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Despotic Leadership and Front-Line Employee Deviant Work Behaviors in Service Organizations: The Roles of Moral Disengagement and Moral Identity

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Abstract

Research on despotic leadership and its impacts on the behavior of front-line employees (FLE) in service organizations is nascent. Drawing on the social cognitive theory of morality, we develop and test a model in two service settings investigating the direct and indirect effects of despotic leadership on three FLE deviant work behaviors. In Study 1, using a multi-wave, multi-data source research design with data derived from banks, telecommunications, and training/education service organizations in Pakistan, we demonstrate the ecological validity of our constructs. In Study 2, using a multi-wave, multi-source longitudinal research design, we investigated these relationships in hotels located in Pakistan and confirmed the results found in Study 1 and also investigated the sustainability of deviant work outcomes. Cumulatively, we found support for the direct effects of despotic leadership on FLE deviant work behaviors. Moral disengagement acted as a partial mediator of these relationships and moral identity moderated the mediated relationship between despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement. Our findings provide a nuanced understanding of despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors in service settings. We contribute to the front-line services literature stream by focusing on the supervisor and FLE interaction and highlighting research and practice implications.

Keywords

despotic leadership, moral disengagement, moral identity, unethical work behavior, negative workplace gossip, retaliation

Introduction

Front-line employees (FLE) are an important stream of service research and in practice are a vital nexus of interaction between the organization and its customers (Good et al. 2023; Singh and Bridge 2023). It is therefore not surprising that an understanding of FLE service attitudes and performance (Ostrom et al. 2010) is a key priority for both service researchers and practitioners. Schepers and Van der Borgh (2020), for example, highlighted the centrality of the leader in explaining FLE role behaviors and research to date has largely prioritized bright-side leadership approaches (Dagger et al. 2013; Herhausen et al. 2017) in addition to highlighting the centrality of the direct supervisor in shaping FLE behaviors as part of the customer experience.

The direct supervisor plays a key role in the service context in stimulating FLE enthusiasm and initiative to provide excellent customer service and is an important source of instructions, direct feedback, and behavior role modeling for FLE (Herhausen et al. 2017). Findings on the impact of bright-side leadership styles in service organizations on FLE behaviors and implications for customer focus are persuasive (Schepers and Van der Borgh 2020); however, we have fewer insights on the

impact of dark-side leadership on FLE behaviors. Two recent meta-analyses (Mackey et al. 2021; Mackey et al. 2019) highlight a gap in understanding of the impact of dark-side leadership concepts. In addition, Table 1 Appendix 1 reveals a small accumulation of research on dark-side leadership and scholars have investigated different variants including destructive, exploitative, and to a lesser extent despotic leadership (Emmerling, Peus, and Lobbestael 2023). The investigation of destructive leadership concepts is not surprising given that

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anecdotal and industry evidence suggests that destructive leadership is on the rise in service organizations (Sun et al. 2023).

Despotic leadership represents an extreme form of destructive leadership and its potential negative implications in the context of FLE behaviors and customers are significant (Albashiti, Hamid, and Aboramadan 2021). Despotic leadership is conceptualized as intentionally destructive, involving self-aggrandization, exploitation of others, personal dominance, and authoritarian behavior (De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2008) and it fits within the general construct of destructive leadership or dark-side leadership, and it incorporates the most negative aspects of leadership in organizations (Naseer et al. 2016). Research points to its negative impacts employee behaviors and in particular deviant work behaviors (Murad et al. 2021) in addition to its impacts on employee behavior in service contexts (Albashiti, Hamid, and Aboramadan 2021). In service settings, interactions between the direct supervisor and FLE are fundamental to service delivery and customer satisfaction; however, despotic leadership has the potential to negatively impact the customer experience of service delivery. For example, despotic leadership indirectly impacts the customer experience through FLE because it elicits deviant behaviors (Naseer et al. 2016) and undermines their ability to deliver customer service (Shah et al. 2023). Despotic leadership behaviors may be elevated some cultural contexts such as Pakistan, the context of both our studies because it is a high-power distance culture characterized by a willingness to follow orders, acknowledge the senior authority, and an unwillingness to challenge supervisors (Syed et al. 2020).

We define deviant work behaviors as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (Robinson and Bennett 1995, p. 556). In the two studies reported in this paper, we capture deviant work behaviors that target individuals within the organization as well as the organization itself (Mackey et al. 2021): Unethical workplace behavior (Veetikazhi et al. 2022), negative workplace gossip (Wu, Balliet, and Van Lange 2016), and retaliation (Mesmer-Magnus Jessica & Viswesvaran Chockalingam, 2005). These deviant work behaviors are non-service specific; however, their manifestation in the service context has the potential to undermine important service objectives including customer satisfaction, levels of service (Lechner, Mathmann, and Paul 2020), customer-focused team climate (Ostrom et al. 2015), customer-oriented FLE behaviors (Kennedy, Lask, and Goolsby 2002) and customer orientation (Herhausen et al. 2017).

In this paper we answer two questions to advance theory and research on destructive leadership and its impacts on FLE deviant behaviors in service organizations: (1) *What role does moral disengagement play in mediating the relationship between direct-supervisor despotic leadership and FLE unethical work behavior, workplace gossip, and retaliation?* and (2) *What role does the moral identity of the FLE play in moderating the mediated relationship between despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement?* To investigate these questions, we draw on Bandura’s social cognitive theory of morality and specifically moral disengagement because it helps explain the

processes by which FLE rationalize engaging in deviant work behaviors. Where FLEs are subjected to direct supervisor despotic leadership behaviors they will seek to avoid feelings of self-condemnation and they will deactivate their self-regulatory processes that would normally inhibit these deviant behaviors from occurring. We propose moral disengagement as a mediator of the direct relationship between despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors. We draw on the concept of moral identity (Moore et al. 2019) to explain our moderated mediation relationship. Moral identity emphasizes the extent to which being moral is important to the self-concept of the FLE and it serves as a break on the FLE potential to engage in deviant work behaviors (Krettenauer and Hertz 2015). We conduct two studies to test our research model. The key difference between the two studies concerns the time duration between the measurement of the independent and dependent variables. In study 1 the time duration is 3 months, whereas in Study 2 the time duration is 6 months. In selecting this approach, we were motivated by the call of Behrendt, Matz and Goritz (2017) to separate the short-term effects of leadership from the sustainable effects.

We make three contributions to the literature. First, our study provides the opportunity for a conceptual replication of findings in the non-service literature that despotic leadership impacts the deviant behaviors of employees. We test these relationships in two service contexts and we incorporate a broader repertoire of deviant work behaviors that target the direct supervisor and the organization. Second, we reveal that moral disengagement acts as a linking mechanism that partially mediates the despotic leadership-deviant work behaviors relationships. As Table 1 illustrates, studies to date in the services context have focused on dispositional, behavioral, and attitudinal mediators; however, in both studies, we conceptualized moral disengagement as a cognitive process mechanism that allows FLE to moralize deviant work behaviors that would otherwise be considered inappropriate or immoral. Third, we add to the literature on boundary conditions of the indirect despotic leadership-deviant work behaviors relationship via moral disengagement through consideration of a dispositional characteristic of FLE-moral identity thus providing a more nuanced understanding of when and how despotic leadership impacts FLE deviant work behaviors. We theorize that moral identity endows FLE with self-regulatory strength which motivates positive work behavior outcomes. Figure 1 presents our research model.

Conceptual Background

Dark Side Leadership Research

Dark-side leadership is of central and critical interest in multiple disciplines including management, psychology, hospitality, and the services literature. In the services literature (see Table 1 in Appendix 1) scholars have started to focus on leadership concepts that emphasize the self-serving interests of leaders at the expense of followers (Naseer et al. 2016). Table 1 (Appendix 1) reveals that researchers have investigated different types of destructive or dark-side leadership concepts; however, what differentiates despotic leadership from these other types is the

Table 1. (Study I) Regression Results – Direct Effects of Despotic Leadership and Moral Disengagement as a Mediator.

	Moral Disengagement				Unethical Workplace Behavior				Negative Workplace Gossip				Retaliation			
	Path	β	SE	R ²	Path	β	SE	R ²	Path	β	SE	R ²	Path	β	SE	R ²
Gender		0.07	0.13	0.21	–0.03	0.07	0.48		–0.03	0.07	0.49		–0.32	0.07	0.64	
Type of organization		0.04	0.08	0.21	0.05	0.05	0.48		–0.11	0.05	0.49		–0.05	0.05	0.64	
Experience		0.21	0.12	0.21	0.07	0.07	0.48		–0.04	0.07	0.49		–0.03	0.07	0.64	
Despotic Leader (DL)	a	0.57***	0.07	0.21	c	0.52***	0.04	0.48	c	0.49***	0.05	0.49	c	0.19***	0.05	0.64
Moral Disengagement (MD)	—	—	—	—	b	0.09***	0.04	0.48	b	0.10***	0.04	0.49	b	0.56***	0.04	0.64

	95% CI				95% CI				95% CI			
	Path	β	LL	UL	Path	β	LL	UL	Path	β	LL	UL
Bootstrap results for indirect effects	ε	0.04**	0.02	0.10	ε	0.06*	0.02	0.11	ε	0.32***	0.22	0.44

Note: N = 225. Control variables: marital status, department, and grade. We report the 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) calculated using 5000 bootstrap samples.

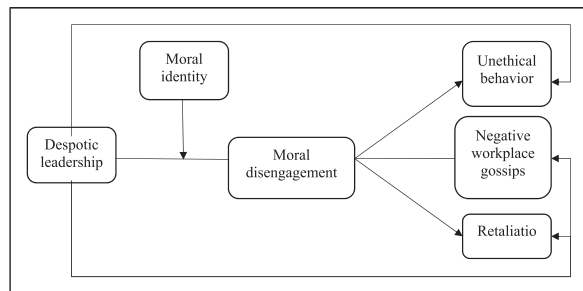


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

lack of morality displayed by despotic leaders towards employees (De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2008). It gives particular primacy to egotistical motives, intentionally destructive behaviors, and self-interest as a guiding principle for leadership behavior. Other destructive leadership concepts do not capture the core of egoism and self-interest. In addition, unlike exploitative leadership (Wu et al. 2021) which has received more attention in the services literature, envisages that leaders can be exploitative in a friendly manner, whereas despotic leadership envisages the use of hostile behaviors. It is also clear from Table 1 that despotic leadership has received less attention compared to the less extreme forms of destructive or dark-side leadership suggesting a gap in the literature. Overall Table 1 highlights cumulatively that dark-side leadership is a viable research stream in the service context.

Conceptually, therefore despotic leadership consists of behaviors that focus on the unquestioned compliance and submission of employees to the will of the leaders, the use of control and demand strategies and selfish behaviors towards employees (Schilling 2009). It gives primacy to the solidification of power and the maintenance of high-power distance between the leaders and FLE. Despotic leaders demonstrate behaviors that reflect egotistic motives and have no issue with manipulating, exploiting and using followers for personal gain

(Naseer et al. 2016) and they will act against the legitimacy of the organization by engaging in behaviors that are morally suspect and self-serving (Aronson 2001). In summary, despotic leadership is evidenced when a direct supervisor exhibits immoral behavior, is self-centered vengeful, exploitative, and authoritarian and considers self-interests to be paramount.

Deviant Work Behaviors

The investigation of deviant work behaviors in service organizations is growing (Browning 2008; Jung and Yoon 2019) and findings indicate that employees in this context are likely to engage in unethical behavior (Akhtar et al. 2020), take revenge on customers (Bedi and Schat 2017), and engage in daily customer mistreatment (Song et al. 2021). FLE deviant work behaviors can be directed at peers, the supervisor, and the organization and are likely to spill over to the treatment of customers (Song et al. 2021). These behaviors are likely to result in negative customer related outcomes including poor customer service, customer complaints and poor customer retention. To gain deeper insights into the types of deviant work behaviors that result from direct supervisor despotic leadership we focus on three types of deviant behavior. The first involves retaliation which we conceptualize as having both interpersonal and organizational-directed components including those directed towards the supervisor. The second focuses on unethical behavior which is directed toward the organization and the third is workplace gossip, we conceptualize as an interpersonal form of deviance directed toward the immediate supervisor (Mackey et al. 2021).

Hypotheses Development

Despotic Leadership and Deviant Work Behaviors

To advance our conceptual replication hypotheses we briefly theorize the direct relationship between despotic leadership and

FLE deviant work behaviors. In the service context, direct supervisors have significant day-to-day contact with FLE and are embedded in service teams (Herhausen et al. 2017); therefore, their potential to impact FLE deviant behaviors is significant. In addition, FLEs have considerable peer embeddedness in that work relationships are close in service organizations (Schepers and Van der Borgh 2020) and the impact of the direct supervisor is quickly felt or experienced. In terms of the three deviant work behaviors that are the focus of this study, we propose the following argumentation. First, the lack of opportunities to act out frustrations against the direct supervisor as a despotic leader will lead FLE to engage in unethical behavior, gossip about each other, and in extreme cases retaliation (Peter, 2019). In the case of unethical work behavior, FLE who experience despotic leadership will consider the organization as a legitimate target (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, and Labianca 2012) and will engage in behaviors including divulging confidential information, not reporting violations of company procedures, concealing errors, and violating company rules (Akhtar et al. 2020). Second, FLE may retaliate against the organization and engage in activities including wasting time, taking extended breaks, intentionally working slower and calling in sick. Third, FLE may speak negatively about the direct supervisor which represents a form of workplace gossip, (Akhtar et al. 2022). We do not hypothesize that direct supervisor despotic leadership will have differing effects on these deviant work behaviors but expect that given the characteristics of despotic leadership, these three behaviors will likely result. Thus, we propose the following replication hypothesis.

H1. *Despotic leadership by direct supervisors will be positively related to FLE' (a) unethical workplace behavior, (b) negative workplace gossip, and (c) retaliation.*

Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement in Despotic Leadership-Deviant Work Behaviors Relationship

Research on mediators in explaining the impacts of despotic leadership on employee behaviors has focused primarily on individual-level attitudinal and behavioral processes or linking mechanisms and given less attention to cognitive mechanisms (see Table 1 Appendix 1). The inclusion of cognitive mechanisms to explain how despotic leadership leads to FLE deviant work behaviors is appropriate because it helps shed light on internal states and in particular internal decision-making processes that lead FLE to respond to despotic leadership through manifesting deviant work behaviors. Moral disengagement a cognitive mediator gives primacy to the notion that where FLE experience despotic leadership behaviors from direct supervisors they will experience difficulties in recognizing the moral consequence of their actions (Dennerlein and Kirkman 2022). Bandura (2002) defined moral disengagement as “the self-regulatory process at which moral control can be disengaged from censurable conduct” and it allows FLE to disengage from deviant behaviors by “reconstructing conduct, obscuring causal agency, misrepresenting or disregarding

harmful consequences or devaluating and blaming victims” (Dennerlein and Kirkman 2022, p. 5). It allow FLE to sidestep their internalized moral standards and behave in deviant and immoral ways (Bandura 1986) because it disables the cognitive link between transgressive behavior and self-sanctioning (that should prevent it) (Bandura 1986, 1990, 1991, 1999, 2002).

Given the characteristics of despotic leadership (Naseer et al. 2016), FLE are likely to demonstrate moral disengagement which leads to deviant work behaviors (Bedi and Schat 2013). Despotic leaders have an expectation of unconditional obedience, which limits the capacity for independent thinking amongst FLE, thus leading to moral disengagement. Moral disengagement neutralizes FLE’s feelings of guilt and therefore they are more likely to engage in deviant work behaviors. When FLEs feel pressurized by despotic leadership behaviors (Hodge and Lonsdale 2011) they will behave in self-serving ways without focusing on the consequences (Kish-Gephart et al. 2014). FLE will use moral justification or a “tit for tat” rationale to justify subsequent unethical, deviant, or retaliatory behaviors. They also rationalize that everyone is engaged in such reprehensible conduct, and they feel less responsible because others are doing the same thing collectively. In addition, FLE can justify deviant work behaviors by displacing responsibility to the leaders.

In support of these arguments research highlights that moral disengagement operates as an important antecedent of deviant work behaviors including aggression (Wang et al. 2017), cyberbullying (Wang et al. 2017), deviance (Huang et al. 2017), unethical social influence (Thiel et al. 2018), and employee silence (He et al. 2019). In service organizations, Zhao et al. (2022) found support for the mediating role of moral disengagement for employees working in education, insurance, and real estate organizations in linking illegitimate tasks and counterproductive work behaviors. We therefore propose the following hypothesis.

H2. *Moral disengagement positively mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and (a) unethical workplace behavior, (b) negative workplace gossip, and (c) retaliation.*

Moderated Mediation Role of Moral Identity

Table 1 Appendix 1 highlights that the study of boundary conditions in the context of different forms of destructive leadership and its outcomes has primarily focused on organizational-level characteristics and individual-level behavioral factors. Overall, the investigation of moderators is nascent in the destructive leadership literature, providing opportunities to understand the role of individual-level mediators. Our focus is on a dispositional cognitive moderator-moral identity—an FLE personal characteristic that plays a key role in moderating the mediated relationship between direct supervisor despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement. We propose that moral identity which is defined as “a self-concept organized around a set of moral

traits” encapsulates the extent to which an individual’s moral identity is embedded in a sense of self (Aquino and Reed II 2002, p. 1424). We propose that because moral identity is dispositional or a trait it will lead to consistent moral actions by FLE across the lifespan and does not respond to events (Cornelissen et al. 2013). We conceptualized it as a self-regulatory mechanism to guide the ethical behavior of FLE (Zheng et al. 2019) and there is strong evidence concerning its moderating role in the context of leadership processes generally (Moore et al. 2019).

Therefore, we propose that an FLE’s moral identity dampens the effects of despotic leadership on FLE deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement. This occurs because central to moral identity are the concepts of internalization and symbolization (Aquino and Reed II 2002). Where FLE have a high moral identity (internalization), they are more receptive to moral information, whereas symbolization is related to how employees convey to society that they display moral behaviors and that they wish to receive recognition from others (Winterich et al. 2013). Therefore, in the context of our research model, our argument is as follows. First, following our conceptualization of moral disengagement as a process we expect that it will mediate the relationship between direct supervisor despotic leadership behaviors and FLE deviant work behaviors. This occurs because moral disengagement allows for the moralization of deviant work behaviors by FLE that would otherwise be considered inappropriate or immoral. Second, we anticipate that the direct effect of despotic leadership on FLE moral disengagement will be weaker when moral identity is higher. Moral identity helps to mitigate the effects of despotic leadership of direct supervisors on moral disengagement because FLE high on moral identity are better able to activate moral related traits and decrease their tendency to morally disengage (Mingzheng et al. 2014). Third, we propose that the indirect effect of despotic leadership on FLE deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement will be moderated by moral identity. Central to Aquino and Reed’s (2002) conceptualization of moral identity is the notion that strong moral identity increases the accessibility of knowledge structures and schemata that serve to guide self-regulation and foster moral action by FLE (Hertz and Krettenauer 2016). Therefore, moral identity renders moral disengagement to be less effective suggesting that the indirect relationship between despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement will be much weaker for FLE with higher levels of moral identity. This occurs because FLE with higher moral identity are more likely to feel a stronger moral obligation to show concern for the needs of the organization and other employees than those with low moral identity. We, therefore, propose the following moderated mediation hypothesis.

H3. *Moral identity moderates the positive and indirect effects of direct supervisor despotic leadership on (a) employee unethical workplace behavior, (b) negative workplace gossip, and (c) retaliation via moral disengagement such that the indirect effects are of despotic leadership through moral disengagement are weaker when moral identity is high.*

We present two studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1 utilizes a multi-wave, multi-respondent research design to conduct a field study that tests our research model with a sample of service firms including banks, telecommunications, and training/education organizations operating in Pakistan. Study 2 employs a longitudinal measurement of the dependent variable with a 6-month gap between the measurement of the independent and dependent variables in a multi-wave, multi-respondent research design field study with a sample of hotels in Pakistan where the dependent variables were measured at two-time points and in which we assess the generalizability of our findings to another service context. In both studies, we collected data on retaliation from peers.

Study 1: Multi-WaveField Evidence

In Study 1, we collected data from ten service sector organizations including banks, telecommunications, and training/education organizations operating in Islamabad and Rawalpindi in Pakistan. These areas are important because many services sector organizations (public and private) have their head offices located in these cities. Consistent with the suggestions of Van Heerde et al. (2021) we designed this study to establish the initial ontological validity of our theoretical framework. These organizations were particularly suited to achieving this objective because they had a significant number of FLE who had high contact with customers, and we had access to direct supervisors who had strong relationships with and regular interactions with their direct reports (Syed et al. 2020).

Method

We obtained multi-source data from employees and their peers (on retaliation) in each organization. We designed the questionnaire in English as this is the business language of Pakistan. We approached each organization using personal contacts to identify respondents and surveys were distributed by the researchers in person to respondents at their workstations. Prior to participation in the study, we asked study participants to complete a consent form that explained the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality. We indicated that all responses were for research purposes only and no individual information would be disclosed.

To reduce common method variance, we collected data using three waves of data collection (Podsakoff et al. 2003). We used pen-and-pencil surveys completed onsite and we asked respondents to report their date of birth to enable survey matching. At Time 1, we initially distributed 480 self-report questionnaires that measured both despotic leadership and the moderating variable (moral identity) and we generated 390 responses. We administered the second survey 1 month later to those who completed the survey at Time 1. This Time 2 survey measured the mediator—moral disengagement—and we received 330 usable questionnaires. We administered the third wave of data collection 1 month later and distributed the survey to the 330 respondents from Time 2. This Time 3 survey asked

respondents to report on their negative workplace gossip and unethical workplace behavior. We also distributed a questionnaire to one peer of each respondent at Time 3 to provide ratings of retaliation behavior. We received 225 completed questionnaires in total representing an overall response rate for those who completed all three surveys and the peer survey of 53 percent.

The final sample size comprised 54 percent male and 46 percent female. Of these, 52 percent were unmarried and 48 percent were married. Furthermore, 35 percent of the respondents were working in public sector organizations, 34 percent of respondents were working in semi-government organizations, and the remaining 32 percent of respondents were working in private sector organizations. Among all the respondents, 29 percent were between the ages of 31 and 40 years, 26 percent were between the ages of 20 and 30 years, 25 percent were between the ages of 41 and 50 years, and the remainder were older than 50 years. 54 percent had 11–20 years of experience, 43 percent had 1–10 years of experience, and 3 percent had more than 21 years of experience.

Study Measures

We used established scales tested in a variety of cultures, countries, and work settings. This approach is recommended because it reduces the likelihood of instrumentation error (Youssef and Luthans 2007). The appendix presents the scales used in this study. Responses to all scales were based on a 5-point Likert scale, anchored at 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree.

Despotic Leadership. We used the despotic leadership scale developed by De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) and assigned the referent to “my direct supervisor.” Sample items included the following: “Is in-charge and does not tolerate disagreement or questioning,” “Gives orders,” and “Expects unquestioning obedience of those who report to him/her.” The Cronbach alpha for this scale is 0.87. We also established convergent validity with all items loaded in a range of 0.690–0.842 with average variance extracted (AVE) = 0.56.

Moral Identity. We measured moral identity using a scale developed by Aquino and Reed II (2002). This measure is the most rigorously validated measure of moral identity (Shao, Aquino, and Freeman 2008) and previous research highlights that it has good psychometric properties (Moberg and Caldwell 2007). To capture moral identity, we asked FLE to consider various moral characteristics, imagine a person who possesses these characteristics, and then indicate how important these characteristics were to their identities (internalization) and the extent to which these characteristics are reflected in their activities (symbolization). Higher scores indicate that moral identity is rooted at the core of the respondent’s self and implemented in their actions. Sample items included the following: “It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics” and “I strongly desire these characteristics.” The Cronbach alpha

for this overall scale was 0.96 (internalization is 0.96 and symbolization is 0.96). We also established convergent validity with all items loaded in a range of 0.786–0.971 with AVE = 0.81.

Moral Disengagement. We measured moral disengagement using a 12-item scale developed by Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer (2008). Sample items included the following: “It is ok to attack someone who threatens your family’s honour” and “Talking about people behind their backs is just part of the game.” The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.92. We also established convergent validity with all items loading in a range of 0.740–0.949 with AVE = 0.74.

Unethical Workplace Behavior. We measured unethical workplace behavior using a 17-item scale developed by Hyams (1991). Sample items included the following: “To what extent do you use company services for personal use” and “To what extent do you do personal business on company time.” The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.94. We also established convergent validity with all items loading in a range of 0.500–0.893 with AVE = 0.50.

Negative Workplace Gossip. We measured negative workplace gossip using a 5-item scale developed by Brady, Brown, and Liang (2017). Sample items included the following: “To what extent do you question your supervisor’s abilities while talking to a work colleague” and “To what extent do you criticize your supervisor while talking to a work colleague.” The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.89. We also established convergent validity with all items loading in a range of 0.652–0.944 with AVE = 0.61.

Retaliation. We measured employee retaliation using a 14-item scale developed by Skarlicki and Folger (1997) at Time 3. Sample items included the following: “To what extent does this employee call in sick when not ill” and “To what extent does this employee fail to give co-worker required information.” We collected data on retaliation from peers because they are in a better position and vantage point to perceive manifestations of retaliation that might elude the target individual’s awareness. The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.95. We also established convergent validity with all items loading in a range of 0.601–0.943 with AVE = 0.60.

Control Variables. We controlled for two individual and one organizational demographic variable (gender, employee work experience, and type of organization) which previous studies indicate are relevant to the moral disengagement (Zheng et al. 2019), unethical workplace behavior (Akhter et al. 2020), and negative workplace gossip.

Measurement Model

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) with maximum likelihood to validate our multi-item measures. To

identify the fit of our CFA models we used different fit indices, for example, Chi-square test (χ^2/df , p), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). Normed Chi-square value <3 , CFI and TLI scores >0.9 , and RMSEA scores <0.08 indicate an acceptable fit (Awang 2012; Forza and Filippini 1998). Due to a large number of construct items, we used the balanced items parceling technique (3 to 4 parcels per construct) (Little et al. 2013) for CFA. CFA shows that the full model (despotic leadership, moral identity, moral disengagement, unethical workplace behavior, negative workplace gossip, and retaliation) has an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 570.11$; $\text{df} = 188$; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.97$; RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94) and has a significantly better fit than a one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 3612.38$; $\text{df} = 209$; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 17.28$; RMSEA = 0.25; CFI = 0.47, TLI = 0.52; FGI = 0.43) and alternative models. Table 1 shows that each of the standardized loadings was more than 0.50. Likewise, each latent construct's AVE was more than 0.50. Composite reliability (CR) values extracted were between 0.88 and 0.98, with 0.70 as an acceptable value for CR (Hair et al. 2010) (See WEB APPENDIX Table 2).

Results

WEB APPENDIX Table 3 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 1. We tested our hypotheses using the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2017) and used bootstrapping tests for indirect effects with the help of confidence intervals (lower limits and upper limits). To test the moderating effects proposed in Hypotheses 3, we calculated the mean-centered values of the interacting variables before multiplying them, to minimize multicollinearity. Table 1 presents the regression results for direct (H1a, b, and c) and mediation hypotheses (H2a, b, and c). The results reveal that despotic leadership has a significant positive direct effect and an indirect effect on unethical workplace behaviors, negative workplace gossip and retaliation through moral disengagement.

More specifically, the results reveal that despotic leadership has a significant and positive effect on unethical workplace behaviors ($\beta = 0.52^{***}$, 95 percent CI = [0.44, 0.62]), negative workplace gossip ($\beta = 0.49^{***}$, 95 percent CI = [0.40, 0.58]), and retaliation ($\beta = 0.19^{***}$, 95 percent CI = [0.10, 0.28]). Therefore, hypotheses H1a, b, and c are supported.

Furthermore, the results of bootstrap tests show the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between despotic leadership and unethical workplace behaviors ($\beta = .04$, LL = 0.02, UL = 0.10), negative workplace gossip ($\beta = .06$, LL = 0.02, UL = 0.11), and retaliation ($\beta = .32$, LL = 0.22, UL = 0.44). According to Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) this is complementary mediation because the results reveal that a x b x c paths for employee unethical workplace behavior ($\beta = 0.0266$), negative workplace gossip ($\beta = 0.0279$), and retaliation ($\beta = 0.006$) are positive. Therefore, hypotheses H2a, b and c are supported.

Table 2 presents the findings for moderated mediation effects (e.g., H3 a, b, and c), whereby moral identity moderates the

indirect effects of despotic leadership on three types of deviant behavior (unethical workplace behavior, negative workplace gossip, and retaliation) through moral disengagement. Hence, we investigated the conditional indirect effects of despotic leadership on outcomes (unethical workplace behavior, negative workplace gossip, and retaliation) at three different values of moral identity (see Table 3).

Analysis revealed that the moderated mediation effects (based on moderator values at +1 SD were positive and significantly different from zero). Bootstrap confidence interval confirmed these results. The mediation effects of despotic leadership on the three categories of deviant behavior: unethical workplace behavior (indirect effect = 0.01, $p = \text{ns}$), negative workplace gossip (indirect effect = 0.01, $p = \text{ns}$), and retaliation (indirect effect = 0.07, $p = \text{ns}$), were weaker but insignificant through moral disengagement under high levels of moral identity and the bootstrap 95 percent CIs contain zero for unethical workplace behavior [−0.01, 0.07], negative workplace gossip [−0.01, 0.09], and retaliation [−0.13, 0.27]. However, these indirect effects were stronger under low moral identity levels—unethical workplace behavior (indirect effect = 0.08, $p < 0.05$), negative workplace gossip (indirect effect = 0.10, $p < 0.05$), and retaliation (indirect effect = 0.54, $p < 0.05$), and the bootstrap 95 percent CIs did not contain zero for unethical workplace behavior [0.04, 0.17], negative workplace gossip [0.04, 0.18], and retaliation [0.36, 0.74]. Therefore, hypotheses H4a, b, and c are supported.

Study 2: Despotic Leadership Effects on long term FLE Deviant Work Behaviors

Method

In Study 2 we obtained data from FLE and their peers in 47 hotels in Pakistan. We randomly selected 47 hotels from the list of 58 hotels in the Pakistan Hotels Association and sent them invitations to take participate in the study. We approached the participating hotels and requested a list of employees who had been employed there for more than a year. From this list, we randomly chose eight staff from each hotel who carried out various front office tasks (e.g., reservations, restaurant, front desk, and call center). We sent questionnaires to FLE and their peers at four different time intervals using a longitudinal multi-wave and multiple-respondent research design (Podsakoff Philip et al., 2012). We provided respondents with a prize (a US\$10 gift card) in exchange for completing the survey in an effort to boost response rates and decrease the number of missing replies. In May 2022, we gathered data at Time 1 (T1) from FLE and included questions evaluating moral identity, despotic leadership, and demographic data. At T2, we collected data on moral disengagement from all employees who completed the survey at T1 in June 2022. At Time 3 (T3) we collected data from peers on FLE unethical workplace behavior, negative workplace gossip, and retaliation in July 2022. A Time 4 (T4) in September 2022 we collected data from peers again on

these deviant behaviors. We distributed 640 surveys and at T1, we received 491 completed responses (response rate: 76.7 percent). At T2 we received completed responses from 287 respondents (or 44.8 percent of the total). At T3 221 focal and peers (or 34.5 percent of the total) completed the questionnaires and at T4 196 focal and peers (or 30.6 percent of the total) completed the questionnaire completed by 103 peers. Peer employees evaluated retaliation in the third and fourth surveys. We chose peers at random within the same department as the focal employees with the requirement that they know them for at least 6 months prior to the survey to ensure better knowledge to compete for the survey items. To avoid data nesting,

each peer could only rate a maximum of two employees (Naseer et al. 2016).

There were 196 focal individuals who responded to the study, and 59 percent of them were men. Most responders are in the 31–40 age range. They represented a number of divisions, such as manager (37 percent), reception (23 percent), maintenance (14 percent), house-keeping (13 percent), and food and drinks (13 percent), among others. Twenty-two percent of employees had been with their employer for less than two years, 43 percent had been there for between 2 and 6 years, and 34 percent had been there for 7 years or more. One hundred and three individuals who responded to the peer-reported surveys, and 63 percent of them were men. Most respondents are in

Table 2. (Study 2) Discriminant Validity Test Results.

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Despotic Leadership (T1)	0.768								
2 Moral disengagement (T2)	0.58	0.818							
3 Moral identity (T1)	−0.075	0.309	0.837						
4 Negative workplace gossip (T3)	0.661	0.676	−0.004	0.857					
5 Negative workplace gossip (T4)	0.379	0.388	−0.034	0.438	0.868				
6 Retaliation (T3)	0.819	0.707	0.019	0.756	0.400	0.69			
7 Retaliation (T4)	0.398	0.460	0.048	0.450	0.658	0.441	0.795		
8 Unethical workplace behavior (T3)	0.531	0.786	0.191	0.611	0.502	0.62	0.586	0.707	
9 Unethical workplace behavior (T4)	0.351	0.391	−0.007	0.394	0.895	0.407	0.736	0.519	0.837

Table 3. (Study 1) Regression Coefficients and Conditional Indirect Effect Estimates.

	Moral Disengagement			Unethical Workplace Behavior			Negative Workplace Gossip			Retaliation		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Gender	0.16	0.12	0.19	−0.04	0.08	0.65	−0.03	0.08	0.68	−0.31	0.08	0.01
Type of organization	0.04	0.08	0.62	0.05	0.05	0.28	−0.11	0.05	0.02	−0.05	0.05	0.29
Experience	0.25	0.11	0.03	0.07	0.07	0.33	−0.03	0.07	0.62	−0.02	0.07	0.71
Despotic Leadership (DL)	1.48	0.26	0.001	0.52	0.05	0.001	0.49	0.05	0.001	0.19	0.05	0.001
Moral Identity (MI)	1.70	0.60	0.05									
DL * MI	−0.51	0.15	0.01									
Moral Disengagement (MD)				0.09	0.04	0.05	0.10	0.04	0.05	0.56	0.04	0.001
R ²	0.35			0.48			0.47			0.61		
ΔR ²	0.03											

Conditional effect of Despotic Leadership on Moral Disengagement.

Moral Identity	95% CI				95% CI				95% CI				95% CI			
	β	SE	LL	UL	β	SE	LL	UL	β	SE	LL	UL	β	SE	LL	UL
−1 SD	.97	.12	.73	1.21	.08	.03	.04	.17	.10	.03	.04	.18	.54	.10	.36	.74
M	.63	.07	.49	.76	.06	.03	.02	.12	.07	.03	.03	.13	.35	.06	.26	.48
+1 SD	.12	.16	−0.19	.43	.01	.02	−0.01	.07	.01	.03	−0.01	.09	.07	.07	−0.13	.27

Note. **N 225**. LL Lower limit confident interval; UL Upper limit confident interval. For the conditional effects and conditional indirect effects, we report the bias-corrected and accelerated 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) calculated using 5,000 bootstrap samples. Statistically significant are in bold.

the 31–40 age range. Thirty percent of employees had been with their employer for less than two years, 39 percent had been there for between two and six years, and 31 percent had been there for 7 years or more. We controlled for two demographic variables gender and work experience and one firm factor proposed by Ogbonna Emmanuel & Harris Lloyd, 2002, the extent of organizational surveillance of employees using video or audio methods.

Data Analysis Strategy

To test the proposed research model, we utilized partial least squares (PLS), with the Smart PLS Software 4.0. We followed the process suggested by (Hair Jr, Howard, and Nitzl 2020), whereby the structural model was assessed first and then the measurement model. PLS is particularly useful when dealing with complex models, small sample sizes, and exploratory research goals. Using PROCESS after PLS for hypothesis testing stems from the need to delve deeper into specific mediation or moderation effects, which PROCESS specializes in. PLS provides an initial understanding of relationships, and then, using PROCESS, we could further examine the mediation and moderated mediation effects more comprehensively. This sequential approach allowed us to build on the initial insights gained from PLS and then rigorously test specific hypotheses using a dedicated tool like PROCESS. The evaluation of the measurement model entailed checking for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity in accordance with (Hair Jr, Howard, and Nitzl 2020) standards. Table 1 (Web Appendix) shows that all constructs had Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability values of more than 0.7, showing strong internal consistency of measurements (Hair Jr, Howard, and Nitzl 2020). We performed CFA to assess for of composite reliability and discriminant and convergent validity after conducting a full-factor measurement model (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981). The AVE values of all reflective constructs above 0.5 were also used to confirm convergent validity. Fornell and Larcker (1981) were used to evaluate the discriminant validity of the data. Table 3 reveals that the condition was met because the square root of the AVE exceeded the correlation values in the rows and columns.

Results

WEB APPENDIX Table 4 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 2. Table 4 reports the results of the PROCESS models used to test our hypotheses. Consistent with Study 1, we present models with the control variables. Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that despotic leadership would be directly related to deviant work behaviors—(a) unethical workplace behavior, (b) negative workplace gossip, and (c) retaliation, and indirectly through moral disengagement. We found support for direct and indirect relationships. We tested the indirect effects by computing 95 percent Monte Carlo confidence intervals (CIs) for the path estimates (Hayes 2017; Preacher and Selig 2012). The results are reported in Table 4.

The results reveal that T1 despotic leadership has a significant and positive direct effect on unethical work behavior at T3 ($\beta = 0.15$, 95 percent CI = [0.02, 0.27]), and T4 ($\beta = 0.16$, 95

percent CI = [0.02, 0.29]), negative workplace gossip T3 ($\beta = 0.49$, 95 percent CI = [0.34, 0.64]), and T4 ($\beta = 0.18$, 95 percent CI = [0.05, 0.32]), and R T3 ($\beta = 0.52$, 95 percent CI = [0.43, 0.61]), and T4 ($\beta = 0.14$, 95 percent CI = [0.02, 0.27]) (see Table 4). Therefore, hypotheses H1a, b, and c are supported.

In Table 4 T2 moral disengagement exerted a significant mediating effect on the relationship between T1 despotic leadership and T3 employee unethical workplace behavior ($\beta = 0.31$, 95 percent CI = [0.23, 0.43]), T3 negative workplace gossip ($\beta = 0.29$, 95 percent CI = [0.20, 0.42]), and T3 retaliation ($\beta = 0.17$, 95 percent CI = [0.11, 0.26]). Furthermore, T2 moral disengagement exerted a significant mediating effect on the relationship between T1 despotic leadership and T4 employee unethical workplace behavior ($\beta = 0.12$, 95 percent CI = [0.05, 0.21]), T4 negative workplace gossip ($\beta = 0.11$, 95 percent CI = [0.05, 0.19]), and T4 retaliation ($\beta = 0.16$, 95 percent CI = [0.08, 0.24]). This again is complementary mediation in that the results reveal that a $x \rightarrow b \rightarrow c$ paths for T3 employee unethical workplace behavior ($\beta = 0.0495$), T3 negative workplace gossip ($\beta = 0.1421$), and T3 retaliation ($\beta = 0.0901$), T4 employee unethical workplace behavior ($\beta = 0.018$), T4 negative workplace gossip ($\beta = 0.0216$), and T4 retaliation ($\beta = 0.0224$) are all positive. These findings, therefore, support Hypothesis 2a, b, and c.

Table 5 presents the findings for moderated mediation effects (H3a, b, and c), whereby moral identity moderates the indirect effects of despotic leadership on three types of deviant behavior (unethical workplace behavior, negative workplace gossip, and retaliation) through moral disengagement. The mediation effects of despotic leadership on the three categories of deviant behavior: unethical workplace behavior (indirect effect at T3 = 0.17, $p < 0.01$), negative workplace gossip (indirect effect at T3 = 0.17, $p < 0.01$), retaliation (indirect effect at T3 = 0.10, $p < 0.01$), unethical workplace behavior (indirect effect at T4 = 0.07, $p < 0.01$), negative workplace gossip (indirect effect at T4 = 0.07, $p < 0.01$), retaliation (indirect effect at T4 = 0.09, $p < 0.01$), were weaker through moral disengagement under high levels of moral identity and the bootstrap 95 percent CIs did not contain zero on unethical workplace behavior at T3 [0.08, 0.31], negative workplace gossip at T3 [0.07, 0.31], retaliation at T3 [0.04, 0.18], unethical workplace behavior at T4 [0.02, 0.15], negative workplace gossip at T4 [0.02, 0.14], and retaliation at T4 ([0.04, 0.17]. Therefore, H4a, b, and c are supported.

Discussion

Study 2 ensured greater research design control in respect of measuring the sustained impacts of despotic leadership on the deviant work behaviors of FLE. We investigated the same moderator to test its generalizability across different service settings; however, our most important motivation in this study was a second measurement of the dependent variables to test whether the effects of despotic leadership on FLE deviant work behaviors are sustainable as suggested by leadership researchers. Consistent with Study 1, this study demonstrates that

Table 4. (Study 2): Mediation Results.

	Moral Disengagement (T2)			Unethical Workplace Behavior (T3)			Negative Workplace Gossip (T3)			Retaliation (T3)			Unethical Workplace Behavior (T4)			Negative Workplace Gossip (T4)			Retaliation (T4)		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Gender	-0.09	0.14	.51	-0.32	0.09	.01	-0.09	0.12	.44	-0.11	0.7	.16	-0.31	0.11	.00	-0.29	0.11	.01	-0.18	0.11	.08
Experience	0.09	0.5	.05	0.04	0.04	.25	-0.11	0.05	.01	-0.06	0.03	.02	0.03	0.04	.46	-0.01	0.04	.97	0.01	0.04	.86
Surveillance	0.08	0.05	.07	-0.04	0.04	.20	-0.03	0.04	.43	-0.001	0.03	.89	-0.09	0.04	.03	-0.09	0.04	.01	-0.03	0.04	.48
DL	0.59	0.07	.00	0.15	0.06	.00	0.49	0.07	.00	0.52	0.05	.00	0.16	0.07	.00	0.18	0.07	.00	0.14	0.06	.00
MD	—	—	—	0.53	0.05	.00	0.49	0.06	.00	0.28	0.04	.00	0.20	0.06	.00	0.19	0.06	.00	0.25	0.05	.00
R ²	0.31			0.53			0.52			0.67			0.20			0.21			0.21		
				95% CI			95% CI			95% CI			95% CI			95% CI			95% CI		
Indirect effects via bootstrap	β	LL	UL	β	LL	UL	β	LL	UL	β	LL	UL	β	LL	UL	β	LL	UL	β	LL	UL
	0.31**	0.23	.43	0.29*	0.20	0.42	0.17**	0.11	0.26	0.12*	0.05	0.21	0.11*	0.05	0.19	0.15*	0.08	0.24			

$N = 196$. Control variables: Gender, experience, firm surveillance of employees. We report the 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) calculated using 5000 bootstrap samples, with lower (LL) and upper limits (UL). Statistically significant indirect effects are in bold face text. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

despotic leadership effects last longer than one occasion and it shows that the mediational evidence for moral disengagement found in Study 1 is supported in Study 2. The study again demonstrates the important buffering role that moral identity plays in the context of despotic leadership and deviant work behaviors via moral disengagement.

Discussion

This paper reports the findings of two studies investigating the relationship between despotic leadership and three interpersonal and organizationally directed FLE deviant work behaviors through the mediation of moral disengagement and the moderated mediation of moral identity in two service settings. We offer the following contributions.

Theoretical Implications

First, drawing on Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of morality, we confirm the negative impacts of an extreme form of dark-side leadership—despotic leadership—on FLE deviant work behaviors directed towards the direct supervisor, and the organization both short and longer term. Direct supervisor leadership in service settings is potentially different from that found in manufacturing organizations due to greater FLE-direct supervisor interaction in delivering the service to customers. Investigation of despotic leadership on FLE deviant behaviors both short and longer term is an important extension of the general findings in the management and OB literatures which have primarily use cross sectional rather than multi-wave research and longitudinal designs. In doing so we add to the emerging service literature stream focused on predictors or antecedents of FLE behaviors in service organizations. Voorhees, Fombelle, and Bone (2020) describe this stream of literature as the emergent field of organizational frontlines and

the important meta-analysis by Schepers and Van der Borgh (2020) reveals multiple sources of positive role-set expectations. Leaders' role expectations are highlighted as one important source; however, one omission highlighted in this meta-analysis is an investigation of the impact of dark-side leadership. We, therefore, respond to scholars' calls for more research on despotic leadership in service settings (Albashiti, Hamid, and Aboraman 2021) and we specifically focus on FLE deviant work behaviors. Research to date has focused on FLE outcomes including job performance (Syed et al. 2020) organizational commitment (van Prooijen and de Vries 2016), and psychological well-being (Raja Usman et al., 2020), whereas research on the deviant work behaviors of FLE is emerging (Syed et al. 2020). We, therefore, provide a conceptual replication of the findings for the impact of despotic leadership on FLE deviant work behaviors found in other research contexts and extend findings to consider different types of FLE deviant work behavior, which is an important extension of the literature.

Second, through identifying moral disengagement as a cognitive linking mechanism that transits despotic leadership to impact FLE deviant work behaviors, we shift focus away from positive to negative linking mechanisms which to date has been the primary focus of investigation of the effects of despotic leadership. We therefore expand the investigation of the mediation mechanism that link despotic leadership to FLE behavior outcomes and build on the investigation of mediators and particularly research on morality-based mediators including moral emotions (Syed et al. 2020) to focus on moral disengagement, a negative mediating mechanism. Our finding goes beyond the previous literature by uncovering why despotic leadership may amplify the extent of FLE deviant work behaviors. In addition to the overall mediation findings, each of the separate links in the mediation model is noteworthy. For the first stage of mediation—despotic leadership to moral disengagement—our results reveal that in service settings

Table 5. (Study 2): Regression Coefficients and Conditional Indirect Effect Estimates.

	Moral Disengagement			Unethical Workplace Behavior (T3)			Negative Workplace Gossip (T3)			Retaliation (T3)			Unethical Workplace Behavior (T4)			Negative Workplace Gossip (T4)			Retaliation (T4)		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Gender	-0.02	0.12	.89	-0.32	0.10	.01	-0.10	0.13	.45	-0.10	0.08	.16	-0.31	0.11	.01	-0.29	0.11	.01	-0.18	0.11	.08
Experience	0.08	0.04	.06	0.04	0.04	.25	0.10	0.04	.02	-0.06	0.03	.02	0.03	0.04	.46	-0.01	0.04	.97	0.01	0.04	.86
Surveillance	0.12	0.04	.01	0.04	0.03	.20	-0.04	0.04	.43	-0.01	0.02	.89	-0.09	0.04	.03	-0.10	0.04	.01	-0.03	0.04	.48
DL	1.19	0.13	.00	0.15	0.06	.00	0.49	0.08	.00	0.52	0.05	.00	0.15	0.07	.00	0.18	0.07	.00	.14	0.06	.00
MI	0.97	0.15	.00																		
DL * MI	-0.22	0.05	.00																		
MD				0.54	0.05	.00	0.47	0.07	.00	0.27	0.04	.00	0.19	0.06	.00	0.18	0.05	.00	0.25	0.05	.00
R ²	0.49			0.53			0.52			0.67			0.20			0.21			0.21		
ΔR^2	0.06																				

Conditional Effect of Despotic Leaders on Moral Disengagement																					
	Moral Disengagement			Unethical Workplace Behavior (T3)			Negative Workplace Gossip (T3)			Retaliation (T3)			Unethical Workplace Behavior (T4)			Negative Workplace Gossip (T4)			Retaliation (T4)		
	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI
Moderator MI	0.94	0.09	0.77 1.11	0.48	0.06	0.38 0.62	0.62	0.08	0.32 0.62	0.25	0.05	0.16 0.37	0.18	0.06	0.08 0.30	0.17	0.05	0.07 0.28	0.23	0.06	0.12 0.35
-1 SD	0.66	0.06	0.54 0.78	0.33	0.05	0.25 0.43	0.31	0.06	0.20 0.44	0.18	0.04	0.11 0.26	0.13	0.04	0.05 0.22	0.12	0.04	0.05 0.20	0.16	0.04	0.09 0.25
+1 SD	0.38	0.09	0.21 0.55	0.17	0.06	0.08 0.31	0.17	0.06	0.07 0.31	0.10	0.04	0.04 0.18	0.07	0.03	0.02 0.15	0.07	0.03	0.02 0.14	0.09	0.03	0.04 0.17

Note. N 196; X = independent variable, W = Moderator, M = Mediator, Y = Dependent variable. DL = despotic leadership, MI = Moral identity, MD = moral disengagement. LLCI = Lower limit confidence interval; UL = Upper limit confidence interval. For the conditional effects and conditional indirect effects, we report the bias-corrected and accelerated 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) calculated using 5,000 bootstrap samples. Statistically significant are in bold.

despotic leadership has the potential; to activate moral disengagement mechanisms. Specifically, we theorize that despotic leadership by direct supervisors has the effect of depleting self-regulatory resources of FLE thus leading to moral disengagement. For the second stage of the mediation model—moral disengagement to deviant work behaviors—we found a positive association between moral disengagement and three deviant work behaviors. This finding is indeed congruent with moral disengagement theory (Bandura 1986) and indicates that where FLE experience moral disengagement they are more likely to engage in deviant work behaviors. This indicates that despotic leadership is cognitively constructed via moral disengagement such that deviant work behaviors are considered appropriate. Overall, our findings, therefore, support the broader leadership literature on leadership that moral disengagement is a very important predictor of deviant behavior amongst FLE in organizations (Moore et al. 2019).

Third, research on leadership in service organizations highlights the need to develop insights into boundary conditions and moderated mediation. Both Schyns and Schilling (2013) and Mackey et al. (2021) point to the importance of investigating moderated mediation and explaining when despotic leadership impacts FLE deviant work behaviors. We found that moral identity moderated the direct relationship between despotic leadership and moral disengagement but more importantly we found support for moderated mediation. This finding therefore elevates the importance of a cognitive construct moral identity and it suggests that this acts as a significant dampener or buffer of the overall mediated relationship between despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors. This occurs because moral identity enhances the accessibility of FLE to knowledge structures and schemata which guide both the regulation and action of FLE (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Chowdhury Rafi & Fernando Mario, 2014). It suggests that high moral identity elevates the sense to which FLE will consider the needs of the organization and by extension, its customers and in effect expand the circle of moral regard of the FLE (Aquino et al. 2007). Overall, the moderated mediation model in this study is conceptually more nuanced and provides greater predictive power than the mediation model alone.

Managerial Implications

Finally, we highlight a practical contribution by highlighting important implications for organization, direct supervisors, and FLE. We detail some of these here.

Selecting the Direct Supervisor and FLE. In the first instance, the findings highlight important implications for HR in service organizations. Our findings point to the need for HR specialists in service organizations to carefully select individuals to the position of direct supervisor and to identify at the selection stage candidates who have the potential to demonstrate despotic

leadership behaviors. This is a vital role in the service chain because they interact with FLE daily. It is not uncommon for organizations to promote high-performing employees to leadership roles but overlook their behavior and potential to be effective supervisors. In addition, HR specialists should be careful not to promote individuals to direct supervisor positions that exhibit the potential to demonstrate despotic leadership behaviors. Service organizations should therefore make use of personality and multi-source feedback to make decisions about the best person for the position. Scholars have pointed out that organizations can measure despotic leadership in leadership selection processes by identifying those who are prone to self-interest and egoism to exclude them as candidates (Schmid, Verdorfer, and Peus 2019). Service organizations can therefore make use of personality profiling and data from performance management systems in the case of internal applicants to screen out individuals who have the potential to be despotic leaders. It also suggests that they should consider only internal appointments to the role because they will have greater amounts of information on their behavior. Effective selection is important because it is important to have the right leadership to encourage appropriate behavior.

Given that moral identity is a stable trait and emerged as important in the indirect despotic leadership-deviant work behaviors relationship, it makes sense for service organizations to identify this trait amongst FLE at the selection stage. Given the relatively limited potential to develop this trait amongst FLE, the most effective course of action is at the selection phase. This suggests the use of personality profiles and ethical and integrity testing. The identification of this trait is vital because our research highlights its buffering role in the context of direct supervisor despotic leadership and FLE deviant work behaviors.

Supportive HR Supports and Feedback Mechanisms. While we propose that service organizations should avoid appointing supervisors who have the potential to demonstrate despotic leadership behaviors in the first instance this may not always be possible. Therefore, it is important to enable employees to have access to HR departments where they can provide confidential feedback and report despotic leadership behaviors. In addition, HR departments must ensure that confidentiality is protected because, given the characteristics of despotic leaders, they are likely to engage in the manipulation of FLE and potentially harm them. Therefore, it is vital that appropriate grievance and voice processes are in place to investigate this feedback appropriately. HR departments will also have a role to play in providing support and coaching to new direct supervisors to help them adjust to the role of managing people.

Finally, the use of development processes such as coaching and feedback may be useful to bolster the moral engagement of leaders. These leadership development processes should focus on helping leaders understand that in service organizations there is a strong interdependency between front-line supervisors and FLE. This suggests that organizations should develop leaders to be self-monitoring.

At the organizational-level service, organizations should focus on service climates that foster psychological safety for FLE to feel safe and free to report violations in leaders' behavior.

Organizational Interventions. Service organizations can take steps to create an organizational culture that promotes positive leadership behaviors and promotes zero tolerance of both despotic behaviors by leaders and deviant behaviors by FLE. This can be achieved through performance management processes, strong senior leadership behaviors, and role modeling in addition to the systematic implementation of HR processes where there are deviations from standards. In addition to the in-use dimensions of organizational culture, it is important for organizations to espouse strong values around leaders and FLE behavior. These can be expressed in organizational culture statements, induction, and training processes. Organizational culture also plays a role in supporting the positive moral identity of employees by rewarding its demonstration in difficult and challenging work situations.

Limitations

Our two studies suffer from limitations that impact the quality of the results. First, we acknowledge that our measurement of FLE's perceptions of despotic leadership, moral disengagement, and moral identity are subject to self-awareness, leniency, and social desirability effects. However, against this, FLE are possibly the best sources of these data. Behrendt, Matz and Goritz (2017) makes an important distinction between leadership behavior perceptions and actual leadership behavior and point to the need for experimental designs, longitudinal designs that separate short-term that are sustainable and the use of objective data. We acknowledge that this distinction presents challenges in the context of measuring dark-side leadership; however, where possible, future research should utilize additional measurement strategies to complement self-report data on deviant behaviors such as HR records, diary methods and the use of participant observation. These additional measures could be useful in observing deviant behavior outcomes. They may also be useful to capture despotic leadership behaviors. Future studies could use triad designs (focal person, peer-reported and supervisor-reported) for better results and authenticity (Greenbaum, Mawritz, and Eissa 2012; Moore et al. 2019; Tang, Zhan, and Chen 2018). While acknowledging the complexities of a longitudinal research design, future studies should collect data on all study variables at each data collection point. This would enable the use of cross-lagged data analysis.

Second, we focused on FLE; however, some of the firms that we included in our sample such as banks are increasingly using low-customer contact models (Ostrom et al. 2015). Therefore, it would be appropriate to conduct studies with what is called "backstage employees." We do not know, for example, whether

"backstage employees" in service settings are more susceptible to the impacts of despotic leadership compared to non-service settings; therefore, this is worth investigating. It is also noted that the research on despotic leadership in non-service settings is nascent at best. We do emphasize that the focus on a particular category of employee potentially provides rich methodological insights and helps us to address issues of endogeneity.

Third, we did not explicitly include the customer in our data collection process. Given the nascent state of the literature on the impacts of despotic leadership on FLE in service settings, we prioritized the investigation of the first component of the service cycle, that of interactions between the direct supervisor and the FLE who interfaces with the customer. It is unlikely that the customer will have a direct proximal experience of despotic leadership by the direct supervisor; hence, this presents an important causation challenge in linking direct supervisor despotic leadership to customer perceptions of service. It will require a carefully designed experiment to surface these effects (Behrendt, Matz and Goritz 2017) and demonstrate causality. In addition, researchers could consider daily surveys of customers to capture the impacts of despotic leadership behaviors more effectively (Song et al. 2021). However, we consider our two studies to be an important first step in investigating the impacts of despotic leadership in service settings.

Fourth, we collected data in Pakistan, a high-power distance culture. This may have resulted in a greater frequency of despotic leadership behaviors than would be the case for low power distance countries. Fifth, this study focused on the boundary condition role of moral identity; therefore, future research could usefully investigate other moderators. These include interactional justice and leader-member exchange. Given that we found partial support for our mediator moral disengagement, it is important that future research should further investigate its mediating role in addition to investigating other relevant mediators for understanding the how despotic leadership affects FLE deviant work behaviors.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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