instance, Valle *et al.* [55] demonstrated that abusive supervision heightens moral disengagement, which subsequently stimulates deviant workplace conduct. Similarly, Zhang *et al.* [49] revealed that moral disengagement serves as a mediating variable linking narcissistic supervision to employees' unethical behaviors.

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

Methods

Design

The current study adopted a quantitative and causal research design. Data were collected from 208 employees working in both public and private organizations across Saudi Arabia. Participants completed self-administered questionnaires, ensuring standardized responses. To test the proposed hypotheses, the study utilized hierarchical regression analysis along with the bootstrapping approach for mediation testing. Due to the unavailability of official labor statistics, a non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed.

Participants

Data collection was conducted through an online survey distributed to full-time employees from diverse sectors across Saudi Arabia. This digital approach enabled access to a broad cross-section of participants and facilitated the generalizability of findings. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained outlining the study's objectives, voluntary nature, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. All data were handled according to ethical and data protection guidelines.

A total of 212 responses were initially received from employees in various Saudi regions. After applying listwise deletion to remove incomplete cases, the final sample size consisted of 208 valid responses. This approach was chosen based on the assumption that missing data were completely random and would not bias the results [62]. In line with Hair *et al.* [63], the sample met methodological requirements, as the minimum threshold is 120 participants, with a recommended ratio of 15 observations per variable.

Participant ages ranged from 20 years to over 40 years, with 86.1% male and 13.9% female respondents. **Table 1** presents a summary of the demographic distribution of the sample.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Variables	Frequency ($N = 208$)	Percentage (%)
Age		
20 - 29	127	61.1
30 - 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 to 3 years	64	3.8
4 to 10 years	77	37.0
More than 11 years	24	11.5

Measurements

Since the original items in this study were designed in English, the researchers translated them into Arabic through the translation–back translation approach recommended by Brislin [64]. All measurement instruments were based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), unless stated otherwise.

Exploitative leadership was assessed using the 15-item instrument by Schmid *et al.* [7]. Example statements include: "My leader assumes my work can be used for his or her own gain" and "My leader treats employees as tools to achieve personal ambitions." UPOB was evaluated through the 6-item scale from Umphress *et al.* [20]. Illustrative items are: "I distort the truth to enhance my organization's image" and "I overstate facts about my organization to support it." Moral disengagement was captured through the 8-item measure developed by Moore *et al.* [48]. Sample items include: "It is acceptable to take something without permission if it is merely borrowed" and "Given how people misrepresent themselves, exaggerating one's credentials is not a real wrongdoing."

Control variables consisted of employee demographic factors—gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age, education, and years of work experience. For additional detail on the scales employed, see Appendix A.

Analysis

To examine the hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted using SPSS version 28. Additionally, the PROCESS macro (v3.4) was applied with a bootstrap sampling procedure (n = 5000) to test interaction effects. As recommended by Hayes [65], asymmetric 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were generated. The hierarchical regression and survey approach were adopted for several reasons. This method made it possible to determine the distinct impact of each predictor after accounting for others [63]. It further allowed the evaluation of incremental variance explained by each factor, thus providing a deeper understanding of the variable relationships.

Results and Hypothesis Testing

To check for the presence of common method bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test [66] was used. The occurrence of CMB would be shown if a single dominant factor emerged or if one general factor explained most covariance among the variables [67]. Factor analysis using principal component analysis with varimax rotation yielded eight distinct factors with eigenvalues > 1.0, jointly explaining 64.15% of total variance. The first and largest factor accounted for 28.21% of the variance—well below the 50% threshold commonly used to indicate CMB [67]. Therefore, since multiple factors emerged and no single factor dominated, CMB was minimal and unlikely to distort interpretation [68].

Simple correlations among variables were also examined to ensure no inflated relationships **(Table 2)**. The correlation coefficients fell within acceptable ranges, confirming the absence of serious bias. Collectively, empirical data, theoretical reasoning, and past evidence indicate that CMB was not a concern in this study.

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; **|t| ≥ 2.33 at p < 0.01; ***|t| ≥ 3.09 at p < 0.001.

UPOB = Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior. Values below the diagonal represent Fornell–Larcker estimates, while those above the diagonal indicate the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT).

CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR (rho_a) = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted. The bold diagonal values show the square root of AVE.

To minimize potential common method variance (CMV), several procedural remedies were implemented, along with a formal CMV test. The survey was designed so that antecedent, outcome, and control variables were interspersed throughout the instrument. Additionally, a "please respond with strongly disagree" item was embedded to detect inattentive participants.

Using the marker variable technique [69], item presentation was randomized for each respondent. A variable reflecting participants' attitude toward the color blue was used as the marker variable, with items such as "I prefer blue to other colors" [70]. This measure contained seven items on a five-point Likert scale. Partial correlations were computed both with and without controlling for the marker variable. The results indicated no meaningful difference between the two conditions, suggesting that CMV was not present and that respondents' perception of the color blue did not affect relationships among study variables.

To verify the internal consistency and measurement stability of all constructs, a reliability and validity analysis was carried out. The findings, summarized in **Table 3**, show the reliability, convergence, and discrimination measures. During this step, three items from the moral disengagement scale (items 6, 7, and 8) were removed because of low loadings. Even after removing these items, the constructs met acceptable thresholds [71]. The reliability values for exploitative leadership ranged from 0.60–0.86, moral disengagement from 0.63–0.70, and UPOB from 0.62–0.70.

Both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (rho_a) were greater than 0.70, except for moral disengagement (0.66), which still indicated satisfactory reliability. The HTMT ratios **(Table 3)** remained below the most conservative criterion of 0.85, confirming discriminant validity [71]. The Fornell–Larcker assessment also verified convergence adequacy, showing that exploitative leadership achieved an average variance extracted (AVE) value of 0.63, exceeding the 0.50 cutoff. Meanwhile, moral disengagement and UPOB returned AVE values of 0.42, slightly lower than the ideal threshold. Nonetheless, since the square roots of AVE for each construct were larger than their correlations with other variables, discriminant validity was upheld [71].

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

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	−.14*	−.08	0.31**	—	0.27**	0.08
6. Education	1.97	0.61	0.01	−.02	−0.02	0.43**	0.27**	—	0.34**
7. Work Experience	2.40	0.94	0.08	−.01	−0.08	0.60**	0.08	0.34**	—

N = 208

Notes: UPOB = Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior; SD = Standard Deviation.

Gender coded as 0 = Male, 1 = Female; Work experience measured in years.

Education coded as 1 = High School, 2 = Bachelor's, 3 = Graduate.

Correlations below the diagonal reflect raw associations; those above the diagonal are adjusted for the marker variable (blue color preference).

Significance: p < .01, *p < .05.

The regression outcomes displayed in **Table 4** summarize the testing of all proposed hypotheses. Findings indicate that exploitative leadership significantly predicts moral disengagement in Model 2 (b = 0.10, p < 0.01), lending support to H1.

Moreover, moral disengagement positively predicts UPOB in Model 5 (b = 0.64, p < 0.01), which supports H2. In addition, exploitative leadership directly and positively influences UPOB in Model 4 (b = 0.15, p < 0.01), confirming H3. These findings demonstrate both the direct and indirect pathways linking exploitative leadership to unethical pro-organizational acts.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression (Unstandardized Coefficients)

	Moral Disengagement		Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior			
Variables	**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.

Notes: Gender = 0 (Male), 1 (Female); Work Experience = Years; Education = 1 (High School), 2 (Bachelor's), 3 (Graduate).

Standard errors appear in parentheses.

p < .01, *p < .05.*

To assess H4, which examined whether moral disengagement mediates the effect of exploitative leadership on UPOB, the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013) was utilized. The bootstrap results (5,000 resamples) revealed full mediation (b = 0.06, SE = 0.03, 95% BCa CI [0.01, 0.12]; zero excluded). Therefore, H4 was supported, demonstrating that moral disengagement completely bridges the relationship between exploitative leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior **(Figure 2)**. Collectively, the results in **Table 4** provide solid empirical confirmation of all proposed hypotheses.

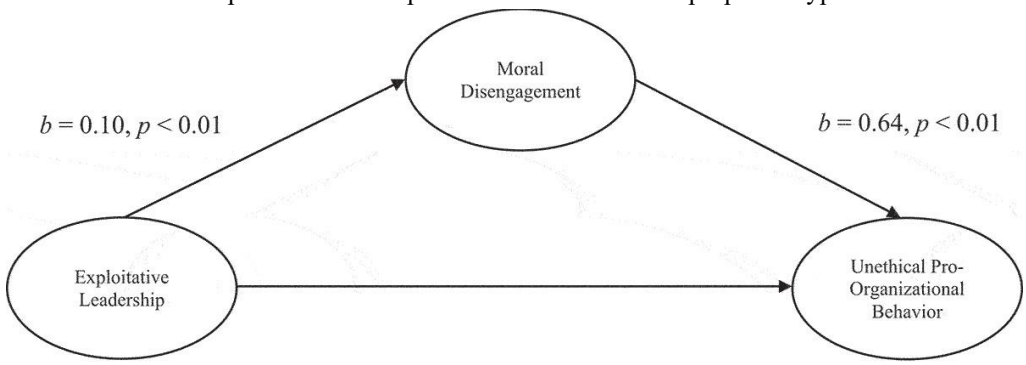

Figure 2. Unstandardized regression coefficients illustrating the indirect path from exploitative leadership to unethical pro-organizational behavior through moral disengagement (**N = 208**).

Discussion

Although research on exploitative leadership and UPOB has expanded, both have often been explored separately rather than together. To address this limitation, this study applied social cognitive theory to clarify how exploitative leadership can drive unethical behaviors that appear to favor the organization. Employees working within politically charged environments often assume that self-serving conduct is routine among peers [30]. Aligning with this assumption, results verified that exploitative leadership significantly increases moral disengagement. When subordinates observe such self-focused behavior from leaders, they often experience a cognitive realignment that suppresses moral reasoning.

Furthermore, a strong positive association emerged between moral disengagement and UPOB. Individuals who disengage morally tend to rationalize unethical behaviors as acceptable strategies for organizational or personal survival [30]. The findings also confirm that exploitative leadership directly heightens the likelihood of UPOB, suggesting that such leadership creates psychological strain and depletes employees' moral resources. To protect themselves, employees may justify unethical acts framed as benefiting the organization. Finally, consistent with social cognitive theory [26], moral disengagement was found to fully mediate the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB. This indicates that when individuals

perceive threats or losses in personal resources, they deactivate moral self-sanctions, making unethical behavior a psychologically defensible response.

Theoretical implications

The theoretical contributions of this study can be divided into four major aspects. First, it enriches the relatively limited scholarship on exploitative leadership by introducing a new employee behavioral outcome—Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPOB). Although academic interest in exploitative leadership has grown, most attention has centered on its consequences for employees' attitudes and behaviors [7, 72]. For instance, Schmid *et al.* [7] identified that this form of leadership decreases job satisfaction and emotional commitment, while elevating burnout and workplace deviance. Later, Schmid *et al.* [72] reported that such leadership also heightens employees' intention to quit. Yet, to date, the potential link between exploitative leadership and UPOB has been rarely considered. Therefore, by establishing this relationship, the current research not only expands the theoretical boundaries of previous work but also directly responds to Schmid *et al.*'s [7] call for additional empirical studies that deepen understanding in this domain. Furthermore, this work advances UPOB research by exploring its antecedents through the perspective of dark leadership.

Second, this study adds value by explaining the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee behavior. It demonstrates that moral disengagement functions as a mediating variable connecting the two. Earlier works (e.g., Schmid *et al.* [7, 72]) focused largely on immediate behavioral outcomes, overlooking how these effects unfold. Drawing on social cognitive theory, the present study conceptualizes moral disengagement as a central mediator explaining why exploitative leadership triggers UPOB. Empirical results confirmed that leaders' exploitative conduct fosters moral disengagement among subordinates, which subsequently leads to UPOB. This aligns with Zhang *et al.* [49], who identified a similar mediating role of moral disengagement between narcissistic supervision and deviant acts. Additionally, the findings affirm the suitability of social cognitive theory as a robust explanatory model for how exploitative leadership exerts its influence through moral disengagement. The results further strengthen the argument that leadership behaviors significantly shape employees' ethical orientations and job performance [73, 74].

Practical Implications

Several managerial and organizational lessons can be drawn from this research. First, the results reveal that exploitative leadership can foster UPOB, underscoring the importance for organizations to actively prevent such leadership tendencies. During recruitment and promotion, firms should prioritize candidates who demonstrate low self-centered traits and minimal "dark" personality markers such as narcissism or Machiavellianism. Furthermore, companies should invest in leadership development initiatives that cultivate awareness of interpersonal interdependence and discourage excessively self-serving behaviors.

Second, since moral disengagement was found to contribute to the emergence of UPOB, managers must pay close attention to the moral climate of their teams. Cultivating a supportive environment and offering ethical behavior interventions can reduce tendencies toward moral detachment. Organizations may, for instance, introduce employee well-being initiatives and counseling programs designed to help staff manage stress, rebuild personal resources, and regulate negative emotions.

Third, recruitment processes should integrate personality assessments capable of identifying applicants with strong ethical orientation and prosocial motivations. Managers are also advised to provide specialized mentoring and ethics-focused training to employees who are socially engaged yet morally disengaged. Such measures can foster positive cognitive reframing, helping workers understand that not all actions benefiting the organization are ethically acceptable.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. First, the generalizability of findings is limited because the sample consisted exclusively of full-time employees in Saudi Arabia. Future investigations should examine other cultural and industrial contexts to validate whether these patterns persist across settings. Second, the research design limits causal inference. Although the authors collected data over a five-week period, the correlational approach prevents definite causal conclusions. Hence, future scholars should consider employing longitudinal or experimental methods to strengthen causal claims.

Third, potential boundary conditions—such as leader-member exchange or organizational politics—might influence how exploitative leadership affects outcomes and should be incorporated as moderators in subsequent studies. Fourth, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for constructs like moral disengagement and UPOB fell below the ideal 0.50 threshold, suggesting a need for further validation. Although preliminary evidence is promising, replication studies are recommended to confirm robustness and enhance understanding of the intricate relationships among these constructs.

Conclusion

In summary, the study concludes that exploitative leadership contributes to employee moral disengagement, which in turn promotes unethical pro-organizational behavior. By employing social cognitive theory, the authors clarified how moral disengagement mediates this association. The findings make substantial contributions to literature on both exploitative leadership and UPOB, while opening promising pathways for further empirical exploration into the ethical consequences of dark leadership.

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