

Exploitative leadership and organizational cynicism: the mediating role of emotional exhaustion

The mediating
role of
emotional
exhaustion

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to clarify the relationship between exploitative leadership (EL) and organizational cynicism (OC). Besides, it aims also to examine the mediating role of emotional exhaustion (EE) underpinning this relation.

Design/methodology/approach – The data were collected by a questionnaire from 491 employees, who work in four telecom firms.

Findings – The paper provides empirical insights about how EL influenced OC; it suggested that EE fully mediated the positive relationship between EL and OC.

Originality/value – To the author's knowledge, it is the first study to address the relationship between exploitative leadership and organizational cynicism. In addition, it is the first one to explore the mediating mechanism of emotional exhaustion underpinning this relation.

Keywords Exploitative leadership, Organizational cynicism, Emotional exhaustion

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leaders represent their organizations, and their activities are frequently linked to their subordinates' actions (Aquino *et al.*, 1999; Jiang *et al.*, 2017). In management literature, leadership has a special interest (Terzi and Derin, 2016); this can be referred to as the "leaders' lure" power to get their subordinates to perform in a certain way freely (Terzi and Derin, 2016). The process of influencing an organized group's activities toward the fulfilment of a task has been termed as leadership (Chemers, 1997; Jiang *et al.*, 2017). Leadership has traditionally been associated with power and influence, which may sometimes be detrimental to teams, organizations and followers (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

Exploitative leadership (EL) is classified as destructive leadership since these leaders engage in a variety of undesirable actions (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Majeed and Fatima, 2020). "Leadership with the primary goal of furthering the leader's self-interest through exploiting others" is how EL is characterized (Schmid *et al.*, 2019, p. 1,426; Guo *et al.*, 2020). Exploitative leaders may take advantage of people by engaging in true egoistic behaviors such as challenging subordinates, taking credit, influencing subordinates and applying pressure (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

Past literature has demonstrated several negative consequences of EL including reduced affective commitment and job satisfaction, raised burnout, turnover intention, realized imbalance in social exchange and workplace deviance (Schmid *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Guo *et al.*, 2020; Pircher Verdorfer *et al.*, 2019).

Exploitative leaders are selfish leaders who manipulate and exploit their subordinates secretly by giving them extra workload (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Majeed and Fatima, 2020). Emotional exhaustion (EE) can result from an employee's excessive work, which leads to a sense of emotional and psychological fatigue and physical exhaustion experienced by



emotionally tired persons (Zohar, 1997; Lim *et al.*, 2020). EE refers to the feeling of being emotionally drained by one's work (Bakker and Costa, 2014; Gkorezis *et al.*, 2015).

Greenglass *et al.* (2001) concluded that EE led to cynicism. In addition, Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly (2003) clarified that organizational cynicism is positively related to EE. Organizational cynicism (OC) is a new concept in the fields of organizational psychology and organizational behavior, and receives the attention of organizational scholars (Mete, 2013). OC can be described as a negative attitude that one holds about the organization where he/she works (Yalçinkaya, 2014; Terzi and Derin, 2016).

Answering the call of Chiaburu *et al.* (2013) to incorporate the interpersonal antecedents of OC in the criterion domain (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2017), this study aims to practically investigate the potential direct impact of EL on OC. In addition, it aims also to examine the indirect effect between them through EE. By providing practical support for these arguments, the current study hopes to make several significant theoretical contributions. Firstly, the current study seeks to extend the line of literature on organizational leadership by assuring the role of EL, as EL is a recent construct and yet limited researches are available (Khursheed, 2020). In addition, although understanding EL is important, empirical research on EL is still limited (Garlatti Costa *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, there are still many unexplored avenues in destructive leadership research, particularly in EL, that need our immediate attention (Kiyani *et al.*, 2021). Kiyani *et al.* (2021) add that because of the neglect of EL, there is a dire need to explore the effects of EL (Naseer *et al.*, 2016). Secondly, the present work sheds light on the relationship between EL and OC. Although the past literature examined several antecedents of OC, such as ethical leadership behavior (Mete, 2013); perceptions of politics (Davis and Gardner, 2004); democratic leadership (Terzi and Derin, 2016); Machiavellian leadership (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2015); authoritarian leadership (Jiang *et al.*, 2017) and leader positive humor (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2015); however, none of them examine the link between EL and OC. Thirdly, past literature emphasized the mediating effect of several constructs such as LMX (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2015); LMX and organizational identification (Qian and Jian, 2020); emotional intelligence (Gunduz, 2017); employee's silence (Park *et al.*, 2015); ethical climate (Amirkhani *et al.*, 2017) and Machiavellianism (Pour *et al.*, 2020) in the relationship between leadership types and OC; however, none of them examines the mediating role of EE. To the best of my knowledge, the present study is the first one to examine the mediating effect of EE in the relationship between EL and OC.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

The relationship between exploitative leadership and organizational cynicism

As a kind of destructive leadership, EL constitutes a negative organizational pressure (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Guo *et al.*, 2020), which denotes that EL can act as a resource-exhaustion leadership (Guo *et al.*, 2020). EL can be described as leadership with an elementary intention to further the self-interest of leaders (Schmid *et al.*, 2019). The exploitative leader is the egocentric leader who manipulates and avails his subordinates secretly by weakening them and even creating impediments in their personal growth (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Majeed and Fatima, 2020).

EL differs from authoritarian leadership, even as authoritarian leadership maintaining absolute authority, manipulate subordinates, and needs unquestionable obedience from followers (Cheng *et al.*, 2004; Jiang *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, exploitative leader exploits other persons by (1) manipulating subordinates and exerting stress, (2) behaving egoistically, (3) consistently, under challenging subordinates, allowing no development, or on other hand, (4) overburdening subordinates (Shen *et al.*, 2019). To guarantee that his or her interests are served, an exploitative leader tends to be overly nice, behaving in an exceedingly pleasant manner. These traits set this construct apart from other types of destructive leadership and strengthen the leader's positive first impression of his followers (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Garlatti Costa *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, unlike other abusive kinds of leadership, an exploitative leader is not inherently aggressive or hostile (e.g. Ashforth, 1994; Tepper, 2000; Garlatti Costa *et al.*, 2021).

The provenance of cynicism, which arose in ancient Greece as a lifestyle and thought (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Mete, 2013), is a school of thought and lifestyle (Arslan, 2012; Mete, 2013). Cynicism is a general attitude that other persons cannot be authenticated or relied on, to be honest (Anderson and Bateman, 1997; Jiang *et al.*, 2017). Cynicism triggers negative emotions and emotional components, such as anger, belittle trouble and shame (Abraham, 2000). OC has lately attained growing attention due to leaders' unethical behavior and corporate scandals that have increased employees' cynicism about the organization (Bommer *et al.*, 2005; Gkorezis *et al.*, 2015).

Dean *et al.* (1998) refer to OC as a person's belief that the workplace lacks integrity and coherence (Terzi and Derin, 2016). Dean *et al.* (1998) asserted that "a negative attitude about person's organization" containing three dimensions: (1) tendency of exhibiting critical behaviors about the organization, (2) negative affect about the organization, (3) a belief that the corporate lacks integrity (Jiang *et al.*, 2017). OC is a state construct, which may vary over time as the person faces new experiences (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Davis and Gardner, 2004). OC is distinguished by hopelessness, frustration, lack of trust in the workplace, contempt toward the workplace (Anderson, 1996; Jiang *et al.*, 2017).

OC consists of three dimensions: cognitive, behavioral and affective (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Mete, 2013). Cognitive cynicism (CC) entails the belief that the workplace lacks integrity (Terzi and Derin, 2016), employees' behaviors are unreliable, changeable, and employees can tell tricks and lies (Brandes, 1997; Mete, 2013). Affective cynicism (AC) refers to the experience acquired through the institution, as well as thought, or through feelings, as well as cognition (Terzi and Derin, 2016). In behavioral cynicism (BC), people who have cynical conduct are inclined to the pessimistic predictions about incidents in the workplace; they can conduct in humiliating and negative (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Mete, 2013).

The key reason for the link between negative leadership and OC, according to Jiang *et al.* (2017), is the difference in perceived organizational support. Exploitative leaders are selfish leaders who discreetly abuse and influence their supporters by discouraging, pressuring, overloading them with work, and even putting roadblocks in their progress (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Kiyani *et al.*, 2021). Since leadership behavior is an important indicator of the degree of support provided by an organization (Levinson, 1965; Kiyani *et al.*, 2021), subordinates under EL may feel that they receive less support from the organization. Furthermore, this decrease in perceived organizational support may be related to the cynical attitudes of followers toward the organization (Leiter and Harvie, 1997; Treadway *et al.*, 2004; Jiang *et al.*, 2017). Based on the conclusion of Wanous *et al.* (2000) that the predecessor of OC is bad management behavior (Mousa *et al.*, 2020), the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H1. Exploitative leadership is positively related to organizational cynicism.

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between exploitative leadership and organizational cynicism

EL and OC relation can be explained more fully by examining the mediating role of EE. EE is the prime dimension of burnout (Gaines and Jermier, 1983). EE occurs when a person is facing overextended demands on him/her energy and time (Boles *et al.*, 1997). EE refers to "a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from an excessive job, personal demands, and continuous stress" (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998, p. 486; Lim *et al.*, 2020). Maslach and Leiter (2008, p. 498) defined EE as "feelings of being depleted and overextended of one's physical and emotional resources." EE can be understood by the feeling of being psychologically fatigued due to accumulated stress from an individual's private life or occupational demands, or a mixture of both (Lim *et al.*, 2020). Exploitative leaders overburden subordinates, give unrealistic deadlines and exploit them; this might increase a negative emotional state among persons (Schmid *et al.*, 2019; Majeed and Fatima, 2020). Past literature

had established that Machiavellian leadership (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2015) and abusive leadership (Lim *et al.*, 2020; Aryee *et al.*, 2008) enhance employee's EE. Employees who have cynical attitudes are perceived as employees who not only have negative beliefs but also have negative emotions in the workplace (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Mete, 2013). Ego-depletion theory is a popular theory in the field of organizational management, providing essential explanations for the psychological/behavioral changes that occur because of resource depletion. It states that the stimulus of a bad environment depletes employees' psychological/emotional resources, which influences employees' specific behaviors (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Thau and Mitchell (2010), for example, discovered that abusive supervision led to employee depletion and, as a result, employees' counterproductive behavior (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Exploitative leaders often create a negative environment for their employees. Pursuing one's interests and exploiting employees leads to depletion of employees' psychological resources. This reduces the active behavior of employees who require psychological resources (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Based on the conclusion of Cole *et al.* (2006) that supervisor support might attenuate OC through the mechanisms of negative and positive emotions (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014) and the conclusion of Aree *et al.* (2008) that EE mediates the link between abusive supervision and contextual performance, this study contends that EL raises EE, further increasing OC, and based on this, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2. Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and organizational cynicism.

In summary, the present study explains how and under what conditions EL is associated with OC through EE. Figure 1 depicts the suggested model. According to the ego-depletion theory, exploitative leaders frequently create a hostile environment for their employees, and their exploitation of employees in pursuit of their own goals will lead to the psychological exhaustion of employees' resources. As a result, the employees' positive actions will be reduced, putting a strain on their psychological resources. As a result, EL is selected as an independent construct (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

Method

Sample and procedure

Hypotheses were validated by utilizing data from a survey of front-line employees in all four telecom firms in Egypt. The front-line employees were selected for their crucial role in service quality (Gao *et al.*, 2013). Besides, they often face negative client reactions and verbal aggression, which can make them more prone to EE (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993). The management of the firms was approached for approval to conduct the study.

Since the present study adopted a self-reporting method, thus, the findings can be impacted by common method variance, to reduce this bias, present study following the recommendation of (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012), the data were collected at two stages with a separation of 10 days. At time 1 respondents completed demographics and EL. At time 2, respondents rated EE and OC.

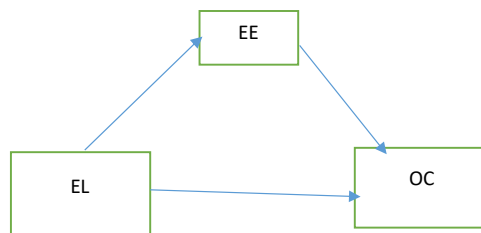


Figure 1.
A conceptual model for hypotheses

A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed to four firms through a convenience sampling method, and 522 were returned; however, out of those returned, 31 were incomplete. As such, 491 were used or analyzed, representing a 75.53% return rate. The data were obtained from participants in their workplaces within 4 months in 2019.69% of respondents were between 20 and 40 years old, 97% received a university education, 78% were male and most of the respondents 45.2% were above 15 years' tenure. The respondents represented a variety of jobs, including sales, technical support and client service.

Participation was voluntary and respondents were assured that their responses would remain anonymous.

Questionnaire design and structure

The present study was conducted in Egypt, and the scales were in English. Thus, standard translation and re-translation procedures were used to guarantee the equivalence of measures between Arabic and English versions (Brislin, 1980; Elsaied, 2019, 2020). The instrument was constructed building on measures developed by Schmid *et al.* (2019), Demerouti *et al.* (2001) and Brandes *et al.* (1999).

It involves two parts: part one was informed consent from which respondents were to register and demonstrate their acceptance of participation in the survey. Part two of the instrument had four sections. The first addresses the four demographic variables, including gender, age, educational level and organizational tenure. The second list EL items, the items of the third list the EE items and the fourth lists the items about OC. The first four items are demographic, while the remaining 32 items are rated on a different point Likert scale.

EL: was measured with a 15-item scale developed by Schmid *et al.* (2019). Sample items included: "Increases my workload without considering my needs in order to reach his or her goals" and "Uses my work to get himself or her self-noticed."

EE: was measured with three items from the EE subscale of the OLB I Demerouti *et al.* (2001). Sample items are "After working, I have enough energy for my leisure activities" and "After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary."

OC: was assessed with 14-item scale developed by Brandes *et al.* (1999), four items for CC, five items for AC and five items for BC. Sample items are: "My organization expects one thing of its employees, but it rewards another," "I find myself mocking my company's slogan and initiatives."

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

To validate the uniqueness of the current study variables, four separate confirmatory factor analysis (CFAs) were performed: the model's CMIN, CMIN/df, root mean square residual (RMR), the goodness-of-fit statistic (GFI), adjusted the goodness-of-fit statistic (AGFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), were used to evaluate the model fit (Elsaied, 2019, 2020). Table 1 shows the CFAs results as follows:

Findings in Table 1 demonstrate that the three-factor model of EL, EE, OC (CMIN = 19946.200; CMIN/df = 40.214; RMR = 0.365; GFI = 0.240, AGFI = 0.191, CFI = 0.281, TLI = 0.285 and RMSEA = 0.283) provided a best fit to the data than any other models; involving a one-factor model (CMIN = 20556.285; CMIN/df = 41.444; RMR = 0.371; GFI = 0.234, AGFI = 0.182, CFI = 0.276, TLI = 0.250 and RMSEA = 0.287); two-factor model (i.e. combining EL into one factor and EE, OC into another factor; CMIN = 2080.415; CMIN/df = 40.686; RMR = 0.368; GFI = 0.237; AGFI = 0.188, CFI = 0.265, TLI = 0.281 and RMSEA = 0.283). Thus, the findings support the distinctiveness of the three variables for

subsequent analysis. In addition, the findings highlights that the data do not severe from common method variance, since the three-factor model provided a best fit to the data than any other models.

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 2 demonstrates the means, standard deviations, correlations among the variables and Cronbach’s alpha coefficients.

The mean values for all variables are between 3.01 and 3.38, with standard deviations between 0.57 and 1.02. The Zero-order Pearson correlations show that EL has a positive and significant relation with EE ($R = 0.216, p < 0.01$, Table 2), OC ($R = 0.170, p < 0.01$, Table 2). Besides, EE has a positive and significant relation with OC ($R = 0.451, p < 0.01$, Table 2). Hence, these findings provide the prerequisite for the analysis of relationships among the relevant constructs. The coefficient alphas for all the three scales range from 0.893 to 0.973 meet Nunnally (1978) criterion of 0.70, suggesting good reliability of all the scales. The results of Table 3 indicates that all item loadings ranged between 0.701 and 0.986 exceeded the minimum threshold level of 0.70 recommended by Hair et al. (2013). The assessment of the composite reliability (CR) illustrated that all the variables had a value greater than the cutoff value 0.70 recommended by Hair et al. (2013); and the average variance extracted (AVE) of all variables was greater than the cutoff value of 0.50 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which confirms the convergent validity of the scales (Elsaied, 2019, 2020).

Hypotheses testing

The common method bias (CMB) test was performed to guarantee the validity of self-reported and single-source data for the present study (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Saira et al., 2020). Harman’s single factor test was utilized (Harman, 1967; Saira et al., 2020). The total variance of the single variable was 25.77%, less than 50% is acceptable (Saira et al., 2020), elucidating no risk of CMB.

The proposed model (shown in Figure 1) was validated by the structural equation modeling (SEM) method in the analysis of moment structures (AMOS).

The results presented in Table 4 reveal that EL has a positive and significant impact on OC ($B = 0.076, p < 0.001$). Thus, H1 received support.

Besides, the findings presented in Table 4 demonstrated that the impact of EL on EE is a positive and significant ($B = 0.216, p < 0.001$, Table 4), and the effect of EE on OC are positive and significant ($B = 0.435, p < 0.001$, Table 4). Moreover, Table 5 shows that the impact of EL

Table 1.
Results of CFA

Model	CMIN	CMIN/df	RMR	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
One-factor model	20556.285	41.444	0.371	0.234	0.182	0.276	0.250	0.287
Two-factor model	20180.415	40.686	0.368	0.237	0.188	0.265	0.281	0.283
Three-factor model	19946.200	40.214	0.365	0.240	0.191	0.281	0.285	0.283

Table 2.
Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas and intercorrelations among variables

Variables	Cronbach’s alpha	M	SD	1	2	3
1. EL	0.893	3.01	0.57	1	0.216**	0.170**
2. EE	0.973	3.38	1.02		1	0.451**
3. CC	0.899	3.2	0.682			1

Note(s): $N = 491$, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Items	Factor loadings	AVE	CR
EL1	0.786	0.527	0.941
EL2	0.737		
EL3	0.809		
EL4	0.771		
EL5	0.736		
EL6	0.701		
EL7	0.719		
EL8	0.739		
EL9	0.709		
EL10	0.707		
EL11	0.749		
EL12	0.760		
EL13	0.937		
EL14	0.821		
EL15	0.823		
EE1	0.986	0.948	0.982
EE2	0.972		
EE3	0.962		
OC1	0.777	0.635	0.960
OC2	0.853		
OC3	0.835		
OC4	0.753		
OC5	0.748		
OC6	0.739		
OC7	0.766		
OC8	0.877		
OC9	0.771		
OC10	0.793		
OC11	0.855		
OC12	0.885		
OC13	0.779		
OC14	0.774		

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Table 3.
CFA's items loadings, AVE and CR

Predictor	Outcome	Estimate
EL	EE	0.216**
	OC	0.076**
EE	EE	0.435**
	OC	0.435**

Note(s): $N = 491$, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 4.
Direct effects

on OC has reduced and become non-significant after integrating EE into the model ($B = 0.076$ ns, Table 5). Furthermore, the findings in Table 5 revealed that the indirect effects of EL on OC through EE are ($B = 0.094$, $p < 0.001$, Table 5). Thus, H2 received support. As such, EE fully mediated the relationships between EL and OC. Figure 2 depicts the mediation model.

Discussion

The current paper aimed to develop a mediation model to explore the emotional mechanism underlying EL and OC relationship. Overall, this paper results provide strong support for the suggested model and contribute to the extent of EL, EE and OC research fields.

The findings proved that EL had a positive and significant relationship with OC, suggesting that when employees perceive their leaders as exploitative, they are more likely to develop cynical attitudes about their companies. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of [Jiang et al. \(2017\)](#) that authoritarian leadership is positively and significantly related to OC. Exploitative leaders deplete followers' valued individual resources related to self-esteem and self-respect. Besides, it is well recognized that the support of leaders is the most worthy social resource in the organization ([Lee et al., 2018](#); [Hobfoll, 2001](#); [Guo et al., 2020](#)).

Exploitative leaders are highly self-interest and take for granted, "Others exist for them" ([Schmid et al., 2019](#); [Guo et al., 2020](#)). Thus, in sense, EL poses a threat to the feeling of self-respect that persons attain through treatment with dignity and respect ([Tyler, 1994](#); [Guo et al., 2020](#)). [Thau and Mitchell \(2010\)](#) concluded that abusive supervision enhanced an individual's depletion and thus resulted in counterproductive behaviors.

Additionally, the findings showed that EE fully mediated the relationships between EL and OC, suggesting that when employees perceive their leaders as exploitative, they are more likely to feel with EE, further affecting OC. This result is consistent with the conclusion of ([Aryee et al., 2008](#)) that EE mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and contextual performance. Exploitative leaders under challenge and undermine their subordinates, give hard deadlines, put extra pressure on them, create obstacles in their growth, give them dull tasks and encumber them ([Schmid et al., 2019](#); [Majeed and Fatima, 2020](#)). Their exploration of followers, in pursuit of their interests will result in followers psychological resources, will in turn decrease the followers' positive behaviors, which requires their psychological resources ([Wang et al., 2020](#)). Researchers have proved that OC is positively linked to EE ([Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003](#); [Gkorezis et al., 2014](#)). [Cole et al. \(2006\)](#) revealed that supervisors might decrease OC through the mechanism of positive and negative emotions ([Jiang et al., 2017](#)).

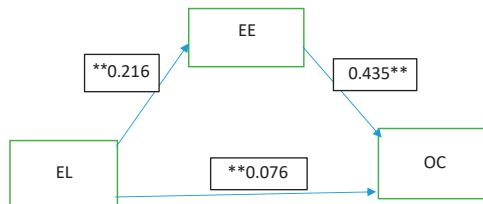
Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on leadership and OC in three ways. First, the current study establishes a link between the literature on EL and OC. Although cynicism constitutes a frequently negative reaction with a harmful impact on diverse outcomes, there are limited practical studies about its antecedents especially concerning OC ([Cole et al., 2006](#); [Gkorezis et al., 2014](#)). Our results emphasized the crucial roles of leaders in employees' OC. The findings have confirmed the early viewpoint that abusive supervision enhanced an individual's

Hypotheses	Direct effect	Indirect effect
EL-EE-OC	0.076	0.094***

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 5.
Mediating effect



Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Figure 2.
The mediation model

depletion and thus led to counterproductive behaviors (Thau and Mitchell, 2010). Notably, concerning EL, which has not received any attention in the literature of OC, the current work is the first one to demonstrate why this vital role in attenuating OC. Moreover, exploitative leadership is an integral part of understanding the spectrum of destructive leadership. Schmid *et al.* (2019) pointed out that exploitative leadership would add maximum value to destructive leadership research if it could be integrated with other structures to measure inherent contingencies and effects. Therefore, based on the theory of self-depletion, it suggests and empirically shows that exploitative leadership has a positive impact on OC. Theoretically, the most important meaning of our research is to investigate whether exploitative leadership enhances OC of employees. This unfolds existing literature due to the negative consequences of exploitative leadership. Second, the current study is among the first to explain whether the Egyptian leadership influences OC or not, extant studies about the influence of leadership types on OC have primarily focused on how western leadership types influence their subordinates' OC (Jiang *et al.*, 2017; Thau and Mitchell, 2010; Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014). EE is the most researched aspect of job burnout (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003) and is regarded as the first stage of burnout development (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). This study sheds light on how telecommunication sector employees' burnout occurs by finding a crucial antecedent of EE. Given the growing interest in telecommunication employees' burnout (Golembiewski *et al.*, 1992; Bakker and Costa, 2014) and engagement (Jiang *et al.*, 2017), this study adds to the homological network of burnout and may be engagement (Golembiewski *et al.*, 1992; Bakker and Costa, 2014).

Third, the current study adds to the body of knowledge by introducing the role of EE as a mediating factor in the relationship between EL and OC. LMX (Qian and Jian, 2020; Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014; organizational identification (Qian and Jian, 2020), psychological strain (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2017), justice perceptions (Wu *et al.*, 2007) and ethical atmosphere (Amirkhani *et al.*, 2017) were found to be mediators between them in previous research. The recent study proposed a new emotional mechanism, EE, which is distinct from the previously identified components. As a result, the new study contributes to our understanding of the emotional mechanism by adding to previous research.

Managerial implications

These findings also have management ramifications. To reduce exploitative behaviors, firms must devote more effort and time to reducing the occurrence of EL, as it is a critical leadership style for triggering employees' OC. Companies should offer favor to management candidates with low selfish intentions and dark side personality traits when selecting and promoting leaders, for example. Furthermore, limiting a leader's extremely self-interested activities may assist training programs that focus on fostering a more true awareness of a person's interdependence with other people (Guo *et al.*, 2020). Second, because the data showed that EE mediated the association between EL and OC, organizations should give their employees with EE-reduction training programs, such as anger management, stress management, goal and team role clarification, and positive thinking programs. These programs may help to avoid employees from being exposed to these undesirable situations by refocusing their attention on the positive aspects of their jobs (Grandey, 2000; Thanacoody *et al.*, 2014). Finally, to decrease OC in the organization, leaders should utilize several approaches to enhance trustworthiness, such as treating all the employees fairly (Jiang *et al.*, 2017). Besides, establishing a communication system that makes employees share work-related information from an organization (Ewis, 2014; Jiang *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, companies should let employees participate in decision-making and build their trust in supervisors (Jiang *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, to reduce OC, according to the findings of this study, leaders should primarily pay attention to their actions, rather than criticize, question or attempt to change

the attitudes of their employees. In particular, our findings suggest that exploitative behavior by individuals can have a powerful impact on attitudes toward organizations. By witnessing and experiencing the ethical behavior and messages of leaders, employees are more likely to improve the quality of their relationships with their leaders, increase their sense of belonging, and find better integrity with their organization's mission and values. As a result, employees are less likely to be cynical towards the organization (Qian and Jian, 2020).

Limitations and future studies

Although the findings of this study are promising, there are a few things to keep in mind. For starts, only EE was looked at as a mediating factor; future research could look into additional mediating factors such as job stress, psychological safety, behavioral integrity and affective organizational commitment. Second, because moderating variables were not included, future researchers may be able to confirm if some characteristics (e.g. follower moral attentiveness, value congruence, hostile attributional style and work satisfaction) can function as moderating variables in the associations between EL and OC. The third limitation is the population sampled; the data were obtained from four telecom companies in Egypt, and thus the results may have been influenced by values and cultural context, such as traditionalism, power distance and collectivism (Zhou *et al.*, 2014; Farh *et al.*, 2004; Elsaied, 2019, 2020). Future research should aim to achieve generalizability of the findings (Gelfand *et al.*, 2007; Zhou *et al.*, 2014; Elsaied, 2019, 2020). The fourth constraint is related to the cross-sectional research methodology; while the current findings are compatible with the hypotheses proposed, the longitudinal design may reveal more information. As a result, the findings may not fully explain the theoretical grounds for determining causation. To better establish the direction of claimed relationships in their work, future studies should adopt a longitudinal research approach (Elsaied, 2019, 2020).

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