



# Paved with Good Intentions: Self-regulation Breakdown After Altruistic Ethical Transgression

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## Abstract

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) is unethical behavior driven by an intention to assist an organization. This study is one of the first attempts to examine the consequences of UPB. We argue that such types of behaviors can induce failure in self-regulation and thereby give rise to counterproductive work behavior (CWB). Based on self-regulation theory, we theorize that the breakdown in three fundamental mechanisms (i.e., moral standards, monitoring, and discipline) explains the link between UPB and CWB. Moreover, moral identity internalization can temper these breakdown processes such that employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization are less likely to experience moral disengagement, workplace entitlement, or self-control depleting after enacting UPB, and therefore, will engage in less CWB. We conducted a 7-day experience sampling study of 95 financial service employees in a Chinese bank to test our theoretical model. The results indicated that transgressions committed with the intention of helping the organization would ultimately harm the organization, especially for those with lower moral identity internalization. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

**Keywords** Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) · Self-regulation theory · Moral identity internalization · Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) · Moral disengagement · Psychological entitlement · Self-control depletion

## Introduction

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Hongyu Zhang and Xin Lucy Liu have contributed equally to this work.

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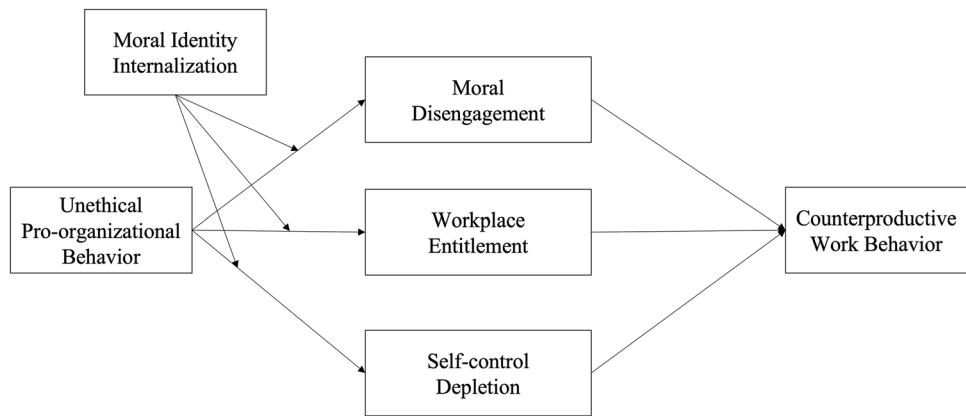
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In April 2020, Luckin Coffee, one of the fastest-growing Chinese beverage retailers, was exposed for fraudulent behavior after fabricating more than \$310 million in sales for 2019.<sup>1</sup> Jian Liu, Luckin's Chief Operating Officer, was held responsible for the fraud. Liu's explanation for his misconduct was that it was a way to lure investors toward the company's "aggressive growth."<sup>2</sup> In the workplace, such behaviors are not uncommon. Salespeople sometimes exaggerate the merits of a product to increase sales revenue for the firm, or may deliberately hide fatal problems of new products to help their firm obtain approvals. Such types of behavior have been examined under the rubric of unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPBs), which are defined as transgressions of "core social values, norms, or standards of proper conduct" done with the motive of assisting an organization (Umphress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/luckin-coffee-fabricated-310-million-in-sales-investigation-2020-4>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/behind-the-fall-of-chinas-luckin-coffee-a-network-of-fake-buyers-and-a-fictitious-employee-11590682336>.

**Fig. 1** Conceptual model

Obviously, UPB damages the organization. After the Luckin Coffee scandal, the stock price declined over 75%, and resulted in the company being delisted from the NASDAQ.<sup>3</sup> However, the way UPB influences the employees who conduct it is more complicated, and may impact the organization in unexpected ways (Schuh et al., 2021). In this study, we propose that UPB may harm the organization via its influences on employees. Specifically, UPB that is driven by the intention to help the organization may ironically induce more counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), which are defined as “employee behaviors that are harmful to the legitimate interests of an organization” (Dalal, 2005, p. 1241).

Previous research found that UPB can have paradoxical impacts on its actors in many domains given its dual nature of being both pro-organizational and unethical (Liu et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020). For example, UPB can induce contradictory feelings, such as pride and guilt (Liu et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020), and organization-based self-esteem and stress (Chen et al., 2021). Its effect can spill over to the family domain by increasing both work-to-family enrichment and work-to-family conflict (Chen et al., 2021). When observed by colleagues, UPB actors may receive both help and incivility as their colleagues show both admiration and disgust toward them (Tang et al., 2021). Despite such actor-centric research on UPB’s consequences, an intriguing yet underexplored domain is how UPB as a morally conflicting behavior influences actors’ subsequent moral beliefs and behaviors. A few studies have verified that UPB leads to good deeds by its actors, such as their organizational citizenship behavior (Tang et al., 2021) and voice (Wang et al., 2022). However, considering the inherently paradoxical nature of UPB, it is also possible that UPB will open a Pandora’s box and precipitate more deviant behaviors.

Relying on self-regulation theory (Bandura, 1991; Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), we propose an actor-centric, multi-path model to explain why UPB can increase subsequent CWB (see our conceptual model in Fig. 1). We surmise that the initial transgression for an organization can become the first domino in the process of self-regulatory breakdown, thereby leading to the transgression against the organization (Welsh et al., 2015). Specifically, we propose that UPB impairs three components—standards, monitoring, and strength—of subsequent self-regulation (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). First, UPB is likely to eclipse overall moral standards, because the implied good intentions and ambiguity provide employees with opportunities to justify their behaviors, which blurs the boundaries of moral standards. Second, UPB is likely to jeopardize moral monitoring, because it can be considered a personal sacrifice and grants employees a sense of entitlement, which leads to decreased motivation to undertake self-monitoring. Third, UPB is likely to hamper moral discipline, because the dissonant components of UPB can exhaust employees’ self-regulatory strength, thus leaving them vulnerable to potentially destructive impulses.

In addition, we propose that employees’ moral identity internalization, defined as the extent of centrality they place on moral values (e.g., honesty) in their self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002), can be a critical boundary condition in the breakdown processes of moral self-regulation after UPB. Adamant and entrenched moral values can block the domino effect triggered by UPB and buffer the erosion of UPB on employees’ moral standards, moral monitoring, and moral strength. In this study, we adopt the experience sampling method (ESM) to test these propositions. The ESM design can capture employees’ momentary psychological experiences and behaviors, and thus, can capture the attitude and behavior changes within an individual. We collect repetitive data from 95 financial service employees in a Chinese bank on 7 consecutive workdays. The results of this ESM study largely support our conceptual model.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/03/luckin-coffee-debacle-is-a-painful-reminder-of-fraud-risk.html>.

This study mainly contributes to two lines of literature. First, we contribute to the existing UPB literature by further exploring the consequences of UPB. Research has predominantly emphasized the antecedents of UPB using different theoretical perspectives (see Mishra et al., 2021 for a review). From the *identity-based perspective*, organizational identity sparks UPB (Matherne & Litchfield, 2012), whereas moral identity inhibits it (Chen et al., 2016; Umphress et al., 2010). From the *relationship-based perspective*, organizational embeddedness (Lee et al., 2022) and perceived organizational support (Wang et al., 2021) induce UPB. From the *social learning-based perspective*, supervisors' UPB can trickle down to their subordinates (Fehr et al., 2019; Lian et al., 2022), whereas supervisors' ethical leadership can inhibit subordinates' UPB (Miao et al., 2020). Although UPB is a volitional behavior, contextual triggers such as organizational politics (Valle et al., 2019), social exclusion (Thau et al., 2015), egoistic norms (Graham et al., 2020), and risk climate (Sheedy et al., 2020) are also considerations when understanding an individual's motivations to engage in UPB. In summary, the literature has primarily focused on the antecedents of UPB and considered it as the result of self-regulation. However, UPB can also be the beginning of a self-regulation process, and thus, it is meaningful to explore its consequences. Following this emerging line of literature (Mishra et al., 2021), our study demonstrates that UPB can function as a trigger for moral regulation breakdown owing to its morally paradoxical nature. By supplementing earlier work, which suggests that UPB may lead to subsequent prosocial behaviors (Tang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022), this study enriches our understanding of UPB by proposing another parallel possibility: UPB may enhance CWB because of moral self-regulation breakdowns.

Second, this study contributes to self-regulation theory by simultaneously theorizing and testing multiple mediating mechanisms in the process of moral regulation breakdown (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). UPB contains paradoxical elements, and thus, is likely to trigger multiple self-regulation mechanisms. The unique nature of UPB provides the opportunity to investigate three pathways from UPB to CWB simultaneously. In doing so, we can compare the relative importance of these mechanisms. Our findings show that each of the three components of self-regulation exerts unique influences during the breakdown processes of moral self-regulation.

Our study also contributes to self-regulation theory by demonstrating how people regulate themselves over time. Research using self-regulation theory has mainly focused on how a person's behavior is shaped by forethought or cognitive schemata in a unidirectional way. However, as Scheier and Carver (1988) noted, there is "no real beginning or end" of self-regulation (p. 304). Behaviors at the end of one self-regulation may represent the beginning of the following

self-regulation, and it "serves as a lens" through which one constructs future behaviors (Merritt et al., 2010, p. 349). This study spotlights the reciprocity between one's behaviors and forethought by examining two consecutive regulation processes: (a) how a morally conflicting behavior such as UPB changes employees' moral schemata (i.e., moral standards, moral self-monitoring, and moral self-regulatory strength); and (b) how the changed moral schemata further impact their subsequent immoral conduct, as in CWB. The combination of these two processes provides an opportunity to better understand the dynamics of the self-regulation process.

## Theory and Hypotheses

This study employs a dynamic self-regulation lens to pinpoint the conceptual framework. Human behaviors can be largely explained by the self-regulation process (Bandura, 1991) through which people seek to "align themselves (i.e., their behaviors and self-conceptions) with appropriate goals or standards" (Brockner & Higgins, 2001, p. 37). Self-regulation enables individuals to resist short-term temptations to achieve a long-term goal (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Successful self-regulation involves three key components: standards, monitoring, and strength (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). The first component, *standards*, represents the ideals and goals that drive behaviors. The second component, *monitoring*, refers to keeping track of one's behaviors and detecting any discrepancy with standards. The third component, *strength*, represents the capacity for change or the willpower to initiate and support the regulation process. Self-regulation theory suggests that the failure of self-regulation can be explained by the breakdown of these three components (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Guided by this theory, we propose three parallel mediators to explain how UPB can simultaneously trigger the breakdown processes of these components and lead to CWB eventually. Specifically, to capture the breakdown of moral standards, we propose the mediating effect of *moral disengagement*, a process in which people lower their moral standards; to capture the breakdown of monitoring, we propose the mediating effect of *workplace entitlement*, a state that stops people from self-monitoring; to capture the breakdown of self-regulation strength, we propose the mediating effect of *self-control depletion*, which implies inadequate self-regulation strength.

Furthermore, from a dynamic self-regulation perspective (Thomas & Mathieu, 1994), people regulate their behaviors in a dynamic way, which mainly consists of two consecutive processes. The first is the reactive process through which people reflect on their past behaviors and adjust their cognitive schemata, and explain how the three mediators can

be shaped by previous UPB; and the other is the proactive process in which people adjust their behaviors based on those changed schemata, and explain how increased moral disengagement, entitlement, and depletion can further cause more CWB (Neal et al., 2017). In addition, we propose that adamant and entrenched moral values may block the moral self-regulation breakdown processes from UPB to CWB, and therefore moral identity internalization is a critical boundary condition in the first stage of our model.

We reveal these mechanisms as follows.

## Breakdown of Moral Standards

According to self-regulation theory, *standards* are one of the essential components for successful self-regulation. These refer to goals or norms that drive individuals' behavior regarding what is ideal, appropriate, or moral. Self-regulation is hampered without clear, consistent, and appropriate standards. The breakdown of moral standards can be captured by moral disengagement, a process through which people lower their moral standards and enlarge the sphere of permissible conduct to justify their unethical behaviors and avoid self-censure (Bandura, 2002). UPB can trigger employees' moral disengagement by contaminating their moral standards.

## UPB and Moral Disengagement

After engaging in UPB, a morally conflicting behavior, employees might exhibit moral disengagement, as they have motivation and excuses to rationalize such behaviors. First, employees who engage in UPB may be motivated to use moral disengagement as a strategy to alleviate the discomfort induced by UPB. Individuals are willing to behave in accordance with their inner standards and experience psychological dissonance when they fail to do so (Festinger, 1957; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Moral disengagement has been found to be a common coping strategy to address such dissonance. UPB, a socially and morally deviant behavior justified by pro-organizational motivation, can create psychological dissonance for the transgressor. Therefore, people may become morally disengaged after UPB to address the discomfort.

Second, because the person engages in UPB with good intentions, it is excusable for them to justify their morally questionable behaviors. Those who engage in UPB might find unethical behavior acceptable when shielded by pro-organizational intention. In addition, employees can attribute UPB to authority figures or their work environment (Thau et al., 2015) to disperse accountability. Both methods—moral justification and the attribution of blame—are critical strategies for moral disengagement (Moore et al.,

2012). Consequently, research has found that as employees engage in more UPB, they would judge UPB as less unethical (Graham et al., 2020).

To make matters worse, the act of UPB can increase an employee's leniency toward a broader range of unethical behaviors, not limited to UPB itself. People tend to use past behavior as a benchmark in judging the appropriateness of future behavior (Bem, 1972). Therefore, it is more likely and easier to rationalize unethical behaviors from UPB than from ethically neutral or laudable behaviors. As Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) noted, people often unconsciously take "incremental steps down the road of unethical behaviors" (p. 229). Despite the good intention behind UPB, such deviant behaviors can seduce employees to give up their original principles and erode their moral standards, which makes further unethical behavior generally more acceptable for them. Thus, we propose as follows:

**Hypothesis 1a** UPB is positively related to moral disengagement.

## Moral Disengagement and CWB

As an employee's moral disengagement increases, so does the sphere of their permissible conduct (Mazar et al., 2008; Welsh et al., 2015). Once employees are used to morally disengaging, they tend to conduct more unethical behaviors in general. The process of moral disengagement prompts employees to use inconsistent and ambiguous moral standards to regulate their behaviors. After moral disengagement, employees themselves might not be able to distinguish whether other unethical behaviors, such as deceiving customers, were done for their own benefit or that of their organizations. Detrimental, inconsistent, and unclear moral standards make it easier for employees to justify reprehensible behavior in the future (Bandura et al., 1996), to underestimate the harmfulness of unethical behaviors that they are considering engaging in (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), and to anticipate fewer sanctions due to unethical behaviors (Shu et al., 2011). Thus, moral disengagement, although originating from pro-organizational motivation, may increase all kinds of misconduct in an organization, not just UPB. Therefore, we propose that the moral disengagement process can be one of three roads to organizational misconduct.

**Hypothesis 1b** Moral disengagement is positively related to CWB.

**Hypothesis 1c** Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between UPB and CWB.

## Breakdown of Moral Monitoring

According to self-regulation theory, successful self-regulation requires not only standards, but also self-monitoring, through which individuals keep track of their actions and compare their actual states with those standards (Bandura, 2002). If there is any discrepancy between the actual state and the ideal state (e.g., behaving unfaithfully when one wants to be a righteous person), effective self-monitoring can detect it promptly so that individuals can exert conscious self-control to change their behaviors, which brings them in line with their ideal or standard state (Karoly, 1993).

The breakdown of self-monitoring occurs when individuals stop tracking themselves and no longer seek feedback. The breakdown of self-monitoring in the workplace, compared with that in other situations, is less common. The workplace is a public place with numerous rules and norms so that individuals usually monitor themselves with extra caution at work (Snyder, 1987). However, employees with a sense of entitlement can be an exception. Workplace entitlement represents an inflated self-perception that one is privileged and deserves more than others in the organization (Campbell et al., 2004). It is hallmarked by privilege and deservedness, which enables individuals to consider that their “self-worth is above an ideal level” (Sachdeva et al., 2009, p. 524). Entitlement biases or even sabotages self-monitoring detectors. In other words, the inflated self-perception prevents individuals from recognizing the discrepancies between their actual state and ideal state, which is a signal of self-monitoring breakdown (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Therefore, entitlement is always accompanied by low self-monitoring. For example, Khan and Dhar (2007) demonstrated that people are more likely to fail to monitor their behaviors and splurge on luxury and frivolous purchases after voluntarily doing community service due to the positive self-perception, such as “I am a compassionate person.”

Therefore, we propose that the breakdown of self-monitoring in the workplace can be captured by the sense of entitlement. Specifically, in the workplace, once employees feel entitled, they often feel that their behavior is good enough and cease to monitor it. Ceasing self-monitoring creates a hotbed for deviant behaviors. Research has established that after engaging in citizenship behavior for their organization, people enjoy a sense of entitlement, no longer monitor their morality, and engage in more deviant behavior (Yam et al., 2017).

## UPB and Workplace Entitlement

Although originally proposed as a chronic personal trait (e.g., Brouer et al., 2011; Campbell et al., 2004), entitlement has been increasingly recognized as a dynamic mindset (O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2017; Qin et al., 2020).

Individuals’ sense of entitlement can be shaped by their previous behaviors (Zitek et al., 2010). Making contributions or sacrifices, such as working overtime or raising creative ideas, for example, may enable employees to feel entitled (Vincent & Kouchaki, 2016; Yam et al., 2017). Similarly, we propose that UPBs can easily induce a sense of entitlement. In the workplace, employees evaluate their state based on the equity rule. They seek a sense of equilibrium between input and output, where input represents the contributions to the organization and output represents the earnings from it (Adams, 1965). Workplace entitlement emerges when employees feel that their inputs are worth more than their outputs, especially when they “have gone above and beyond the call of duty” (Yam et al., 2017, p. 373). UPB can engender workplace entitlement, because transgressors can easily take credit for such behaviors and overestimate their input while underestimating their output.

Specifically, we argue that UPB can augment workplace entitlement for the following reasons. First, UPB is not required by the job description or included in the formal employment contract so that employees view such kinds of behavior as extra input to the organization. Second, research has found that UPB hurts employees. It can lead to negative emotions (Tang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022) and a sense of victimhood (Zitek et al., 2010), and can harm their well-being (Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Such unpleasant feelings can make employees feel that their organizations owe them. Relatedly, UPB violates the universal moral norms and puts employees’ social image, credit, and reputation at risk (Brass et al., 1998). Therefore, employees view UPB as a personal sacrifice.

According to self-enhancement theory (Swann et al., 1987, 1989), employees strive to enhance their self-perception and tend to self-credit their conduct at work. They are “especially likely to credit themselves for their acts that contribute to organizational functioning but do not directly lead to formal rewards” (Ng & Yam, 2019, p. 2). UPB demands extra inputs and personal sacrifice while rarely being openly rewarded. Therefore, we argue that UPB is likely to be considered by employees as an “input” to the organization and induces the perception of deservingness (O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2017). Overall, UPB may lead to a sense of deservedness that makes its actors assume they have accumulated credit.

**Hypothesis 2a** UPB is positively related to workplace entitlement.

## Workplace Entitlement and CWB

Research has established that entitled groups, such as the upper classes (Piff et al., 2012) and leaders (Levine, 2005), less frequently monitor themselves and more frequently

engage in more immoral behaviors. The entitlement of such groups often makes them blind to the harmfulness and inappropriateness of their conduct (Merritt et al., 2010). Similarly, we propose that the enhanced workplace entitlement induced by UPB may negatively impact an employee's self-monitoring process and lead to more CWB.

Entitled individuals are less willing to monitor their behaviors based on the existing rules (Li, 2021; Zitek & Jordan, 2019). They may regard the organizational rules as made for their coworkers but not for themselves, as they deserve more leniency and immunity from potential punishments. Consequently, entitled employees cease monitoring themselves according to organizational rules and thus, demonstrate more CWB.

In summary, after engaging in UPB, employees may feel that their good intentions and self-sacrifices earn them the moral license for less self-monitoring and more bad deeds (Klotz & Bolino, 2013); therefore, they can afford to 'purchase' the right to engage in CWB (Hollander, 1958).

**Hypothesis 2b** Workplace entitlement is positively related to CWB.

**Hypothesis 2c** Workplace entitlement mediates the relationship between UPB and CWB.

### Breakdown of Self-regulation Strength

According to self-regulation theory (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), besides standard and monitoring, successful self-regulation also requires adequate self-regulatory resources to "override impulses, block out distracting emotions and cognitions, and align behaviors with social norms and task standards" (Lanaj et al., 2014, p. 11). However, self-regulatory resources are limited and all kinds of self-regulation draw from the same finite pool of self-regulatory resources. Therefore, as lifting weights causes muscle fatigue and leaves people barely able to lift heavy items in the near term, effortful self-control also consumes self-regulatory resources and impairs subsequent self-regulation (Gailliot et al., 2006). For example, an experimental study reported that people who performed a task that required self-control (e.g., suppressing emotional feelings) showed worse regulatory performance subsequently (Muraven et al., 1998). The decreased self-regulatory resources, in particular, lead to vulnerability in resisting the temptation to engage in harmful behaviors (Gino et al., 2011; Joosten et al., 2014). For example, the exhibition of surface acting can result in abusive supervision because it consumes the self-regulatory resources of leaders (Uy et al., 2017; Yam et al., 2016). Similarly, we propose that UPB can deplete employees' self-regulatory resources, thus making them yield to the impulse of engaging in CWB.

### UPB and Self-control Depletion

The strength model of self-regulation points out that self-regulation often fails despite the best intentions because it requires and consumes self-regulatory resources (Baumeister et al., 2007, 2018). Research has indicated that making choices among conflicting demands and resisting temptation from alternatives can consume self-regulatory resources and lead to depletion. For example, consumers who face multiple alternatives (Huffman & Kahn, 1998; Malhotra, 1982) and employees whose values are different from those of their organizations (Deng et al., 2016) are more likely to feel depleted. Similarly, UPB is morally conflicting, as it satisfies the loyalty requirement of being an employee, yet sacrifices the integrity requirement of being a societal member (Liu et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020). Therefore, we propose that UPB leads to employees' self-regulatory resource depletion.

Making a choice is also an effortful act that occupies self-regulatory resources rather than a habitual one, as it involves contemplating alternatives and selecting between them (Vohs et al., 2018). UPB is a choice between two 'right' alternatives: be loyal to the organization, or be honest with outside stakeholders (Finegan, 1994). In complex circumstances of this kind, the brain's automatic evaluation and selection process cannot settle on a single optimal response (Hirsh et al., 2011, 2012). Therefore, UPB depletes the attentional resources of its actors, who are uncertain about whether a choice or course of action is the right thing to do. They keep chewing over the alternatives after engaging in UPB. In addition, they engage in effortful self-regulation processes to deal with UPB's conflicting elements (Deng et al., 2016), and the negative affect (e.g., anxiety) that accompanies UPB (Liu et al., 2021), both of which are depleting.

Overall, after engaging in UPB, employees contemplate whether their choices are correct and strive to prove that they are. These effortful acts of self-regulation appear to consume or even deplete the self-regulatory resources of employees. Thus, we propose as follows.

**H3a** UPB is positively related to self-control depletion.

### Self-control Depletion and CWB

All acts of self-regulation draw from a limited pool of resources, thereby leaving fewer resources for future self-regulation. When self-regulatory resources deplete, self-regulation diminishes and allows unwanted behaviors to emerge (Gailliot et al., 2006). For example, depleted students are more likely to cheat (Gino et al., 2011), and depleted accountants are more likely to engage in fraud (Yam et al., 2014). Following this line of research, we propose that

self-control depletion resulting from UPB may increase employees' CWB in the future.

CWB not only can bring its actor some direct short-term interests (e.g., leisure time or free public supplies) but also can "satisfy a motive such as pleasure, greed, thrill-seeking, risk-taking, or attention-seeking" (Cullen & Sackett, 2003, p. 154). Therefore, resisting the destructive temptations of CWB and delaying gratification require adequate self-regulatory resources and can become less attainable when employees are depleted (Fehr et al., 2017; Klotz et al., 2018). Consequently, the self-control depletion originating from UPB hinders the executive function so that those who are depleted are less likely to resist engaging in CWB successfully.

In summary, UPB consumes self-control resources, and the lack of self-regulatory resources further impedes employees from recognizing organizational regulations and resisting counterproductive temptations. Therefore, we propose as follows.

**Hypothesis 3b** Self-control depletion is positively related to CWB.

**Hypothesis 3c** Self-control depletion mediates the relationship between UPB and CWB.

### The Moderating Effect of Moral Identity Internalization

On account of the underlying good intentions, UPB is not rare in the workplace, and leniency toward UPB is always greater than leniency toward other unethical behaviors. However, as discussed in the sections above, UPB can induce moral regulation breakdown and lead to more significant deviant behaviors against the organization. Therefore, it is important to explore the boundary condition of the downward spiral in the aftermath of UPB. In particular, the intervention toward the first stage of this process, that is, employees may change their moral schema after UPB, is upfront and critical for preventing self-regulation breakdown.

Moral identity represents the extent to which people regard morality as being essential to their self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). It is one of the key personal characteristics that matter for the moral regulation breakdown processes as it "act(s) as a self-regulatory mechanism that sets parameters for individual behavior" (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007, p. 1611). Moral identity can be divided into two dimensions: internalization and symbolization. Moral identity symbolization reflects how ethical traits are demonstrated publicly through one's choices and actions, whereas moral identity internalization reflects how moral traits relate to one's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). People with high symbolic moral identity care about the public, 'doing'

side of moral identity, whereas those with high internalized moral identity emphasize the private, the 'having' side of moral identity (Gotowiec & Van Mastrigt, 2019).

This study focuses on moral identity internalization instead of symbolization as a moderator. It represents a determined belief about one's private moral principles regardless of the symbolic behaviors one presents to the world. Individuals with higher levels of moral identity internalization (instead of symbolization) tend to exhibit higher immunity against external incentives and invariably stick to their moral values (Skarlicki et al., 2008). Therefore, we propose that employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization tend to have stable and entrenched moral schemata that are less affected by any disturbance, including past behaviors, such as UPB.

The mitigating effect can hold for all three mechanisms. Specifically, those with higher levels of moral identity internalization are less likely to justify UPB in avoidance of dissonant feelings. Similarly, they are less likely to consider themselves being privileged because of the pro-organizational motivation of UPB. Furthermore, they are less likely to be depleted by chewing over the correctness of engaging in UPB or by striving to justify UPB. To sum up, moral identity internalization can serve as a dam that blocks the self-regulation breakdown processes after UPB, and all three mechanisms proposed above will be mitigated by moral identity internalization. We elaborate in detail on these points as follows.

### Mitigating the Breakdown of Moral Standards

As discussed in Hypothesis 1a, after engaging in UPB, employees tend to be morally disengaged because the paradoxical nature of UPB provides excuses and motivations for them to rationalize their immorality. However, moral disengagement or justification is just one of the coping strategies for the dissonance, and not everyone uses it to manage morally questionable behaviors (Stone & Cooper, 2003). For example, individuals with higher levels of moral identity are less likely to morally disengage even when they are depleted (Gino et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2016) or when they are cognitively creative (Zheng et al., 2019). Research has also established that people with high moral identity would be "more likely to show a compensatory reaction rather than a consistency reaction to their previous dishonesty" (Mulder & Aquino, 2013, p. 219).

Following this line of research, we propose that moral identity internalization could be a crucial moderator between UPB and moral disengagement such that employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization may be less likely to compromise their moral standards after UPB. Specifically, employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization would consider moral principles as an

essential part of their self-identity and they consistently follow their innate and stable standards. Accordingly, they would hardly distort or lower their moral standards to justify their UPB for temporary relief, neither would they regulate future behaviors using distorted standards. By contrast, those with lower moral identity internalization may have pliable moral standards that are easily shaped by morally paradoxical behaviors. Accordingly, they will have a higher chance of encountering a ‘slippery slope’ through moral disengagement (Baron et al., 2015; Welsh et al., 2015).

### Mitigating the Breakdown of Self-monitoring

As discussed in Hypothesis 2a, employees tend to have a sense of entitlement after engaging in UPB as they consider it an extra contribution to the organization. However, such logic might not apply to those with a higher level of moral identity internalization. With higher accessibility to moral concepts and higher obligations feelings toward outgroup members (Reed & Aquino, 2003; Winterich et al., 2013), these employees tend to associate UPB with a lack of morality rather than a pro-organizational motivation. Therefore, employees with high moral identity internalization do not regard UPB as a contribution to the organization, nor do they have psychological entitlement about such behavior. In other words, they would hardly have an inflated self-perception because of their UPB; if anything, they would perceive a larger discrepancy between their actual behaviors and ideal moral state and keep monitoring their moral conduct. Employees who have lower moral identity internalization, however, care less about the moral issues in their UPB (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and thus, are prone to attribute their UPB in a biased and self-serving way. Specifically, they may emphasize the pro-organizational motivation of their UPB while ignoring its unethical nature, thereby considering UPB as a contribution to the organization and generating an inflated self-perception and a feeling of entitlement in their work.

### Mitigating the Breakdown of Moral Discipline

As discussed in Hypothesis 3a, UPB consumes its actors' self-regulatory resources because its paradoxical nature forces employees to mull their choices. We argue that, comparatively, those with higher levels of moral identity internalization may feel less depleted after UPB for the following reasons.

First, for these employees, moral issues are chronically available so that they can intuitively recognize the moral elements of behaviors without using too many cognitive resources (Skubinn & Herzog, 2016). Employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization will have “stricter internal moral standards and thus rely less on a

cognitive resource when making ethically relevant decisions” (Zheng et al., 2019, p. 656). For example, Greene and Paxton (2009) found that honest people can be automatically aware of the immorality of cheating and would not be tempted by it, while dishonest people are easily tempted and spend more cognitive resources to calculate whether to engage in unethical behavior or not.

Second, positive cognitions about oneself can make an individual less vulnerable to dissonance arousal following a discrepant behavior (Stone & Cooper, 2003); therefore, we argue that people who deeply believe that they are moral are unlikely to be trapped in self-doubt, rumination, or dissonance because of one questionable act as they have enough self-affirmational resources (see self-affirmation theory: Steele, 1988; Steele & Liu, 1983). Consequently, those with high moral identity internalization might have more conviction in their integrity and might not be easily depleted because of their UPB.

On the contrary, because of UPB’s paradoxical nature, employees with lower levels of moral identity internalization tend to be hesitant about their choices and thus, be exhausted by such ambiguity and uncertainty. They may repeatedly ruminate whether UPB is the right thing (Gino et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2021). Taken together, we propose as follows.

**Hypothesis 4** For employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization, the positive relationship between UPB and the three mediators of (a) moral disengagement, (b) workplace entitlement, and (c) self-control depletion are weaker.

In Hypotheses 1–3, we propose that UPB can lead to CWB through the breakdown of moral standards, moral self-monitoring, and moral discipline. In Hypothesis 4, we propose that moral identity internalization can buffer the effects of UPB on these three mechanisms. Overall, we propose that internalized moral identity can also mitigate the indirect impact of UPB on CWB through these three mechanisms.

Specifically, after engaging in UPB, employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization do not alter their inner states to accommodate UPB owing to their entrenched and adamant moral values. Therefore, their moral standards, moral self-monitoring, and moral discipline remain untarnished, as will their subsequent moral self-regulation based on those inner states. However, for employees with lower levels of moral identity internalization, after engaging in UPB, they readily lower their moral standards, lose their moral monitoring due to their inflated self-perception, and become depleted from ruminating on their UPB. Subsequently, their moral regulation breakdown tends to lead to more CWB.

In conclusion, we argue that higher levels of moral identity internalization can help to block the slippery slope from

UPB to CWB as entrenched moral values can protect the inner states from becoming tarnished by paradoxical behaviors, such as UPB.

**Hypothesis 5** For individuals with higher internalized moral identity, the positive indirect effects that UPB has on CWB through the three mediators of (a) moral disengagement, (b) workplace entitlement, and (c) self-control depletion are weaker.

## Methods

To test our conceptual model, we employed the ESM, a data collection method in which participants repeatedly respond to certain assessments. Unlike other survey designs, the ESM is suitable for our study because it can capture the within-person variance that is masked by between-person variance (Masterson et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2021). Within-person variance is important because our key variables are significantly impacted by environmental stimuli and fluctuate from day to day. Additionally, the mediating variables (e.g., self-control depletion) in our conceptual model are relatively transient experiences. The ESM is particularly suited for our model because its ability of capturing momentary psychological experiences can alleviate the issue of recall bias (Scollon et al., 2009).

## Study Context

We collected data from financial service employees of a bank in northern China. We chose financial service employees because they had abundant chances to engage in UPB. According to our pilot interview, in their daily work, these financial service employees interacted with customers face to face to analyze their financial needs and risk preferences, and then matched customers' needs with certain financial products. In this process, employees sometimes deliberately introduced certain inappropriate financial products for a higher profit and, at times, hid potential risks from customers to sell more products. Their tendency to engage in UPB changed daily based on their interactions with the customers. Moreover, employees' salaries at this bank were not commission-based, which excludes the possibility that they undertook such behaviors for their own interests.

## Procedures

With the help of an executive of this bank, we collected data in two phases. The survey in Phase 1 contained the consent form, basic demographic information, and moral identity internalization (moderator). The questionnaires in Phase 2 (1 week after Phase 1) were repeated for 7 consecutive working days. As

employees in this bank worked from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., the questionnaires that measured transient experiences were sent out at 9:30 a.m. (Timepoint 1, T1), 1:00 p.m. (Timepoint 2, T2), and 5:30 p.m. (Timepoint 3, T3) every day, and participants were required to submit their responses within half an hour. Specifically, at T1, we measured three mediating variables, namely, their current experience including moral disengagement, workplace entitlement, and self-control depletion, and we used them as baseline controls in the first-stage analysis. At T2, we measured: (a) their UPB since arriving at work as the independent variable, (b) three mediating variables, and (c) their CWB since arriving at work, and we used them as baseline control at the second-stage analysis. At T3, we measured their CWB since arriving at work again as the dependent variable. All the questionnaires for the study were built on wjx.cn, a reliable Chinese data-collection platform similar to Qualtrics that has been used in many previous studies (e.g., Lu et al., 2020). The platform created a link that directs participants to a specific questionnaire, and we sent the link to participants' cellphones.

To facilitate data collection and increase the response rate, we monitored the wjx.cn platform and sent reminders twice for each questionnaire (Liu et al., 2017). At 9:50 a.m., 1:20 p.m., and 5:50 p.m., we sent out a group message to participants as a general reminder. Ten minutes after the general reminder, we sent a direct message as a follow-up reminder to those who had not submitted their questionnaires. To encourage participation, we gave each participant 100 RMB (the equivalent of 15 USD) for completing all the questionnaires.

## Participants

Of the 121 participants who consented to participate in the survey originally, 26 quit at the beginning of Phase 2 because they were too busy at work. Following previous research (Liu et al., 2017; Rosen et al., 2016), we deleted responses that were submitted 1 hour after the questionnaire was sent out and those that lacked core variables. We received 573 person-day data points from a final sample of 95 participants (62.11% female;  $M_{age} = 30.99$  years,  $SD_{age} = 4.14$ ;  $M_{tenure} = 67.73$  months,  $SD_{tenure} = 43.59$ ). Most of them (65.26%) were entry-level employees, 28.42% were junior managers, and 6.32% were middle managers. Regarding educational attainment, 8.42% had a technical/associate degree, 82.11% had a college degree, and 9.47% had a master's degree or above.

## Daily Measures (Within-Person)

### UPB

We adapted the scale developed by Umphress et al. (2010) to suit our context. The participants were asked: "Since

arriving at work today, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors?” Sample items were: “Misrepresented the truth to make my organization look good and help my organization,” “Recommended inappropriate products or services to customers for the profit of my organization,” and “Withheld negative information about my organization or its products from customers and clients to benefit my organization” (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*;  $\alpha = .92$ ).

### Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement was measured using the widely used eight-item scale developed by Moore et al. (2012). The participants were asked: “Please recall your working experience today and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements at this moment.” The sample items were: “It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about,” “Taking something without the owner’s permission is okay as long as you’re just borrowing it,” and “Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .88$ ).

### Workplace Entitlement

We adapted the nine-item scale from Yam et al. (2017). Specifically, participants were asked: “Please recall your working experience today and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements at this moment.” Sample items were: “I honestly feel I’m just more deserving than other colleagues,” “Great things in this organization should come to me,” and “I feel entitled to more of everything in this organization” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .97$ ).

### Self-control Depletion

We measured self-control depletion using a five-item scale adopted by Johnson et al. (2014) and Lanaj et al. (2014). Specifically, participants were asked: “Please recall your working experience today and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements at this moment.” Sample items were: “I feel drained” and “I feel like my will-power is gone” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .97$ ).

### CWB

This aspect was measured by asking the participants the following query: “Since arriving at work today, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors?” We drew seven items describing misconducts that were damaging to the organization from the scale of Harold et al. (2016), including the following: “Spent time on tasks unrelated to work” and

“Spoke poorly about my organization to others” (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*;  $\alpha = .93$ ). We used this self-reporting measure of CWB because colleagues and leaders had difficulty observing employees’ working behaviors at all times in our research context. As Berry et al. (2012) demonstrated, self- and other reporting measures of unethical behaviors show similar patterns and are moderately to strongly correlated with each other, while other reporting measures account for “little incremental variance in the common correlates beyond self-report” (p. 613).

### Moderator and Controls (Between-Person)

#### Moral Identity Internalization

We measured moral identity internalization with the five-item scale developed by Aquino and Reed (2002). We listed a set of moral characteristics and asked the participants to what extent they agreed with the following statements. Sample items were: “Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am” And “It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .94$ ).

#### Control Variable

At between-person level, we controlled for age, gender (0 = women, 1 = men), education level (1 = junior high school or below, 2 = senior high school, 3 = technical/associate degree, 4 = college degree, 5 = master’s degree or above), job level (1 = entry-level employee, 2 = junior manager, 3 = middle manager, 4 = senior manager), and organizational tenure (months). At the within-person level, following previous research (Gabriel et al., 2019; Parke et al., 2018; Song et al., 2018), we adopted two versions of endogenous controls: (a) lagged controls collected at the same timepoint on the previous day to account for autoregressive effects carrying over across days; and (b) baseline controls that were collected at the previous measurement episode on the same day to capture their changes within the day.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, for example, when modeling the relationship between UPB and mediators, we controlled mediators collected at T1 (i.e., 9:30 a.m.) as baseline controls and mediators collected the day before at T2 (i.e., 1:00 p.m.) as lagged controls. The results remained robust if we controlled either one of them.

<sup>4</sup> In a robustness check suggested by an anonymous reviewer, we controlled for day and cyclical effects (Beal & Weiss, 2003; Gabriel et al., 2019) and most of our findings remained significant.

**Table 1** Percentage of within-person and between-person variances for daily variables

Variable	Within-person variance ( $e^2$ )	Between-person variance ( $r^2$ )	Percentage of within-person variance (%)
UPB	0.32	0.60	35
Moral disengagement	0.26	0.83	24
Moral disengagement (baseline)	0.33	0.81	29
Workplace entitlement	0.33	1.46	18
Workplace entitlement (baseline)	0.59	1.58	27
Self-control depletion	0.69	1.35	34
Self-control depletion (baseline)	0.84	1.11	43
CWB	0.21	0.43	33
CWB (baseline)	0.36	0.38	49

$N=573$  at the within-person level (Level 1) and  $N=95$  at the between-person level (Level 2).  $e^2$  is the within-person variance in a variable, and  $r^2$  is the between-person variance in the variable. The percentage of within-person variance was computed as  $e^2/(e^2+r^2)$

## Analytic Strategy

As our data had a nested structure (multiple days nested within employees), we conducted multilevel analyses to account for potential statistical dependence. The within-person variables (i.e., UPB, moral disengagement, workplace entitlement, self-control depletion, and CWB) were modeled at Level 1, and the between-person variables (i.e., moral identity internalization, age, gender, education level, organizational tenure, and job level) were modeled at Level 2. Following previous research (Enders & Tofghi, 2007; Foulk et al., 2018), we grand-mean centered all Level 2 variables and group-mean centered all Level 1 predictors to examine daily within-person fluctuation while controlling for the between-person variables.

In line with prior research, we conducted multilevel path analysis using Mplus 8.4 to test Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a (the effects of UPB on mediators), Hypotheses 1b, 2b, and 3b (the effects of mediators on CWB), and Hypotheses 4 (the interaction effects of UPB and moral identity internalization on mediators). To test Hypotheses 1c, 2c, and 3c (the indirect effect of UPB on CWB through mediators), we utilized parametric bootstrapping to estimate the significance of indirect effects (Bauer et al., 2006), which estimates Type-I error rates more accurately and is more powerful than traditional mediation tests (MacKinnon et al., 2007). To test Hypothesis 5, we used moderated path analysis to calculate the conditional indirect effects of UPB on CWB via mediators at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of moral identity internalization.

Before testing our hypotheses, we ran a series of null models to examine whether there was sufficient within-person variance for each within-person construct in our model. Following previous ESM studies (Gabriel et al., 2011; Lanaj et al., 2016; Methot et al., 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2019; Scott & Barnes, 2011), Table 1 presents within- and between-individual variance of the within-person constructs.

These variance decomposition results indicated meaningful within-person variance in our data and buttressed the need for multilevel modeling. The descriptive results are shown in Table 2.

## Results

Following prior ESM studies (e.g., Barnes et al., 2015; Foulk et al., 2018; Koopman et al., 2016), the results of multilevel path analysis are shown in Table 3 and Fig. 2. In support of Hypothesis 1a, UPB significantly predicted moral disengagement ( $\gamma=.20$ ,  $SE=.06$ ,  $p=.001$ ). In support of Hypothesis 1b moral disengagement significantly predicted CWB ( $\gamma=.12$ ,  $SE=.05$ ,  $p=.020$ ). We used parametric-based bootstrapping analysis with 20,000 iterations to test indirect effects. In support of Hypothesis 1c, the results revealed that the indirect effect of UPB on CWB via moral disengagement is significant, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero (95% bias-corrected CI [.002, .052]). In support of Hypothesis 2a, UPB significantly predicted workplace entitlement ( $\gamma=.24$ ,  $SE=.05$ ,  $p=.000$ ). In support of Hypothesis 2b workplace entitlement significantly predicted CWB ( $\gamma=.09$ ,  $SE=.04$ ,  $p=.032$ ). In support of Hypothesis 2c the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero (95% bias-corrected CI [.003, .046]). Similarly, in support of Hypothesis 3a, UPB significantly predicted self-control depletion ( $\gamma=.23$ ,  $SE=.07$ ,  $p=.001$ ). In support of Hypothesis 3b, self-control depletion significantly predicted CWB ( $\gamma=.07$ ,  $SE=.03$ ,  $p=.023$ ). In support of Hypothesis 3c the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero (95% bias-corrected CI [.002, .036]). Moreover, we tested the difference among three indirect effects and the results showed that there was no significant difference among them. Specifically, the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect

**Table 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>Within-person level</i>															
1. UPB															
2. Moral disengagement (baseline)	0.14**														
3. Moral disengagement	0.27**	0.36**													
4. Workplace entitlement (baseline)	0.09*	0.39**	0.18**												
5. Workplace entitlement	0.28**	0.18**	0.42**	0.35**											
6. Self-control depletion (baseline)	0.06	0.31**	0.19**	0.34**	0.17**										
7. Self-control depletion	0.23**	0.14**	0.21**	0.18**	0.20**	0.43**									
8. CWB (baseline)	0.31**	0.20**	0.27**	0.16**	0.23**	0.34**	0.49**								
9. CWB	0.18**	0.16**	0.28**	0.19**	0.25**	0.22**	0.31**	0.40**							
<i>Between-person level</i>															
10. Moral identity internalization	-0.19	-0.25*	-0.21*	0.24*	0.12	0.05	0.03	-0.21*	-0.24*						
11. Gender (0 = woman)	0.24*	0.06	0.06	-0.001	0.19	0.02	0.002	0.18	0.17	-0.10					
12. Education level	-0.12	-0.16	-0.14	0.03	0.06	-0.17	-0.13	-0.07	-0.09	0.11	-0.12				
13. Organizational tenure	-0.05	0.04	0.05	0.14	0.16	-0.15	-0.16	-0.04	-0.07	-0.06	0.08	0.29**			
14. Age	-0.13	-0.04	-0.04	0.08	0.13	-0.29**	-0.23*	-0.19	-0.20	0.04	0.19	0.35**	0.53**		
15. Job level	0.09	0.11	0.11	0.02	0.12	-0.09	-0.06	0.05	0.06	-0.01	0.22*	0.15	0.40**	0.50**	
Mean	1.63	2.40	2.24	3.51	2.72	2.41	2.36	1.64	1.62	6.15	0.38	4.01	67.73	30.99	1.41
SD	0.94	1.05	1.02	1.47	1.33	1.39	1.41	0.85	0.79	0.94	0.49	0.43	43.59	4.14	0.61

*N*=573 at the within-person level (Level 1) and *N*=95 at the between-person level (Level 2); For the correlations among Level 1 variables, all the within-person variables were group-mean centered. For Level 2 correlations, all within-person variables were aggregated

\**p*≤0.05; \*\**p*≤0.01

**Table 3** Multilevel path analysis results

Predictor	Moral disengagement		Workplace entitlement		Self-control depletion		CWB	
	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE
<i>Between-person level</i>								
Intercept	2.29***	0.09	2.75***	0.12	2.40***	0.12	1.64***	0.07
Gender (0=woman)	0.01	0.22	0.48	0.28	0.10	0.30	0.24	0.16
Education level	-0.29	0.21	-0.03	0.28	-0.15	0.28	0.11	0.16
Organizational tenure	0.001	0.002	0.004	0.003	-0.001	0.003	0.000	0.002
Age	-0.02	0.03	0.01	0.04	-0.07*	0.03	-0.06*	0.03
Job level	0.23	0.19	0.02	0.28	0.14	0.19	0.21	0.12
Moral identity internalization	-0.19	0.11	0.19	0.12	0.06	0.13	-0.16*	0.08
<i>Cross-level moderator</i>								
UPB × Moral identity internalization	-0.12*	0.06	-0.08	0.06	-0.19**	0.07		
Residual Variances	0.78***	0.11	1.37***	0.20	1.30***	0.31	0.36***	0.07
<i>Within-person level</i>								
UPB	0.20***	0.06	0.24***	0.05	0.23***	0.07	-0.01	0.06
Moral disengagement (baseline)	0.28***	0.05						
Moral disengagement (lagged)	-0.03	0.06						
Workplace entitlement (baseline)			0.24***	0.05				
Workplace entitlement (lagged)			0.11	0.08				
Self-control depletion (baseline)					0.38***	0.07		
Self-control depletion (lagged)					0.03	0.06		
Moral disengagement							0.12*	0.05
Workplace entitlement							0.09*	0.04
Self-control depletion							0.07*	0.03
CWB (baseline)							0.22**	0.07
CWB (lagged)							0.01	0.10
Residual Variances	0.19***	0.03	0.26***	0.06	0.51***	0.08	0.17***	0.03

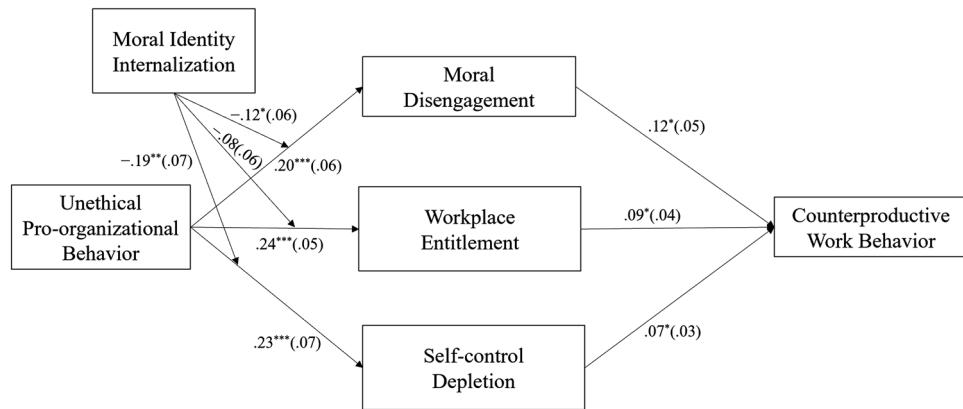
*N*=573 at the within-person level (Level 1) and *N*=95 at the between-person level (Level 2)

\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$

difference between moral disengagement and workplace entitlement included zero (95% bias-corrected CI [-.030, .036]), the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect difference between moral disengagement and self-control depletion included zero (95% bias-corrected CI [-.022, .039]), and the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect difference between workplace entitlement and self-control depletion included zero (95% bias-corrected CI [-.029, .036]).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that moral identity internalization would weaken the effect UPB has on three mediators, with the effect being stronger for individuals lower (vs. higher) in moral identity internalization. In support of Hypothesis 4a, the interaction effect of UPB and moral identity internalization on moral disengagement was significant (Table 3:  $\gamma = -.12$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .048$ ). To facilitate the interpretation of this interaction effect, we performed multilevel simple slope analyses (Bauer et al., 2006) and examined the effect of UPB on moral disengagement at two conditional values

of moral identity internalization (+1 SD and -1 SD): The effect of UPB on moral disengagement was significant and positive ( $\gamma = .31$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .000$ ) when moral identity internalization was low (at -1 SD), but not significant ( $\gamma = .08$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .36$ ) when moral identity internalization was high (at +1 SD). However, we did not find support for Hypothesis 4b, as the interaction between UPB and moral identity internalization on workplace entitlement was not significant (Table 3:  $\gamma = -.08$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .219$ ). In support of Hypothesis 4c, the interaction between UPB and moral identity internalization on self-control depletion was significant (Table 3:  $\gamma = -.19$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .010$ ). The effect of UPB on self-control depletion was significant and positive ( $\gamma = .39$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .000$ ) when moral identity internalization was low (at -1 SD), but not significant ( $\gamma = .06$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .60$ ) when moral identity internalization was high (at +1 SD). For a graphical illustration, see Fig. 3a and b.



**Fig. 2** Path analyses results

Hypothesis 5 predicted that moral identity internalization would moderate the indirect effect of UPB on CWB via three mediators. We used parametric bootstrapping analysis with 20,000 iterations to test these conditional indirect effects. Specifically, with regard to Hypothesis 5a, the indirect effect through moral disengagement was significant and positive when moral identity internalization was low (95% bias-corrected CI [.005, .080]), but not when moral identity internalization was high (95% bias-corrected CI [−.010, .037]); moreover, the difference between these indirect effects was significant (95% bias-corrected CI [−.070, .001]; 90% bias-corrected CI [−.060, −.001]). We acknowledge that the 95% CI of the difference included zero. Nevertheless, according to Preacher et al. (2010) and studies with similar analytical approaches (e.g., Taylor et al., 2019), it is justifiable to use the 90% CI to test conditional indirect effects. Therefore, although these results did not provide full support for Hypothesis 5a, they were generally consistent with this hypothesis. The results of Hypothesis 4b showed that moral identity internalization did not moderate the indirect effect of UPB on CWB via workplace entitlement, so we did not find support for the conditional indirect effect of workplace entitlement (Hypothesis 5b). In support of Hypothesis 5c, the indirect effect through self-control depletion was significant and positive when moral identity internalization was low (95% bias-corrected CI [.004, .059]), but not when moral identity internalization was high (95% bias-corrected CI [−.010, .022]); moreover, the difference between these indirect effects was significant (95% bias-corrected CI [−.056, −.001]).

## Discussion

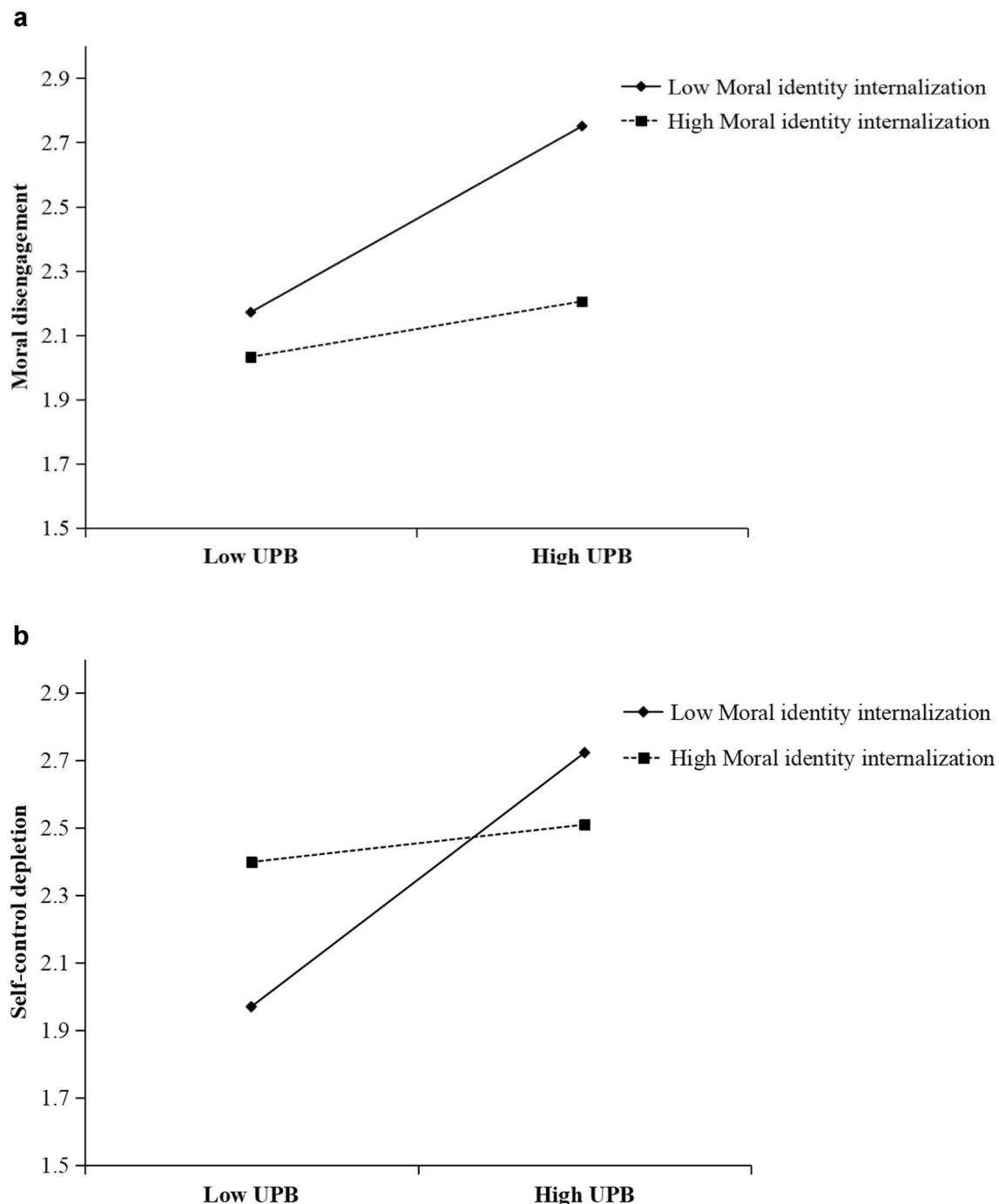
Drawing on self-regulation theory (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), we developed a model to demonstrate how UPB relates to CWB through three parallel self-regulation breakdown processes. First, by influencing the *standards* of moral

self-regulation, UPB causes employees to engage in moral disengagement, thus enabling them to use detrimental, unclear, and decreased moral standards to regulate future behaviors. Second, by influencing the *monitoring* of self-regulation, UPB induces workplace entitlement and prevents employees with an inflated sense of deservedness from monitoring themselves in the future. Third, by influencing the *strength* of self-regulation, UPB depletes employees' self-regulatory resources, impeding them from resisting counterproductive temptations. We employed an experience sampling method of 95 financial service employees over 7 days to test the theoretical model. The results supported all three mediating hypotheses, and importantly, indicated that each path plays a unique role in explaining the mechanisms between UPB and CWB, while there was no difference among the mediating processes.

We also identified moral identity internalization as a crucial boundary condition that mitigates the mediating effects of moral disengagement and self-control depletion. However, we failed to empirically support the moderating effect of moral identity internalization on the relationship between UPB and workplace entitlement, which means that even for employees with higher levels of moral identity internalization, UPB can still induce an inflated sense of entitlement. In our theorization, we argued that employees with high moral identity internalization tend to associate UPB with a lack of morality, and thus, they are less likely to feel proud of themselves or entitled. However, the counterargument is also possible in a way that the employees with high moral identity internalization may care more about their moral image so that they regard UPB as a personal sacrifice conducted for their organization, and thus, may feel entitled in this organization (Zitek et al., 2010).

## Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several critical theoretical contributions. First, although it is not the first to leverage self-regulation theory to understand morality (see Bandura, 1991; Gino



**Fig. 3** **a** Moderating effect of moral identity internalization on the relationship between UPB and moral disengagement. **b** Moderating effect of moral identity internalization on the relationship between UPB and self-control depletion

et al., 2011; Sachdeva et al., 2009), it extends self-regulation theory to the domain of ethics in the following ways.

First, prior literature that empirically examined moral regulation breakdown often selectively focused on one or two components of self-regulation. For example, Welsh et al. (2015) found that a minor ethical transgression can lead to substantial transgressions via increased moral

disengagement. Lin et al. (2016) demonstrated that leaders who exhibit ethical leadership may display more abusive behaviors the following day owing to increased ego depletion and entitlement. As informative and enlightening as these findings are, they failed to provide a broader picture of the breakdown processes in an integrative way. By integrating three self-regulation breakdown pathways into one model,

we view the self-regulation process in a more integrative and comprehensive way. As Lian et al. (2017) pointed out, the current literature on self-control “has overly focused on one component of self-regulation—resource depletion perspectives—while neglecting other components that play equally important roles in the self-control processes” (p. 703). Our study fills this gap by showing that the three elements of self-regulation, namely, standards, monitoring, and strength, each have unique roles in the self-regulation process, and they are equally important to understanding self-regulation breakdown.

Second, prior research has mainly focused on one-time self-regulation. For example, Bandura et al. (2001) demonstrated that transgressive behavior is a consequence of self-regulation failure. By examining how engaging in UPB changes one’s moral schemata (e.g., moral standards, moral monitoring, and moral strength) in a reactive regulation process and how the changed moral schemata increase CWB in a proactive regulation process, our research integrates two consecutive moral self-regulatory processes. Such integration not only reflects people’s regulating behavior more realistically, as people indeed repeatedly regulate their behaviors but also theoretically echoes the appeal of paying more attention to dynamic self-regulation (Neal et al., 2017).

We also contribute to the ethics literature by considering the evolution of unethical behaviors over time. Investigating CWB as a behavioral consequence of UPB at the within-person level, we complement the literature on the consequences of UPB and contribute to the knowledge of how unethical behavior evolves by exploring how one altruistic transgression develops into another malign one via moral regulation breakdown (Welsh et al., 2015). Relatedly, we add to the CWB literature by enriching its antecedents. Previous research has found that CWB originates from many negative triggers, such as unsatisfactory work experience, lack of organizational monitoring and self-control, and certain personal propensities (Marcus & Schuler, 2004). We extend this line of research by demonstrating that CWB, although an unwanted behavior, might originate from pro-organizational motivation. Thus, the good intention is not a shield against unethical behavior and instead puts an organization on the road to hell.

## Practical Implications

Our findings are also meaningful to the business world. Unlike other unethical behaviors, organizations sometimes acquiesce to UPBs owing to their pro-organizational motivation and likely short-term benefits to the organization (Vadera et al., 2013). Especially when facing performance and competition pressure, it is not easy for organizational members to stick to ethical requirements (Jones & Ryan, 1997). Previous research has found that in reality, middle managers

may encourage or even coerce their subordinates into deceptive behavior (den Nieuwenboer et al., 2017). As Shi Wang, a Chinese real estate tycoon, mentioned in a public speech, “no entrepreneur would admit to bribery in public, but few dare to say in public that they don’t engage in bribery, especially in the real estate industry,” and “it is easy not to bribe, but it is difficult to do business without bribery.”<sup>5</sup>

However, as our research showed, UPB might not benefit an organization as intended. Instead, UPB can lead to cognitive, psychological, and emotional changes in employees, increasing the probability of their engaging in CWBs. Therefore, organizational leaders should require employees to comply with ethical standards and not let pro-organizational motivation be an excuse to justify UPB. Organizational leaders should realize that the sacrifice of personal ethical standards, even voluntarily, might cause psychological imbalances in employees and increase their psychological burden. Even if UPB is conducted out of good intentions, organizational leaders should still explicitly express a negative attitude on UPB and implement policies and sanctioning systems to prohibit such behavior (Chui & Grieder, 2020).

In addition, our results demonstrate that moral identity internalization could significantly buffer moral regulation breakdown after UPB. In practice, employees might occasionally engage in UPB for certain reasons. It is necessary to take actions to minimize its downstream consequences. Our results suggest that managers can achieve this goal by enhancing employees’ moral identity internalization in recruitment and training. For example, organizations should consider assigning employees with high moral identity internalization to positions where UPB occurs frequently. Such an arrangement would not only decrease the frequency of UPB, but also curb its subsequent negative impacts.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Our research has several limitations that provide avenues for future research. First, the measure of our dependent variable CWB was self-reported. Although this is a common practice in previous ESM studies (Marcus et al., 2016), it would be better to test the theoretical model in another context in which CWB is easier to observe, and we could measure CWB more objectively. Relatedly, we include a single ESM study, yet other methodologies such as the experiment or critical-incident study, could complement the ESM design. To obtain more robust results, we encourage future studies to use multiple methods to explore the consequences of UPB.

Second, as a pioneering attempt to explore the consequences of UPB, our study highlighted CWB as a possible negative consequence of UPB for an organization. However,

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ecns.cn/cns-wire/2014/02-12/100502.shtml>.

due to the moral conflicting nature of UPB, it might have more complicated ramifications for the organization. Thus, it would be meaningful to explore other positive consequences of UPB (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior; Tang et al., 2020). Such an investigation could provide a deeper understanding of why UPB is sometimes explicitly or implicitly encouraged by an organization and how to manage UPB effectively.

Third, we examined only one boundary condition that can mitigate the effect of UPB on moral self-regulation. There may be other meaningful individual differences that also can mitigate this process and deserve further investigation. For example, previous research showed that dispositional mindfulness can help individuals to regulate their reactions toward workplace incivility by mitigating their rumination and negative affect (Tarraf et al., 2019). Therefore, it is possible that employees with higher mindfulness successfully regulate their morality after engaging in UPB. Similarly, certain contextual factors such as ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005) may mitigate this process by encouraging employees to stick to their moral schemata (e.g., less moral disengagement, less entitlement, and less self-control depletion) and stop the moral regulation breakdown following UPB. In particular, it is worthwhile to explore whether and how moral identity symbolization, the other dimension of moral identity, can be a boundary condition. Although correlated, moral identity symbolization and identity internalization have different emphases, and thus, may have divergent influences on the moral regulation breakdown process in the aftermath of UPB.

## Appendix

### Instructions and items

**UPB.** Since arriving at work today, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors? (1 = “never” to 7 = “always”)

1. Misrepresented the truth to make my organization look good and help my organization
2. Recommended inappropriate products or services to customers for the profit of my organization
3. Withheld negative information about my organization or its products from customers and clients to benefit my organization
4. Exaggerated the truth about my organization’s products or services to customers to help my organization
5. Concealed information from customers that could be damaging to my organization
6. Coaxed customers into unnecessary over-spending for the profit of my organization

**Moral disengagement.** Please recall your working experience today, and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements **at this moment**. (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”)

1. It is okay to spread rumors to defend those I care about

### Instructions and items

2. Taking something without the owner’s permission is okay as long as I’m just borrowing it
3. Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it’s hardly a sin to inflate my own credentials a bit
4. People shouldn’t be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do
5. People can’t be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too
6. Taking personal credit for ideas that were not my own is no big deal
7. Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt
8. People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves

**Workplace entitlement.** Please recall your working experience today, and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements **at this moment**. (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”)

1. I honestly feel I’m just more deserving than other colleagues
2. Great things in this organization should come to me
3. If someone were to be promoted, I should be given priority to
4. I demand the best in this organization because I’m worth it
5. I deserve special treatment in this organization
6. I deserve more things in this organization
7. People like me deserve an extra break now and then
8. Things should go my way in this organization
9. I feel entitled to more of everything in this organization

**Self-control depletion.** Please recall your working experience today, and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements **at this moment**. (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”)

1. My mind feels unfocused right now
2. Right now, it would take a lot of effort for me to concentrate on something
3. I feel drained
4. I feel like my willpower is gone
5. My mental energy is running low

**CWB.** arriving at work today, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors? (1 = “never” to 7 = “always”)

1. Spent time on tasks unrelated to work
2. Spoke poorly about my organization to others
3. Did not work to the best of my ability
4. Did not fully comply with a supervisor’s instructions
5. Criticized organizational policies
6. Took an unnecessary break
7. Worked slower than necessary

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