

# Supervisor bottom line mentality, self-regulation impairment and unethical pro-organizational behavior: investigating the moderating effect of perceived employability

Perceived  
employability

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) is one of the major reasons behind high-profile financial frauds in the recent past. This study aims to explore how an exclusive focus on financial outcomes, i. e. supervisor bottom-line mentality (BLM) leads to UPB among employees and highlights the critical role of self-regulation impairment and perceived employability in the process. Drawing on self-regulation theory, this study examines how BLM and perceived employability interactively impact self-regulatory strength, which ultimately influences UPB.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The theoretical model is tested through a time-lagged field study of 171 employees and hypothesis testing in SPSS PROCESS Macros.

**Findings** – Results suggest that self-regulation impairment mediates a positive relationship between supervisor BLM and employee UPB and perceived employability moderates this indirect association between BLM and UPB, wherein the indirect positive relationship is stronger when perceived employability is low (than high).

**Disclosure statement:** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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

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



**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the BLM and UPB literature by identifying the critical role of perceived employability and suggesting that UPB is an impulsive action rather than an intentional move.

**Keywords** Bottom-line mentality, Unethical behavior, Perceived unemployability, Self-regulation impairment, Supervisor bottom-line mentality, Perceived employability, Unethical pro-organizational behavior

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Bottom-line mentality (BLM) is defined as “one-dimensional thinking that revolves around securing bottom-line outcomes to the neglect of competing priorities” (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2012, *p* 344). Bottom-line outcomes are often referred to performance metrics, like economic efficiency, that stimulate the organization’s profitability. In today’s highly competitive business environment, obtaining performance outcomes is highly important to the success and survival of the organization. However, recent corporate scandals (e.g. Enron and Volkswagen) indicate that myopic focus on bottom-line, which disregards competing priorities such as employee welfare, social and moral norms or work quality, produces financial and reputational costs for organizations. Beyond high profile scandals, a handful of prior studies also demonstrated that BLMs in organization can have detrimental effects, such as abusive supervision (Mawritz *et al.*, 2017) and customer-directed unethical behavior (Babalola *et al.*, 2022). Research has shown that supervisor BLM may have undesirable consequences for employees even outside the organization – they may suffer from insomnia (Babalola *et al.*, 2022) and work-family conflict (Quade *et al.*, 2021). Although these findings have yielded valuable insights, little is known, however, of how high-BLM supervisors undermines subordinates’ self-control capacity, resulting in irrational work behaviors such as unethical pro-organizational behavior [UPB, i.e. behaviors that violate ethical norms, but are intended to serve organizational interests; Umphress and Bingham (2011)].

Drawing on self-regulation theory (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), we posit that employees working for high-BLM supervisors experience diminished self-regulatory capacity, which impairs their ability to control subsequent inappropriate responses. High-BLM supervisors have elevated performance expectations regarding subordinates’ work-efforts and monitor their behaviors closely to ensure that employees are contributing positively to bottom-line success (Mawritz *et al.*, 2017; Wolfe, 1988). Any discrepancy between the supervisor’s desired and current states reflects subordinate failure to attain bottom-line goals and he/she thus might face negative consequences (e.g. reprimand, termination, withholding promotion). In this respect, we believe that supervisors’ high BLM represent a dynamic and unique stressor for employees because it makes them more concentrated on the worrisome and foreboding aspects of the work, which drains their self-resources and energy. In turn, a depleted employee fails to recognize the ethical implications of their decisions and engages in UPB to help their supervisors in meeting his or her bottom-line objectives.

Furthermore, this study argues that the magnitude of the effects of supervisor BLM on employee self-regulation and subsequent work behaviors is contingent on subordinates’ perceived employability. Perceived employability refers to the employee’s capability to obtain or retain employment (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012; Sok *et al.*, 2013). The individual subjective evaluation of one’s marketability in the internal or external labor market is based on both individual capabilities and contextual factors (e.g. national unemployment rate) (Forrier *et al.*, 2015; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007)). Employees who perceive themselves highly employable have a greater sense of control, the control of being able to quit the current

employer if necessary (Baruch, 2001; Berntson *et al.*, 2010). Employable workers are equipped with (many) resources (e.g. trainings and social networks), therefore, cope more effectively with stressful work situations (e.g. job loss and unemployment; Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). Thus, if a working environment is perceived as taxing or daunting, highly employable workers could opt to leave the organization for another. In line with this argument, we believe that perceived employability has the potential to alter employees' responses to stressful factors, such as supervisor BLM.

Our work intends to make three primary contributions. First, we contribute to the BLM literature by examining the underlying mechanism of how supervisor BLM influences subordinates' behavior. Although research on supervisor BLM is emerging (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2012) and research has demonstrated that supervisor BLM incites dysfunctional work behaviors (Farasat and Azam, 2020), yet, much remains to be understood. Our study sheds light on an overlooked theoretical process, self-regulation impairment resulting from supervisor BLM, whereby the occurrence of UPB can be explained. Second, we contribute to the literature by identifying a boundary condition of the effects of supervisor BLM on employee self-regulation impairment. Supervisor BLM has the potential to influence employee self-regulatory resources but the strength of this effect depends on employee perceived employability. Lastly, our research extends the nomological network of UPB by identifying a new antecedent that motivates unethical, but pro-organizational behaviors (i.e. self-regulation impairment). Prior studies on UPB have mainly focused on identification-related factors (Johnson and Umphress, 2019; Miao *et al.*, 2013; Umphress *et al.*, 2010) and individual differences (Lee *et al.*, 2019), in predicting UPB. By integrating research on supervisor BLM and perceived employability with self-regulation theory, we demonstrated that UPB may likely be the outcome of self-regulation impairment rather than intentional behavior.

## Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

### *Supervisor bottom line mentality and self-regulation impairment*

Self-regulation represents an individual's capacity to control, override and alter their responses. It is the complex, multifaceted process by which individuals attempt to constrain unwanted urges and override subsequent behavioral actions (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister and Vohs, 2007). Prior research on self-regulation (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996) identified three main ingredients that embody self-regulation: standards, monitoring and operation. Standards are goals, ideals or conceptions of desired states. Ambiguous, conflicting, inconsistent goals can prevent effective self-regulation. Monitoring involves comparing one's current state to the standard. Operation, third ingredient of self-regulation, aimed at changing the self to reduce the unwanted discrepancy. Self-regulation attempt to bring behavior into line with some standard (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007) and "inhibit [. . .] responses that may arise as a result of physiological processes, habit, learning or the press of the situation" (Schmeichel and Baumeister, 2004, p. 86); however, individual self-regulatory resources are limited akin to energy or strength and becomes depleted by a prior self-regulatory task. When self-regulatory breakdowns occur, it becomes difficult for individuals to control their urges and make decisions almost unwittingly (Ferris *et al.*, 2009).

Given the influence of self-regulatory resources on individual's responses, prior studies have focused on why self-regulatory failures may occur (Baumeister *et al.*, 1998; Baumeister and Vohs, 2007; Mawritz *et al.*, 2017; Schmeichel and Baumeister, 2004). This study has suggested that supervisor exclusive focus on bottom-line depletes employee self-regulatory resources and impair their ability to regulate appropriate behavioral responses. More specifically, we posit that BLM supervisors by targeting three main

ingredients of self-regulation (i.e. standards, monitoring and operation) drain subordinates' self-regulatory resources (Baumeister *et al.*, 1998). First, BLM supervisors by setting unrealistic and incompatible standards for subordinates, hamper and thwart their self-regulation (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Second, subordinates of BLM supervisors realize that their position within the organization depends on how well they are contributing toward bottom-line goals (Quade *et al.*, 2021). Any discrepancy between desired and current state threatens the employee standing in the organization and creates doubts in one's abilities (Sitkin *et al.*, 2011), resulting in energy depletion. Lastly, as discussed, BLM supervisors regularly convey the supreme importance of bottom-line outcomes and expect that their subordinates will engage in whatever is necessary to increase bottom-line success (Babalola *et al.*, 2020a). In such situations, subordinates try to stretch their capabilities beyond their normal abilities so as to meet high-BLM supervisor's performance expectations (Farasat and Azam, 2020). However, working incessantly hard without sufficient rest may consume employee self-regulatory resources, subsequently limiting one's ability to pursue bottom-line goals.

Prior research has provided evidence that threatening situations impair concentration, diminish psychological states and heightened perceived difficulty of tasks (Hagger *et al.*, 2010). In the present study, we suggest that supervisor one-dimensional focus on securing short-term financial wins (Wolfe, 1988) relays to employees that they must contribute toward bottom-line goals or face negative consequences. However, employees who self-regulate behavior to meet high-BLM supervisor's expectations may put stress on their self-regulatory resources. If employees are unable to replenish these resources because circumstances (similar to supervisor BLM) do not allow them to rest, then gradually they become deficient in resources (Muraven and Baumeister, 2000). In support of this notion, Greenbaum *et al.* (2012) have shown that supervisor BLM leads to social undermining of employees. When such employees perceive their self-worth to be at stake, there is an increased likelihood that their self-regulation would be depleted (Ferris *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, we hypothesize:

- H1.* Supervisor bottom-line mentality has a positive relationship with subordinates' self-regulation impairment

### **Subordinate self-regulation impairment and unethical pro-organizational behavior**

UPB is defined as "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, mores, laws or standards of proper conduct" (Umphress and Bingham, 2011, p. 622). This type of immoral behavior is either unlawful or goes against the ethical values of society (Jones, 1991). It can refer to acts of omission (for instance concealing negative information to safeguard the organization's goodwill and reputation) and commission (for instance fabricating financial numbers to show enhanced profitability and market performance) (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). It is essential to note that such behavior is neither a part of an employee's official work requirement nor is demanded by top management, but it is still performed to secure the organization's interests (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Veetikazhi *et al.* (2021) argue that UPB is a form of unethical 'pro-other' behavior, as opposed to 'pro-self' behavior and is not primarily performed for self-interest but to extract benefit for another party (i.e. the firm in this case). Existing literature on ethics is divided into two main types of behavior (Shah *et al.*, 2020) – positive, desirable behavior that benefits the organization (i.e. citizenship behavior) and negative, undesirable conduct that is intended to harm the organization (i.e. counterproductive behavior). However, majority of this research body ignores UPB, which has serious repercussions even

though it is more of a gray area – morally objectionable but in the interest of the organization. Therefore, investigating the cognitive processes and environmental stimuli responsible for such behavior is critical. We hypothesize that UPB is a consequence of self-regulation impairment caused by supervisor BLM. As employees' self-regulatory resources are depleted because of constant pressure from their high BLM bosses, they are unable to resist temptations (Gino *et al.*, 2011), to perform immoral acts that are expected to give them short-term gains. As employees perceive their relationship with the organization as a social exchange (Blau, 1964), they believe that benefiting the organization would ultimately benefit them. Consequently, because of impaired self-regulation, they are unable to synthesize the negative long-term implications of their unethical conduct. For instance, high profile corporate scandals in the recent years are an evidence of the negative ramifications of UPB. Enron was charged for a financial fraud in which the firm falsified its profits through "mark-to-market" accounting. Its employees were involved in manipulating the financial statements to understating losses and overstate profits. The company, along with its accounting firm Arthur Anderson, collapsed when the scandal was uncovered (Li, 2010). Similarly, because of a top-down pressure from top management to increase the number of new account openings through cross-selling, Wells Fargo's employees created approximately two million fraudulent accounts on behalf of the bank's clients without their permission (Tayan, 2019). When the scandal was exposed, Wells Fargo had to pay heavy fines and faced various legal and financial consequences.

Previous research suggests that self-regulation depletion impacts human behavior. Self-regulation is vital in ascertaining that individuals act in a certain desirable manner. When self-regulatory resources are exhausted because of demanding circumstances, self-control is diminished and individuals are deprived of the strength to stay away from immoral behavior (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996). In their empirical study, Owusu *et al.* (2018) found that individuals who lack self-control have a substantially higher propensity to perform unethical acts. Also, employees tend to engage in deviant work behavior as a result of daunting work demands which hinder their self-regulation (Thau and Mitchell, 2010). Hong (2019) warns that stretch goals putting excessive performance demands on employees, may spur immoral conduct among them. In a laboratory experiment, Welsh and Ordóñez (2014) demonstrated that setting exceedingly high performance objectives and emphasizing to "do your best," decreased self-regulatory capacity of participants which led to unethical behavior. Another research has found a negative relationship between self-control and counterproductive behaviors (Marcus and Schuler, 2004). Moreover, socially undermined employees (e.g. because of high BLM leaders) may experience ego depletion – a phenomenon which, when combined with self-regulation impairment, decreases the motivation to act in a morally desirable manner (Baumeister *et al.*, 2006).

The cognitive processes responsible for immoral conduct as a consequence of impaired self-regulatory function can be explained through the phases of self-regulation: the third and final one (i.e. operate) is concerned with how individuals "act" as a result of nonconformance to the standards as revealed by monitoring (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996). It may also be the case that an individual has ideal standards and carries out monitoring properly, yet he/she is unable to control impulsive action because of self-regulatory failure. On many occasions, behavioral responses to an environmental trigger are caused by inherent programming, latent motivation, habitual tendency or learning. Successful self-regulation serves the purpose of overriding these impulses or temptations and prevents the usual, expected outcomes. Therefore, because of a compromised self-regulatory mechanism, employees may have diminished strength to control their impulses propelling them to engage in dishonest activities that help in fulfilling the short-lived financial targets of their

organization. In particular, self-regulation strength provides the individual a capacity to transcend the current situation by evaluating its long-term ramifications and outcomes. As self-regulation fails, transcendence ability is hindered by any stimulus that limits the focus to a more myopic view. According to [Thau and Mitchell \(2010\)](#), self-regulation impairment tends to promote helping behaviors that may not generally be considered harmful but a deeper contextual analysis would identify them as inapposite. UPB is a suitable example of such practices.

Based on the argument given above, we present the following hypothesis:

*H2. Subordinates' self-regulation impairment has a positive relationship with unethical pro-organization behavior*

Following the hypotheses presented above, we propose a mediating effect of self-regulation impairment on the relationship between supervisor BLM and employee UPB. With their self-regulation resources depleted as a consequence of high supervisor BLM, employees are unable to thoroughly process the situation. As an impulsive response, they may perform acts that enable their organization to attain its bottom-line targets. To them, UPB may seem highly effective in fulfilling the organization's bottom-line needs ([Zhang et al., 2020](#)), because such immoral behaviors give instant financial benefits as compared to ethical conduct ([Zhang et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

*H3. Self-regulation impairment mediates the relationship between supervisor BLM and employee UPB.*

#### Moderating role of perceived employability

We have hypothesized that high supervisor BLM leads to greater levels of self-regulation impairment. However, this negative consequence of BLM may be neutralized in the presence of certain moderating variables. These environmental, situational or personal factors may determine the extent to which self-regulatory capacities of employees are weakened as a result of their managers' bottom-line pursuits. In other words, even though such high-pressure organizational circumstances are conducive to self-regulation depletion, subordinates' individual convictions and perceptions may act as a buffer safeguarding their self-control. In this study, we investigate the differentiating role of employee's perceived employability as a first stage moderator.

Perceived employability refers to an individual's belief about being able to secure a new job opportunity ([Berntson and Marklund, 2007](#)). The extent of perceived employability is dependent on a combination of personal, structural and job-market related factors ([Vanhercke et al., 2014](#)). Personal factors are determined by the employees' perceptions of their capabilities, skills and competencies. Structural factors are related to the employee's professional and social contacts and the organization's recruitment preferences. The quantity and quality of employment opportunities available determine job-market related factors. Therefore, perceived employability is based on a dynamic interplay of these aspects which paints a comprehensive picture in one's mind about his/her new job prospects ([Van Hootegem et al., 2019](#)). In today's era, perceived employability is an important construct to consider because of low unemployment rates, financial pressures, unpredictable organizational scenarios and disintegrated careers ([Forrier et al., 2015](#)).

Employees working under managers with BLM are constantly in a fear of losing their jobs if they are unable to meet the challenging financial targets ([Mesdaghinia et al., 2019](#)). They also perceive their social standing in the organization to be at risk for the same reason

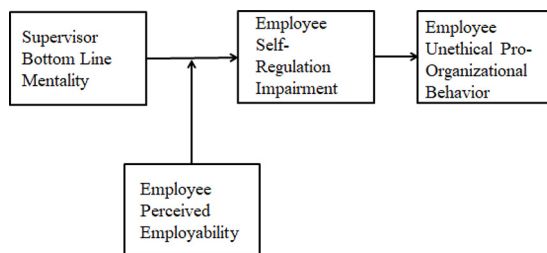


(Mitchell *et al.*, 2018). These overwhelming fears and risks serve to deplete self-regulation which is a limited resource. Individuals equipped with self-resources are less adversely affected by such strains that drain their psychological energy (Hobfoll, 2002). This indicates that resources have a stress-minimizing impact. Perceived employability may function as a highly valuable individual resource in the present-day work environment for employees who are insecure about their current jobs (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012). As supervisor BLM is expected to increase job insecurity among subordinates (Zhang *et al.*, 2021), high perceived employability may help in reducing the stress ensuing in such a situation. Job insecurity tends to decrease self-control, whereas perceived employability reinforces self-control (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2008). When employees are content about their future career prospects, their mental peace is not significantly disturbed by their supervisor's "tunnel vision" (i.e. BLM). These employable individuals know that they can easily remove themselves from the organization and find another job if the work situation becomes too unbearable (Pfeffer and Jeffrey, 1998). Therefore, employees who are confident about obtaining another employment would have better self-regulation capability despite being under pressure of supervisor BLM. On the contrary, employees with low perceived employability have a vulnerable position in the organization as they have a constant threat of being unemployed if they lose their current job upon failing to achieve bottom-line goals. As a result, they are likely to experience greater self-regulation impairment.

- H4. Employee perceived employability would moderate the relationship between supervisor bottom-line mentality and employee self-regulation impairment such that the positive relationship will be weaker when perceived employability is high than when perceived employability is low

Based on the aforementioned set of hypotheses, we have developed a moderated mediation model (Figure 1) wherein supervisor BLM influences employee UPB via employee self-regulation impairment and employee perceived employability moderates this indirect relationship at the first stage. In response to BLM, subordinates are expected to exhibit higher UPB because of impaired self-regulation, when they have low perceived employability than when they have high perceived employability. It is because such individuals would try to reinforce their position in the organization by extending benefits to the organization – even if it is through unethical means – as they do not have hopes of finding employment elsewhere if they quit or lose their current job. As such, we hypothesize as follows:

- H5. Employee perceived employability moderates the indirect effect of supervisor BLM on UPB via employee self-regulation impairment, such that this indirect effect is stronger when perceived employability is low versus high.



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual model

## Method

### *Sample and procedures*

For this research, data were gathered through a field-survey of employees working in private sector organizations of Pakistan. Industries included agriculture; pharmaceuticals and biotechnology; paper and packaging; textiles and leather goods; and services like banking, IT, etc. Following the practice of previous studies on BLM and UPB (Babalola *et al.*, 2021; Farasat and Azam, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020), we chose the private sector because managers tend to have a more bottom-line centric approach in this sector as they have to meet the profitability targets of their firm in an intensely competitive business environment. As research on BLM is progressing, it shows that this phenomenon is highly generalizable to a vast range of industries (Quade *et al.*, 2021). Studies have been made in several industrial sectors including, but not limited to, financial services (Eissa *et al.*, 2019); information technology (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2021); real estate (Mawritz *et al.*, 2017); food-chain (Lin *et al.*, 2022) and banking (Babalola *et al.*, 2020b). This indicates the pervasive nature of BLM allowing it to be investigated across diverse contexts (Babalola *et al.*, 2022; Farasat *et al.*, 2021; Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019).

To minimize assessment apprehension and socially desirable responses, we assured the participants complete anonymity and confidentiality. It was clearly mentioned that the survey is purely for research purposes. Participation in the survey was voluntary and respondents were allowed to quit whenever they felt like. To control the threat of common-method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012), we conducted the survey in two waves ensuring temporal spacing. At Time 1, we approached 300 employees asking them to answer questions related to demographic variables (age, gender, education, tenure, position in organization, industry) and to report on their supervisor's BLM, perceived employability and self-regulation impairment. Four weeks later, at Time 2, these participants were requested to rate their UPB. Based on earlier studies, we used self-report measures of UPB, as it is not easy for others to gauge an individual's pro-organizational behavior (Chen *et al.*, 2016). As the questionnaire was anonymous, we used a unique code for each respondent from Time 1 to match their response from Time 2. After one-to-one matching, the total number of useable responses was 171, indicating an overall response rate of 57%. We attribute this low response rate to unstable and uncertain circumstances created in the overall business landscape as a result of COVID-19. Nonetheless, our work is line with prior studies (AlQershi *et al.*, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2015; Rezaeirad and Jahromi, 2021), with a sample size of less than 200. Out of the 171 participants, 53.8% were from the 25–30 years age group and 73.1% were male. In terms of educational qualification, the majority (52.0%) had undergraduate degrees, followed by Masters (38.6%) and M Phil (7.6%) degrees. Most of the respondents (67.8%) carried less than 5 years of total experience. About 44.4% of employee had spent almost one to two years with their current supervisor and 29.2% worked under their current supervisor for less than one year. Nearly, two-thirds (68.4%) of the participants were at non-managerial positions, 15.2% at first line management, 11.7% at middle management and 4.7% at senior management level.

*Survey and measures.* Scales used by previous researchers and possessing stable psychometric properties were adapted to measure the constructs of this study. Five-point Likert scale anchors ranging from 1 308 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”) were used.

Supervisor bottom-line mentality. Employee's perception of supervisor BLM was measured using the four-item scale developed by (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2012). Sample items include: “My supervisor cares more about profits than hi/he/her employees' well-being” and “My supervisor treats the bottom-line as more important than anything else.” (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.763$ )



Perceived employability. A seven-item measure created by [Berntson and Marklund \(2007\)](#) was used to evaluate perceived employability of the participants. Example items are: “My personal qualities make it easy for me to get a new (equivalent or better) job in a different company/organization” and “My competence is sought-after in the labor market.” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.758$ )

Self-regulation impairment. Employee’s self-regulation impairment was measured using a 16-item scale by [Arslan and Gelisli \(2015\)](#). Sample items include: “I need something pleasant to make me feel better” and “If I were tempted by something right now, it would be difficult to resist.” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.879$ )

Unethical pro-organizational behavior. Employees reported their UPB tendencies on a six-item measure provided by [Umphress et al. \(2010\)](#). Sample items are: “If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good” and “If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.777$ )

Control variables. Following the example of [Babalola et al. \(2021\)](#), we used employee’s age and gender as control variables as they may be related to UPB. Additionally, we also controlled for social desirability because of the possibility that respondents may self-report on their unethical behavior in a self-favoring manner ([Uziel, 2010](#)). It was measured in the first wave of data collection through [Strahan and Gerbasi’s \(1972\)](#) ten-item scale. Sample items include: “There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone” and “I always try to practice what I preach.”

### *Data analysis and results*

*Analytical procedures.* Initially, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation was conducted in SPSS AMOS to evaluate discriminant validity among the study constructs. Thereafter, SPSS PROCESS Models 4 and 8 of [Hayes \(2017\)](#) were used to assess the mediating and moderating relationships in the study’s framework. PROCESS procedure was selected because of its statistical strength in dealing with asymmetric or non-parametric distributions to estimate direct, indirect and conditional indirect effects of their bootstrapping confidence intervals (CIs) ([Hayes, 2017](#)). This is particularly helpful in our case (i.e. small sample size) because bootstrapping offers higher precision in the calculation of confidence intervals even if sample or effect size is small ([Mallinckrodt et al., 2006](#)). In total, 5,000 bootstrapped samples were used, giving a 95% bias-corrected CI. PROCESS Model 4 tested the mediating role of self-regulation impairment on the indirect path. Next, PROCESS Model 8 was used to investigate the moderating role of perceived employability in the relation between supervisor BLM and self-regulation impairment and the moderated mediation where perceived employability moderates the indirect effect of supervisor BLM on subordinate UPB via self-regulation impairment.

*Measurement model.* Four factors were included in our measurement model: supervisor BLM, perceived employability, self-regulation impairment and employee UPB. As perceived employability, self-regulation impairment and UPB scales have a large number of items, we made parcels by partial disaggregation to develop indicators for the latent constructs. This approach helps in obtaining an optimal indicator to sample size ratio ([Coffman and MacCallum, 2005](#)). Three-item parcels were used as indicators for perceived employability, self-regulation impairment and UPB ([Landis et al., 2000](#)). Previous researchers have demonstrated that forming composite measures (parceling approach) gives rotational results with greater accuracy and higher individual item reliability ([Little et al., 2002](#)). As the objective of our research is to evaluate the link between latent constructs rather than investigating inter-item relationships or developing measurement scale, a model based on

parceling is favorable (Williams and O’Boyle, 2008). Parceling is particularly appropriate in this study because the items used are adapted from uni-dimensional scales validated by previous researchers (Little, 2013). Following the recommendations of Matsunaga (2008), we conducted exploratory factor analysis to ascertain the uni-dimensionality of each observed variable. Thereafter, items were grouped into parcels considering their respective loadings which ensured item-to-variable balancing (Rogers and Schmitt, 2004).

In CFA, normed chi-square score less than 3; Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI) greater than 0.90; and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) lower than 0.08 indicate a fairly good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Our four-factor measurement model demonstrated acceptable values i.e.  $\chi^2/df = 1.643$ , CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.060 and significant loading of all indicators in their respective factors was observed. Table 1 shows factor loadings. Table 2 exhibits that the four-factor measurement model has a significantly better fit as compared to the subsequent set of three-factor and one-factor solutions. This establishes adequate discriminant validity and minimizes the threat of common method variance.

It is essential for the measurement model to have adequate reliability and validity. The composite reliability (CR) of a construct should be greater than 0.6 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), to ensure acceptable reliability. For the establishment of convergent validity, average variance extracted (AVE) value of the construct should exceed 0.50 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) or at least meet the minimum criteria of 0.40 (Chen et al., 2018). As shown in table 1, all the constructs satisfy these requirements. Discriminant validity was established as the square root of AVE (diagonal values in Table 3) were higher than their respective correlations with other variables in the study (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Moreover, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha to determine the internal reliability of the measures in this study. All the indices had values higher than the 0.70 threshold provided by (Nunnally, 1978).

*Hypothesis testing.* H1 suggested a positive relationship between supervisor BLM and employee self-regulation impairment. It can be noted in Table 4 (Model 1) that supervisor

| Constructs                        | Standardized loadings | CR (>0.6) | AVE (>0.4) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Supervisor BLM</i>             |                       | 0.767     | 0.453      |
| Item 1                            | 0.68                  |           |            |
| Item 2                            | 0.69                  |           |            |
| Item 3                            | 0.74                  |           |            |
| Item 4                            | 0.58                  |           |            |
| <i>Perceived Employability</i>    |                       | 0.813     | 0.594      |
| Parcel 1                          | 0.69                  |           |            |
| Parcel 2                          | 0.75                  |           |            |
| Parcel 3                          | 0.86                  |           |            |
| <i>Self-Regulation Impairment</i> |                       | 0.794     | 0.565      |
| Parcel 1                          | 0.75                  |           |            |
| Parcel 2                          | 0.80                  |           |            |
| Parcel 3                          | 0.64                  |           |            |
| <i>UPB</i>                        |                       | 0.773     | 0.534      |
| Parcel 1                          | 0.74                  |           |            |
| Parcel 2                          | 0.66                  |           |            |
| Parcel 3                          | 0.84                  |           |            |

**Table 1.**  
Factor loadings from  
CFA

**Notes:** CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

| Model                           | $\chi^2$   | df | $\Delta\chi^2$ | $\chi^2/\text{df}$ | RMSEA | TLI  | CFI  | Perceived employability |
|---------------------------------|------------|----|----------------|--------------------|-------|------|------|-------------------------|
| Four-factor model               | 94.680**   | 59 |                | 1.605              | 0.060 | 0.93 | 0.95 |                         |
| Three-factor model <sup>a</sup> | 221.222*** | 62 | 126.54 ***     | 3.568              | 0.123 | 0.71 | 0.77 |                         |
| Three-factor model <sup>b</sup> | 247.181*** | 62 | 25.959***      | 3.987              | 0.133 | 0.66 | 0.73 |                         |
| Three-factor model <sup>c</sup> | 251.681*** | 62 | 004.500***     | 4.059              | 0.134 | 0.65 | 0.73 |                         |
| Three-factor model <sup>d</sup> | 260.456*** | 62 | 008.775***     | 4.201              | 0.137 | 0.64 | 0.71 |                         |
| One-factor model                | 564.094*** | 65 | 303.638***     | 8.740              | 0.213 | 0.12 | 0.27 |                         |

**Notes:**  $p < 0.005$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. <sup>a</sup>Three-factor model combines self-regulation impairment and UPB. <sup>b</sup>Three-factor model combines supervisor BLM and perceived employability. <sup>c</sup>Three-factor model combines self-regulation impairment and perceived employability. <sup>d</sup>Three-factor model combines supervisor BLM and UPB

**Table 2.**  
Measurement model comparisons

| Variable                    | Mean | SD   | 1      | 2      | 3       | 4       | 5     | 6      | 7 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|--------|--------|---------|---------|-------|--------|---|
| 1. Supervisor BLM           | 3.04 | 0.88 | (0.67) |        |         |         |       |        |   |
| 2. Perceived employability  | 3.50 | 0.57 | 0.26** | (0.77) |         |         |       |        |   |
| 3. SRI                      | 2.46 | 0.64 | 0.18*  | −0.18* | (0.75)  |         |       |        |   |
| 4. UPB                      | 2.42 | 0.80 | 0.04   | −0.02  | 0.25**  | (0.73)  |       |        |   |
| 5. Social desirability bias | 3.35 | 0.54 | −0.09* | 0.23** | −0.36** | −0.23** | −     |        |   |
| 6. Age <sup>a</sup>         | 2.09 | 1.06 | 0.06   | −0.02  | 0.08    | 0.04    | −0.04 | −      |   |
| 7. Gender <sup>b</sup>      | 0.27 | 0.45 | −0.10  | 0.09   | −0.10   | −0.14   | −0.02 | −0.19* | − |

**Notes:**  $N = 171$ . Diagonal shows square root of AVE. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . SRI = self-regulation impairment <sup>a</sup>Age was measured using an eight-point scale (where 1 = “<25 years”, 2 = “25–30 years”, 3 = “31 – 35 years”, 4 = “36–40 years”, 5 = “41–45 years”, 6 = “46–50 years”, 7 = “51–55 years”, 8 = “>56 years”). <sup>b</sup>0 = male, 1 = female

**Table 3.**  
Descriptive statistics, correlations and AVE values

BLM has a significant positive impact on self-regulation impairment ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus,  $H1$  is validated. Next,  $H2$  predicted that employee’s self-regulation impairment positively influences their UPB. Table 4 (Model 2) demonstrates that self-regulation impairment positively predicts UPB ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Hence,  $H2$  is supported. Thereafter, we tested  $H3$ , which stated that employee self-regulation impairment mediates the link between supervisor BLM and employee UPB. Regression results with

| Variables<br><i>Control</i>    | Self-regulation impairment<br><i>Model 1</i> |           |                | UPB<br><i>Model 2</i>          |           |               |
|--------------------------------|--|-----------|----------------|--------------------------------|-----------|---------------|
|                                | <i>B</i>                                     | <i>SE</i> | <i>95% CI</i>  | <i>B</i>                       | <i>SE</i> | <i>95% CI</i> |
| Age                            | 0.01   | 0.04      | [−0.07, 0.10]  | 0.01                           | 0.06      | [−0.10, 0.13] |
| Gender                         | −0.12  | 0.10      | [−0.32, 0.09]  | −0.23                          | 0.14      | [−0.50, 0.04] |
| Social desirability bias       | −0.39**                                      | 0.09      | [−0.56, −0.22] | −0.23                          | 0.12      | [−0.47, 0.01] |
| SBLM                           | 0.11**                                       | 0.05      | [0.01, 0.22]   | −0.03                          | 0.07      | [−0.17, 0.12] |
| Perceived employability        | −0.28**                                      | 0.09      | [−0.46, −0.09] | 0.22                           | 0.12      | [−0.03, 0.47] |
| SBLM × perceived employability | −0.36**                                      | 0.11      | [−0.57, −0.14] | 0.29                           | 0.15      | [0.00, 0.59]  |
| Self-regulation impairment     |  |           |                | 0.29**                         | 0.11      | [0.08, 0.50]  |
| $R^2$                          | 0.23   |           |                | 0.13                           |           |               |
|                                | F (6, 159) = 7.87, $p < 0.001$               |           |                | F (7, 158) = 3.31, $p < 0.001$ |           |               |

**Table 4.**  
Regression results for self-regulation impairment and UPB

bootstrapping (5,000 samples) for the indirect effect of supervisor BLM on employee UPB through self-regulation impairment did not include zero in the 95% bias-corrected CIs. ( $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $95\text{ CI} = -0.22, -0.03$ ). Thus, *H3* is validated.

*H4* states that employee's perceived employability moderates the positive relationship between supervisor BLM and employee self-regulation impairment. Our results (Table 4, Model 1) indicate a significant interaction between supervisor BLM and perceived employability in predicting employee self-regulation ( $\beta = -0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting *H4*. To further investigate the invigorating role of perceived employability on the supervisor BLM and employee self-regulation impairment relationship, the interaction at  $\pm 1$  SD of perceived employability is plotted in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 2, in situations of high supervisor BLM, employee self-regulation impairment is higher under low perceived employability ( $-1$  SD) and lower under high perceived employability ( $+1$  SD).

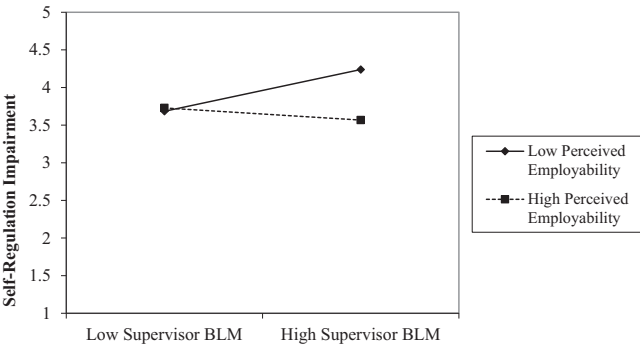
Finally, *H5* proposed that perceived employability moderates the indirect effect of supervisor BLM on employee UPB through employee self-regulation impairment. Using SPSS PROCESS macro, conditional indirect effects at three levels of perceived employability were calculated as shown in Table 5. These effects (supervisor BLM  $\rightarrow$  self-regulation impairment  $\rightarrow$  employee UPB) are significant (no zero value between CIs) when subordinates are low ( $-1$  SD) in perceived employability ( $\beta = 0.093$  (0.038),  $95\%$  CI = 0.029, 0.180), become less significant at mean ( $\beta = 0.033$  (0.021),  $95\%$  CI = 0.002, 0.089) and insignificant at high perceived employability ( $+1$  SD). Hence, *H5* is validated.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. It provides a unique lens in explaining why supervisor BLM may lead to undesirable conduct by employees such as UPB. Previous studies have examined the impact of BLM on UPB via different underlying

**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of perceived employability on the relationship between supervisor bottom-line mentality and self-regulation impairment



**Table 5.**

Conditional indirect effect of SBLM on UPB through Self-regulation impairment

| Levels of perceived employability | Effect | SE    | Boot <i>LLCI</i> | Boot <i>ULCI</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--------|-------|------------------|------------------|
| Conditional indirect effect       |        |       |                  |                  |
| $-1\text{ SD } (-0.57)$           | 0.093  | 0.038 | 0.029            | 0.180            |
| $M (0)$                           | 0.033  | 0.021 | 0.002            | 0.089            |
| $+1\text{ SD } (0.57)$            | -0.027 | 0.031 | -0.109           | 0.020            |

mechanisms such as moral disengagement (Farasat and Azam, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020) and job insecurity (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Our research has responded to the call for exploration of other possible mediating variables in this relationship to gain deeper insights about the nature of this phenomenon (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, we have highlighted the role of employee self-regulation impairment as an important mediator. Because of ever-increasing performance requirements in such bottom-line driven environments, employees' self-resources may be depleted as they perceive their current achievement level to be inadequate (Sitkin *et al.*, 2011). According to the theory of self-regulation (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), in such a stressful state, these individuals are likely to experience diminished self-regulation and hence, engage in immoral conduct (i.e. UPB) to secure short-term financial wins, without considering the deeper implications of their actions. Hence, this is the first study to incorporate theory of self-regulation into the burgeoning BLM literature.

Moreover, our study advances the existing body of research on perceived employability. We have demonstrated that manager's BLM triggers self-regulation impairment among their followers because of which they develop a tendency to get involved in UPB. However, our research suggests that perceived employability serves to attenuate this positive effect of BLM on self-regulation depletion. This implies that employees who are confident about getting an employment opportunity elsewhere are less likely to experience self-regulation impairment. Pressure from high-BLM supervisors creates a fear of being terminated among their subordinates (Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019). In such a scenario, perceived employability is considered to be a powerful self-resource (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2012), particularly in today's labor market with high unemployment rates. This resource helps in maintaining the self-control of individuals working under leaders with a bottom-line approach. Thus, perceived employability presents a novel approach in understanding the dysfunctional outcomes of BLM especially those associated with stress and self-control mechanisms.

Lastly, we contribute to the UPB literature by identifying self-regulation impairment as a critical precursor to such behavior. Previous studies have mostly studied UPB under the lens of social exchange and social identity theories (Veetikazhi *et al.*, 2021). The perspective of self-regulation depletion in inducing such conduct opens up an entirely different line of inquiry as far as research on UPB is concerned. While previous work implies that UPB is a rational, intentional act, our study signifies it to be more of an inadvertent, spontaneous response. As employees are unable to control their impulsive reactions in stressful work environments (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), they 'try to deal' with the situation by engaging in immoral acts (Thau and Mitchell, 2010), intended to benefit the organization.

### *Practical implications*

Our study has significant practical implications. As managers' BLM is likely to result in UPB among their subordinates organizations should maximize their efforts in limiting this supervisory approach. Top management should emphasize on a multidimensional (i.e. ethical, legal, social, environmental) view of work practices and performance requirements as opposed to a one-dimensional vision related to profitability (Eissa *et al.*, 2019). Selection and promotion of supervisors should be based on their emphasis on ethics, morality and welfare of others along with work performance. Moreover, managers pursuing bottom-line targets without ethical considerations should be penalized for such an approach. These measures in reducing supervisor BLM could be valuable in curbing UPB among their subordinates. In situations where bottom-line goals are absolutely necessary, managers should closely observe the means used by subordinates to achieve such goals (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, to minimize immoral conduct in the organization, managers should develop a culture promoting ethical behavior. This can be achieved by establishing a strict code of

ethics and organizing ethical training for all employees. There should be a zero tolerance policy for unethical pro-organizational acts and harsh disciplinary actions must be taken against employees who are involved in such activities (Umphress and Bingham, 2011).

As self-regulation impairment has been identified as a potential cause of UPB, managers should consider how to improve their subordinates' self-regulatory strength. Self-regulation has been likened to a muscle, wherein the more it is exercised, the stronger it becomes (Thau and Mitchell, 2010). Along this vein, providing employees counseling and mentoring to instill self-discipline among them may prove to be helpful. This could involve employees taking more control over their emotions by being more aware of their feelings and mindful of the situation while making a rational decision on how to respond rather than acting impulsively. They should be taught meditation and deep-breathing techniques to help regulate their emotions and behaviors. Additionally, organizational managers should make conscious attempts to minimize stressful work situations for employees so as to avoid depletion of their self-resources and energy (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996).

Finally, this study recognized the moderating role of perceived employability in the relationship between BLM and self-regulation impairment. Therefore, it has implications regarding employees' career coaching and development. At the individual level, employees should become self-motivated and participate in training programs to enhance their soft and technical skills, which would ultimately improve their labor market position (Van Hooitegem *et al.*, 2019). It would also be beneficial if they keep upgrading their qualifications by continuing education (Berntson *et al.*, 2006) and joining leadership development programs. To increase their employability, they should also consider membership of professional networking groups to grow connections with people in the industry. Organizational managers should acknowledge the need to enhance the perceived employability of their subordinates as it would enable them to make more informed decisions in an ethical dilemma, knowing that they can switch their jobs easily with no fear of being unemployed. This necessitates the formulation of strategic career development programs (Gutteridge *et al.*, 1993), which would involve developing a culture of learning through corporate universities and assessment centers, cross-trainings, stretch assignments, job enrichment and rotations.

### Limitations and future research directions

Our study has a few limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, our research design was cross-sectional because of which we could not establish causality between the variables investigated. Future studies could fill this gap by conducting longitudinal and experimental analysis. Second, we used self-report measures to collect data related to UPB. This could be a source of common method bias as respondents may have under-reported their immoral conduct because of social desirability. Even though, we used social desirability bias as a control variable and ensured anonymity and confidentiality to the respondents (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012), the possible threat could not be eliminated altogether. Multi-source designs with more objective measures of UPB could help in addressing these concerns in further studies.

Additionally, we observed the moderating role of perceived employability in Pakistan where overall unemployment rates are high and the economy is struggling. Investigating this effect in developed economies with much lower unemployment rates could provide different findings and implications regarding how BLM impacts self-regulation impairment and UPB. Moreover, the effect of industry type on unethical behavior could be evaluated as some industries may provoke more UPB, cheating and fraud than others.



Finally, we have examined the influence of self-regulation depletion on UPB which is an organizational level construct. Future research could advance this line of inquiry by evaluating the impact of self-regulation impairment and work-related stress because of BLM, on individual personal level variables like employee health, overall well-being and work-life balance.

## Conclusion

Our research extends the current literature on BLM and UPB by highlighting the critical role of underlying cognitive and psychological mechanisms. The results suggest that supervisor BLM undermines the self-regulatory strength of employees by depleting their self-resources and energy. This impaired self-regulation capability negatively affects these individuals' moral reasoning and promotes impulsive behavior because of which they engage in UPB to secure short-term financial wins. Furthermore, we demonstrate that perceived employability acts as a buffer in the relationship between supervisor BLM and self-regulation impairment. Employees who are more confident about getting other employment opportunities are less prone to self-regulation depletion despite working in stressful, bottom-line focused work situations.

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications. They explain why as a result of supervisor's bottom-line approach, certain employees perform immoral acts to benefit the organization. It is because they have lower self-control to resist their temptations to indulge in unethical behavior. Moreover, when these employees have a fear of not being employed elsewhere, their self-control diminishes and they further engage in such undesirable conduct. Therefore organizational leaders should pay attention to the dysfunctional outcomes of bottom-line targets and be concerned for the ethical, social and legal implications of their decisions. A more balanced supervisory approach should be adopted, so that employees' self-regulatory resources are not depleted in constant pursuit of difficult, bottom-line goals. At the same time, employees should work on increasing their self-regulatory strength by controlling their temptations and resisting impulsive behavior. They should also make efforts to improve their employability by focusing on career development through continuing education and training

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