Linking Exploitative Leadership with Employee Time Theft: A Study of the Hospitality Sector of Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigated the link between exploitative leadership (EL) and time theft (TT), with the mediating role of work alienation (WA) and the moderating effect of professional commitment (PC). This study collected data through a self-administered questionnaire from 328 frontline hospitality employees and their managers working in two to five-star hotels in Pakistan. A quantitative research design along with the positivism paradigm and the deductive approach were used. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for quantitative data analysis in smart PLS 4. The results show that EL is positively related to employee TT through WA. The results also show that PC moderates the relationship between EL and WA.

Keywords: Exploitative leadership, work alienation, professional commitment, employee time theft, hospitality sector.

Introduction

Due to increased competition, enterprises are showing keen interest in time because it is a valuable and finite resource for the organization (Ślusarczyk & Tuczapski, 2021). A manager's ability to manage their time well is a critical component in accomplishing the organization's strategic goals. Thus, effective time management is a useful skill for people and organizations alike (Bedi & Sass, 2023), but most personnel discard their work time on non-work related matters in day-to-day workplace management (Sinclair, 2024). Time theft is a dominant and costly unethical work behavior that exists in the workplace (Hu et al., 2022). During COVID-19, employees mostly worked from home, giving them more opportunities to be involved in this behavior (Zhong et al., 2022). It is 'the behavior of employees in which they use their work time in non-work related activities' (Henle et al., 2010 p.53). Time theft involves taking excessive breaks, daydreaming, withholding effort, abusing sick day privileges, working slowly, using social media during work hours, and gossiping.

These acts include wasting or stealing time from an organization (Fatima et al, 2021; Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021). However, it's crucial to remember that not all cases of time theft are intentional. Certain employees may participate in these activities without realizing that what they're doing is similar to time theft (Manikam, 2023). Thus, it is vital to study this hidden employee's behavior. In previous research, scholars were interested to know why employees do

time theft. Further to add, the research in the past has focused on factors such as empowering leadership (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017), Laissez-Faire Leadership (Hu et al., 2022), use of office-related information and communication technologies (Xu et al., 2023), punitive supervision (Sarwar et al., 2022), supervisor narcissism (Ding et al., 2018), organizational dehumanization (Muhammad & Sarwar, 2021), workplace bullying (Fatima et al., 2021), supervisor developmental feedback (Wang et al, 2024) and perceived over qualification (Zhao & Ma, 2023) as predictors of time theft. However, examining the association between exploitative leadership and employee time theft remained limited in the literature.

Along with work, individual, and organizational level factors, it is important to study the association between leadership and the time theft behavior of employees. In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in exploring the negative characteristics of leadership (Hassan et al., 2023). A type of dark-side leadership known as "exploitative leadership" is defined by a leader who excessively pursues their own interests while taking advantage of their followers. Recently, researchers researching hospitality have concentrated on this topic (Wu et al., 2021). These leaders can exploit others by "acting egoistically, manipulating followers, putting pressure, overloading followers, and constantly under-challenging followers with no professional growth" (Schmid et al., 2019). Specifically, the hotel sector is based on long work hours, less pay, unpredictable shift patterns, and little downtime (Ren & Chadee, 2020). Thus, in this industry, workers are overworked and treated poorly by their managers. This leadership style results in various organizational, individual, and interpersonal consequences such as lower employee creativity and job performance (Syed et al., 2021), high turnover intentions, knowledge hiding (Khalid & Aftab, 2024; Syed et al., 2019), burnout and deviance at workplace (Guo et al., 2023; Lyu et al., 2022), employee workplace venting (Wang et al, 2023) and psychological distress (Alajhar et al, 2024). However, the understanding of exploitative leadership remains new within the organization specifically under what conditions exploitative leadership promotes time theft behavior in employees.

Furthermore, we also explore the indirect effect of EL on TT via WA in the current study. According to contemporary research, work alienation may be simply described as "estrangement or disconnect from work" (Nair & Vohra, 2012, p. 27). Studying work alienation is crucial when examining exploitative leadership and time theft because it gives information on the psychological and social dynamics of the workplace. Accordingly, negative work circumstances are a result of destructive leadership, particularly exploitative leadership, which forces employees to take part in actions that alienate them and foster a hostile work atmosphere. Exploitative leaders use persuasion to make their followers do more work and they also take advantage of their followers by being very nice to them and giving them more tasks to perform even though they are already overworked which can contribute to employee work alienation (Basiony & Ibrahim, 2023). Negative behaviors and moral influences can result from exploitative leadership (Sobhy Mohamed et al, 2024). This increases the possibility of time theft because employees may disconnect from their jobs or utilize work time for personal pursuits as a means of coping or resisting. If a leader is exploitative, then feelings of alienation will arise among

followers. These feelings result in workplace outcomes such as less satisfaction, commitment, and work performance (Lagios et al., 2023; Zanjireh et al., 2023). In an organization with exploitative leaders, employees are not empowered and therefore they experience alienation at work. Thus, the feelings of work alienation enhance time theft among employees.

Moreover, in this study, we also explored the importance of PC as a moderator. Professional commitment can help to alter the effects of exploitative leadership. Given its emerging significance as a determinant of employees' attitudes and organizational success, professional commitment (PC) is selected as a moderator. Professionally dedicated workers may be more resistant to the damaging effects of exploitative leadership as they find fulfillment and happiness in their jobs rather than only in their bosses' acknowledgment or approval. Employees with a strong dedication to their profession will do their jobs more effectively (Rangus et al, 2020), this can serve as a defensive factor against participating in time theft behaviors, even in the face of exploitative leadership. Limited research have examined the moderating effect of professional commitment (Malik et al., 2019; Saeed et al., 2022). Thus, individuals with high professional commitment can buffer themselves against exploitative leadership and feelings of work alienation, resulting in time theft.

This study contributes to the literature in multiple ways. First, this study considers time theft as an unethical behavior because the literature on this work behavior is scarce and needs to be studied. Limited studies have been conducted to examine exploitative leadership as a predictor of employee time theft to date. Despite enough research has been conducted in this field, however, the self-interest of leaders remained under-explored. Second, this study proposes work alienation as a mediator between exploitative leadership and employee time theft. There is a need to study the affective experiences in the workplace and how alienation occurs due to a negative event. So, this study has proposed work alienation as a mediator between exploitative leadership and time theft. Third, in this study, the moderating variable i.e., professional commitment is proposed between exploitative leadership and work alienation. Previous research also shows that professional commitment can provide a defensive mechanism to deal with destructive behaviors (Malik et al., 2019; Saeed et al, 2022). To the best of our knowledge, scarce research has been conducted that examined professional commitment as a moderator on exploitative leadership and work alienation. So, this study proposed professional commitment as a moderator between exploitative leadership and work alienation (see Figure 1).

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

The current study was based on the conservation of resource theory (COR) proposed by Hobfoll (1989). According to this theory, actual or perceived loss or lack of gain is sufficient to cause stress. Stress occurs when there is a danger that key resources will be lost or when we are unable to gain resources despite enough effort. When individuals are faced with a stressor that threatens their resources, they may experience stress as they try to cope with the situation. By understanding the role of resources in motivating and sustaining human behavior, COR theory provides insights into how people use important resources to cope with stress and create a reserve for future needs (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR theory states that people often gather

and hold onto resources to deal with stressful situations. Some examples of these resources include material resources (e.g., tools for the job), condition resources (e.g., employment), personal resources (e.g., abilities and personality traits), and energy resources (e.g., knowledge, money) (Hobfoll et al. 2018, p. 105).

The theory states that resource loss is far more significant than resource gain. More specifically, it is proposed that resource loss is larger in scale than resource gain, affecting individuals more immediately and at a faster pace over time (Hobfoll et al., 2018). A stressful event can be transmitted from one individual to another (Westman, 2001). Negative workplace events, such as exploitative leadership can also be transmitted to others and result in negative effects. For instance, if a leader engages in destructive behaviors, it can create a toxic work culture where employees may experience work alienation, leading to resource depletion and increased time theft. The COR theory provides insight into the behaviors of people who utilize coping strategies to manage stress resulting from resource losses. As a supporting theory for the current study, Hobfoll et al. (2018) modified version of the COR theory has been utilized. This theory helps to describe how exploitative leadership becomes a threat to an individual's psychological resources and results in certain behaviors. Employees will see this as a stressor because it becomes a threat to their psychological resources. Due to this stressor, people feel alienated at work. Therefore, feelings of alienation due to leader behavior are considered stressful as well.
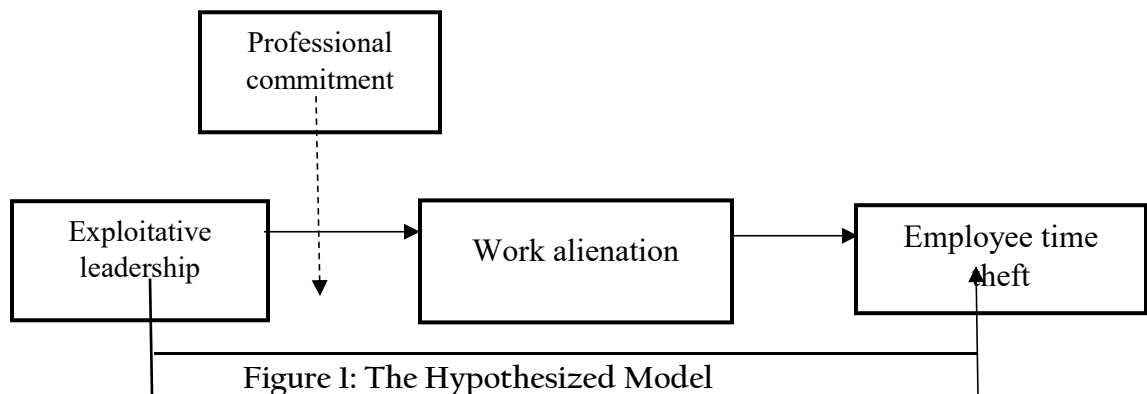

Figure 1: The Hypothesized Model

Source: Own Study

⟶ : Direct effect: ⤏ Moderating effect

Exploitative Leadership and Employee Time Theft

Employee time theft, according to Hu et al. (2022), is a costly and prevalent unethical workplace behavior. Prior studies have identified individual, work level, and organizational level factors of employee time theft (Hong & Wokutch, 2023; Harold et al, 2022; Ding et al, 2018). Researchers have also tried to examine the relationship between empowering leadership and employee time theft (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). However, scarce research has been conducted to investigate the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee time theft. A leader that practices exploitative leadership takes use of their position and power to get an advantage over their

followers (Schmid et al., 2019). Particularly, supervisory exploitative behaviors will cause employees to feel that interacting with leaders is a psychological burden and a psychologically unsafe place to work (e.g., placing undue pressure on workers for unrealistic performance, taking credit from workers, and neglecting workers' emotional needs and professional development) (Guo et al., 2023).

However, hospitality professionals confront problems in carrying out their duties. They mostly face limited opportunities for promotion and advancement, the absence of performance reviews and feedback, and lower incentives and pay (Kim et al, 2015). For example, a leader may repeatedly give unreasonable workloads or tight deadlines without giving enough resources or assistance. Employees who are overworked and unable to meet goals may turn to time theft to manage their workload, such as taking extended breaks or extending lunch hours to deal with stress. Similarly, a hotel manager frequently schedules personnel for extended shifts or overtime without providing adequate remuneration or breaks. Based on the COR theory, we understand that exploitative leaders as a common stressor that crosses over and evokes negative behavior among subordinates i.e., time theft. Stressors in the form of exploitative leadership may threaten employee resources and engage in unethical workplace behavior to deal with stressful situations. For example, employees may leave the workplace early to escape from the stressor and protect their resources. So we anticipate that exploitative leadership will be positively related to one's willingness to be involved in time theft. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H$_1$: Exploitative leadership is positively related to employee time theft.

Work Alienation as a Mediator between Exploitative Leadership and Employee Time Theft
An exploitative leader views their followers as a tool for pursuing their own goals and is fundamentally self-serving (Schmid et al, 2019). Negative leadership, particularly exploitative leadership, can have a detrimental effect on the morals and behaviors of employees. Because they view their leader as a role model to follow, employees who feel exploited at work become unsatisfied, alienated, and engage in unethical behaviors without feeling guilty about it (Sobhy Mohamed et al, 2024). Additionally, research has shown that alienated employees are more prone than non-alienated employees to act abnormally and perform poorly at work. These findings can suggest to management scholars and practitioners that alienation is a worthwhile topic for further investigation (Shantz et al, 2015). Leaders who engage in inappropriate behavior, including character assassination, devastation, hypocrisy, exploitation and abuse, and other abusive behaviors, negative outcomes like employee harassment, bullying, deceptive behavior, and various forms of fraud are common in their workplace. Thus, leading to increased work alienation among employees (Nastiezaie et al., 2022).

Work alienation is commonly observed in service sector organizations such as hospitality (Peng et al, 2024). The topic of work alienation has received attention in recent years since there is mounting evidence that it can negatively impact one's physical, psychological, and professional well-being. Work alienation, for instance, is linked to inadequate productivity, poor performance, lack of commitment, unhappiness with one's work, drug abuse, and desire to quit the company. Therefore, by engaging in actions that alienate employees and foster a toxic

work environment, exploitative business leaders harm their organizations. Consequently, executives must acquire a deeper comprehension of employee work alienation and its consequences (Basiony & Ibrahim, 2023). Victims of exploitative leadership may experience psychological distress, including feelings of discontent, isolation, estrangement, and alienation (Guo et al, 2023). Employees who feel disengaged from their jobs may be less inclined to complete their responsibilities with diligence and may take more frequent breaks or use work time for personal purposes. Workplace alienation serves as a medium by which time theft by employees is influenced by exploitative leadership. In the current study, employees who are subjected to exploitative leadership may feel devalued from their work, leading to a perception of work alienation and resulting time theft behavior. Based on the above discussion, it is proposed that:

H_2: Work alienation mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee time theft.

Professional Commitment as a Moderator

PC can be defined as 'psychological attachment to and identification with one's profession" (Chang & Choi, 2007, p. 301). Employees who exhibit a strong commitment to their work are more likely to be driven to perform since high performance helps to accumulate resources essential to their professional growth (Sungu et al., 2019). High levels of staff professionalism and professional satisfaction are necessary for hospitality organizations, which are service-oriented businesses with a high degree of employee-guest contact and guest satisfaction. High levels of work satisfaction are associated with professional employees (Mekoth et al., 2023). In the hotel industry, commitment is a significant concern since hotels often express a desire to hire employees who are devoted to the organization (Ruiz-Palomo et al, 2020). Thus, employees who have high professional commitment may be able to deal with stressors such as exploitative leadership and thus reduce time-theft behavior. When employees have a high level of professional commitment, they may be more resilient to the negative effects of exploitative leadership, including work alienation. This is because professional commitment can act as a buffer against negative workplace emotions. Thus, in the present model, employees having high professional commitment become less affected by exploitative leadership as compared to those having low professional commitment. We can investigate how exploitative leadership results in feelings of work alienation and how professional commitment moderates this relationship. So, it is proposed that:

H_3: Professional commitment moderates the relationship between exploitative leadership and work alienation such that the positive relationship between EL and WA was weaker (stronger) when the degree of PC was high (low).

Research Methodology

In this study, the sample consists of hospitality employees and their managers working in different two to five-star hotels in Pakistan, especially those working in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore, Multan, and Gujranwala. The initial sample size was around 450 from which 350 were

received back and 22 questionnaires were excluded as they were not filled. Therefore, 328 questionnaires were used for the research, representing a response rate of 73%.

Measurements

For the collection of primary data, the self-administered questionnaire was used for this study adapted from the source. Questionnaires were administered to hospitality employees and asked about their leaders i.e., exploitative leadership. The data to report their demographic variables, their professional commitment, and work alienation was also collected. Afterward, data from supervisors was collected who were the managers of different hotels and they were asked to report their employee's time theft behavior. The responses were taken on a five-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. In this research, managers and employees were asked to write a code for their employees which was used as a unique identification code that was given to each respondent. This code was used to match the responses.

To measure *Exploitative Leadership*, a scale developed by Schmid et al. (2019) was used in this research which consists of 15 items. Sample items include "My supervisor increases my workload without considering my needs to reach his or her goals". To measure *Employee Time Theft*, a three-item measure validated by Lorinkova and Perry (2017) was used to measure time theft, which was drawn from the original scale developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000; α = 0.86). Sample items include 'My employee worked on a personal matter instead of working for his/her employer'. *Work alienation* was measured using an 8-item scale by Nair and Vohra (2010). Sample items include "I do not enjoy my work." and "Facing my daily tasks is a painful and boring experience." *Professional commitment* was measured by using a 5-item scale developed by Chang and Choi (2007). Sample items include "I am proudly talking to others about this profession".

Analytical Strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for data analysis using Smart PLS 4.0 software in this study.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The research sample mostly consists of male staff as compared to female staff from various hotels in Pakistan. The majority of sample members have one to five years of experience. The age range of the participants was from 21 to over 41. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 30. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and correlations for the research variables.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations among constructs

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
TT	3.76	.904	0.824			
EL	3.66	.822	0.393**	0.724		

PC	3.77	.794	0.356**	0.276**	**0.781**
WA	3.85	.810	0.406**	0.333**	0.326**	**0.792**

The square root of the AVE value on the diagonal (in bold) and off-diagonal values are correlations between the constructs.

Note: **p < 0.01

Measurement Model

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented in Table 2. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was computed for all latent variables which appears to be above 0.70. The values of Cronbach's alpha for EL was 0.935, for WA was 0.914, for PC was 0.841, and for TT was 0.763 (see Table 2). Higher values generally indicate higher levels of reliability. Reliability levels, for instance, vary from "satisfactory to good" between 0.70 to 0.90 (Hair et al., 2019). In this study, the values of CR for EL were 0.943, for WA 0.931, for PC 0.887, and for TT 0.863 (see Table 2). In this study, the convergent validity is checked through AVE. The AVE values for all constructs in this study are greater than 0.50 lying between 0.525 and 0.679. This shows that more than 50% variance is explained for every latent variable (see Table 2). The outer loadings for all 31 items were observed. Almost all loadings were greater than the recommended value of 0.708, apart from a few loadings for the EL variable (see Table 2). For EL items whose loadings were less than 0.70, AVE was calculated to be greater than 0.50. Thus, all the items were retained in the model for further analysis.

Table 2: Confirmatory factor analysis results

Latent Variables	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
	EL1	0.738			
	EL2	0.690			
	EL3	0.710			
	EL4	0.729			
	EL5	0.752			
	EL6	0.746			
	EL7	0.696			
EL	EL8	0.690	0.935	0.943	0.525
	EL9	0.650			
	EL10	0.726			
	EL11	0.693			
	EL12	0.742			
	EL13	0.786			
	EL14	0.710			
	EL15	0.791			

	WA1	0.701			
	WA2	0.845			
	WA3	0.817			
WA	WA4	0.844	0.914	0.931	0.627
	WA5	0.834			
	WA6	0.786			
	WA7	0.761			
	WA8	0.737			
	PC1	0.797			
PC	PC2	0.810			
	PC3	0.763	0.841	0.887	0.610
	PC4	0.774			
	PC5	0.761			
TT	TT1	0.778			
	TT2	0.896	0.763	0.863	0.679
	TT3	0.793			

Two methods were used to check that the constructs have discriminant validity. First, each construct's square root of its AVE should be greater than its maximum correlation with any other construct in the model, following the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Hair et al, 2016), shown in Table 1. Second, we applied heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT). An HTMT score greater than 0.90 indicates a lack of discriminant validity (Hair et al, 2016). All the HTMT values were below the cut-off value of 0.90, as indicated in Table 3, supporting discriminant validity.

Table 3: Discriminant validity (HTMT criterion)

	1	2	3	4
TT				
EL	0.447			
PC	0.438	0.304		
WA	0.482	0.350	0.366	

Structural Model

The R^2 represents the variance in the structural model. This indicates the degree to which the independent variable has influenced the variation in the dependent variable. R^2 values that fall into the categories of weak, moderate, and substantial are 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75, respectively (Hair et al., 2011). In this study, R^2 values were estimated. The R^2 value for employee time theft was 0.240 (Figure 2). R^2 values show that 24.0% of the variation in the dependent variable i.e., employee time theft was explained by latent variables including work alienation, exploitative leadership, and professional commitment. Based on these results, it was summed up that latent variables have a weak impact on the dependent variable.

The bootstrapping procedure in Smart PLS was used to compile the results of the hypotheses. In this study, hypotheses were tested by using the t-values (t ›1.96) along with their respective p-values (p ‹ 0.05) between latent variables. The results show that exploitative leadership with time theft (β = 0.290, t=5.154, p‹0.01) was positive and statistically significant, thus supporting H_1 (Table 4).

Table 4: Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Hypotheses Paths	Path coefficients	T values	Accept/reject significance
H_1	EL⟶TT	0.290	5.154	Accept ***
H_2	EL→WA →TT	0.066	2.958	Accept **
H_3	PC x EL→ WA	-0.179	4.701	Accept ***

Next, we examined the impact of the mediating variable to see if work alienation mediates the link between time theft and exploitative leadership. The results show that work alienation mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and time theft with an indirect effect size was 0.066 (p= 0.003, t=2.958). The results show that the effect of EL on TT was significant. Thus, it was concluded that work alienation partially mediates the relationship between EL and TT. Thus, supporting H_2. Table 4 and Figure 2 display the indirect effect's results. Next, we examined the moderating effect of professional commitment in the relationship between exploitative leadership and work alienation. Results are presented in Table 4 and Figure 2. The results reveal that the path coefficient of -0.179, for the interaction construct was significant at p ‹0.01 (t value=4.701) (see Figure 2). Thereby, supporting H_3. Thus, professional commitment moderates the relationship between exploitative leadership and work alienation.
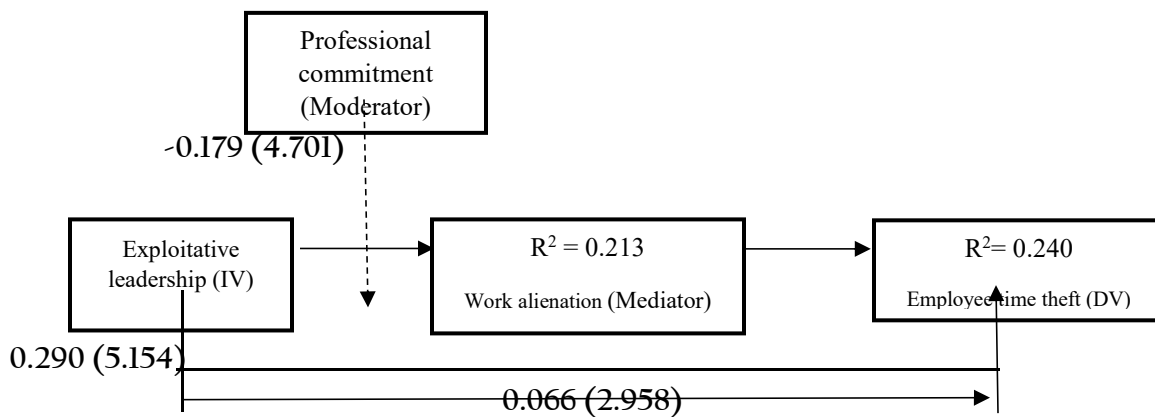

Figure 2: Interaction Effect Model

⟶ : Direct effect - - - - ▶ : The moderating effect

Note: t-values in parenthesis

To plot the interaction and identify the nature of moderating influence, we computed slopes 1SD above and below the mean of professional commitment. The moderating influence of professional commitment can be seen in Figure 3. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the positive relationship between EL and WA was weaker (stronger) when the degree of PC was high (low).
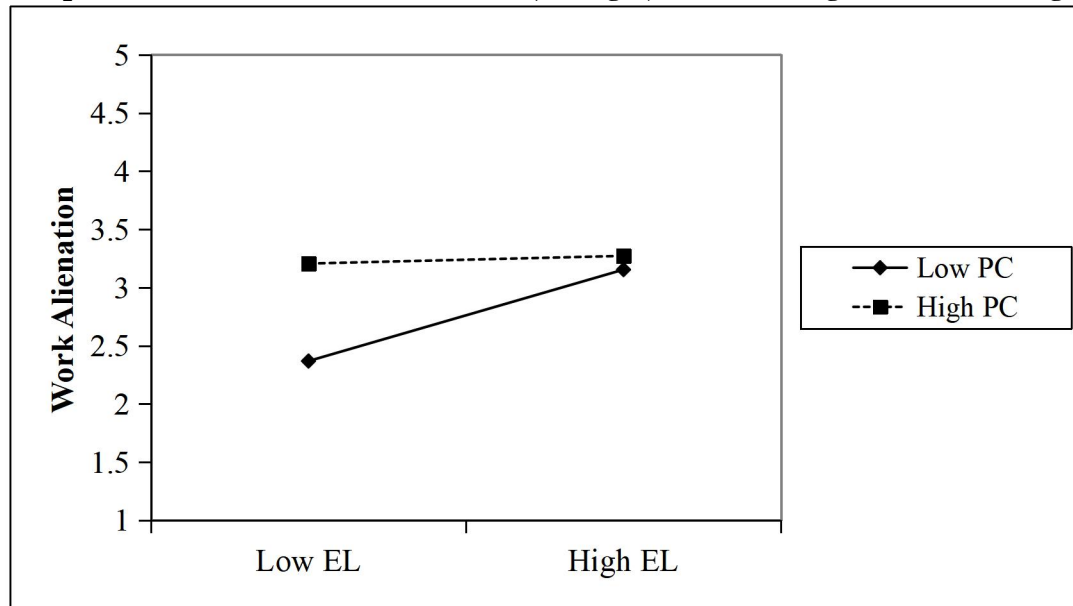

Figure 3: Interaction between EL and PC on WA

Discussion

Based on the COR theory, the main aim of the study was to examine the relationship between exploitative leadership and time theft of hospitality employees with work alienation as the mediator and professional commitment as the moderator. This study examined the relationship between exploitative leadership and time theft. From the results, it was found that the impact of exploitative leadership on time theft was significant and positive. Thus, it can be argued that exploitative leadership in hospitality makes employees more oriented towards time theft behavior. In this study, we explored work alienation as a mediator between exploitative leadership and time theft. From the results, it was found that work alienation mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and time theft. These results show that work alienation was a significant mechanism that facilitates exploitative leadership which ultimately leads to time theft behavior among employees.

As expected, professional commitment moderated the relationship between exploitative leadership and work alienation. The findings show that professional commitment moderates the relationship between exploitative leadership and work alienation. Simply put, employees who have a strong sense of commitment to their profession may be better able to withstand the negative effects of exploitative leadership. Even when they feel separated from their job or

organization, they may be driven to uphold their ethical standards and professional reputation. The correlation between time theft and work alienation could be weaker in this instance.

Limitations and Future Directions

Due to time limitations, the study has been conducted with a cross-sectional time frame from two sources i.e., supervisors and their employees from the hospitality sector. Secondly, the sample size was not sufficient and broad and may not represent all employees in the hospitality sector of Pakistan. This limitation reduces the application of the findings of the study to other key employment sectors. The type of organization also affects the results due to the nature of the work environment. In the service sector, the level of exploitative exposure is higher because of the challenges and deadlines of certain activities as compared to the manufacturing sector in which routine work does not involve dealings with the public and following strict deadlines.

The hospitality industry was the exclusive focus of this study; adding other significant companies and organizations, such as banking and telecoms, might strengthen the testing and importance of the findings. To generalize the results of the current study, bigger samples may be used in future investigations. To increase the validity of the current study, other research methods, such as longitudinal design, may be used in the future. Additionally, only one moderator and mediator were assessed for exploitative leadership owing to time and resource restrictions. Other mediating factors, such as anger and anxiety can also be used to evaluate the relationship between exploitative leadership and time theft. Subsequent studies may concentrate on additional moderating factors, such as the degree of perceived organizational support. To improve the generalizability of the findings over a wider area, future studies might concentrate on the cultural influences on the link between the aforementioned factors.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between time theft and exploitative leadership, focusing on how work alienation functions as a mediator and professional commitment as a moderator between time theft and exploitative leadership. The study's findings suggest a favorable correlation between time theft and exploitative leadership. Moreover, results show that work alienation mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and time theft. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that professional commitment mitigates the relationship between exploitative leadership and work alienation. Organizations may utilize this information to create measures that will lessen employee time theft and the actions of exploitative leaders.

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