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Cheating from dominating: An investigation of how leaders' dominant behavior elicits employee cheating

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Abstract

While prior research suggests that leaders' dominant behavior effectively enhances organizational effectiveness and is necessary for navigating today's uncertain and competitive business environments, its hidden costs—rooted in control, intimidation,

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and coercion—have received limited attention. In this study, we argue that leaders' dominant behavior can serve as a workplace stressor that leads to employees' defensive yet covert responses. Drawing on the transactional model of stress, we develop a serial mediation model in which leaders' dominant behavior undermines employees' psychological well-being (i.e., psychological empowerment), subsequently heightens negative emotions (i.e., workplace anxiety), and ultimately provokes employees' cheating as a discreet coping strategy for releasing workplace anxiety. Furthermore, we predict that when coworker support is available, employees are less likely to adopt cheating as a defensive coping strategy. Results from three field survey studies—including two three-wave studies and one two-source, four-wave study—provide consistent support for our model. The conclusions drawn from this study provide valuable insights for both organizational leaders and HR professionals seeking to recognize and manage the hidden costs associated with leaders' dominant behavior.

Keywords
leaders' dominant behavior, psychological empowerment, workplace anxiety, workplace cheating, the transactional model of stress

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving business environments, organizations face growing threats from heightened competition and uncertainty, including intensified global rivalry fueled by artificial intelligence and economic volatility (Zhu et al., 2025). Within such contexts, leaders' dominant behavior—characterized by force, threats, and coercion (Cheng et al., 2013)—is frequently perceived as a demonstration of strength that enables organizations to navigate these challenges more efficiently. By leveraging dominant behavior, leaders can extract compliance and assert authority over divergent parties, thereby protecting organizational interests and enhancing prospects for success (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017). Indeed, prior research suggests that leaders' dominant behavior can bolster organizational effectiveness in the face of threats such as intergroup competition (van Kleef et al., 2021) and economic uncertainty (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017).

However, despite its benefits, leaders' dominant behavior also has potential downsides. Two recent studies grounded in social learning have highlighted the negative outcomes of such behavior. Specifically, Kakkar and Sivanathan (2022) noted that employees who frequently observe leaders' dominant behavior may develop a zero-sum mindset, which in turn undermines their interpersonal helping at work. Similarly, Brady and Sivanathan (2024) found that leaders' dominant behavior may signal that norm violations are acceptable, thereby encouraging employees' misconduct, such as shifting blame onto innocent coworkers. Although these studies offer valuable insights, they may fall short in capturing the unique adverse outcomes stemming from the stressful nature of leaders' dominant behavior. Leaders who exhibit dominant behavior tend to exert assertive control, intimidation, and coercion (Lee et al., 2021). Prior research has identified such demanding and controlling leadership behaviors as salient stressors (Harms et al.,

2017), which can drive employees to engage in self-serving, harmful behaviors as a means of defense (Kouchaki and Desai, 2015), imposing significant organizational costs (Mitchell et al., 2018). Thus, overlooking these harmful defensive responses may result in an incomplete understanding of leaders' dominant behavior as a stressor.

To address this gap, we draw on the transactional model of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) to examine employee cheating as a distinct defensive response associated with the stress-inducing aspects of leaders' dominant behavior. Given its demanding and controlling nature, leaders' dominant behavior can constitute a stressor for employees (Harms et al., 2017). The transactional model of stress posits that when individuals encounter stressors, they typically respond through two strategies: problem- and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping involves efforts to directly change or eliminate stressors, whereas emotion-focused coping functions as a defensive mechanism when individuals want to shield themselves from a stressful situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Welbourne and Sariol, 2017). When problem-focused coping is unfeasible, such as in situations where power asymmetries limit employees' ability to alter their leaders' dominant behavior (Xu et al., 2015), emotion-focused coping strategies tend to predominate (Lazarus, 1991). Among them, cheating, defined as self-serving acts that create unfair advantages and benefits for the actor (Mitchell et al., 2018), represents a discreet and relatively low-cost option. Unlike more overt forms of defensive coping (e.g., aggression or withdrawal), cheating can be executed with minimal visibility, allowing employees to maintain a facade of compliance while covertly protecting their self-interest (Kundro et al., 2023). Hence, we focus on cheating as a distinct form of emotion-focused coping through which employees respond to the stress induced by leaders' dominant behavior.

Based on the two-stage appraisal process outlined by the transactional model of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), we further delineate the underlying mechanisms linking leaders' dominant behavior to employee cheating. In the primary appraisal, individuals experience negative emotions when a stressor is perceived as threatening to their well-being. In the secondary appraisal, individuals adopt coping strategies to minimize the emotional impact of the stressor. Following this logic, we argue that leaders' dominant behavior serves as a stressor that threatens employees' psychological well-being (i.e., psychological empowerment) and further triggers their negative emotions (i.e., workplace anxiety) during the primary appraisal. In turn, employees may engage in cheating as an emotion-focused coping response in the secondary appraisal. Moreover, drawing on the theoretical argument that the availability of interpersonal resources can influence coping responses (Lazarus, 1991), we identify coworker support as a key boundary condition. When faced with leaders' dominant behavior and reduced personal well-being, employees may rely on coworker support as available resources to manage their anxiety (Lu et al., 2023). Accordingly, we propose that high coworker support buffers the effect of workplace anxiety—triggered by leaders' dominant behavior—on employee cheating. In summary, grounded in the transactional model of stress, we propose a moderated mediation model (see Figure 1) in which leaders' dominant behavior undermines employees' psychological empowerment and, in turn, triggers workplace anxiety, ultimately leading to cheating as a defensive response. Coworker support may mitigate this sequential effect.

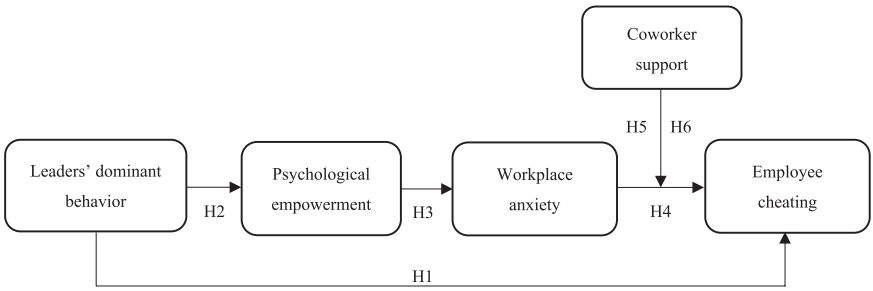

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Our study makes several theoretical contributions. First, we identify cheating—a harmful yet covert employee behavior—as an important outcome of leaders' dominant behavior. In doing so, we extend the literature on the adverse outcomes of leaders' dominant behavior (Brady and Sivanathan, 2024; Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2022) and highlight the risks inherent in such behavior, thereby informing strategies to mitigate them effectively. Second, drawing on the transactional model of stress, we construct a serial mediation model that explains how leaders' dominant behavior provokes employee cheating, offering new insights into the underlying mechanisms of this relationship. While prior studies have primarily framed leaders' dominant behavior as a social cue that models negative behavior, our study shifts the scholarly focus to its role as a stressor (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and reveals its potential to elicit emotional and behavioral reactions from employees. Third, by introducing the moderating role of coworker support, we demonstrate that coworker support can buffer the workplace anxiety-cheating relationship when employees face leaders' dominant behavior.

Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

Leaders' dominant behavior

The dominance-prestige model identifies two distinct strategies for gaining influence and authority: prestige and dominance (Cheng et al., 2010). Whereas prestige entails earning respect by sharing valued knowledge and expertise, dominance involves asserting control through intimidation, coercion, and manipulation (Cheng et al., 2013). Leaders who engage in dominant behavior tend to exhibit assertiveness, forcefulness, and control in interpersonal interactions (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2022). Such behavior generally leads leaders to be perceived as strong and agentic, as they often command attention, centralize decision-making, and prioritize their own self-interest above the interests of others (van Kleef et al., 2021). Consequently, dominant behavior is frequently regarded as a necessary and strategic move for modern managers to assert authority and influence, thus navigating high-stakes and volatile conditions effectively (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017). In particular, as a manifestation of influence strategy, dominant behavior is often automatically triggered in response to specific situations. As Cheng et al. (2013) noted, the choice between dominance- and prestige-oriented behavioral

strategies typically arises from automatic affective processes, not conscious deliberation. Supporting this view, their empirical findings suggest that individuals experiencing hubristic pride are especially prone to unconsciously display dominant behaviors.

Building on the above characterization, it is essential to clarify that leaders' dominant behavior does not constitute a formal leadership style—one that is consciously and deliberately enacted by a leader in a consistent and stable manner (Cheng et al., 2010). Moreover, it is conceptually distinct from the well-established constructs of authoritarian leadership and abusive supervision. While all three constructs emphasize control and authority, they differ significantly in their behavioral expressions. Specifically, *authoritarian leadership* involves leaders' use of their authority to demand absolute obedience from followers (Cheng et al., 2014). It is rooted in a role obligation mindset: leaders believe they are responsible for employing their authority to guide and protect followers, and in return, expect followers to comply with the strong control and strict discipline (Wang et al., 2023). Thus, although both authoritarian leadership and leaders' dominant behavior entail forceful control over employees, authoritarian leadership is characterized by explicit, non-exploitative disciplinary actions (e.g., enforcing rules) and emphasizes compliance through formal authority (Hiller et al., 2019; Takeuchi et al., 2020). In contrast, leaders' dominant behavior centers on interpersonal assertiveness and control-seeking actions (e.g., overriding others' preferences, using aggressive tactics, and seeking authority for its own sake) through social dominance (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2022). *Abusive supervision*, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which leaders intentionally engage in sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact, to mistreat and exploit employees (Tepper et al., 2017). While both abusive supervision and leaders' dominant behavior entail the exertion of power over employees, abusive supervision is characterized by overtly hostile and aggressive behaviors, such as ridiculing subordinates, excluding them, and subjecting them to silent treatment. In contrast, dominant behavior reflects assertive, control-driven behaviors, including interrupting others and dominating interactions, which are intrusive but not explicitly hostile (Cheng et al., 2013).

Leaders' dominant behavior as a stressor: A transactional model of stress perspective

The transactional model of stress posits that stress arises when external demands deplete an individual's personal resources (Lazarus, 1991). Accordingly, we contend that leaders' dominant behavior functions as a significant workplace stressor for employees, as its demanding and coercive nature places substantial strain on employees' personal resources, such as energy, motivation, and positive work-related perceptions (Harms et al., 2017). Specifically, leaders who exhibit dominant behavior tend to prioritize their own interests over those of employees (McClanahan et al., 2022). This display creates a deleterious work environment that gradually depletes employees' energy and motivation (Decoster et al., 2021). In addition, leaders' dominant behavior is also featured by centralized decision-making and exerting coercion over employees (Lee et al., 2021), which may diminish employees' positive perceptions and expectations at work (McClanahan

et al., 2022). Taken together, these features illustrate how leaders' dominant behavior can act as a workplace stressor for employees.

Furthermore, the transactional model of stress states that individuals typically adopt coping strategies in response to stressors, which are broadly categorized as problem- and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping refers to efforts aimed at directly addressing the stressor, such as eradicating its source and taking direct actions against the stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping involves attempts to minimize the negative emotional impact of stressors (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping allows individuals to regulate their internal emotional state through psychological distancing rather than directly confronting the stressor (Restubog et al., 2011). In particular, when individuals perceive a stressor as uncontrollable and problem-focused coping as infeasible, they are more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping, which often manifests as defensive responses (Lazarus, 1991; Welbourne and Sariol, 2017). In the case of leaders' dominant behavior, the inherent power imbalance renders such behavior a chronic stressor that is difficult for employees to directly address or alter. Consequently, employees are more likely to adopt emotion- rather than problem-focused coping in response to such a stressor. Building on this reasoning, we postulate that leaders' dominant behavior acts as a stressor that may elicit employees' emotion-focused coping responses, which manifest as cheating.

Employee cheating as a defensive response to leaders' dominant behavior

Workplace cheating involves attempting to gain benefits and advantages for oneself by artificially inflating one's work-related performance (Mitchell et al., 2018). Previous literature has identified various defensive responses, such as passive withdrawal (Chiang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2015) and direct aggression (Mackey et al., 2020), that employees may adopt to cope with leader-induced stressors. Yet, these responses may incur significant costs for employees' benefits and careers. For instance, when employees exhibit withdrawal, leaders may interpret it as an approval of their stressful behaviors and reinforce it, potentially initiating a negative escalation spiral (Decoster et al., 2021). Direct aggression may lead to employees losing desirable opportunities, such as continued employment and career advancement (Xu et al., 2015). Hence, we contend that, compared to passive withdrawal and direct aggression, employees are apt to engage in self-serving cheating to defend themselves against the pressure of leaders' dominant behavior. To be specific, workplace cheating can expediently protect individuals' self-interest without attracting immediate scrutiny (Kundro et al., 2023). Hence, covert cheating enables individuals to shield themselves from potential harm while enhancing their benefits (Kundro et al., 2023; Spoelma, 2022). In this respect, when faced with leaders' dominant behavior, employees may regard cheating as an effective, defensive coping response. Recent empirical evidence has suggested that stressful situations elicit employee cheating as a defensive response (Kundro et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2018; Spoelma, 2022). We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Leaders' dominant behavior is positively related to employee cheating.

The serial mediating roles of psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety

Leaders' dominant behavior and employee psychological empowerment. We posit that leaders' dominant behavior may thwart employees' psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment reflects employees' perceptions of control, certainty, and meaning at work, which is manifested through four cognitions: meaning, self-determination, competence, and impact (Seibert et al., 2011). Meaning is employees' sense that their work is significant; self-determination is employees' sense that they have the autonomy to decide how to initiate their work; competence involves employees' self-efficacy that they have sufficient ability to successfully perform their work; impact represents employees' belief that they can influence strategic, administrative, or operational activities and outcomes at work (Spreitzer, 1995).

According to the transactional model of stress, individuals first engage in a primary appraisal to evaluate whether the environmental stimuli pose implications for their well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In this regard, when faced with leaders' dominant behavior, employees may perceive their psychological empowerment as undermined. First, leaders who adopt dominant behavior tend to prioritize their goals and interests over those of employees (McClanahan et al., 2022). In this case, employees may perceive that their work is not valued by leaders (Sun et al., 2022), thus experiencing a decreased sense of meaning. Second, leaders who exert dominant behavior prefer to control others by forcefully imposing their viewpoints and demanding that followers acknowledge their authority (Lee et al., 2021). This practice may lead employees to experience a diminished sense of self-determination. Third, leaders who adopt dominant behavior tend to exhibit intimidating and personal attacks at work (Cheng et al., 2013). Under such circumstances, employees may doubt their abilities to complete work tasks, undermining their sense of competence. Sun et al. (2022) found that the unfavorable behaviors raised by supervisors hinder employees' competence perceptions at work, supporting this argument. Finally, leaders' dominant behavior is also manifested in taking control of decision-making power and avoiding sharing it with employees (Lee et al., 2021). Consequently, employees may perceive that they have less impact on significant work decisions. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 2: Leaders' dominant behavior is negatively related to employee psychological empowerment.

Psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety. Workplace anxiety refers to nervousness, uneasiness, and tension about accomplishing work tasks (Cheng and McCarthy, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2016). It is a negative emotion closely related to low control and uncertainty (Cheng and McCarthy, 2018). The transactional model of stress also states that, in the primary appraisal, individuals may experience anxiety when they evaluate

external stressors as undermining their well-being in terms of personal certainty and control (Lazarus, 1991). In this sense, undermined psychological empowerment may be particularly relevant to employees' workplace anxiety, as it reflects a broad sense of control, certainty, and meaning that enables employees to perform work tasks and achieve high performance effectively (Seibert et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2022). Thus, we posit that diminished psychological empowerment derived from leaders' dominant behavior may elicit employees' workplace anxiety.

Psychological empowerment facilitates a sense of personal control for employees by fulfilling the fundamental intrinsic human needs for autonomy and purpose (Seibert et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2022). When such perceptions are depleted by leaders' dominant behavior, employees' beliefs regarding their self-determination, control, and impact in arranging and executing their work tasks are undermined (Kim et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022). As a result, they may experience more anxiety about the effectiveness of task accomplishment. Indeed, the prior studies (Kim et al., 2023; Seibert et al., 2011) have shown that psychological empowerment offsets anxiety and enables employees to enhance task performance effectively. Moreover, psychological empowerment engenders an active motivational state among employees by fostering their sense of competence and meaningfulness at work (Sun et al., 2022). In this respect, when psychological empowerment is diminished by leaders' dominant behavior, employees' positive self-evaluations of their work and work-related abilities can be undermined (Kim et al., 2023). Consequently, employees may experience elevated workplace anxiety about their effectiveness in completing tasks (Cheng and McCarthy, 2018). Hence, we put forth:

Hypothesis 3: Leaders' dominant behavior has a positive indirect effect on employee workplace anxiety through psychological empowerment.

Workplace anxiety and cheating. Finally, according to the transactional model of stress, in the secondary appraisal, individuals experiencing anxiety are more likely to use emotion-focused coping as a defensive response to release this negative emotion (Lazarus, 1991). Thus, we assume that when employees face leaders' dominant behavior, the workplace anxiety arising from the undermined psychological empowerment may drive them to enact cheating. To be specific, when workplace anxiety is evoked by low psychological empowerment, the resulting nervousness and feelings of uneasiness may heighten employees' apprehensions about task completion and the potential consequences, such as losing social status or termination (Cheng and McCarthy, 2018). Meanwhile, the tension stemming from workplace anxiety may lead to information processing biases (McCarthy et al., 2016). Employees may selectively notice and recall threat-related information, persistently interpreting their situation as unfavorable (Kouchaki and Desai, 2015).

The above distress associated with workplace anxiety may lead employees to prioritize the advancement of work performance while ignoring the moral implications of their actions (Kouchaki and Desai, 2015). Mitchell et al. (2018) suggested that an enhanced motivation to protect self-interest drives individuals to cheat, regardless of the unfavorable consequences of their behavior to others. Recent studies also indicate that experiencing intensive workplace anxiety prompts employees to prioritize short-term relief over long-term consequences, leading to self-serving cheating (Hillebrandt and

Barclay, 2022). Accordingly, we propose that workplace anxiety triggered by low psychological empowerment may motivate employees to engage in cheating as a means to maximize performance and alleviate this negative emotion.

Furthermore, we have previously stated that employees experience workplace anxiety following leaders' dominant behavior because their psychological empowerment is drained by such leadership behavior. By integrating this argument with the above theoretical reasoning, we posit that leaders' dominant behavior may elicit employees' cheating by first thwarting their psychological empowerment and subsequently triggering workplace anxiety.

Hypothesis 4: Leaders' dominant behavior has a positive serial indirect effect on employee cheating through psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety.

The moderating role of coworker support

Additionally, the transactional model of stress posits that individuals' coping responses to stressors are influenced by available interpersonal resources, such that adequate resources enable them to rely less on emotion-focused coping (Lazarus, 1991). Hence, we posit that when employees perceive psychological empowerment being depleted by leaders' dominant behavior, coworker support may mitigate the downstream impact of workplace anxiety on their cheating.

To be specific, coworker support manifests as emotionally expressing sympathy, affirmatively recognizing and supporting one's opinions (Tews et al., 2013). Higher coworker support indicates that employees can obtain care, support, and encouragement from coworkers when they share negative feelings about work (McCarthy et al., 2016). Coworker support also includes sharing work-related expertise, experience, and advice (Tews et al., 2013). As such, with high coworker support, the socioemotional and/or material resources provided by coworkers could motivate employees to build a positive self-evaluation and, thus, seek constructive strategies for improving their situations (McCarthy et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2023). In this case, employees experiencing workplace anxiety induced by leaders' dominant behavior are less likely to resort to cheating as a coping strategy (McCarthy et al., 2016; Tews et al., 2013). In contrast, employees with low coworker support are deprived of constructive assistance from coworkers when navigating task-related information. In this case, employees may lack the additional resources needed to effectively process their anxiety caused by leaders' dominant behavior or to generate constructive alternatives for managing the situation (Lu et al., 2023; Tews et al., 2013). As a result, the experience of workplace anxiety is more likely to drive employees to engage in cheating as an emotion-focused coping strategy, thus alleviating negative emotions and achieving relief from the stressful situation (Hillebrandt and Barclay, 2022; Hillebrandt et al., 2021). Therefore, we predict that coworker support moderates the effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating.

Hypothesis 5: Coworker support will moderate the relationship between workplace anxiety and employee cheating, such that this positive relationship will be weaker at higher levels of coworker support.

We further anticipate that coworker support could moderate the serial positive indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating via psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety. We have theorized that leaders' dominant behavior diminishes psychological empowerment and subsequently triggers workplace anxiety, which, in turn, provokes employee cheating. Moreover, we have argued that coworker support moderates the effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating. These theoretical rationales indicate an integrative moderated mediation model.

Specifically, employees in a higher coworker support context can utilize the supportive resources from coworkers to broaden the available resource pools, which potentially influences the serial indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on their cheating via psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety. With high coworker support, employees' psychological empowerment will be less likely to be affected by leaders' dominant behavior, and they will be less likely to exhibit anxiety and engage in cheating. Conversely, when encountering leaders' dominant behavior, employees in a lower coworker support context experience a greater psychological empowerment depletion and workplace anxiety. Consequently, they are more likely to engage in cheating to relieve anxiety. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 6: Coworker support will moderate the sequential mediation between leaders' dominant behavior, employee psychological empowerment, workplace anxiety, and cheating, such that the mediation will be weaker at high levels of coworker support.

Overview of studies

We tested the above hypotheses across three studies. In Study 1, we collected three-wave data to test all the hypotheses. To enhance the validity of our findings, Study 2 also used three-wave data to rigorously reassess all hypotheses while incorporating alternative mediation mechanisms. Finally, Study 3 employed a four-wave, coworker-employee dyadic design to test all hypotheses and to address common method bias associated with the serial mediators and self-reported cheating in Studies 1 and 2. Additionally, Study 3 also examined alternative mediation mechanisms to further ensure the reliability of our findings.

Study 1 methods

Participants and procedure

We recruited the participants from two companies in the manufacturing and construction industries in northwest China.[1] Following Hillebrandt and Barclay (2020), we collected three waves of data separated by 1 week and included one attention check. At time 1 (T1), 358 participants assessed leaders' dominant behavior and control variables. After we removed the participants who failed to provide consistent completions and pass attention checks, there were 305 responses (i.e., a response rate of 85.20%). At T2, there were 246 responses regarding psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety (i.e., a response rate of 80.66%). At T3, there were 201 responses regarding coworker support and employee cheating (i.e., a response rate of 81.71%). Participants who finished all

three waves of the survey and had their responses included received 10 RMB as payment. The final sample (N=201) was 57% female, with an average age of 31.26 years (SD=3.79) and an average organizational tenure of 5.61 years (SD=2.20); 78% held a bachelor's degree.

Measures

We followed the translation-back-translation procedure to translate all English measures into Mandarin Chinese. Unless otherwise specified, the measures used a 7-point scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*). All survey items are included in Appendix A of the online supplement.

Leaders' dominant behavior (T1). Leaders' dominant behavior was measured with eight items developed by Cheng et al. (2010). A sample item is "He/she often tries to get his/her own way regardless of what others may want."

Psychological empowerment (T2). Psychological empowerment was assessed using 12 items developed by Spreitzer (1995). A sample item is "I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work."

Workplace anxiety (T2). Workplace anxiety was measured by eight items used by McCarthy et al. (2016). A sample item is "I worry that I will not be able to successfully manage the demands of my job" (1=*not at all* to 7=*very much*).

Coworker support (T3). Coworker support was measured by eleven items used by Tews et al. (2013). A sample item of emotional support is "My coworkers listen to me when I have to get something off my chest (1=*never* to 7=*always*)."

Employee cheating[2] *(T3).* Employee cheating was assessed with seven items developed by Mitchell et al. (2018). A sample item is "Misrepresented work activity to make it look as though you have been productive" (1=*never* to 7=*always*).

Control variables (T1). We controlled several demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, education, and organizational tenure) and moral identity because they have been included in previous research on cheating (Hillebrandt and Barclay, 2022). Moral identity was assessed with five items used by Mitchell et al. (2018). Additionally, as prestige is a separate facet of the dominance-prestige model, we controlled for leaders' prestige behavior to ensure that the effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating was not confounded. Leader prestige behavior was assessed with nine items developed by Cheng et al. (2010).

Analytical approach

Before hypothesis testing, we applied AMOS 23.0 to conduct the confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to examine the validity of our measures. Next, we adopted PROCESS

Macro 3.3 in SPSS 23.0 to test our hypotheses. The variables (i.e., workplace anxiety and coworker support) involved in the moderation were mean-centered. Indirect effects were assessed via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals, and effects were considered significant if zero was not included in the interval.

Study 1 results

Preliminary analysis

The CFA results indicate that the seven-measurement model with all the measured variables, including controls, fit the data better than all the alternative models[3] ($\chi^2/df = 1.59$, RMSEA = 0.05, IFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, CFI = 0.91). Thus, the participants in our study could distinguish the focal measures clearly. Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1.

Hypothesis testing

First, we used PROCESS Model 4 and Model 6 to test the direct and indirect effects. As shown in Table 4, leaders' dominant behavior positively affects employee cheating ($B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively affects psychological empowerment ($B = -0.34$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. The indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on workplace anxiety through psychological empowerment was significant (*estimate* = 0.10, 95% CI = [0.023, 0.187]), supporting Hypothesis 3. The serial indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating via psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety was significant (*estimate* = 0.02, 95% CI = [0.003, 0.059]), supporting Hypothesis 4.[4]

Second, we adopted PROCESS Model 1 to test the moderation effects. Table 4 revealed a significant interaction effect of workplace anxiety and coworker support on employee cheating ($B = -0.21$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$). As presented in Figure 2, simple slope tests suggested that when coworker support was low (−*SD*), the effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating was significant (*simple slope* = 0.38, $t = 6.63$, $p < 0.001$), and not significant (*simple slope* = −0.02, $t = -0.19$, $p = 0.847$) when coworker support was high (+*SD*). Hence, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Finally, we used PROCESS Model 87 to test the moderated serial mediation effect. The results suggested that the conditional effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating via psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety was significant (*effect* = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.004, 0.081]) when coworker support was low (−*SD*), and not significant (*effect* = −0.004, 95% CI = −0.034, 0.014]) when coworker support was high (+*SD*). The index of moderated mediation was significant (*index* = −0.02, 95% CI = −0.056,−0.001]), supporting Hypothesis 6.

Study 1 discussion

Although Study 1 supported all the hypotheses, it failed to consider the alternative mediations between leaders' dominant behavior and employee cheating. Brady and Sivanathan

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables (Study 1).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender											
2. Age	−0.01										
3. Education	−0.16**	0.10									
4. Organizational tenure	0.11	0.47***	−0.05								
5. Moral identity	0.12*	0.11	0.00	0.07	**0.85**						
6. Leaders' prestige behavior	−0.09	0.17**	0.23***	−0.01	0.06	**0.92**					
7. Leaders' dominant behavior	0.02	−0.17**	0.12	−0.17**	−0.03	−0.16**	**0.96**				
8. Psychological empowerment	−0.02	0.06	0.03	−0.04	−0.01	0.16**	−0.47***	**0.95**			
9. Workplace anxiety	−0.03	−0.11	−0.11	−0.08	0.13*	−0.27***	0.42***	−0.43***	**0.96**		
10. Coworker support	−0.03	0.33***	0.16**	0.23***	0.46***	0.24***	−0.39***	0.26***	−0.25***	**0.95**	
11. Employee cheating	0.05	−0.23***	−0.07	−0.16**	−0.03	−0.22***	0.46***	−0.30***	0.46***	−0.45***	**0.90**
Mean	1.43	31.26	3.18	5.61	5.48	5.06	2.88	5.59	2.49	5.70	2.16
SD	0.50	3.79	0.48	2.20	1.00	0.98	1.65	1.14	1.21	0.93	0.97

N = 201. Alpha coefficients are presented in bold on the diagonal. Organizational tenure was reported in years. Gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male. Education was coded as 1 = high school or lower, 2 = junior college degree, 3 = bachelor degree, and 4 = master degree or higher.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, and ***$p < 0.001$. Two-tailed tests.

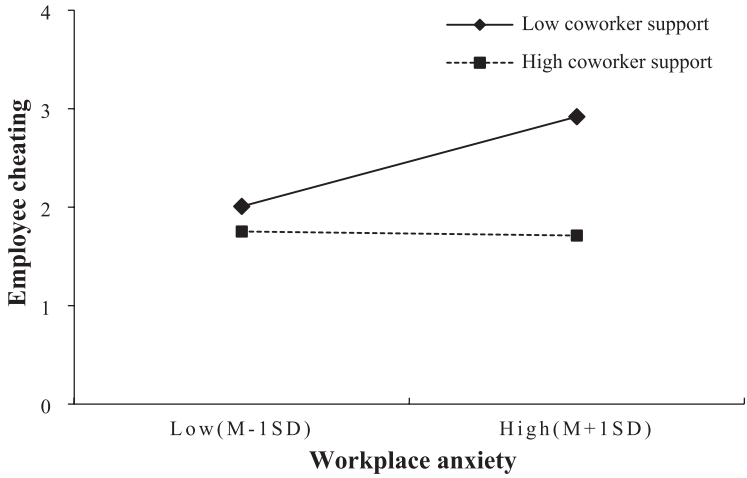

Figure 2. Interaction of workplace anxiety and coworker support onto employee cheating (Study 1).

(2024) found that leaders' dominant behavior elicits employees' unethical conduct by stimulating the perceived acceptability of norm-violating. Meanwhile, performance pressure is a critical driver of employee cheating (Spoelma, 2022). Thus, to enhance the validity of our findings, we conducted Study 2 to control for these two alternative mediation mechanisms.

Study 2 methods

Participants and procedure

We collected three-wave data from two companies in the finance and energy industries in Southern China.[1] As in Study 1, at T1, 460 employees reported leaders' dominant behavior and control variables. There were 398 valid completions with a response rate of 86.52%. At T2, 1 week later, there were 344 valid responses regarding psychological empowerment, workplace anxiety, performance pressure, and the perceived acceptability of norm violations (i.e., a response rate of 86.43%). At T3, there were 299 valid responses concerning coworker support and employee cheating (i.e., a response rate of 86.92%). Employees who completed all three-wave surveys received 12 RMB as payment. Among 299 employees, 52.20% were female with an average age of 30.18 years ($SD = 4.76$), organizational tenure of 5.53 years ($SD = 2.11$), and tenure with a leader of 3.10 years ($SD = 1.58$), respectively. 74.90% had bachelor's degrees.

Measures

All variables were measured using the same instruments as in Study 1, with all survey items provided in Appendix A of the online supplement.

Alternative mediation variables. *Perceived acceptability of norm violations (T2)* was measured with five items adopted by Brady and Sivanathan (2024); *Performance pressure (T2)* was measured with four items from Mitchell et al. (2018).

Control variables (T1). Besides controls in Study 1, we also controlled for employees' work tenure with their leaders, as it may influence their perceptions of leaders' stressful behaviors and, consequently, psychological empowerment (Sun et al., 2022).

Analytical approach

We applied AMOS 23.0 to conduct the CFA to examine the validity of the measures in Study 2. Next, MPLUS 8.0 was employed to test our hypotheses. We mean-centered the variables concerning the moderation effects. For indirect effects, a bootstrapping technique with 5,000 samples was adopted to estimate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals.

Study 2 results

Preliminary analysis

CFA results revealed that the nine-measurement model (i.e., all measured variables and controls) provided a better data fit than the alternative models[3] ($\chi^2/df = 1.35$, RMSEA = 0.03, IFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.92, CFI = 0.92), which indicated the distinctiveness of variables in our measurement model. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

Hypothesis testing

First, we tested the direct and indirect effects. As shown in Table 4, leaders' dominant behavior positively affects employee cheating ($B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively affects psychological empowerment ($B = -0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. The indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on workplace anxiety via psychological empowerment was significant (*indirect effect* = 0.05, 95% CI = [0.019, 0.089]), supporting Hypothesis 3. The serial indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating via psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety was significant (*indirect effect* = 0.007, 95% CI = [0.002, 0.018]). This serial indirect effect did not change after we controlled for performance pressure and acceptability of norm violations. The results did not provide evidence for these two alternative mediation mechanisms: performance pressure (*indirect effect* = 0.006, 95% CI = −0.001, 0.020]) and the perceived acceptability of norm violations (*indirect effect* = 0.006, 95% CI = −0.001, 0.020]). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported[4].

Second, we tested the moderation effects. Table 4 revealed a significant interaction effect of workplace anxiety and coworker support on employee cheating ($B = -0.17$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). As presented in Figure 3, when coworker support was low, the

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables (Study 2).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Gender														
2. Age	0.07													
3. Education	−0.02	−0.03												
4. Organizational tenure	0.01	0.50***	0.01											
5. Work tenure with leader	0.11*	0.18***	−0.08	0.36***										
6. Moral identity	−0.08	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.10*	**0.80**								
7. Leaders' prestige behavior	−0.02	0.04	−0.02	0.04	0.08	0.11*	**0.81**							
8. Leaders' dominant behavior	−0.04	−0.29***	0.03	−0.17***	−0.06	0.00	−0.02	**0.97**						
9. Psychological empowerment	0.06	0.02	0.07	0.08	0.04	0.06	−0.06	−0.28***	**0.97**					
10. Workplace anxiety	0.06	−0.05	0.02	0.03	0.05	−0.10*	−0.03	0.41***	−0.30***	**0.92**				
11. Perceived acceptability of norm violations	−0.03	−0.04	0.12**	0.01	0.03	−0.19***	−0.10*	0.18***	−0.19***	0.18***	**0.79**			
12. Performance pressure	0.10*	−0.13**	−0.05	−0.10*	0.02	−0.06	−0.03	0.16***	−0.04	0.06	0.07	**0.80**		
13. Coworker support	−0.04	0.03	−0.05	0.06	−0.03	−0.02	0.01	−0.06	−0.01	−0.20***	0.05	−0.04	**0.89**	
14. Employee cheating	−0.02	−0.09	−0.03	−0.04	−0.10*	0.00	−0.03	0.44***	−0.19***	0.37***	0.16***	0.14**	−0.23***	**0.82**
Mean	1.48	30.18	3.08	5.53	3.10	5.49	5.56	2.62	5.54	2.34	2.29	2.06	5.74	2.11
SD	0.50	4.76	0.51	2.11	1.58	0.93	0.68	1.47	0.61	1.09	0.72	0.69	0.75	0.76

N = 299. Alpha coefficients are presented in bold on the diagonal. Organizational tenure and work tenure with leader were reported in years. Gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male. Education was coded as 1 = high school or lower, 2 = junior college degree, 3 = bachelor degree, and 4 = master degree or higher.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, and ***$p < 0.001$. Two-tailed tests.

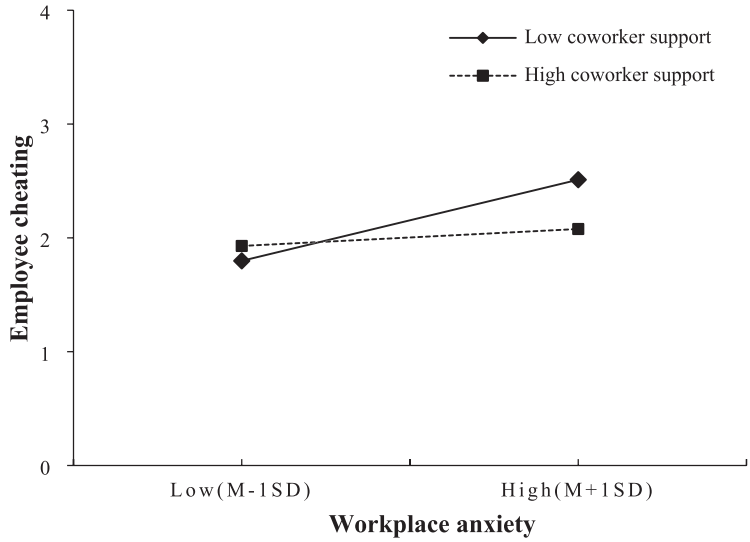

Figure 3. Interaction of workplace anxiety and coworker support on employee cheating (Study 2).

effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating was significant (*simple slope* = 0.33, $t = 7.00$, $p < 0.001$), and not significant (*simple slope* = 0.07, $t = 1.25$, $p = 0.212$) when coworker support was high, supporting Hypothesis 5.

Third, we tested the moderated mediation effects. The results indicated that when coworker support was low, the serial indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating through psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety was significant (*effect* = 0.01, 95% CI = [0.003, 0.022]), and not significant (*effect* = −0.01, 95% CI = −0.018, 0.000]) when coworker support was high. The index of moderated mediation was significant (*index* = −0.01, 95% CI = −0.025, −0.003]), supporting Hypothesis 6.

Study 2 discussion

Study 2 supported all the hypotheses, which provides robust evidence for our findings. However, in Studies 1 and 2, the serial mediating variables (i.e., psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety) were measured simultaneously, and employee cheating was self-reported, which may introduce concerns regarding common method bias and social desirability. Additionally, although we controlled for the alternative mediation mechanisms in Study 2, several important mediation mechanisms remain unaddressed. For instance, stressful leaders can render employees' negative responses by evoking emotional exhaustion and self-depletion (Mackey et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2015). Hence, we conducted Study 3 to address these issues.

Study 3 methods

Participants and procedure

We recruited full-time employees (working > 30 hours/week) from various industries, including information technology services, finance, scientific research, healthcare, education, and others, in northwest China. Participants were informed that completing the survey with a coworker would enter them into a lottery for a 100 RMB gift card. All participants and their coworkers whose responses met quality criteria would receive 8 RMB and 5 RMB, respectively.

We conducted a four-wave survey that was separated into 1 week. At T1, 552 employees assessed leaders' dominant behavior and control variables. There were 475 valid responses with a response rate of 86.05%. At T2, 412 employees provided valid responses about psychological empowerment (i.e., a response rate of 86.73%). At T3, the same 412 employees were invited to assess workplace anxiety. They were also asked to provide the contact information of a coworker willing to participate in our survey and with whom they interacted at least 3 to 4 days per week in the same physical location. There were 361 valid completions with a response rate of 87.62 %. At T4, 361 employees were asked to assess coworker support, emotional exhaustion, and self-depletion. Meanwhile, based on the coworker information they provided in T3, we invited these coworkers to assess the cheating behavior exhibited by employee participants over the past week. A total of 315 employees provided valid responses (i.e., a response rate of 87.25%), while 296 coworkers submitted valid responses. Finally, there were 260 employee-coworker dyads after we excluded unmatched data. There were no cases in which a coworker assessed multiple focal employee participants.

Employees had an average age of 31.86 years ($SD = 4.92$), organization tenure of 6.03 years ($SD = 3.75$), and work tenure with leaders of 4.00 years ($SD = 2.58$), respectively; 54.60% were female, and 67.7% had a bachelor's degree. Coworkers had an average age of 30.37 years ($SD = 5.64$) and work tenure with the participants of 4.40 years ($SD = 3.77$); 53.8% were female.

Measures

All measures utilized a 5-point Likert scale with items consistent with those used in Studies 1 and 2. The survey items are detailed in Appendix A of the online supplement. The control variables and analytical approach were the same as those in Study 2.

Alternative mediation variables. *Emotional exhaustion* (T4) was measured using the six items developed by Wharton (1993); *Self-depletion* (T4) was assessed with five items used by Johnson et al. (2014).

Study 3 results

Preliminary analysis

CFA results demonstrated that the hypothesized model (i.e., all measurement variables and controls) fit the data well[3] ($\chi^2/df = 1.49$, RMSEA = 0.04, IFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, CFI = 0.91) and had a better fit than the alternative eight models. Table 3 displays descriptive statistics.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables (Study 3).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Gender														
2. Age	−0.07													
3. Education	−0.01	−0.18**												
4. Organizational tenure	−0.02	0.50***	−0.07											
5. Work tenure with leader	0.03	0.44***	−0.14*	0.35***										
6. Moral identity	−0.19**	0.18**	−0.03	0.23***	0.04	**0.85**								
7. Leaders' prestige behavior	−0.03	0.14*	0.05	0.13*	0.09	0.22***	**0.90**							
8. Leaders' dominant behavior	−0.09	−0.01	0.08	−0.01	0.10	0.06	0.17**	**0.82**						
9. Psychological empowerment	−0.05	0.04	0.01	0.08	−0.02	0.18**	0.29***	−0.15*	**0.94**					
10. Workplace anxiety	0.06	−0.11	0.04	−0.13*	−0.01	−0.17**	−0.06	0.25***	−0.30***	**0.94**				
11. Emotional exhaustion	0.06	−0.06	0.11	−0.14*	−0.03	−0.06	−0.04	0.14*	−0.07	0.18**	**0.90**			
12. Self-depletion	0.06	−0.09	−0.03	−0.09	0.00	−0.12	0.02	0.16**	−0.10	0.45***	0.08	**0.85**		
13. Coworker support	−0.13*	−0.01	0.04	0.01	−0.01	0.14*	0.19**	0.06	0.24***	−0.27***	−0.03	−0.16*	**0.95**	
14. Employee cheating	−0.05	−0.13*	0.13*	−0.19**	−0.04	−0.19**	−0.12	0.39***	−0.08	0.29***	0.15*	0.17**	−0.12	**0.91**
Mean	1.45	31.86	3.95	6.03	4.00	3.92	3.40	2.51	3.30	2.71	2.41	2.93	3.25	1.94
SD	0.50	4.92	0.68	3.75	2.58	0.56	0.57	0.55	0.70	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.77	0.68

N = 260. Alpha coefficients are presented in bold on the diagonal. Organizational tenure and work tenure with leader were reported in years. Gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male. Education was coded as 1 = junior high school or lower, 2 = high school, 3 = junior college degree, 4 = bachelor degree, and 5 = master degree or higher.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, and ***$p < 0.001$. Two-tailed tests.

Hypothesis testing

First, we tested the direct and indirect effects. As shown in Table 4, leaders' dominant behavior positively affects employee cheating ($B = 0.47$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively affects psychological empowerment ($B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = 0.005$), supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. The mediation analysis suggested that leaders' dominant behavior positively affects workplace anxiety via psychological empowerment (*indirect effect* = 0.07, 95% CI = [0.021, 0.144]), supporting Hypothesis 3. The serial mediation analysis revealed that leaders' dominant behavior positively affects employee cheating via psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety (*indirect effect* = 0.01, 95% CI = [0.003, 0.031]). Additionally, this serial indirect effect did not change after controlling for emotional exhaustion and self-depletion. The results did not provide evidence for these two alternative mediation mechanisms: emotional exhaustion (*indirect effect* = 0.007, 95% CI = −0.010, 0.044]) and self-depletion (*indirect effect* = 0.004, 95% CI = −0.021, 0.035]), supporting Hypothesis 4[4].

Second, we tested moderation effects. Table 4 revealed a significant interaction effect of coworker support and workplace anxiety on employee cheating ($B = -0.28$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). As shown in Figure 4, when coworker support was low, the effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating was significant (*simple slope* = 0.46, $t = 5.44$, $p < 0.001$), and not significant (*simple slope* = 0.01, $t = 0.08$, $p = 0.941$) when coworker support was high. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Third, we tested moderated mediation effects. The results suggested that when coworker support was low, the serial indirect effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating through psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety was significant (*effect* = 0.02, 95% CI = [0.003, 0.043]), and not significant (*effect* = 0.001, 95% CI = −0.006, 0.013]) when coworker support was high. The index of moderated mediation was also significant (*index* = −0.01, 95% CI = −0.030, −0.001]), supporting Hypothesis 6.

Study 3 discussion

Using a multi-wave and multi-source design, the results of Study 3 supported all hypotheses, suggesting that leaders' dominant behavior has an indirect effect on employee cheating via the proposed mechanism. More specifically, leaders' dominant behavior elicits employee cheating via a sequential process involving diminished psychological empowerment and heightened workplace anxiety. This serial mediation effect remained robust despite controlling for alternative mediating pathways. In addition, Study 3 provided evidence for the moderating effect of coworker support. Taken together, these findings replicate and extend the findings of Studies 1 and 2.

General discussion

To advance the understanding of the adverse outcome of leaders' dominant behavior, our study draws on the transactional model of stress and develops a serial mediation model, elucidating whether and when such behavior leads to employee cheating. The results of three complementary studies support our predictions, showing that both the direct effect of leaders' dominant behavior on employee cheating and the serial mediation effect via

Table 4. Results of direct and moderation effects (Study 1, Study2, and Study 3).

Variable	*Study 1*				*Study 2*				*Study3*			
	PE	WA	WC	WC	PE	WA	WC	WC	PE	WA	WC	WC
	B(SE)	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*	*B(SE)*
Constant	5.92*** (0.88)	4.87*** (0.99)	2.73** (0.83)	1.89* **(0.75)**	5.88*** (0.55)	3.65*** (0.10)	2.18* (0.98)	2.86*** (0.06)	2.35*** (0.58)	3.55*** (0.67)	1.09* (0.56)	2.69*** (0.51)
Control variables												
Gender	0.05 (0.15)	−0.20 (0.15)	0.09 (0.12)	0.11 (0.11)	0.07 (0.07)	0.15 (0.11)	0.00 (0.08)	−0.05 (0.08)	−0.05 (0.08)	0.06 (0.09)	−0.08 (0.08)	−0.16* (0.08)
Age	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Education	0.15 (0.16)	−0.26 (0.16)	−0.09 (0.13)	0.11 (0.12)	0.09 (0.08)	0.06 (0.10)	−0.08 (0.07)	−0.08 (0.07)	0.00 (0.06)	0.01 (0.08)	0.10 (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)
Organizational tenure	−0.07 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.02* (0.01)
Work tenure with leader					0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	−0.06 (0.02)	−0.05* (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Moral identity	−0.02 (0.07)	0.20* (0.07)	−0.05 (0.06)	0.06 (0.07)	0.05 (0.04)	−0.10 (0.08)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.15 (0.08)	−0.15 (0.10)	−0.17* (0.09)	−0.12 (0.10)
Leaders' prestige behavior	0.07 (0.08)	−0.22* (0.08)	−0.05 (0.06)	−0.05 (0.06)	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.05 (0.09)	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.06)	0.36*** (0.08)	0.01 (0.10)	−0.19** (0.07)	−0.10 (0.08)
Main variables												
Leaders' dominant behavior	**−0.34*** (0.05)**	0.20** (0.05)	**0.18*** (0.04)**		**−0.12*** (0.03)**	0.28*** (0.05)	**0.18*** (0.04)**		**−0.27** (0.10)**	0.30** (0.10)	**0.47*** (0.09)**	
Psychological empowerment		−0.29** (0.07)	−0.003 (0.06)			−0.36*** (0.10)	−0.04 (0.08)			−0.25** (0.08)	0.10 (0.06)	
Workplace anxiety			0.25*** (0.06)	0.18** (0.05)			0.16* (0.06)	0.20*** (0.04)			0.16** (0.06)	0.22*** (0.06)
Coworker support				−0.39*** (0.08)				−0.10* (0.05)				−0.06 (0.06)
Workplace Anxiety × Coworker Support				**−0.21*** (0.05)**				**−0.17*** (0.04)**				**−0.28*** (0.07)**
R	0.50	0.56	0.58	0.63								
R^2	0.25	0.32	0.33	0.40								
F	9.07***	11.09***	10.56***	13.96***								
Residual variance					0.33*** (0.03)	0.91*** (0.11)	0.75*** (0.04)	0.44*** (0.06)	0.42*** (0.04)	0.47*** (0.04)	0.34*** (0.03)	0.37*** (0.03)

$N_{study1} = 201$, $N_{study2} = 299$, $N_{study3} = 260$, unstandardized coefficients are reported. SE = Standard error. Numbers in bold indicate results supporting the study hypotheses. PE = Psychological empowerment; WA = Workplace anxiety; WC = Employee cheating.

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, and ***$p < 0.001$. Two-tailed tests.

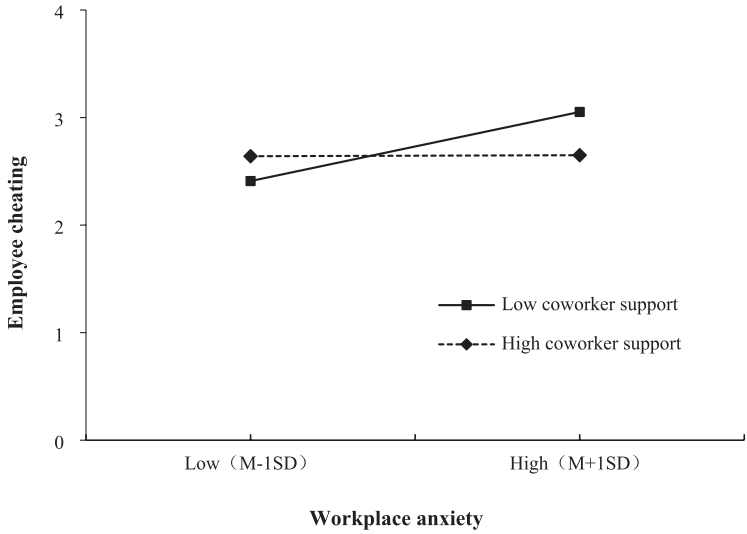

Figure 4. Interaction of workplace anxiety and coworker support on employee cheating (Study 3).

psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety are significant. Furthermore, our results suggest that coworker support can buffer the effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating.

Theoretical contributions

Our study makes several significant theoretical contributions. First, we advance the literature on dominance influence strategy by uncovering a harmful yet less easily detectable consequence—employee cheating. While prior studies have identified unfavorable employee outcomes associated with leaders' dominant behavior, such as diminished helping (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2022) and general unethical behavior (Brady and Sivanathan, 2024), these findings have not fundamentally challenged the prevailing view of dominance as an effective influence strategy (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017; van Kleef et al., 2021). By empirically demonstrating that leaders' dominant behavior can elicit detrimental yet covert employee cheating, we encourage both future research and managerial practice to raise awareness of its potential downsides and to critically address the costs regarding the use of dominant behavior in organizational settings.

Second, we theoretically and empirically demonstrate how leaders' dominant behavior elicits employee cheating. Drawing upon the transactional model of stress, we theorize leaders' dominant behavior as a stressor and highlight its adverse effects on employees' psychological well-being and emotions, which, in turn, provoke employees' cheating as a defensive coping response. Our results supported these theoretical predictions and indicated that leaders' dominant behavior can thwart employees' psychological empowerment and subsequently trigger their workplace anxiety. This, in turn, drives employees to alleviate their anxiety by defensively cheating at work. Consequently, we underscore the importance of considering the stressful nature of leaders' dominant behavior and its

subsequent harmful emotional and behavioral reactions among employees. Such reactions are distinct from the findings of previous studies (Brady and Sivanathan, 2024; Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2022) that emphasized the social learning roles of leaders' dominant behavior. As such, our study extends prior research and redirects future research to consider that leaders' dominant behavior not only functions as a role model but also serves as a source of work-related stress.

Third, we specify when leaders' dominant behavior can be less salient in eliciting employee cheating. We found that higher coworker support attenuates the effect of workplace anxiety on employee cheating when their psychological empowerment is undermined by leaders' dominant behavior. Previous studies have shown that external uncertainty (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017) and competitive (van Kleef et al., 2021) situations affect the effectiveness of leaders' dominant behavior. Our findings enrich this line of literature by showing that leaders' dominant behavior can be less detrimental when employees possess adequate interpersonal resources. This paves the way for future research to investigate the factors that could mitigate the harmful outcomes of leaders' dominant behavior while enhancing its benefits from a resource-based perspective. Meanwhile, this finding is consistent with prior studies. For example, Lu et al. (2023) found that the relations between abusive supervision and psychological distress are weakened when employees benefit from higher interpersonal support at work. These findings and ours together indicate the positive role of coworker support in helping employees deal with workplace stress.

Finally, our study yields important implications for the transactional model of stress by extending its explanatory power to the domain of leaders' dominant behavior and uncovering a more covert, self-interested form of emotion-focused coping (i.e., employee cheating) in response to such stressors. Although the transactional model of stress has been widely applied in organizational research to examine employees' emotional coping responses to uncontrollable stressors arising from abusive (Restubog et al., 2011) and ambivalent leadership behaviors (Chen et al., 2025), its application to dominant leadership behavior remains largely underexplored. Our study theoretically delineates and empirically tests a detailed emotional process through which leaders' dominant behavior acts as a stressor that undermines employees' psychological resources, fuels negative emotions, and ultimately prompts cheating as a means of emotion regulation. In doing so, we not only validate the applicability of the transactional model of stress to dominant leadership behavior but also advance its theoretical utility by identifying a previously overlooked emotional coping response. Beyond the commonly observed outcomes such as displaced aggression (Restubog et al., 2011) and disengagement (Chen et al., 2025), our findings highlight the emergence of more covert, self-serving coping under leaders' dominant behavior. This insight offers promising avenues for future research to explore a broader range of emotion-focused coping within the transactional model of stress.

Practical implications

Our study offers several practical implications for leaders, human resources (HR) departments, and employees. For leaders, it is critical to recognize that while dominant behavior is effective for asserting influence and ensuring organizational effectiveness in high-stakes environments, it also carries hidden costs. Our findings suggest that such

behavior can trigger employee cheating by undermining psychological empowerment and increasing anxiety. To reduce these risks, leaders should begin by actively monitoring how their behavior is perceived and how it affects employee well-being and anxiety. This can be achieved through frequent interpersonal communications, group meetings, and feedback systems (e.g., 360-degree assessments). Once potential risks are identified, leaders can further participate in targeted coaching and developmental programs that help them adopt alternative influence strategies, such as learning how to express assertiveness without intimidation. These adjustments not only improve leader effectiveness but also promote a healthier psychological climate for employees.

To facilitate these leader-level changes, HR departments are well-positioned to provide the necessary infrastructure. First, one practical step is to redesign leadership development programs to incorporate behavioral diagnostics that help detect early signs of excessive dominance among leaders. For example, tools such as real-time behavioral simulations, role-playing exercises, and facilitated feedback sessions can help leaders recognize when their behavior may cross the line into coercion. In addition, implementing upward feedback mechanisms—such as anonymous pulse surveys or leader behavioral audits—can give HR teams and leaders timely insights into how leadership behaviors are affecting employees' psychological empowerment and anxiety levels. Once risks are identified, HR should coordinate follow-up interventions (e.g., one-on-one coaching, peer mentoring, and training sessions). These practices allow HR departments to actively manage leadership accountability and support a more balanced use of influence in the workplace.

From the employee perspective, firstly, our findings highlight the importance of coworker support as a buffer against the negative psychological impact of leaders' dominant behavior. We recommend that employees proactively build support networks by engaging in joint problem-solving, participating in cross-functional projects, and initiating informal check-ins with colleagues. These peer-based interactions can serve as emotional reassurance, which can help reduce the likelihood of resorting to cheating. Secondly, our findings highlight psychological empowerment and anxiety as two critical indicators for employees to monitor their own psychological state. Organizations can aid this process by offering accessible resources, such as self-assessment tools, wellness check-ins, and confidential consultation sessions. Lastly, at a broader level, cultivating a workplace that prioritizes collaboration and peer support can reinforce these individual efforts. This could include setting explicit expectations for prosocial behavior in team charters, offering training in peer coaching, and recognizing team-based contributions through peer-nominated awards. Together, these practices can help organizations build a more favorable workplace culture that facilitates positive interpersonal dynamics, helping employees overcome the stress induced by leaders' dominant behavior, and reducing the likelihood of employing cheating as a coping strategy for workplace anxiety.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be addressed by future research. The first limitation is related to the boundary conditions that mitigate the negative effect of leaders' dominant behavior. By investigating the moderating role of coworker support, our study suggests that

factors attenuating the detrimental effect of leaders' dominant behaviors extend beyond uncertain and competitive contexts (Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017; van Kleef et al., 2021). Meanwhile, future scholars should recognize the complex nature of such leadership behaviors, as additional boundary conditions likely exist. Specifically, Wang et al. (2023) found that leader control did not reduce employees' satisfaction and citizenship behavior when employees' perceptions of control aligned with their expectations. Further, Takeuchi et al. (2020) suggested that different manifestations of control-oriented leadership behaviors may help attenuate their drawbacks, such as combining hierarchical control with employee training and achieving focus, or exercising control while demonstrating morality and benevolence. Collectively, these studies highlight that employees' personal attributes and the manner in which leaders enact control-oriented behaviors may shape their consequences. Hence, future research is encouraged to explore these employee- and leader-related factors that may buffer the negative effects of leaders' dominant behavior while enhancing its potential for fostering positive outcomes.

Another limitation is the extent to which our findings can be generalized to other cultural contexts. Although we collected multi-wave and multi-source data to empirically test our hypotheses, the participants are primarily from mainland China. People in such Confucian cultural settings tend to exhibit high power distance and collectivism (Wang et al., 2023) and prefer to maintain hierarchical relationships at work (Chiang et al., 2021). Thus, when faced with the pressures of leaders' dominant behavior, individuals are less likely to confront their leaders directly; instead, they are more inclined to engage in covert cheating to protect themselves. However, in Western cultures, independence and self-assertion values may motivate people to adopt more direct coping approaches when experiencing pressure from leaders' dominant behavior (Chiang et al., 2021). Thus, future research would benefit from examining the extent to which our findings are applicable across different cultural contexts.

Conclusion

While leaders who exhibit dominant behavior can effectively enhance organizational effectiveness under competitive and uncertainty threats, it may also render harmful consequences. Extending beyond the previous literature, we theoretically elaborate and empirically demonstrate the mechanisms and conditions through which leaders' dominant behavior leads to harmful yet covert outcomes (i.e., employee cheating). We found that leaders' dominant behavior induces employee cheating by eroding psychological empowerment and triggering workplace anxiety. The theoretical framework positing leaders' dominant behavior as a stressor establishes a critical foundation for future research in this domain.

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Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. All participants consented to take part in the survey of this study. It didn't pose any risk to the participants' health.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1 Because the data in Studies 1 and 2 were collected from different organizations, we calculated intraclass coefficients ICC1 values for the mediation and outcome variables in our theoretical model. The ICC1 values for these variables were insignificant, leading us to conclude that non-independence was not a concern in our data. Specific results are available in Appendix B of the online supplement.

2 Drawing on the practice of Hillebrandt and Barclay (2020), we used the following instructions to reduce participants' concerns about reporting their unethical behavior. "Our survey aims to better understand workplace behavior. We promise that your responses will not be disclosed and will only be used for research purposes. A wide range of participants are being asked to assess the frequency with which they have participated in a variety of behaviors that may arise at work. You will be asked to rate several of those behaviors." Please think about how often you engaged in each of the following workplace behaviors over the past week. More importantly, we collected additional data to help support the validation of the self-report measure of employee cheating. The results indicated that employee self-reporting of cheating was positively related to the coworker rating of cheating. At the same time, employees' self-reported cheating was also positively related to other theoretically related constructs (e.g., political behavior and workplace deviance). Specific results can be found in Appendix C of the online supplement.

3 Specific CFA results of Studies 1 to 3 can be found in Appendix D of the online supplement.

4 In Studies 1 to 3, we conducted a series of supplementary analyses in which psychological empowerment and workplace anxiety function as parallel mediators in the relationship

between leaders' dominant behavior and employee cheating. The parallel mediating effects were not supported, indicating the robustness of our findings. Specific results are available in Appendix E of the online supplement.

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