



ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVIANCE: THE MODERATING ROLE OF NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY IN APPAREL INDUSTRY

L. Mayuran¹, T. Thasika¹ and S. Shamini^{2*}

¹Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, ²Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Engineering, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan apparel industry, known for its ethical manufacturing and global brand partnerships, remains the country's most vibrant and labor-intensive economic contributor. This sector operates under high-pressure conditions and strict hierarchical structures, demands productivity and discipline, often at the expense of employee well-being. Within such contexts, workplace behaviors, both constructive and counterproductive, carry significant implications. One notable concern is organizational deviance, which encompasses voluntary behavior that violates organizational norms and harms the employer. While positive leadership is often promoted to enhance conduct, the dark side of leadership, that is, abusive supervision, which is conceptualized as a pattern of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors by supervisors, has gained attention for its potential to trigger deviant responses. Grounded in the Displaced Aggression Theory, this study explores how employees subjected to such mistreatment may redirect their frustration toward the organization rather than confront their supervisors. Furthermore, the study examines how negative reciprocity orientation, or the inclination to reciprocate harmful treatment, may moderate this relationship, intensifying the likelihood of organizational deviance. A cross-sectional, quantitative research design was employed using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. Convenience sampling was used to collect the data, producing 170 valid responses from 200 questionnaires given to workers in Sri Lankan apparel sector organisations. Negative reciprocity, organisational deviance, and abusive supervision were measured using validated instruments. Both direct and interaction effects were tested using SPSS's hierarchical regression analysis. Abusive supervision was positively associated with organizational deviance ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of supervisory abuse were linked to increased deviant behaviours against the organization. The moderating impact was supported by the substantial interaction term between negative reciprocity and abusive supervision ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$). According to a simple slope study, employees with high negative reciprocity exhibited a stronger relationship with abusive supervision and deviance (simple slope = 0.52, $p < 0.001$), whereas employees with low negative reciprocity showed a weaker association (simple slope = 0.28, $p < 0.05$). The model explained 47% of the variance in workplace deviance ($R^2 = 0.47$). This study demonstrates that abusive supervision significantly contributes to organizational deviance, especially among employees with a high tendency for negative reciprocity, the findings support the Displaced Aggression Theory. When these people are mistreated by supervisors, they are more likely to indirectly retaliate against the company. Consequently, abusive supervision has a



greater impact on deviant behavior when there is a negative reciprocity orientation. The findings draw attention to the hidden costs of toxic leadership and emphasize how crucial it is to comprehend how different employees react to mistreatment by their supervisors.

Keywords: abusive supervision, organizational deviance, displaced aggression theory, negative reciprocity, apparel industry

**Corresponding Author: shamkumar2911@gmail.com*



ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVIANCE: THE MODERATING ROLE OF NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY IN APPAREL INDUSTRY

L. Mayuran¹, T. Thasika¹ and S. Shamini^{2*}

¹Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, ²Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Engineering, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

The apparel industry in Sri Lanka represents a crucial element of the national economic landscape. Its role in generating export revenue and creating employment opportunities significantly contributes to the overall economic development. The historical progression of this sector demonstrates a remarkable transition from traditional export methodologies to modern advancements, including fashion business process outsourcing services. The industry is characterized by its dedication to high-quality production and adherence to ethical standards, with numerous manufacturing facilities implementing sustainable operational procedures (Industry Capability Report Sri Lankan Apparel Sector, 2025). However, despite its productive contributions, the industry operates within a challenging occupational environment marked by stringent hierarchies and considerable pressure to attain optimal performance.

In such demanding work environments, workplace deviance emerges as a critical concern. Robinson & Bennett (1995) developed a widely accepted framework for categorizing workplace deviance, which distinguishes between two primary types: organizational deviance (e.g., neglecting work hours, deliberately extending overtime) and interpersonal deviance (e.g., verbal abuse, sexual harassment). These deviant actions represent intentional breaches of organizational norms and can result in significant economic and reputational damages (Tiwari & Jha, 2022). The primary aim of this research is to examine the impact of abusive supervision on organizational deviance within the Sri Lankan apparel sector workforce. To fulfill this aim, the research delineates the following sub-objectives:

RO 1: To investigate the direct relationship between abusive supervision and organizational deviance.

RO 2: To identify the moderating effect of negative reciprocity on the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational deviance.



One key factor contributing to deviant behaviors in the workplace is abusive supervision, which Tepper (2000) defined as subordinates' assessments regarding the degree to which supervisors exhibit sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding any physical interactions. While numerous theories within organizational behavior prioritize positive reciprocity (i.e., responding to kindness with kindness), Gouldner (1960) emphasized the existence of negative reciprocity, wherein individuals retaliate in response to mistreatment. Nonetheless, not all employees exhibit the same retaliatory behaviors; some may choose to forgive, while others might channel their frustration through indirect means.

This variability in individual responses is effectively elucidated by Displaced Aggression Theory, which asserts that individuals who are unable to retaliate directly against a dominant or threatening source of provocation (such as a supervisor) may redirect their aggressive impulses toward safer, alternative targets (Berkowitz, 1989). In organizational settings, such displaced aggression can manifest as organizational deviance, including absenteeism, rule violations, or the misuse of resources.

Furthermore, this displaced behavior is not uniform across individuals. Individuals with a high negative reciprocity orientation, a predisposition to retaliate when wronged, exhibit a greater likelihood of responding to abusive supervision with deviant actions. Consequently, negative reciprocity functions as a significant moderator that intensifies the connection between abusive supervision and organizational deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

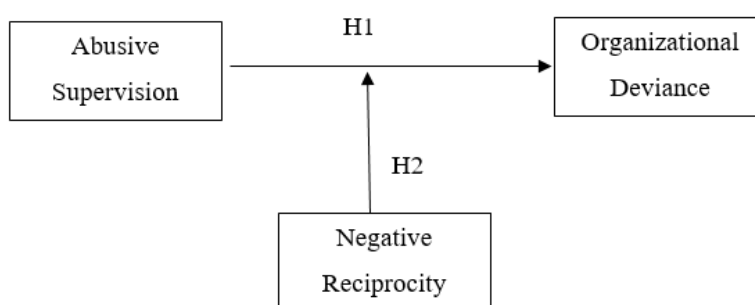


Figure -1 Conceptual Model



The theoretical framework serves to visually articulate the hypothesized interrelations pertinent to this investigation. It is asserted that abusive supervision exerts a direct positive influence on organizational deviance, which manifests as employees' intentional violations of organizational norms in reaction to sustained adverse supervisory conduct (Tepper, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). The construct of negative reciprocity orientation functions as a moderating variable, suggesting that employees exhibiting a heightened propensity for retaliation when aggrieved are more likely to demonstrate deviant behaviors in the context of abusive supervision, a notion that aligns with the tenets of Displaced Aggression Theory (Berkowitz, 1989) and the principle of negative reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). This framework affords a coherent, integrated comprehension of the manner in which individual predispositions and supervisory behaviors coalesce to shape organizational deviance.

In light of this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Abusive supervision is positively associated with organizational deviance among employees in the apparel industry.

H2: Negative reciprocity orientation moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational deviance, such that the relationship is stronger among employees with high levels of negative reciprocity orientation.

METHODOLOGY



This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to test the hypothesis. Data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire, which facilitated participants in providing honest feedback while mitigating interviewer bias. The survey instrument was methodically developed in the English language to guarantee precision and comprehensibility for the intended participants. A convenience sampling method was utilized to recruit participants from diverse organizations within the apparel sector in Sri Lanka, specifically focusing on operational-level employees who are more inclined to engage in supervisory interactions regularly. The target population comprised operational-level employees in apparel manufacturing firms located mainly in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, reflecting one of the country's key apparel-producing regions. Convenience sampling was adopted due to practical constraints of accessibility and company permissions, a method widely applied in organizational behavior studies when direct access to respondents is limited. For this study, operational employees referred to machine operators, line workers, quality checkers, and support staff directly engaged in production and frequent supervisory interactions. From the 200 questionnaires disseminated, 170 valid responses were retrieved, culminating in an effective response rate of 85%. The demographic profile of the respondents covers aspects such as age, gender, educational level, and years of work experience. This information provides useful context for interpreting the findings, as it may shape how employees perceive supervisory behaviors and react to them. The sample size of 170 valid responses further satisfied Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) guideline for populations above 10,000 and the rule of thumb of 10–15 observations per predictor in regression, ensuring adequate statistical power. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to foster openness in their responses. Although the survey was administered in English, participants were supported through brief clarifications in Tamil or Sinhala when required, and most employees could complete the questionnaire independently owing to the industry's use of English in workplace communication and training. The study employed standardized and validated measurement scales for all principal constructs. Abusive supervision was evaluated utilizing Tepper(2000) 15-item scale, which encapsulates hostile verbal and non-verbal supervisory behaviors. Organizational deviance was quantified using Bennett & Robinson (2000) scale, concentrating on actions that deliberately contravene organizational norms. Negative reciprocity orientation was assessed through Wu et al. (2006) 14-item scale, which denotes the propensity to retaliate when subjected to unfair treatment.

Data were subjected to analysis using SPSS software, with hierarchical regression analysis employed to examine both the direct influences of abusive supervision on organizational deviance and the interactive effect of negative reciprocity as a moderating variable. Before the regression analysis, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were evaluated and confirmed. The interaction term was generated by mean-centering the predictor and moderator variables to alleviate multicollinearity and subsequently calculating their product. A simple slope analysis was further conducted to elucidate the nature of the moderating effect at elevated and diminished levels of negative reciprocity.



This methodological framework enabled a rigorous exploration of both primary and interaction effects, thereby enhancing the understanding of how negative reciprocity influences employee reactions to abusive supervision within the context of the apparel industry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prior to testing the proposed hypothesis, descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and zero-order correlations among the variables under investigation were scrutinized. Table 1 delineates the mean values, standard deviations, internal consistency reliabilities, and correlations, thereby furnishing a comprehensive overview of the current state of the selected constructs.

The research findings demonstrated a statistically significant and positive correlation between abusive supervision and organizational deviance ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that when employees perceive elevated instances of abusive conduct from their supervisors, such as aggression, derision, or public disparagement, they are more likely to engage in organizational deviances that are directed towards the organization. Such behaviors may encompass activities like deliberately reducing work pace, withholding exertion, misappropriating organizational resources, or other manifestations of counterproductive work behavior that adversely harm the organization.

Moreover, the research examined the moderating influence of negative reciprocity, defined as an individual's propensity to retaliate when subjected to unfair treatment or harm. The moderating effect was statistically significant, as evidenced by a notable interaction term between abusive supervision and negative reciprocity ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$). This negative beta coefficient signifies that the intensity of the relationship between abusive supervision and deviance is contingent upon the employee's level of negative reciprocity.

To further elucidate this moderation, a simple slope analysis was performed. The findings indicated that for employees exhibiting high levels of negative reciprocity, the correlation between abusive supervision and organizational deviance was considerably stronger (simple slope = 0.52, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, for employees displaying low negative reciprocity, the relationship, albeit still statistically significant, was comparatively weaker (simple slope = 0.28, $p < 0.05$). In essence, individuals who possess a greater inclination towards retaliation were more likely to respond to abusive supervision with heightened deviant behaviors, whereas those with lesser inclinations to retaliate exhibited a more mitigated response.



These findings underscore the critical role of individual differences in shaping responses to abusive supervision, highlighting how personality traits such as negative reciprocity can amplify the behavioral consequences of abusive leadership. From a theoretical perspective, the results extend displaced aggression theory by demonstrating that frustration from hierarchical power imbalances may be redirected toward organizational targets rather than the direct source of mistreatment. The observed effects also suggest that organizational culture and structural constraints may interact with personal predispositions, reinforcing the need for policies that mitigate retaliatory norms and promote constructive conflict resolution.

The overall model, which integrated abusive supervision, negative reciprocity, and their interaction, elucidated a considerable proportion of the variance in organizational deviance, as indicated by the r^2 value of 0.47. This signifies that 47% of the variance in workplace deviant behaviors can be accounted for by the variables incorporated within the model, thereby suggesting robust predictive capability. Negative reciprocity beliefs significantly influence the manner in which employees react to abusive supervision. Individuals who firmly subscribe to these beliefs exhibit a higher propensity to engage in retaliatory deviant behavior, directed either at specific individuals or the organization as a whole.

Mitchell & Ambrose (2007) identified that such employees frequently direct their retaliatory actions towards their supervisors. Faldetta (2021) elucidated that the norms of reciprocity dictate both the nature and the intensity of deviance, where direct norms result in interpersonal deviance, and generalized norms culminate in organizational deviance.

Empirical studies substantiate this assertion. Nugroho et al. (2019) documented instances of customer mistreatment among employees subjected to abuse who exhibited high levels of negative reciprocity. Koay et al. (2022) demonstrated a correlation between heightened cyberloafing and elevated levels of moral disengagement. Selem et al. (2023) observed that acts of retaliation may alleviate emotional distress by providing a rationale for the experienced abuse.

In summary, negative reciprocity fundamentally influences employees' perceptions and responses to abusive conduct, frequently exacerbating the occurrence of deviant behaviors.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-1Summary Statistics

Variable	M	Sd	1	2	3
1. Abusive supervision	2.10	0.78	(.91)		
2. Negative reciprocity	2.45	0.84	.36**	(.87)	
3. Organizational deviance	1.95	0.69	.42**	.39**	(.88)



CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical results of this study provide compelling evidence in support of displaced aggression theory, which posits that individuals who experience frustration or maltreatment from a supervisor may redirect their aggressive impulses toward a less intimidating target, namely the organization itself. In particular, the findings revealed that abusive supervision serves as a significant predictor of organizational deviance, with this relationship being especially salient among employees characterized by a pronounced tendency for negative reciprocity, those who exhibit a greater propensity to retaliate when aggrieved. Employees with a strong tendency toward negative reciprocity may feel unable or unwilling to directly confront supervisors who mistreat them, such as through belittlement, verbal hostility, or unfair treatment, due to the existing power imbalance. Consequently, their frustration and inclination for vengeance are redirected onto the organization via deviant behaviors such as intentionally diminishing work effort, misappropriating organizational resources, or contravening established organizational norms. This indirect form of retaliation permits them to exact retribution against their perceived source of injustice without engaging in confrontation with the supervisor.

These results contribute to the literature by providing empirical evidence of how negative reciprocity moderates the link between abusive supervision and organizational deviance, offering a nuanced understanding of employee behavioral responses. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of leadership training, fair treatment policies, and mechanisms to reduce the likelihood of retaliatory behaviors, thereby enhancing organizational effectiveness and well-being. Future research may further explore mediating factors such as emotional exhaustion or moral disengagement to uncover the processes through which abusive supervision translates into deviance.

Thus, the interplay between abusive supervision and negative reciprocity elucidates the magnifying influence of personality traits on professional conduct. In this scenario, negative reciprocity functions as a susceptibility factor that intensifies the detrimental consequences of toxic leadership. Although abusive supervision in isolation is harmful, its consequences become particularly pronounced when directed towards employees predisposed to retaliatory behaviors.

These exposures elucidate the hidden costs associated with toxic leadership within organizational contexts. Beyond the immediate emotional detriment, abusive supervision can activate a cascade of deviant behaviors that erode organizational effectiveness and culture. Furthermore, the findings accentuate the necessity of acknowledging individual disparities in employees' coping mechanisms and retaliatory inclinations. Organizations ought to endeavor not only to eradicate abusive supervisory practices but also to cultivate environments that mitigate retaliatory norms and encourage constructive responses to conflict and mistreatment.



REFERENCES

- Bennett, R. J., & Robinson, S. L. (2000). Development of a measure of workplace deviance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(3), 349–360. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.85.3.349>
- Berkowitz, L. (1989). Frustration-aggression hypothesis: examination and reformulation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106(1), 59.
- Faldetta, G. (2021). Abusive supervision and workplace deviance: the role of negative reciprocity. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 29(4), 935–949. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-03-2020-2062>
- Gouldner, A. W. (1960). *American Sociological Review the Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement* * (Vol. 25, Issue 2).
- Industry Capability Report Sri Lankan Apparel Sector*. (2025).
- Koay, K. Y., Lim, V. K. G., Soh, P. C.-H., Ong, D. L. T., Ho, J. S. Y., & Lim, P. K. (2022). Abusive supervision and cyberloafing: A moderated moderation model of moral disengagement and negative reciprocity beliefs. *Information & Management*, 59(2), 103600. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2022.103600>
- Mitchell, M. S., & Ambrose, M. L. (2007). Abusive Supervision and Workplace Deviance and the Moderating Effects of Negative Reciprocity Beliefs. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(4), 1159–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.4.1159>
- Nugroho, A., Oktavio, A., & Kartika, E. W. (2019). *Salesperson deviant behavior in Indonesian restaurant service attendants*.
- Robinson, S. L., & Bennett, R. J. (1995). a Typology of Deviant Workplace Behaviors: a Multidimensional Scaling Study. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(2), 555–572. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256693>
- Salem, K. M., Boğan, E., Elsayed, A., & Mohamed, H. A. (2023). A moderated - mediation analysis of abusive supervision , fear of negative evaluation and psychological distress among Egyptian hotel employees.



- Current Psychology*, 3395–3410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03822-4>
- Tepper, B. J. (2000). CONSEQUENCES OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(2), 178–190. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1556375>
- Tiwari, M., & Jha, R. (2022). Narcissism, toxic work culture and abusive supervision: a double-edged sword escalating organizational deviance. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 30(1), 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-05-2020-2187>
- Wu, J. B., Hom, P. W., Tetrick, L. E., Shore, L. M., Jia, L., Li, C. P., & Song, L. J. (2006). The norm of reciprocity: Scale development and validation in the Chinese context. *Management and Organization Review*, 2(3), 377–402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-8784.2006.00047.x>