



Study on the Mechanism of the Effect of Leader Pro-Organizational Unethical Behavior on Employee Cyberloafing Behavior

Yuxin Wang^{a*}, Jianju Wang^b, Fanfan Liu^c

School of Business Administration, Guizhou University of Finance and Economics, Guiyang 550025, China

Corresponding author email: ^{a*} qqwqq1210@163.com
^b 21747483@qq.com, ^c 1740736095@qq.com

Abstract. Using social cognitive theory, this study employs multiple regression and the Bootstrap method to analyze 249 data samples, examining the mechanism of how leader unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) affects employee cyberloafing behavior. The results of the study indicate that leader UPB has a positive impact on employee cyberloafing behavior, and employee cynicism partially mediates this relationship. The research not only explains the mechanism of leader UPB on employee cyberloafing behavior, but also enriches the application scope of social cognitive theory to a certain extent, providing theoretical and practical insights for organizations to reduce leader UPB.

Keywords: Leader Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior; Cynicism; Cyberloafing Behavior; Hierarchical Regression

1 Introduction

In recent years, global corporate scandals have been growing exponentially. The 2022 Global Business Ethics Report found that more than one-third of Chinese employees witness unethical behavior in their daily work. With the exposure of events such as "Dieselgate," people have realized that organizational members engage in unethical behavior not only for their own benefit but sometimes for the benefit of the organization as well. Umphress and Bingham^[1] define this type of behavior, which is unethical but in favor of the organization, as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). Research on UPB mainly focuses on employees as the subjects and its antecedents. Compared to employees, leaders have higher status and power in organizations, and bear direct responsibility for organizational development, with a stronger sense of mission to achieve organizational goals, thus having a greater likelihood of engaging in UPB for the benefit of the organization. In addition, some of the behaviors exhibited by leaders in organizations are more likely to trigger learning and imitation among employees^[2]. Therefore, exploring the downstream effects of leader UPB has certain theoretical and practical significance.

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Although UPB can bring short-term benefits to organizations, its unethical nature may cause huge losses to the organization ^[1]. When individuals engage in UPB, they first experience feelings of guilt or shame, and then use organizational citizenship behavior to compensate for their previous unethical behavior ^[3]; when the perpetrator of UPB is a colleague, individuals may experience two different emotions, admiration or disgust, to guide opposite behaviors, such as helping behavior or rudeness ^[4]. When the perpetrator of UPB is a leader, the mechanism of influence on employees may differ due to hierarchical differences and therefore needs further exploration. Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals' attitudes and behaviors depend on their cognitive evaluations of situational cues ^[5]. When leaders engage in UPB, they send a signal to employees that it is acceptable to act without certain moral and social norms in the organization, which reduces employees' moral identification. In this scenario, employees may engage in cyberloafing behavior to express their dissatisfaction with the leader's unethical behavior.

Cyberloafing refers to the voluntary engagement in non-work-related online activities, such as browsing the internet or checking emails during working hours. It is a destructive and covert behavior that can harm organizational interests ^[6]. After witnessing a leader's UPB, employees may be influenced by their own ethical and moral standards, making it difficult for them to accept the leader's behavior, which can lead to negative emotions ^[4]. Cyberloafing is a way for employees to relieve negative emotions ^[7], and negative emotions are believed to positively influence cynicism ^[8]. Cynicism, with its unique "pessimistic" state and contagiousness, has drawn the attention of managers ^[9]. As a negative attitude, cynicism can lead to some negative employee behaviors. Based on this, this study explores the mediating role of employee cynicism in the relationship between leader UPB and employee cyberloafing behavior.

In summary, this study intends to explore the mechanism by which leader UPB affects employee cyberloafing behavior through the mediating role of employee cynicism, based on social cognitive theory and from a cognitive perspective. This study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanism of leader UPB and investigate the mediating effect, providing theoretical guidance and practical implications for reducing the negative impact of leader UPB.

2 Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Leader Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior and Cyberloafing Behavior

UPB is defined as behavior that violates social or organizational norms for the benefit of the organization or its members. This behavior has two attributes: pro-organizational and unethical, and is often exhibited as exaggerating product features or concealing product issues ^[1]. Conventional unethical behavior is behavior that violates social norms and harms others for personal gain, such as embezzlement. In contrast, UPB is characterized by its altruistic nature, meaning that this behavior is based on consideration for the organization's interests, and the motivation behind the

behavior is to seek short-term economic benefits for the organization, such as data fabrication. Although UPB can improve organizational performance in the short term, it has significant risks in the long term. Research on UPB has mainly focused on organizational employees, and experiments have shown that participants assigned to leadership roles are more likely to engage in cheating behavior that benefits the group^[10], which may be due to the leader's sense of responsibility to the group. As direct responsibility for the organization's interests, leaders also play a critical role in shaping employee behavior. When leaders exhibit certain negative behaviors, it can trigger subordinates to learn and engage in negative behaviors^[2]. At the same time, leader UPB differs from other employee UPB, as the behavior is carried out by a leader and therefore has certain power characteristics^[1]. The behavior of those with more power often has more far-reaching effects than those with less power. Therefore, employees are more likely to experience negative emotions when facing leader UPB.

Cyberloafing behavior refers to employees actively engaging in non-work related activities on the internet during work hours for personal needs, such as browsing the internet or sending/receiving emails^[6]. Previous studies have shown that organizational justice negatively affects employees' cyberloafing behavior, meaning that the more individuals perceive the organization to be fair in allocation, procedures, and interaction, the more likely they are to restrain their cyberloafing behavior. At the same time, strict internet regulations in organizations can effectively suppress employees' cyberloafing behavior^[11]. As a negative behavior, leader UPB can also lead to employees' cyberloafing behavior. On the one hand, UPB is considered lacking in integrity as it violates social or organizational norms^[1]. Employees consider leaders as role models in the organization, and leader UPB can undermine their trust and loyalty. On the other hand, employees tend to interpret leader UPB negatively, leading to resistance and avoidance of leaders. Leader UPB also sends a message to employees that it is acceptable to violate norms^[2]. The internet's anonymity, convenience, and entertainment features make it difficult to detect cyberloafing behavior carried out through the internet, and it can help employees relieve negative emotions^[7]. According to social cognitive theory^[5], an individual's behavior is influenced by external environmental factors, which can shape their cognition. Therefore, after observing leader UPB, employees tend to interpret it negatively, ultimately leading to cyberloafing behavior. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: leader UPB has a positive impact on employees' cyberloafing behavior.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Employee Cynicism

Employee cynicism refers to negative and distrustful attitudes towards authority, institutions, and organizations, manifested as disillusionment and a sense of futility. Employee cynicism has three dimensions, including beliefs that the organization lacks integrity, negative affect towards the organization, and a tendency towards critical behavior towards the organization^[12]. According to social cognitive theory, there is a certain predictive relationship between leader UPB and employee cynicism. On the one hand, cynicism typically refers to a skeptical attitude towards social values. If a

leader engages in UPB, it will make employees feel that the leader does not really care about morality and values, thereby intensifying their skepticism and distrust towards social values. This opportunistic behavior of the leader will undermine the moral standards within the organization and have a negative impact on employees' moral sense and values, ultimately increasing their cynicism towards the organization's values. On the other hand, third-party observations of UPB can increase their negative emotions ^[4], ultimately leading to emotional exhaustion in employees. Cynicism can serve as a self-defense way to deal with emotional exhaustion at work ^[13], so leading the UPB will lead to staff cynicism tendencies.

Employee cynicism further increases cyberloafing behavior. This is because when employees develop cynicism, they are prone to engage in psychological withdrawal, reducing their effort towards work. Cynical employees believe that work is meaningless, and working hard only satisfies their basic needs without achieving self-fulfillment, leading to a lack of work motivation and achievement, which in turn results in reduced enthusiasm and engagement towards work, and ultimately more cyberloafing behavior. Additionally, employees with cynicism tend to exhibit more silence behavior ^[14], which makes it difficult for them to integrate into the team, ultimately leading them to engage in cyberloafing behavior as a means of avoidance. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Leader UPB has a positive impact on cynicism.

Hypothesis 3: Employee cynicism mediates the relationship between leader UPB and cyberloafing behavior.

By integrating the above hypotheses on leader UPB, cynicism, and cyberloafing behavior, we propose a hypothetical model (see Figure 1).

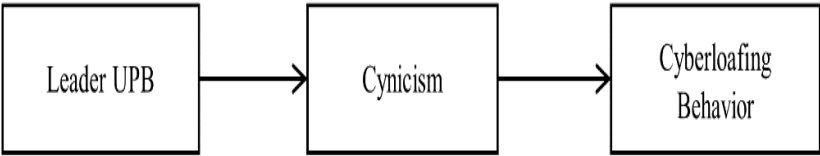


Fig. 1. Theoretical model

3 Research Design

3.1 Participants and Procedure

The data for this study were collected from companies in various provinces in China. A total of 280 questionnaires were distributed, and 249 valid questionnaires were obtained. Among the respondents, 56.63% were male and 43.37% were female; 85.94% had a bachelor's degree or above; 31.33% were aged between 20-29, 54.62% were aged between 30-39, and 14.05% were aged between 40-49; 60.24% had worked for 6 years or less.

3.2 Measures

The scales used in this study are all mature scales, and except for demographic variables, all scales in this study are scored using a 5-point Likert scale.

Leader UPB: The scale developed by Umphress et al. [15] was used, which consists of 6 items, such as "If it benefits my organization, my leader will distort facts to make the organization look good". The Cronbach's α value of the scale is 0.871.

Cynicism: The scale developed by Dean et al. [12] was used, with a total of 14 items such as "I believe that the company says one thing and does another." The Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.910.

Cyberloafing behavior: A scale developed by Lim et al. [16] consisting of three items, such as "I usually use the internet for non-work related activities during work." The scale's Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.776.

Control variables: Employee gender, age, job tenure, education level, and job position level were included as control variables in the analysis.

4 Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using Amos 23.0 software to examine the discriminant validity and common method bias of the three variables. As shown in Table 1, the three-factor model had the best fit compared to other models ($\chi^2/df=1.59$, CFI =0.95, TLI =0.94, RMSEA =0.05), and the variables had good discriminant validity, indicating that the next step of testing could be conducted.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Three-factor model (A, B, C)	361.34	227	1.59	0.95	0.94	0.95	0.05
Two-factor model (A+B, C)	657.04	229	2.87	0.83	0.81	0.83	0.09
Single-factor model (A+B+C)	792.25	230	3.45	0.77	0.75	0.77	0.10

Note: A represents leader UPB, B represents cynicism, C represents cyberloafing behavior.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the main variables of this study are shown in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, there is a significant positive correlation between leader UPB and cyberloafing behavior ($r=0.448$, $p<0.01$); there is a significant positive correlation between leader UPB and cynicism ($r=0.573$, $p<0.01$); and there is a significant positive correlation between employee cynicism and cyberloafing behavior ($r=0.403$, $p<0.01$). The correlation among the core variables provides a foundation for hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N=249)

Model	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Gender	1.43	0.50							
2.Age	32.45	5.32	-0.121						
3.Education	3.00	0.67	0.007	-0.173*					
4.Job level	1.86	0.85	-0.023	0.377**	0.221**				
5. Tenure	2.31	0.83	-0.155*	0.722**	-0.053	0.396**			
6.Leader UPB	2.44	0.85	-0.083	-0.073	-0.180**	-0.034	-0.159*		
7.Cynicism	2.38	0.73	-0.030	-0.101	-0.123	-0.059	-0.155*	0.573**	
8.Cyberloafing behavior	2.58	0.92	-0.040	0.004	-0.236**	-0.081	-0.043	0.448**	0.403**

Note: *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, and $p < 0.001$, respectively, and so on.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

This study used SPSS26.0 to conduct multilevel regression analysis to test the hypotheses, and the results are shown in Table 3. Model 4 showed that after controlling for relevant variables, leader UPB was significantly positively related to cyberloafing behavior ($\beta=0.462$, $p<0.001$). Model 2 showed that leader UPB was significantly positively related to cynicism ($\beta=0.481$, $p<0.001$). Model 5 revealed that employee cynicism was significantly positively related to cyberloafing behavior ($\beta=0.480$, $p<0.001$). Moreover, model 6 showed that both leader UPB and cynicism were significantly positively related to cyberloafing behavior ($\beta=0.272$, $p<0.01$; $\beta=0.331$, $p<0.001$). Therefore, hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported.

Table 3. Mediation effect test of Cynicism (N=249)

Model	Cynicism		Cyberloafing behavior		Cyberloafing behavior	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender	-0.084	0.010	-0.089	0.002	-0.048	-0.001
Age	-0.004	-0.004	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.002
Education	-0.161*	-0.032	-0.324***	-0.200*	-0.247**	-0.191*
Job level	0.044	-0.004	-0.008	-0.053	-0.029	-0.052
Tenure	-0.151	-0.037	-0.071	0.038	0.001	0.048
Leader UPB		0.481***		0.462***		0.331***
Cynicism					0.480***	0.272**

Model	Cynicism		Cyberloafing behavior		Cyberloafing behavior	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
R ²	0.046*	0.334***	0.061**	0.228***	0.199***	0.259***
ΔR ²	0.027*	0.317***	0.042**	0.209***	0.179***	0.237***
F	2.368*	20.221***	3.153**	11.910***	10.013***	12.028***

To further verify the mediating effect of cynicism, this study used the Process method and conducted 5000 bootstrap samples to examine its significance. The results showed that, after controlling for relevant variables, the indirect effect of leader UPB on cyberloafing behavior through cynicism was 0.1306, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.0427,0.2352], which did not include 0. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported again.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

First, this study reveals that leader UPB can increase employee cyberloafing behavior through social cognitive mechanisms, breaking through the previous one-sided understanding of UPB and promoting the academic community's understanding of the governance mechanism of UPB. In the past, most research has focused on the antecedents of UPB and found that both individual and situational factors can effectively predict UPB. However, little is known about the impact of UPB. This study takes UPB as an antecedent variable and uses leaders as the behavioral subject to confirm the possibility that leader UPB can increase employee cyberloafing behavior through social cognitive mechanisms.

Secondly, based on the mediating role of cynicism, this study has opened the "black box" of how leader UPB affects employee cyberloafing behavior and expanded the pathway of leader UPB's influence. Previous research on the consequences of UPB has mostly focused on emotional pathways [4]. However, the three aspects of cynicism - affective, cognitive, and behavioral - provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanism of leader UPB. This study breaks through the limitations of previous research that mainly focused on the formation mechanism and mediating pathways of UPB, and enriches the content of the mechanism of leader UPB.

5.2 Practical Implications

On one hand, organizations should establish sound systems and regulations, clarify the responsibilities and rights of leaders and employees, and provide clear provisions and punishments for violations, in order to promote the standardization and institutionalization of members' behaviors. In the process of selecting and appointing leaders, it is important to have a deep understanding of their personal ethics, work style, and other characteristics. A morally upright leader is usually better able to handle

problems, and can establish a more stable working environment, playing an important role in the long-term development and success of the organization.

On the other hand, organizations should establish sound supervision and feedback mechanisms, strengthen the supervision and management of employees' cyberloafing behavior. Due to the concealment of cyberloafing behavior and its serious impact on employees' work efficiency [6], organizations should establish a sound supervision and feedback mechanism to monitor and evaluate employees' cyberloafing behavior, promptly identify and correct improper behavior, ensure normative behavior of employees, and safeguard their efficiency and organizational benefits.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Firstly, the use of data from a single participant may lead to unavoidable common method bias, which could affect our findings. To minimize these issues, future studies should use multi-source data to validate our hypotheses. Secondly, since UPB has both pro-organizational and unethical dimensions, this study only focused on its unethical aspect. To better understand the impact of leader UPB, future research can explore its pro-organizational effects on employee behavior. Finally, future research could investigate the influence of leader UPB under different boundary conditions.

6 Conclusions

In summary, this article used social cognitive theory to construct a theoretical model of the impact of leader UPB, cynicism, and cyberloafing behavior on employees. The analysis of data from 249 employees showed that leader UPB has a negative impact on employee behavior. In the future, experimental methods or cultural perspectives can be used to further examine other paths of the leader's impact on employees.

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