

# Don't exploit me any longer! How exploitative leadership influence work active behavior: The moderating effect of problem-solving rumination and psychological availability

## 不要再剝削我了！剝削型領導對社會閒散與脈絡績效之影響：心理可用性與問題解決反芻的調節效果

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**Abstract:** This study leverages the social exchange theory to elucidate the impact of exploitative leadership on subsequent positive and negative work behavior. Data were collected from 298 full-time employees with direct supervisory roles across various industries in Taiwan, over two time points with two-week intervals, to address common method bias concerns. The findings of this study reveal the following: (1) exploitative leadership positively influences social loafing; (2) exploitative leadership negatively influences contextual performance; (3) psychological availability and problem-solving rumination mitigate the positive relationship between exploitative leadership on social loafing and contextual performance. Based on the findings of this study, it not only extends the outcome variables and applicable contexts within the field of research, but also introduces a relevant theoretical perspective. Finally, this study not only examines the relationship between exploitative leadership, contextual performance, and social loafing but also extends the existing literature by investigating the moderating effects of psychological availability and problem-solving rumination. Furthermore, it validates the theoretical mechanisms underlying the social exchange perspective.

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**Keywords:** Exploitative leadership, social loafing, contextual performance, psychological availability, problem-solving rumination.

**摘要：**本研究基於社會交換理論，試圖闡釋剝削型領導對於後續正負向自發性工作行為的影響。本研究收集 298 位具有直屬主管之全職員工做為研究樣本，為降低研究結果受到共同方法變異之影響，在研究設計的部分，分別在三個時間點發放問卷進行資料蒐集，並以 Mplus 進行研究假設驗證。研究結果指出剝削型領導會降低部屬的脈絡績效，以及提升社會閒散行為的展現。在調節作用的部分，當部屬為高度問題解決反芻傾向時，會減緩剝削型領導與脈絡績效的負向關係，以及剝削型領導與社會閒散行為的正向關係。此外，當部屬為高度心理可用性時，亦會降低剝削型領導與脈絡績效的負向關係，以及剝削型領導與社會閒散行為的正向關係。本研究結果除了探討剝削型領導與脈絡績效以及社會閒散之間的關係，並且同時檢驗心理(心理可用性)與認知(問題解決反芻)機制的調節效果為該領域做出延伸，亦驗證社會交換之觀點理論機制。

**關鍵詞：**剝削型領導、社會閒散、脈絡績效、心理可用性、問題解決反芻。

### 1. Introduction

In the workplace, incidents of employees attributing merit to one's own actions while shifting blame for errors onto others are all too common. However, the most painful phenomenon is when employees, after countless days of hard work, present their achievements to supervisors only to be accused of self-aggrandizing and showmanship, leaving the employees to face their sadness in silence. Exploitative leadership, as proposed by Schmid et al. (2019), is a style of leadership that embodies a high degree of selfishness, wherein leaders may sacrifice others for their own gain. Consequently, such leaders exploit their employees' efforts and accomplishments to gain praise for themselves. Both in practice and academia, exploitative leadership is a widely acknowledged issue in workplaces and is believed to negatively affect the cognitive and behavioral aspects of the relationship between leaders and employees. For instance, Majeed

and Fatima (2020) and Wang et al. (2021) indicate that subordinates exposed to exploitative leadership experience negative affect and emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, Wu et al. (2021) assert that such leadership behaviors lead to diminished job performance and the emergence of knowledge-hiding behaviors (Guo et al., 2021; Lyu et al., 2023), and may even result in increased turnover intentions (Syed et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to thoroughly discuss and address the effects and consequences of exploitative leadership.

Despite significant progress in the study of exploitative leadership, several research gaps remain to be addressed. Firstly, although prior research has examined service performance (Sun et al., 2023), other dimensions of work performance remain insufficiently explored. For instance, contextual performance serves as a critical indicator of an individual's proactive contributions within their work environment (De Boer et al., 2015). Additionally, in leadership studies, contextual performance has been identified as a key work behavior through which employees respond to their perceptions of leadership styles in the workplace (Judge et al., 2006). While previous research has investigated deviant behavior, supervisors, as the primary gatekeepers of employees' work-related resources (Emmerling et al., 2023), may also elicit passive responses such as social loafing as a means for subordinates to cope with exploitative leadership (Sun et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2021). Moreover, existing studies suggest that future research should further integrate additional work behaviors as dependent variables (Emmerling et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2022) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how exploitative leadership influences various aspects of subordinates' work behaviors and performance.

Secondly, recent scholars have attempted to elucidate the boundary conditions of exploitative leadership (Bajaba et al., 2022; Emmerling et al., 2023), indicating that the relationship between employees' perceptions of exploitative leadership and their subsequent work behaviors may vary according to individual tendencies (Fatima and Majeed, 2023; Feng et al., 2022; Lyu et al., 2023). Furthermore, Lyu et al. (2023) have suggested that individuals' perceptions and tolerance of exploitative leadership differ, advocating for the

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examination of whether these individual cognitive or psychological tendencies influence the relationship between exploitative leadership and subsequent behavior. Hence, whether employees with different cognitive or psychological dispositions interpret the negative impacts of perceived exploitative leadership differently, thereby affecting their subsequent work attitudes and behaviors, remains an issue that warrants further investigation and clarification.

Based on the above, this study aims to address two key areas to fill the research gaps and extend the contributions to the field. First, recent empirical studies have established that exploitative leadership can indeed lead to deviant workplace behaviors (Lyu et al., 2023). Emmerling et al. (2023) further argued that, compared to other forms of abusive supervision or destructive leadership, employees are more likely to adopt passive behaviors in response to exploitative leadership. Social loafing, as a manifestation of passive workplace behavior, has been recognized as one such response (Chiu et al., 2020; He et al., 2022). Moreover, following the recommendations of Wu et al. (2021), this study recognizes that work performance encompasses other dimensions that have yet to be examined, such as whether employees display behaviors beyond their assigned tasks and actively assist with organizational matters when faced with exploitative leadership. Contextual performance, defined as an employee's voluntary efforts to assist in tasks beyond their prescribed role (Borman and Motowidlo, 1997), is influenced by their perception of supervisory leadership and subsequently affects overall job performance. Building upon the existing literature on the impact of exploitative leadership on employee work behaviors, this study simultaneously investigates contextual performance and social loafing as outcome variables. Furthermore, both a decline in contextual performance (i.e., reduced discretionary efforts) and an increase in social loafing (i.e., passive resistance) reflect employees' responses to exploitative leadership. When subordinates perceive that their contributions are not reciprocated or fairly rewarded, they may resort to these negative behaviors as a means of retaliation (Aryee et al., 2007). This interaction pattern aligns with the negative reciprocity principle of social exchange theory, highlighting a key theoretical contribution of

this research.

Secondly, regarding boundary conditions, based on the future research suggestions by Emmerling et al. (2023) and Lyu et al. (2023), an important issue that has been neglected in the current research domain is the role of individual differences in the relationship between exploitative leadership and subsequent work behaviors. Currently, much of the research in this field focuses on organizational policies as moderating variables. According to Wu et al. (2021) and Emmerling et al. (2023), individuals' cognition and affectivity in response to exploitative leadership may significantly influence their subsequent behavioral performance. Thus, this study aims to extend the recommendations of previous research by exploring these aspects separately. Concerning the cognitive mechanism, this study utilizes problem-solving rumination as a moderating variable. Problem-solving rumination refers to the process by which individuals, when faced with stressful events or problems, reflect on past experiences to assess the causes and associated factors while also developing solutions and strategies to mitigate the negative impact of the event on themselves (Treynor et al., 2003). Therefore, it has the potential to buffer the negative effects associated with exploitative leadership. In addressing the affectivity mechanism, this study incorporates psychological availability as a moderating variable. Psychological availability denotes an individual's positive psychological state, which, when high, provides sufficient mental and emotional resources that can be employed to confront specific events or challenges (Barrick et al., 2015; Kahn, 1990). Consequently, individuals with higher psychological availability may be better equipped to handle the negative impacts stemming from exploitative leadership. Therefore, building on and extending past research, this study introduces new boundary conditions by including problem-solving rumination and psychological availability as moderating variables in different mediating processes. This approach aims to explore whether these factors influence the relationship between exploitative leadership and social loafing and contextual performance.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory, proposed by Blau (1964), posits that individuals' social interactions and behaviors are based on the principle of reciprocity, emphasizing the exchange of rewards in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, when employees perceive their work environment as caring and supportive, they tend to invest effort in their work to reciprocate for the rewards or feedback provided by the organization.

This study posits that social exchange theory can effectively integrate and explain the relationship between exploitative leadership and subsequent work behaviors for two reasons. First, scholars argue that, according to social exchange theory, the interactions and reciprocity between supervisors and subordinates influence mutual trust and the maintenance of relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). When subordinates exert effort and achieve results, they expect corresponding "rewards" from their supervisors (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Kim and Vandenberghe, 2021). Therefore, if subordinates encounter exploitative leadership (e.g., supervisors taking credit for subordinates' work), they not only fail to receive the deserved rewards, but their achievements are also appropriated by others. Additionally, they may feel deceived or betrayed, potentially leading to retaliatory behaviors such as reduced performance or withdrawal of effort (Sun et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2021).

Secondly, a review of recent studies in this field reveals that most research has primarily adopted ethical orientations or fairness theory as the dominant theoretical perspectives. Notably, Wu et al. (2021) is among the few scholars who have employed social exchange theory as the foundational framework. Expanding on this perspective, the present study adopts the principle of negative reciprocity within the social exchange process as its core theoretical lens. According to the concept of negative reciprocity, existing empirical findings indicate that when employees perceive themselves as having limited resources, they are more likely to reduce work performance, exhibit withdrawal behaviors,

or even engage in retaliatory actions in response to negative leadership, thereby reciprocating the supervisor's exploitative behavior (Guo et al., 2018; Shillamkwese et al., 2020). Conversely, employees with greater resources are better equipped to cope with negative leadership and adverse interactions, mitigating the detrimental effects on their work behaviors. Thus, this study not only aligns with the theoretical framework of negative reciprocity but also resonates with previous scholarly arguments suggesting that negative leadership provokes deviant behaviors directed at specific targets (Faldetta, 2021; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). In light of this, social exchange theory provides a robust explanation for how employees' perceptions of exploitative leadership influence their emotional and cognitive mechanisms, shaping their behavioral responses toward specific targets. Moreover, this study offers novel theoretical insights and contributes to the expanding body of literature on exploitative leadership (Emmerling et al., 2023). Accordingly, this research adopts the principle of negative reciprocity within social exchange theory as its theoretical foundation and systematically examines the relationships between the key variables.

## **2.2 Exploitative leadership**

Exploitative leadership describes a style of leadership in which leaders exert pressure and control and engage in manipulation to secure their own interests and goals (Schmid et al., 2019). This includes the coercive imposition of high-demand tasks and the appropriation of employees' work achievements for personal gain (Emmerling et al., 2023; Lyu et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023). The concept of exploitative leadership was further compared to abusive supervision by Schmid et al. (2019). Abusive supervision is defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). In contrast, exploitative leadership emphasizes the process by which leaders achieve personal gain through pressure, manipulation, and obstruction of subordinates' development. This leadership style is fundamentally characterized by self-serving motives, treating subordinates as

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mere tools for achieving personal objectives. While both styles are categorized as forms of destructive leadership, the primary distinction lies in the focus of abusive supervision on verbal sarcasm and ridicule. Notably, abusive supervision can achieve its goals by catering to employee interests, whereas exploitative leadership disregards subordinate development opportunities, prioritizing only self-interest (Schmid et al., 2019).

Although exploitative leadership remains a relatively recent and emerging concept, a growing body of empirical research has underscored its significance in shaping supervisor-subordinate interactions (Lyu et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2022). Given that supervisors serve as gatekeepers of subordinates' career development and advancement while simultaneously controlling resource distribution, their demonstration of exploitative leadership in the workplace creates a unique power dynamic (Emmerling et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023). Subordinates, constrained by their dependence on supervisors for career progression and resources, often find themselves unable to resist such exploitative behaviors effectively (Schmid et al., 2019). Consequently, the imbalance between their invested time and effort and the lack of equitable returns becomes a significant source of cognitive and emotional stress (Elahi et al., 2024; Emmerling et al., 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, when individuals encounter stressors such as exploitative leadership, they engage in cognitive appraisals to assess the cause of stress, its perceived threat, and its potential impact. If individuals perceive themselves as lacking the necessary resources to cope with or mitigate the stressor, they are likely to experience negative emotional and cognitive states, which can subsequently deteriorate their psychological well-being and work performance (Fox and Stallworth, 2010). This aligns with prior empirical findings indicating that exploitative leadership is positively associated with increased psychological distress (Majeed and Fatima, 2020), knowledge hiding (Guo et al., 2021), decreased organizational identification (Bajaba et al., 2023), and even heightened turnover intentions and actual turnover (Syed et al., 2021). Furthermore, from a behavioral perspective, exploitative leadership has been

linked to declines in job performance and creativity (Sun et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2021), as well as an increase in service sabotage and deviant workplace behaviors (Lyu et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2022).

Building on this foundation, this study posits that when subordinates experience exploitative leadership (e.g., when supervisors take credit for their subordinates' work), they not only suffer from a lack of due recognition and rewards but also witness their contributions being unfairly appropriated. This experience induces stress, and given that supervisors control critical resources, subordinates may perceive limited options for altering the situation. As a result, they may respond to this stressor by reducing active behaviors (e.g., decreasing job performance) or increasing passive behaviors (e.g., disengaging from work or adopting a passive coping approach) as a means of coping with the exploitative work environment (Sun et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2021). In summary, this study aims to elucidate the impact of perceived exploitative leadership on subordinates' subsequent work attitudes and behaviors. The following sections will systematically develop research hypotheses based on this theoretical framework.

### **2.3 Exploitative leadership and work active behavior**

In both academic and practical spheres, the display of voluntary and proactive work behaviors by employees have long been a critical area of concern (Bakker et al., 2020). When employees demonstrate positive work behaviors, this benefits the organization. Conversely, if they exhibit negative behaviors that undermine the organization, significant damage can ensue (Dalal, 2005). Furthermore, work active behavior encompasses not only the aforementioned active work behaviors but also passive work behaviors. Passive behavior occurs when employees, under work pressure, avoid their work or do not fully commit to their work responsibilities, thereby withholding effort in response to job demands (Spector and Fox, 2002). Therefore, this study aims to integrate both positive and negative work active behaviors to thoroughly elucidate how exploitative leadership affects subsequent work behaviors.

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First, contextual performance refers to the voluntary execution of tasks beyond formal job responsibilities within the workplace, wherein individuals assist others. This concept encompasses informal role expectations that contribute to the overall functioning of the organization (Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994). In terms of negative passive behavior, social loafing refers to a phenomenon wherein individuals in a group setting exhibit diminished performance due to a weakened association between effort and outcomes. This occurs because individual contributions are less recognizable, leading to poorer performance compared to solitary work conditions (Karau and Williams, 1993). Social loafing is commonly observed in workplace settings (Liden et al., 2004), and not only leads to a decline in job performance and productivity, but over a longer period of time may also potentially harm the organizational climate, causing other members of the organization to lower one's own performance. Therefore, determining how to mitigate the occurrence of this behavior is a critical issue for organizations (Akgunduz and Eryilmaz, 2018).

According to the social exchange theory, individuals in social interactions tend to reciprocate in kind when they receive help or harm. Thus, under the negative reciprocity framework, individuals respond to harm with a "tit-for-tat" approach (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Applying this theoretical perspective, when subordinates experience exploitative leadership, they perceive that their efforts not only go unrewarded but also lead to further loss. As a result, when subordinates view their exchange relationship with their supervisor as negative, they perceive their current work situation as insecure and feel unable to obtain necessary resources from their supervisor, leading to a reluctance to continue their efforts (Emmerling et al., 2023). This study posits that when subordinates experience exploitative leadership and fail to receive commensurate rewards, yet are unable to resolve the situation or leave their current job, they are unlikely to continue making efforts that are continuously exploited without any return. Based on the negative reciprocity perspective, when both parties in an interaction perceive their exchange relationship as negative, it results in the exhibition of negative behaviors towards the other party (Rosen et al., 2009). Therefore,

subordinates are likely to reduce proactive efforts (e.g., sharing knowledge and ideas, voluntarily taking on tasks). Additionally, they might choose to decrease their work efficiency as a response to exploitative leadership. Consequently, the following research hypothesis is proposed.

*Hypothesis 1a.* Exploitative leadership negatively affects contextual performance.

*Hypothesis 1a.* Exploitative leadership positively affects social loafing.

## 2.4 The moderating effect of problem-solving rumination

Cropley and Zijlstra (2011) further differentiated rumination into two categories: affective rumination and problem-solving rumination. Affective rumination is more likely than problem-solving rumination to lead individuals into a state of tension, ultimately disrupting their emotional well-being. In contrast, problem-solving rumination focuses on achieving problem resolution; individuals engage in repeated assessments of past work experiences while contemplating potential challenges and threats they may face in the future (Cropley and Zijlstra, 2011; Querstret and Cropley, 2012). Previous research has demonstrated that problem-solving rumination facilitates recovery from work-related stress and contributes to enhanced positive affect in subsequent contexts (Firoozabadi et al., 2018). Therefore, this study incorporates problem-solving rumination as one of the moderating variables.

Treynor et al. (2003) proposed the concept of problem-solving rumination, which refers to the process by which individuals use their internal experiences to reassess the causes of an event or problem they encounter, and reconsider potential solutions to the issue. This process allows individuals to mitigate the negative effects of the problems encountered. According to social exchange theory, individuals engage in rational deliberation before interactions, reflecting on prior exchanges to assess their experiences and determine subsequent behavioral responses. This cognitive process serves as a crucial driver of behavioral expression (Homans, 1958). From this perspective, individuals with sufficient cognitive resources are better equipped to rationally evaluate and

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process interpersonal interactions and situational contexts. Consequently, when confronted with exploitative leadership, they are more likely to engage in thoughtful reflection and assessment of the interaction before deciding on their response. Conversely, individuals with limited cognitive resources may struggle to effectively evaluate their interactions with a supervisor, thereby exacerbating the negative impact of exploitative leadership.

Building upon this notion, this study posits that individuals with high levels of problem-solving rumination engage in reflective thinking during idle moments, systematically revisiting past events and problems to explore their origins and contributing factors (Cropley et al., 2012). Such individuals repeatedly evaluate their experiences based on prior knowledge and seek potential solutions to address encountered challenges (Di Schiena et al., 2012). This cognitive process allows them to analyze and assess their interactions with supervisors, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of exploitative leadership on subsequent work behaviors. In contrast, individuals with low levels of problem-solving rumination are less inclined to engage in retrospective evaluation of past interactions and lack the cognitive processing necessary for such reflection. As a result, when subjected to exploitative leadership, they may not only struggle to comprehend the rationale behind their supervisor's actions but may also experience an intensified negative impact on their perceptions and behaviors. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

*Hypothesis 2a.* High problem-solving rumination positively moderates the negative relationship between exploitative leadership and contextual performance.

*Hypothesis 2b.* High problem-solving rumination negatively moderates the positive relationship between exploitative leadership and social loafing.

## **2.5 The moderating effect of psychological availability**

Secondly, this study incorporates psychological availability as a moderating variable in the emotional process. Psychological availability refers to an individual's positive mental state characterized by a constructive belief in their

ability to confront work-related challenges and the availability of adequate emotional resources, which facilitates improved social interactions at work (Russo et al., 2016). Moreover, prior research has indicated that individuals with higher levels of psychological availability possess sufficient psychological and emotional resources to effectively address problems and setbacks when encountering stressful events at work (Barrick et al., 2015). Therefore, this study includes psychological availability as one of the moderating variables under investigation.

Psychological availability is defined as the individual's sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to utilize to personally engage at a particular moment (Barrick et al., 2015; Kahn, 1990). Kahn (1990) further noted that psychological availability is a positive psychological state that facilitates individuals in confronting complex issues. According to social exchange theory, an individual's ability to evaluate the dynamics of interpersonal interactions influences subsequent behavioral responses (Homans, 1958). From this perspective, possessing sufficient psychological resources facilitates the assessment and management of interactions with supervisors. Consequently, when a supervisor exhibits exploitative leadership, individuals with greater psychological resources may be better equipped to mitigate the emergence of negative work behaviors.

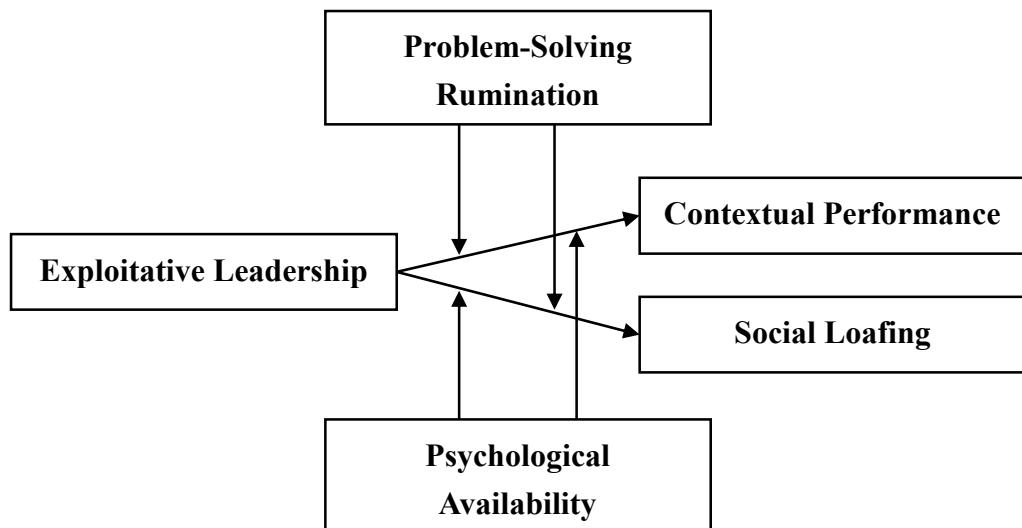
Building on this premise, this study posits that individuals with high psychological availability possess adequate mental resources to navigate their interactions and relationships with supervisors. As a result, even when faced with exploitative leadership, they are more capable of buffering its adverse effects and minimizing negative behavioral responses. Conversely, individuals with low psychological availability, due to their limited psychological resources, may struggle to effectively cope with their interactions with supervisors. Their emotional state may further hinder their ability to evaluate and process such exchanges. Therefore, when confronted with a supervisor's exploitation of work outcomes or performance, they are more likely to experience intensified negative consequences on their subsequent work behaviors. Therefore, this study proposes

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the following hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 3a.* High psychological availability positively moderates the negative relationship between exploitative leadership and contextual performance.

*Hypothesis 3b.* High psychological availability negatively moderates the positive relationship between exploitative leadership and social loafing.



**Figure 1**  
Hypothesized model in the present study.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants and procedures

Following the method utilized by Cable and DeRue (2002), to enhance the generalizability of the research findings and align with the research focus, this study collected research samples from a diverse range of industries and occupations across Taiwan, specifically targeting full-time employees with immediate supervisors.

First, before distributing the questionnaires, we reached out to contacts at

each target company via email and messaging apps to explain the purpose of the survey, the administration process, and to solicit their participation. Second, an online survey system was used to distribute the questionnaires via email and social media platforms. To facilitate the matching of questionnaires to different time points and to enhance the response rate, each respondent was assigned a unique code prior to distribution. This code helped in matching and consolidating data from different time points while ensuring that the questionnaires were completed in full. Third, to mitigate concerns related to common method variance and reverse causality that might arise from self-reported questionnaires, this study followed the preventive measures suggested by Podsakoff and Organ (1986) to preemptively mitigate potential biases. The questionnaire was designed to reduce respondents' speculation by concealing the purpose of the statements. During the questionnaire administration, the time-lag approach was used to collect data regarding the main study variables at different time points to minimize the impact of common method variance on research outcomes (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). This questionnaire was administered over two time points, each two weeks apart. At the first time point (T1), employees were asked to complete sections on exploitative leadership, problem-solving rumination, and psychological availability. At the second time point (T2), employees reported on social loafing, and contextual performance. Finally, reminders were sent to respondents via messaging apps or email at each time point to prevent missed surveys and enhance the response rate.

In this study, a total of 364 questionnaires were distributed at Time 1, yielding 355 completed responses. At Time 2, follow-up questionnaires were administered to the same 355 participants, resulting in 334 returned responses. After excluding incomplete or unidentifiable questionnaires, a total of 298 valid responses were retained for analysis, corresponding to an effective response rate of 82%. Regarding the participant demographics, there were more women, accounting for 54.7% of the total, and the average age was 37.28 years. Regarding education, 70.1% held a bachelor's degree. The average years of work experience was 8.15 years.

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## **3.2 Measures**

### **3.2.1 Exploitative leadership**

We used the scale by Schmid et al., (2019), which comprises 15 items. An example statement includes: "My supervisor assumes as a matter of course that my work achievements can be used for their personal benefit." Responses to the statements in this scale were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = always). The Cronbach's alphas was .97.

### **3.2.2 Social loafing**

We used the scale by George (1992), which comprises 10 items. An example statement includes: "I defer responsibilities that I should assume to other group members." Responses to the statements in this scale were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alphas was .90.

### **3.2.3 Contextual performance**

We used the scale by Motowidlo and Van Scotter (1994), which comprises 15 items. Sample items included, "volunteer for additional duty." Responses to the statements in this scale were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alphas was .89.

### **3.2.4 Problem-solving rumination**

We used the scale by Cropley et al. (2012), which comprises 5 items. Sample items included, "I find solutions to work-related problems in my free time." Responses to the statements in this scale were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never; 5 = always). The Cronbach's alphas was .89.

### **3.2.5 Psychological availability**

We used the scale by Byrne et al. (2016), which comprises 7 items. Sample items included, "I am emotionally ready to deal with the demands of my work."

Responses to the statements in this scale were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alphas was .84.

### **3.2.6 Control Variables**

Following the recommendations of previous research (Guo et al., 2020), this study incorporates gender, age, marital status, education, and tenure as control variables. Prior studies have indicated that gender influences the manifestation of social loafing (Simms and Nichols, 2014), while both age and education have been shown to impact job performance (Hassan et al., 2016; Kmicinska et al., 2016). Furthermore, the findings of Yildiz and Elibol (2021) suggest that tenure affects employees' tendencies to engage in social loafing, as well as their responses to negative workplace events. Similarly, tenure has been identified as a factor influencing employee reactions to workplace stressors (Kim et al., 2015). To account for these potential confounding effects, this study controls for these demographic variables, ensuring that their explanatory influence is minimized.

## **3.3 Data analyses**

This study first employed SPSS 24 to assess the reliability of each construct and used Mplus statistical software to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the fit between the hypothesized model and its constructs and variables. Given the large number of items in the primary research variables, this study adopted the item parceling approach based on the recommendations of Williams and O'Boyle (2008), consolidating multiple measurement items into more concise indicators. Following scholarly recommendations, each construct's measurement items were combined into three parcel indicators (Rogers and Schmitt, 2004).

Additionally, as Mplus statistical software (Muthén and Muthén, 2007) offers a more comprehensive analytical capability for model testing—allowing simultaneous examination of multiple moderating variables and outcome variables in path analysis—this study employed Mplus 8 to test the hypotheses of the overall research model. Prior to hypothesis testing, the independent and

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moderating variables were mean-centered to mitigate potential biases caused by multicollinearity. The standardized independent and moderating variables were then multiplied to compute interaction terms. If the interaction terms were found to be significant, the study further followed Aiken and West's (1991) procedure to plot interaction effects, thereby examining the directionality of the moderation effect.

## 4. Result

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the primary research variables are presented in Table 1. The correlation analysis results reveal that exploitative leadership is significantly positively correlated with social loafing ( $r = .46, p < .01.$ ) and negatively correlated with contextual performance ( $r = -.13, p < .05.$ ). Additionally, problem-solving rumination is significantly negatively correlated with exploitative leadership ( $r = -.36, p < .01.$ ). Lastly, Psychological availability is significantly negatively correlated with exploitative leadership ( $r = -.24, p < .01.$ ). These findings are all consistent with the hypothesized relationships between the research variables.

**Table 1**  
**Correlations of variables**

Variable	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.Gender	1.55	.50	--									
2.Age	32.28	8.41	-.07	--								
3.Marital status	1.49	.50	.01	.40**	--							
4.Education	2.80	.72	-.01	-.31**	-.17**	--						
5.Tenure	8.51	6.18	-.16*	.64**	.36**	-.15*	--					
6.Exploitative leadership	2.99	.93	-.04	-.02	-.01	.03	-.01	(.97)				
7.Social loafing	2.86	.75	-.08	-.07	-.05	.03	-.01	.46**	(.90)			
8.Contextual performance	3.82	.47	-.13*	.01	.07	-.07	.10	-.13*	-.17**	(.89)		
9.Problem-solving rumination	3.63	.70	-.08	-.01	-.07	-.09	.01	-.36**	-.13*	.43**	(.89)	
10.Psychological availability	3.84	.54	-.05	-.01	-.03	-.12*	.01	-.24**	-.31**	.51**	.57**	(.84)

*Note.* Gender (1=Male; 2=Female); Marital status (1=Single; 2= Married); Education (1=High school graduate; 2=College graduate; 3=bachelor's degree; 4=at or above Master's program).

\*p < .05 ; \*\*p < .01 ; N =29

## 4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

This study also used JASP statistical software to conduct CFA on the main research variables to evaluate the model fit (Bagozzi and Phillips, 1991). The results of the research model goodness-of-fit measurement as follows:  $\chi^2$  (280.24) = 142,  $P < .001$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .96, NFI = .93, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05. Additionally, comparison with a four-factor model and one-factor model (see Table 2). The findings indicate that the hypothesized model significantly outperforms the other model, suggesting that the overall model fit is acceptable (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1996).

Furthermore, following the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981), the average variance extracted (AVE) values should exceed .50 to demonstrate adequate convergent validity. In this study, the AVE values for the key research variables were as follows: exploitative leadership (.67), contextual performance (.56), social loafing (.59), problem-solving rumination (.62), and psychological availability (.58). As all AVE values met the recommended threshold, the findings indicate that the constructs exhibit satisfactory convergent validity.

**Table 2**  
**Confirmatory factor analysis**

Model	$\chi^2$	$df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	CFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA	SRMR
5 factor model	280.24	142	–	–	.96	.96	.93	.06	.05
4 factor model	451.27	146	171.03	4	.89	.89	.86	.09	.07
3 factor model	1258.06	149	977.82	7	.72	.67	.69	.16	.19
1 factor model	2689.75	152	2409.51	10	.35	.27	.27	.24	.27

N = 298.

5-factor model was hypothesized

4-factor model combined problem-solving rumination and psychological availability into one factor.

3-factor model combined problem-solving rumination and psychological availability into one factor. Combined contextual performance and social loafing into one factor.

1-factor model combined all variable into one factor.

## 4.2 Hypothesis testing

This study utilized Mplus 8 software to conduct hypothesis model analysis. The results of the model evaluations are presented in Table 3. Results from Table 3 indicate that exploitative leadership significantly positively correlated with social loafing ( $\gamma = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1a is supported. Moreover, exploitative leadership significantly negatively correlated with contextual performance ( $\gamma = -.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1b is supported.

The results indicate that when individuals experience high-level problem-solving rumination, there is a significant negative moderating effect on the relationship between exploitative leadership and social loafing ( $\gamma = -.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, when individuals experience high-level problem-solving rumination, there is a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between exploitative leadership and contextual performance ( $\gamma = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

To clarify the directionality of the moderating effects, interaction graphs were plotted for this study according to the suggestions of Aiken and West (1991). As shown in Figure 2, it was found that when individuals have a high tendency toward problem-solving rumination, this effectively mitigates the positive relationship between perceived exploitative leadership and social loafing. Furthermore, as depicted in Figure 3, when individuals have a high level of problem-solving rumination, the negative relationship between exploitative leadership and contextual performance weakens.

Furthermore, when individuals experience high-level psychological availability, there is a significant negative moderating effect on the relationship between exploitative leadership and social loafing ( $\gamma = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, when individuals experience high-level psychological availability, there is a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between exploitative leadership and contextual performance ( $\gamma = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In Figures 4 and 5. The results present that psychological availability plays a buffering role in alleviating negative consequences of exploitative leadership on subordinates' work active

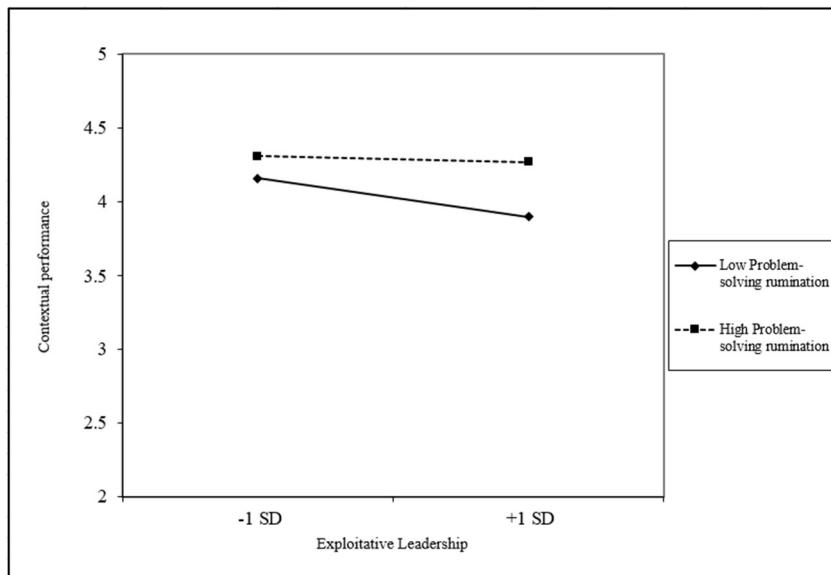
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behavior (e.g., reducing contextual performance and increasing social loafing). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

**Table 3**  
**Results of research model**

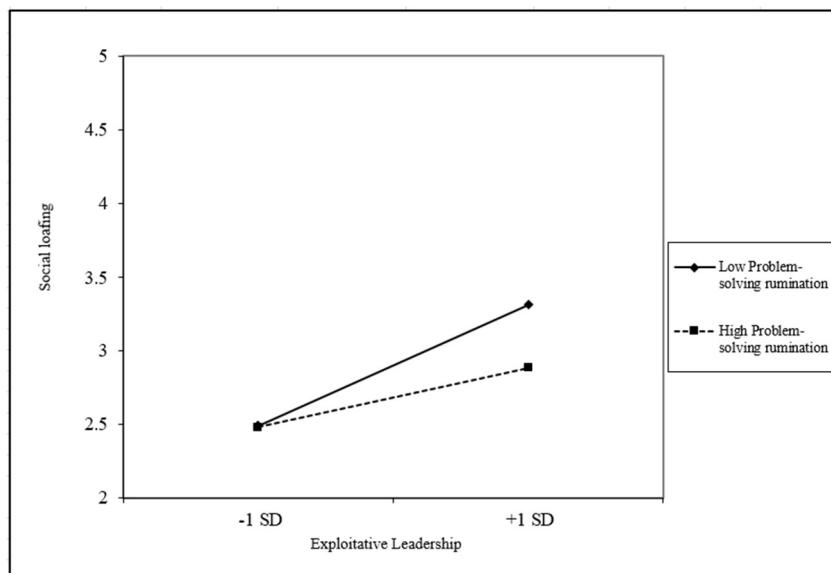
Variable	Social loafing		Contextual performance	
	Estimate	95% C.I.	Estimate	95% C.I.
Gender	.09	[-.16, .25]	-.26**	[-.41, -.10]
Age	-.01	[-.03, .02]	.03	[-.14, .19]
Marital status	-.13	[-.30, .14]	-.06	[-.17, .05]
Education	.04	[-.13, .22]	-.10	[-.22, .01]
Tenure	-.01	[-.04, .02]	.01	[-.01, .03]
Exploitative leadership (EL)	.41**	[.28, .55]	-.13*	[-.21, -.05]
Problem-solving rumination (PSR)	-.22**	[-.35, -.09]	.26**	[.17, .35]
Psychological availability (PA)	-19**	[-.34, -.05]	.28**	[.20, .36]
EL*PSR	-.21**	[-.30, -.11]	.11*	[.05, .16]
EL*PA	-.13*	[-.24, -.02]	.15*	[.02, .23]

\*p < .05 ; \*\*p < .01 ; N = 298



**Figure 2**

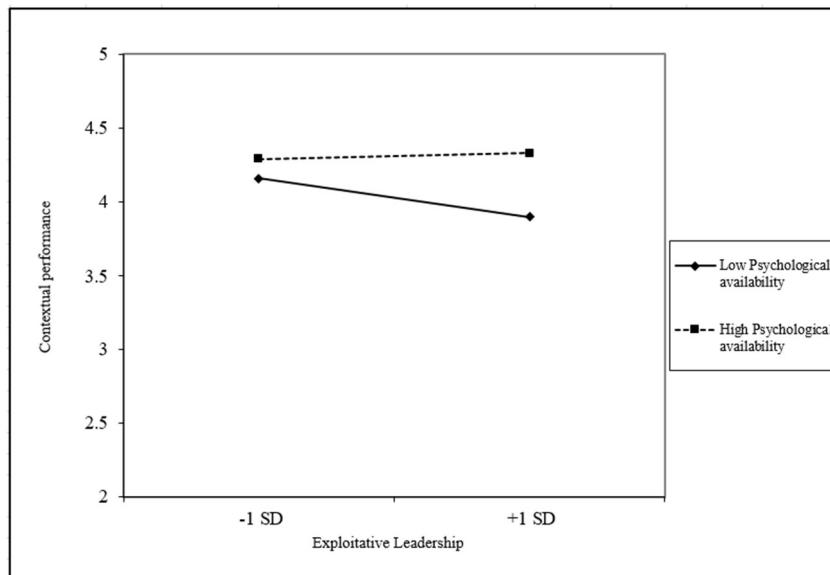
**The moderating effect of problem-solving rumination on the relationship between exploitative leadership and contextual performance**



**Figure 3**

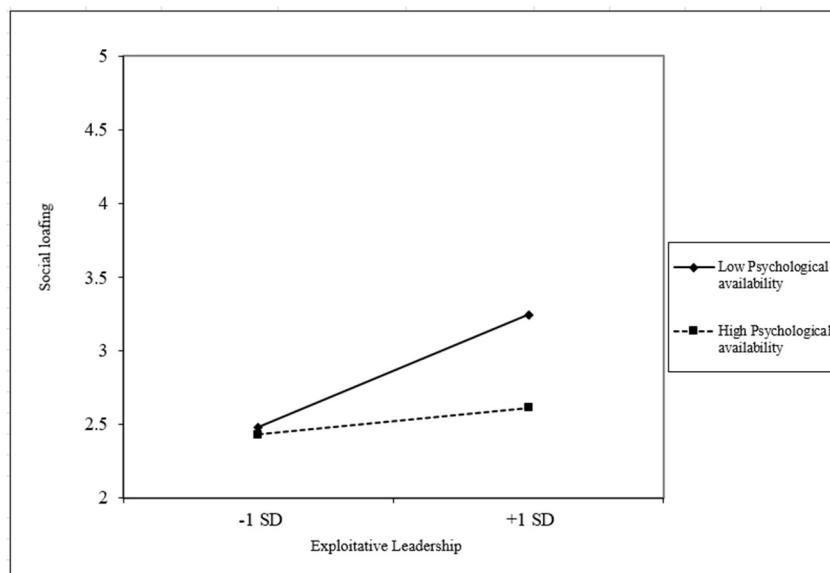
**The moderating effect of problem-solving rumination on the relationship between exploitative leadership and social loafing**

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**Figure 4**

**The moderating effect of psychological availability on the relationship  
between exploitative leadership and contextual performance**



**Figure 5**

**The moderating effect of psychological availability on the relationship  
between exploitative leadership and social loafing**

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

Based on the findings of this study, two primary theoretical contributions can be identified. First, while prior empirical research has examined various aspects of workplace behaviors, most studies have focused on negative behaviors such as diminished job performance, service sabotage, and workplace deviance (Lyu et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2022). Emmerling et al. (2023) further proposed in their conceptual work that, compared to destructive or negative leadership styles, employees are more likely to respond to exploitative leadership by reducing proactive behaviors and performance rather than engaging in overtly counterproductive behaviors. Moreover, both academia and practice have long recognized the significance of employees' voluntary and discretionary work behaviors as a critical area of concern (Bakker et al., 2020; Spector and Fox, 2010; Tsai, 2024). Thus, this study extends and responds to scholars' calls for further exploration of the diverse consequences of exploitative leadership.

Second, unlike previous research that has primarily examined moderating effects such as perceived organizational support (Wang et al., 2021), forgiveness climate (Fatima and Majeed, 2023), and personality traits (Ye et al., 2022), this study focuses on individuals' cognitive and psychological resources by incorporating problem-solving rumination and psychological availability as key moderating mechanisms. The findings indicate that when individuals experience stress due to exploitative leadership, their subsequent work behaviors tend to be negatively affected. However, problem-solving rumination and psychological availability serve as critical resource mechanisms that not only mitigate the adverse emotional and cognitive burdens induced by exploitative leadership but also equip individuals with the necessary resources to assess and cope with such stressors effectively. These findings align with theoretical frameworks and core conceptual mechanisms, yet prior research in this domain has rarely approached the topic from this theoretical perspective (Elahi et al., 2024; Emmerling et al., 2023). Therefore, this study not only builds upon previous scholars'

recommendations for future research (Antino et al., 2022) but also introduces novel contextual variables, offering a new perspective for future investigations. By extending theoretical frameworks and perspectives in the field of exploitative leadership research, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the literature.

## 5.2 Practical implications

Based on the findings of this study, exploitative leadership has been shown to contribute to increased social loafing and decreased contextual performance. Therefore, this study offers the following practical recommendations for organizational management:

To mitigate the negative effects of exploitative leadership, managers should avoid adopting exploitative, manipulative, and coercive leadership styles. Instead, they should foster a leadership approach grounded in fairness, justice, and timely recognition of employees' contributions to ensure that employees' efforts are appropriately acknowledged and rewarded. Such practices can help reduce perceptions of injustice and exploitation in the workplace (Schmid et al., 2019). Additionally, organizations should consider implementing leadership training programs or incentive initiatives for supervisors who frequently exhibit exploitative leadership tendencies, encouraging them to adopt more ethical and equitable leadership practices.

Second, this study finds that employees with higher levels of problem-solving rumination and psychological availability are better equipped to buffer the negative effects of exploitative leadership on work-related behaviors. When employees possess adequate cognitive and emotional resources to assess and cope with workplace stressors, they may be more resilient in managing the adverse impact of exploitative leadership (Elahi et al., 2024). Based on this, organizations could consider hosting experience-sharing sessions where senior employees with strong coping mechanisms share their experiences and strategies for handling workplace stress. Such initiatives could encourage employees to adopt a challenge-oriented mindset when confronting difficulties. Additionally, organizations should provide support and incentives to employees, fostering an

environment where they feel empowered to face workplace stressors. These efforts may help alleviate the potential negative consequences of exploitative leadership and enhance employees' ability to manage workplace challenges effectively.

### **5.3 Limitations and future research**

This study is subject to certain limitations. First, the measurement of key research variables relied exclusively on self-reported questionnaire data from employees, which may raise concerns about common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff et al., 2012). To mitigate potential CMV-related biases, this study followed established recommendations by implementing a multi-wave survey design, separating the measurement of independent and dependent variables across different time points (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Additionally, several procedural remedies were employed to reduce common method variance. Participants were explicitly informed that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and no individual data would be disclosed. These measures aimed to minimize potential distortions caused by social desirability bias. Moreover, results from the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicate that the hypothesized model demonstrates a significantly better fit compared to alternative models. Furthermore, discriminant validity tests confirm that respondents were able to distinguish among the key research constructs. Taken together, these findings suggest that CMV is unlikely to pose a significant threat to the validity of this study's results.

Second, as this study utilized cross-sectional data, concerns about reverse causality may arise. However, from negative reciprocity, such concerns about inferring causality among study variables are less plausible. Furthermore, this study suggests that future research could adopt alternative research designs, such as peer rating, objective data, or experience sampling methods, to examine the relationships between research variables. The rationale for this recommendation lies in the fact that leadership behaviors exhibited by supervisors can vary significantly on a day-to-day basis (Barnes et al., 2015; Courtright et al., 2016).

To further clarify and comprehensively present the dynamic relationship between exploitative leadership and its impact on subordinates' work behaviors, this study recommends the use of experience sampling methods, which can provide a more precise verification of the relationships between these variables.

This study offers two recommendations for future research. First, the findings suggest that problem-solving rumination and psychological availability serve as buffering mechanisms for subordinates in coping with exploitative leadership or workplace stressors. However, other individual or contextual factors may also provide similar protective effects. For instance, psychological capital at the individual level or a climate of organizational justice at the organizational level could potentially function as moderators in mitigating the negative impact of adverse leadership. Future research is encouraged to explore the moderating effects of both individual and organizational-level factors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these protective mechanisms. Finally, various types of employee work behaviors, such as silence behavior, remain to be examined.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This study aims to explore how exploitative leadership influences subordinates' contextual performance and social loafing. Building upon the work of Schmid et al. (2019), the study incorporates psychological availability and problem-solving rumination as a moderating variable to further clarify its moderating effects. The findings of this study not only examine the relationship between exploitative leadership and subordinates' positive and negative work-active behaviors but also validate the integration of the social exchange perspective within the same framework, elucidating potential theoretical mechanisms. This contributes to the extension of the literature on exploitative leadership and provides theoretical insights. In practice, the results of this study will help organizational authorities and managers understand the negative effects of exploitative leadership on subordinates and offer practical recommendations.

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