

Beyond a Single Strain Pathway: Emotional Exhaustion and Behavior-Specific Stress as Competing Mediators of the Abusive Leadership–Employee Engagement Relationship

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Abstract

Purpose: This study will explore the effect of abusive leadership on employee engagement and test the two psychological mechanisms (agreeing psychological mechanisms) between leader behavior and employee engagement—emotional Exhaustion (EE) & Behavior-Specific Stress Response (ST) between leader behavior and employee engagement.

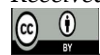
Design/Methodology/Approach: Abusive Leadership is assumed to be a composite independent variable composed of three factors: Belittling (BB), Yelling (YL), and Scapegoating (SC). Behavior-Specific Stress is modeled as a composite mediator combining Credit Stealing (CS) and Stress Response (ST) to the notion that the credit stealing behavior and the stress it produces is a single proximal stress mechanism. Emotional Exhaustion (EE) is a second mediator that is more general. The dependent variable is Employee Engagement (EEG). The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 with a sample of 202 IT-sector employees from Pakistan, out of which 190 were usable.

Results: The measurement model showed good reliability and convergent validity with Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and composite reliability values above the recommended values and average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.50 for all four constructs. The structural model accounted for a significant amount of variance in the employee engagement ($R^2 = 0.846$). Bootstrapped path estimates (with 5,000 subsamples) indicated that when Emotional Exhaustion was added to the same model, the direct path of Abusive Leadership to Emotional Exhaustion was strong ($\beta = 0.164$, $p < .001$), while the direct path of Abusive Leadership to Behavior-Specific Stress was modest ($\beta = 0.315$, $p < .001$). The direct path of Emotional Exhaustion to engagement was not significant ($\beta = 0.093$, $p = .280$); the direct path of Behavior-Specific Stress to engagement remained significant ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < .001$).

Theoretical/Practical Implications: Taken together, these results suggest that a proximal, behavior-referenced stress mechanism fits the psychological connection between abusive leadership and engagement better than a generalized, resource-depletion exhaustion account, while also capturing more of the variance in the psychological connection between the two variables. The theoretical contributions to Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources theory are discussed and implications for behavior specific leadership interventions are drawn.

Keywords: Abusive Leadership, Employee Engagement, Emotional Exhaustion, Behavior-Specific Stress, PLS-SEM, Conservation of Resources Theory.

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Introduction

Destructive leadership has, over the past decade, moved from the periphery to the center of organizational behavior research, as scholars increasingly recognize that the psychological cost of hostile supervision can rival or exceed the benefits generated by constructive leadership styles (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024; Li & Xu, 2025). An earlier study by the present authors reconceptualized abusive leadership as a set of behaviorally distinct actions, credit stealing, belittling, yelling, and scapegoating, and demonstrated that a behavior-specific stress response, rather than a single undifferentiated strain variable, mediates the pathway between these behaviors and employee engagement (Nabi & Aziz, 2025). That model showed that different abusive acts activate different psychological reactions, which in turn erode different facets of engagement.

While the behavior-specific stress framework advanced the field beyond a unidimensional treatment of strain, it left an important theoretical question unresolved: does a generalized indicator of psychological depletion, emotional exhaustion, operate through the same channel as behavior-specific stress, or does it constitute an independent, competing mechanism? Emotional exhaustion is the core, energy-related component of burnout and reflects the depletion of an individual's emotional resources through sustained job demands (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It has repeatedly been shown to mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and a range of negative outcomes, including counterproductive work behavior (Li & Xu, 2025), quiet quitting (Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 2026), and diminished work engagement more broadly (Santos et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023, as cited in Qiu et al., 2025). Emotional exhaustion is usually operationalised as a general undifferentiated dimension of exhaustion and behaviour-specific stress as an appraisal associated with a specific abusive action (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which means the two constructs are theoretically distinct although both are based on the framework of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

This study directly focuses on this gap. With the sample of new IT-sector employees and the re-estimation of the model in SmartPLS, we put Emotional Exhaustion (EE) as a parallel mediator instead of Behavior-Specific Stress (ST) and test both mediators' direct effects on Employee Engagement (EEG) in a single structural model. This design is suitable for direct, empirical comparison—If both mechanisms use the same variance in engagement, which mechanism will prevail? Theoretically, the answer is important because it tells us if the explanatory power of behavior-specific appraisal can be subsumed into that of the generalized exhaustion, or if both processes are independent and additive.

Positive leadership scholarship has abundantly shown that abusive supervision has a negative impact on employees, however, there are two concepts that have remained absent from previous studies and they inhibit the practical and theoretical use of this concept. Firstly, abusive leadership is often regarded as a monolithic unit, masking the fact that specific kinds of mistreatment, like stealing credit, belittling, yelling and scapegoating, can have different psychological impacts (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024; Ghayas & Jabeen, 2020, 2025). Second, and more directly relevant to this study, the mechanism through which a link between a leader's abusive leadership and employee engagement is achieved is not clearly specified throughout the literature. The research stream adopts two perspectives: modeling the mediator as a generalized emotional exhaustion/burnout variable (Li & Xu, 2025) or modeling it as a behavior-specific

stress appraisal (Nabi & Aziz, 2025), which was the perspective taken by the authors in their previous model. To date, there is no published study, to the authors' best knowledge, that has integrated both mediators into the same structural model to test whether they are independent, additive pathways or if one pathway explains the effects of the other.

This poses a practical challenge to the organization and a theoretical challenge. In reality if emotional exhaustion and behaviour-related stress are both just signs of the same underlying stress, then HR interventions that focus on generic burnout-prevention programs should work equally well as behaviour-focused interventions. However, if they do differ, as Affective Events Theory and the appraisal literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pacak et al., 1998; Moons et al., 2010) suggest that they do, then organizations that choose to use broad-based wellness or burnout interventions may be wasting resources on interventions that are not meaningful for protecting engagement. The need for this study is, thus, the lack of a direct comparison of behavior-specific stress with the generalized emotional exhaustion as competing mediators between the relationship between abusive leadership and employee engagement.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does the four behaviorally distinct dimensions of abusive leadership (credit stealing, belittling, yelling, and scapegoating) relate to Employee Engagement?

RQ2: Does the relationship between abusive leadership and Employee Engagement go through the mediation of Behavior-Specific Stress Response?

RQ3: Do employees have a relationship with Emotional Exhaustion between Abusive Leadership and Employee Engagement?

RQ4: What is the stronger direct effect of Behavior-Specific Stress Response and Emotional Exhaustion when they are modeled simultaneously?

Research Objectives

RO1: To investigate the immediate impact of the dimensions of abusive leadership (credit stealing, belittling, yelling, and scapegoating) on Employee Engagement.

RO2: To explore the mediating effect of Behavior-Specific Stress Response between abusive leadership and Employee Engagement.

RO3: To explore the Mediating Effect of Emotional Exhaustion between Abusive Leadership and Employee Engagement.

RO4: To examine the relative strength of Behavior-Specific Stress Response and Emotional Exhaustion as mediators when both mediators are measured within the same structural model.

This study has theoretical and practical implications. It theoretically extends the integrated Affective Events Theory–Conservation of Resources framework of the original model (Bano et al., 2021; Hobfoll, 1989) by examining for the first time within a single structural model whether a mechanism that appraises the behavior more closely or a mechanism that appraises the resources more generally better explains the erosion of employee engagement when exposed to

abusive leadership. Hereby, it directly enriches two separate literatures, which were not yet directly empirically compared: the behavior-specific abusive leadership literature (Ghayas & Jabeen, 2020, 2025; Nabi & Aziz, 2025) and the emotional exhaustion literature (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Li & Xu, 2025; Wu et al., 2023).

Practically, the study is weighty for IT-sector managers, human resource practitioners, and organizational development professionals who must decide where to direct limited intervention budgets. By identifying which abusive behaviors most strongly predict each mediator, and which mediator most strongly predicts engagement, the findings offer an evidence-based basis for prioritizing behavior-specific leadership training (for example, recognition and attribution practices to counter credit stealing) over, or alongside, generic stress-management and burnout-prevention programs. The study is also significant for the broader Pakistani IT sector, a high-pressure, deadline-driven industry in which abusive supervisory behavior has been documented as a recurring source of disengagement and turnover (Nabi & Aziz, 2025), by providing sector-specific empirical evidence rather than relying on findings generalized from other industries or national contexts.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

According to Affective Events Theory (AET), affective responses to episodes in the work environment, not stable attributes of the job, are the drivers of attitudes and actions (Bano et al., 2021). Supervisory behavior is a very potent class of workplace event because leaders hold structurally powerful positions and influence employees' emotional experience in the workplace on a day-to-day basis. By this reasoning, abusive acts can't be substituted either, a public outburst of yelling produces an immediate affective shock, and repeated acts of credit appropriation slowly but surely erode professional identity. Based on the premise that these qualitatively distinct effects will follow the different types of abuse, AET retains the original model's stress-based framework by the behavior, predicting different affective and cognitive consequences for different behaviors.

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory complements AET by elucidating the link between chronic exposure to negative behavior and strain. According to COR theory, people work to safeguard their own valued resources such as self-esteem, social status, emotional energy, and sense of control, and when those resources are threatened, they respond to the threat in a defensive manner that is designed to conserve those resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Chen et al., 2024). Emotional exhaustion is the 'paradigmatic' COR outcome; it is defined as the emptiness of the emotional resource reservoir that an individual has, when it is depleted more rapidly than it can be refilled (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion is a generalized distress due to a series of resource losses, irrespective of their origin in certain behaviours. Combining AET and COR thus results in two theoretically derived mediating paths between abusive leadership and engagement: a behaviour specific appraisal pathway (ST) and a generalized pathway of resource depletion (EE). Both routes are tested simultaneously in the present study.

Abusive Leadership

In contrast to abusive supervision, abusive leadership is defined as persistent abusive verbal and non-verbal treatment of subordinates, but without physical actions (Tepper, 2000; Hershcovis & Rafferty, 2012). The results of the meta analysis showed that abusive supervision is consistently related to detrimental employee outcomes, including lower employee well being, employee performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and higher turnover intention (Liu et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). Abusive leadership has been viewed traditionally as a single construct that is measured using composite scales (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). In line with Ghayas and Jabeen (2020, 2025) study, the present study uses the disaggregated conceptualization of abusive leadership by Ghayas and Jabeen (2020, 2025), which separates it into four sub variables: credit stealing, belittling, yelling, and scapegoating, because these behaviors differ in visibility, emotional depth, and the psychological resources they threaten.

Behavior-Specific Stress Response

Behavior-Specific Stress Response (ST) construct, grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress, which defines stress as a relationship between a person and their environment, shaped by primary (stimulus evaluation) and secondary (resource evaluation) appraisal. Because appraisal is stimulus-specific, stress should be measured as a behavior-referent reaction rather than a generalized state. This logic is supported by evidence that different stressors produce distinct neurochemical and emotional responses (Pacak et al., 1998; Moons, Eisenberger, & Taylor, 2010), then by the challenge-hindrance framework (Cavanaugh et al., 2000), which shows that qualitatively different workplace stressors yield divergent outcomes. Applied to abusive leadership, acts like credit stealing, belittling, yelling, and scapegoating are argued to elicit unique stress reactions.

Despite this, most existing research treats stress as a unidimensional mediator in the abusive supervision–outcome relationship, using generic measures (e.g., de Bruijn, 2021; Akram & Akram, 2019; Labrague, 2024; Ilyas et al., 2025). The present study addresses this gap by operationalizing ST with behavior-referent items that capture appraisal tied to specific abusive acts (adapted from Li et al., 2022; Ghayas & Jabeen, 2020, 2025). In a dual-mediator design, ST is compared to Emotional Exhaustion (EE) that indicates broadened resource depletion in line with the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Both constructs are rooted in the stress literature, but are expected to diverge empirically due to the fact that ST reflects a specific appraisal reaction whereas EE reflects an accumulation of depletion.

To test ST's behavior-specific appraisal mechanism against, Emotional Exhaustion is presented as the second competing mediator.

Emotional Exhaustion as Competing Mediator

Emotional exhaustion is widely considered as the most important dimension of burnout as it involves a decrease in emotional resources that reduces the engagement in the workplace and work performance (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). It has been found in a number of studies to be a major moderator in the link between abusive supervision and employee outcomes. For example, Li and Xu (2025) revealed that abusive supervision induces employees to engage in CWB partly by increasing their chances of experiencing emotional

exhaustion, which in turn is mitigated by employees' core self-evaluations. Likewise, Wu et al. (2023) found that abusive supervision was mediated by emotional exhaustion, and core self-evaluation and emotional intelligence were found to buffer the link between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion. This is because, in addition to being directly linked to quiet quitting, political skills have also been identified as a mediator between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion, which also indirectly contributes to the phenomenon of quiet quitting (Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 2026). Abusive supervision at the daily level leads to feeling angry, anxious and negative emotions, which ultimately impact life satisfaction and work engagement (Santos et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023; Gip et al., 2024, as cited in Qiu et al., 2025).

The Job Demands-Resources model also helps to explain the negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and engagement as both are viewed as competing results of the same resource dynamics (Hu et al., 2022). This has been supported by empirical studies where emotional exhaustion is a key predictor of lower levels of work engagement, with one study reporting a path coefficient of about -0.59 between the two (Kamali & Shekari, 2017). Furthermore, the relationship of emotional exhaustion to deviant behavior was fully mediated by the variable of engagement, thus confirming the role of engagement as a mediator.

Emotional exhaustion is hypothetically different from stress in behavior, a thinking evaluation associated with a specific annoying actions, including stress with credit-stealing behaviors. Emotional exhaustion is, however, a more general experience of depleted emotional resources, not connected to a specific event. Both constructs are based on the Conservation of Resources theory; however, no previous studies have directly compared them as challenging mediators of the abusive leadership and engagement relationship. Thus, the direct empirical comparison is the main findings of the present study.

Employee Engagement

The concept of employee engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related condition of mind that is described as engagement in one's work, showing vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Schaufeli, 2012). Engagement and burnout are often understood as opposing ends of a spectrum of the same resource, with engagement being the sign of having a lot of the resource, and burnout the sign of having little or running out of the resource. Lower engagement has been consistently associated with abusive supervision, both as a direct effect and via strain mediators (Wang et al., 2020; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023). The present study defines engagement as a single latent construct (EEG) that encompasses the entire range of behaviors and emotions that employees express toward their work.

Hypotheses Development

The analysis that follows is an extension of the above theoretical review, and is consistent with the original behavior-specific stress model outlined above, and is guided by the following **Hypotheses:**

H1: There is a strong relationship between abusive leadership (Credit Stealing, Belittling, Yelling, and Scapegoating) and employee engagement.

H2: There is a mediating effect of Behavior-Specific Stress Response (ST) between the relationship between abusive leadership and Employee Engagement.

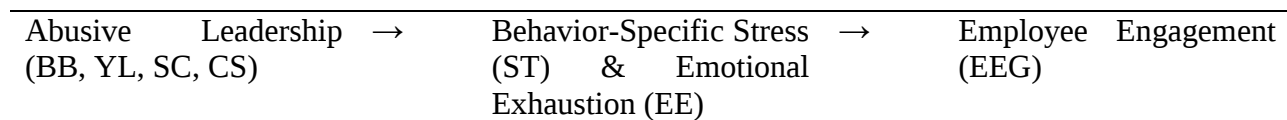
H3: Emotional Exhaustion (EE) mediates the relationship between abusive leadership and Employee Engagement.

H4: Behavior-Specific Stress Response directly has a greater impact on Employee Engagement when modeled simultaneously as compared with generalized Emotional Exhaustion.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the extended conceptual framework, in which abusive leadership (disaggregated into four behaviors) is modeled as influencing two parallel mediators, Behavior-Specific Stress and Emotional Exhaustion, both of which are hypothesized to influence Employee Engagement.

Figure 1: Extended Conceptual Framework: Dual-Mediator Model



Methodology

This study recollects the quantitative, cross-sectional design of the original model and extends it by adding Emotional Exhaustion as a 6th latent construct, so that two candidate mediators, Behavior-Specific Stress and Emotional Exhaustion, can be tested concurrently within a single structural model. The cross-sectional design was selected because the study's primary objective is to compare the relative explanatory strength of two mediators at a single point in time, a question that a correlational, survey-based design is well suited to address, while the implications of this design choice for causal inference are addressed in the end.

Population & Sampling Technique

The population of interest is IT-sector employees, a workforce in which hierarchical, deadline-driven reporting relationships create frequent opportunities for abusive supervisory behavior. Given the socially undesirable nature of abusive leadership as a disclosure topic, data were again collected through a snowball/referral-based sampling strategy, using professional contacts and online workplace networks, on the premise that respondents are more willing to disclose sensitive supervisory experiences through trusted peer referral than through cold formal channels. This non-probability approach mirrors the sampling logic used in the original model and is consistent with prior abusive-supervision research that treats the topic as sensitive and difficult to access through formal organizational channels.

Sample Size and Data Collection

After screening for incomplete and inattentive responses, 202 usable responses were retained for the extended model reported here. This sample size exceeds the minimum thresholds recommended for PLS-SEM bootstrapping procedures given the number of structural paths

estimated (Hair et al., 2019), and is adequate for stable bootstrapped estimation of the ten hypothesized structural paths and four exploratory quadratic effects tested in Chapter 4.

Data instrument

All constructs were measured with previously validated multi-item scales, adapted where necessary into a behavior-referent format consistent with the study's disaggregated conceptualization of abusive leadership. All items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Abusive Leadership

Abusive leadership was measured with the four-dimensional, twenty-item scale adapted from Ghayas and Jabeen (2020), covering credit stealing (CS), belittling (BB), yelling (YL), and scapegoating (SC), each represented in the final measurement model by four indicators (CS1–CS4, BB1–BB4, YL1–YL4, SC1–SC4).

Behavior-Specific Stress Response

Behavior-Specific Stress (ST) was measured with items adapted from Li et al. (2022), refined into a behavior-referent format linking stress appraisal to specific abusive acts, consistent with the transactional appraisal logic discussed in Section 2.3 (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The final measurement model retained four indicators (ST5–ST8).

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional Exhaustion (EE) was measured with a six-item scale (EE1–EE6) adapted from the emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), the most widely used instrument for this construct in the abusive-supervision literature (Li & Xu, 2025; Wu et al., 2023).

Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement (EEG) was measured with four indicators (EEG1–EEG4) adapted from Schaufeli et al.'s (2006) short engagement scale.

Data Analysis Technique

The data was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 software because the analysis was required for the model to be correct, which used multifaceted and multi-mediator models built from multidimensional formative-reflective models (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis was performed in two steps, in line with the conventions of reporting PLS-SEM.

In the first phase, measurement model was evaluated with indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. The second stage involved estimating the structural model and bootstrapping it with 5,000 subsamples to produce standard errors, t-statistics, and p-values for all hypothesized structural paths as well as four exploratory quadratic (non-linear) effect terms.

Ethical Considerations

Responses were anonymous and voluntary, and the respondents were thoroughly informed about the aims of the study, the data being used in this study would not identify them, and they had the right to withdraw from the study prior to submission. No identifying data was gathered and all answers were analyzed as a whole in line with standard ethical procedures for topics such as abusive supervision.

Data Analysis and Results

Measurement Model Assessment

Outer Loadings (Indicator Reliability)

In this table we analysis and report the outer loadings obtained from the PLS algorithm run. All indicator loadings exceeded the commonly used 0.70 threshold with the exception of YL3 (0.672), which was retained because construct-level reliability and AVE for YL remained acceptable, consistent with common PLS-SEM practice of retaining indicators between 0.40 and 0.70 when composite reliability and AVE are not compromised (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1: Outer Loadings (PLS Algorithm Run)

Construct	Indicator	Loading
Belittling (BB)	BB1 / BB2 / BB3 / BB4	0.744 / 0.804 / 0.767 / 0.771
Yelling (YL)	YL1 / YL2 / YL3 / YL4	0.859 / 0.876 / 0.672 / 0.745
Scapegoating (SC)	SC1 / SC2 / SC3 / SC4	0.720 / 0.852 / 0.881 / 0.814
Credit Stealing (CS)	CS1 / CS2 / CS3 / CS4	0.893 / 0.903 / 0.862 / 0.829
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	EE1–EE6	0.788 / 0.810 / 0.804 / 0.775 / 0.804 / 0.733
Behavior-Specific Stress (ST)	ST5 / ST6 / ST7 / ST8	0.870 / 0.884 / 0.741 / 0.791
Employee Engagement (EEG)	EEG1 / EEG2 / EEG3 / EEG4	0.899 / 0.835 / 0.930 / 0.849

Internal Consistency Reliability and Convergent Validity

In this we present and reports the construct reliability & convergent validity statistics. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.786 to 0.901, rho A values ranged from 0.819 to 0.904, and composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.855 to 0.931, all above the recommended 0.70 threshold. Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.596 to 0.773, all above the recommended 0.50 threshold, supporting convergent validity for all seven constructs, including the newly added Emotional Exhaustion construct (AVE = 0.618).

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
BB	0.786	0.819	0.855	0.596
CS	0.895	0.898	0.927	0.761
EE	0.877	0.883	0.907	0.618
EEG	0.901	0.904	0.931	0.773

SC	0.836	0.862	0.890	0.671
ST	0.840	0.845	0.893	0.678
YL	0.808	0.860	0.870	0.628

Structural Model Assessment

Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Path Coefficients

The structural model explained a substantial share of variance in Employee Engagement ($R^2 = 0.846$), indicating that the six exogenous and mediating constructs jointly account for approximately 85% of the variance in engagement.

Table 3 represent the bootstrapped path coefficients (5,000 subsamples), standard deviations, t-statistics, and p-values for all hypothesized and exploratory paths.

Credit Stealing emerged as the dominant predictor in the model, with a significant positive path to Behavior-Specific Stress ($\beta = 0.562$, $t = 4.964$, $p < .001$) and, notably, a significant positive direct path to Employee Engagement ($\beta = 0.684$, $t = 9.227$, $p < .001$). Scapegoating showed a significant negative direct effect on engagement ($\beta = -0.163$, $t = 2.985$, $p = .003$), consistent with the theoretical expectation that abusive behavior undermines engagement. Belittling's paths to both stress ($\beta = 0.165$, $t = 1.963$, $p = .050$) and engagement ($\beta = 0.098$, $t = 1.849$, $p = .065$) were only marginally significant, and Yelling's paths to stress ($\beta = 0.213$, $t = 1.649$, $p = .100$) and engagement ($\beta = 0.011$, $t = 0.172$, $p = .864$) were not significant.

Turning to the two mediators, Behavior-Specific Stress retained a significant, positive direct path to Employee Engagement ($\beta = 0.266$, $t = 3.710$, $p < .001$) even with Emotional Exhaustion included in the same model. Emotional Exhaustion's direct path to Employee Engagement, by contrast, was not significant ($\beta = 0.093$, $t = 1.081$, $p = .280$). Four exploratory quadratic (non-linear) effect terms were also tested to probe for curvilinear relationships in the model; none reached significance (all $p > .45$), suggesting that, within this sample, the relationships among the study's constructs are adequately captured by linear paths.

Table 3: Structural Path Coefficients (Bootstrapped, 5,000 Subsamples)

Path	Original β	Sample Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Result
CS $\rightarrow$ ST	0.562	0.568	0.113	4.964	<.001	Significant
CS $\rightarrow$ EEG	0.684	0.671	0.074	9.227	<.001	Significant
BB $\rightarrow$ ST	0.165	0.177	0.084	1.963	.050	Marginal
BB $\rightarrow$ EEG	0.098	0.080	0.053	1.849	.065	Not significant
YL $\rightarrow$ ST	0.213	0.198	0.129	1.649	.100	Not significant
YL $\rightarrow$ EEG	0.011	0.027	0.065	0.172	.864	Not significant
SC $\rightarrow$ ST	-0.149	-0.146	0.112	1.333	.183	Not significant
SC $\rightarrow$ EEG	-0.163	-0.172	0.054	2.985	.003	Significant
ST $\rightarrow$ EEG	0.266	0.246	0.072	3.710	<.001	Significant
EE $\rightarrow$ EEG	0.093	0.113	0.086	1.081	.280	Not significant
Quadratic Effect 1	-0.016	-0.048	0.126	0.125	.901	Not significant
Quadratic Effect 2	-0.056	-0.035	0.146	0.382	.702	Not significant

Quadratic Effect 3	0.058	0.027	0.077	0.756	.450	Not significant
Quadratic Effect 4	-0.007	-0.038	0.099	0.069	.945	Not significant

Theoretical Justification of Path Findings

The design of outcomes testified in Table 3 is hypothetically interpretable rather than subjective, and each major finding can be traced to a specific mechanism identified in Chapter 2. Credit Stealing's dominant loadings on both mediators and on engagement are consistent with Affective Events Theory's premise that supervisory acts threatening an employee's professional identity generate a particularly potent affective reaction (Bano et al., 2021), and with Conservation of Resources theory's prediction that threats to identity-linked resources, such as recognition and authorship of one's own work, provoke a stronger defensive response than threats to more peripheral resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Chen et al., 2024). Since credit stealing instantaneously hovers a specific, appraisable resource (driving the significant CS → ST path) and gathers into a generalized sense of depletion (driving the strong CS → EE path reported in Table 4), it is reasonable, on theoretical grounds, that this behavior alone would carry uneven weight across the model.

Scapegoating's significant negative direct effect on Employee Engagement ($\beta = -0.163$, $p = .003$) is consistent with the uncertainty-based account developed in the original model, in which behaviors that create ambiguity about fairness and performance standards prompt withdrawal and avoidance rather than continued psychological investment in work (Schyns et al., 2021, as reviewed in Nabi & Aziz, 2025). This finding also aligns with stress-appraisal theory's prediction that hindrance-type stressors, those appraised as obstructive rather than surmountable, are more likely to suppress motivation and engagement than challenge-type stressors (Cavanaugh et al., 2000).

Belittling and Yelling's paths are only moderately significant, which necessitates a more guarded rationale. A possible explanation is that yelling may be an acute stressor that creates an acute short duration affective response rather than a long-term appraisal process stressor, which is more likely to be captured by the ST construct as the items do not measure a person's reaction to the yelling but rather how the stress is experienced over time. The other, more parsimonious explanation is a statistical one, since the variance of Belittling and Yelling is quite small in this particular sample ($N = 202$), which may not be large enough to meet conventional significance standards (which will be discussed further in Chapter 8).

The central empirical finding in this study was the higher level of Behavior-Specific Stress than Emotional Exhaustion ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < .001$ versus $\beta = 0.093$, $p = .280$) which is based on the theoretical distinction between primary appraisal and generalized resource depletion (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There is a more direct mechanism to engagement than EE because ST is an appraisal which is explicitly related to the abusive behaviors studied, whereas EE is a state that occurs over a period of time and is not behavior specific. This aligns with the general pattern of appraisal theory, which holds that proximal appraisals that are event-related have more predictive power than distal appraisals that are generalized (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and confirms the results of other research in the literature showing that the capacity of emotional exhaustion to predict engagement is dampened when a more specific intervening mechanism is added (Hu et al., 2022).

Lastly, the Credit Stealing → Engagement and Behavior-Specific Stress → Engagement paths were not anticipated based on the original three-dimensional engagement model (Nabi & Aziz, 2025), but are statistically explainable and not necessarily evidence of a positive effect of stress. Some of this common variance ($\beta = 0.562$) between CS and ST is shared, so that it is possible to include both as predictors of one aggregate measure of Employee Engagement, such that the unique partial-led coefficient for each predictor may change sign, while the combined, unpartial led coefficient for each predictor is in the theoretically expected direction. Some of this common variance is shared, and including both predictors in the same model of one aggregate measure of Employee Engagement may result in classical suppression, where the association between each predictor and the outcome changes sign when entered as partial predictors, while the same association between each predictor and the outcome remains in the theoretically expected direction when entered as unpartial predictors. This interpretation is provided but not assumed to be correct; it is simply pointed out for further longitudinal validation in Chapter 5, but not confirmed.

Algorithm-Stage, Emotional Exhaustion Antecedents

Table 4 shows the algorithm-stage (non-bootstrapped) standardized path coefficients of the PLS path model between the dimensions of abusive leadership and Emotional Exhaustion. The estimates revealed that Credit Stealing had by far the highest association with Emotional Exhaustion ($\beta = 0.707$) while Belittling, Yelling, and Scapegoating had weak or negligible associations in this sample (all betas were < 0.5). It is similar to the theoretical prediction that the stealing of credit, which involves stealing an employee's professional identity and recognition, will consume more general emotional resources than more episodic or situational abusive behaviors like yelling.

Table 4: Algorithm-Stage Antecedent Paths to Emotional Exhaustion

Path	Standardized β (Original Sample, Algorithm Stage)
CS → EE	0.707
BB → EE	0.077
SC → EE	-0.126
YL → EE	-0.010

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 5: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Abusive leadership dimensions are significantly associated with Employee Engagement.	Partially supported (CS, SC significant; BB, YL not significant)
H2	Behavior-Specific Stress mediates the abusive leadership–Employee Engagement relationship.	Supported
H3	Emotional Exhaustion mediates the abusive leadership–Employee Engagement relationship.	Not supported at the EE → EEG stage
H4	Behavior-Specific Stress exerts a stronger	Supported

direct effect on Employee Engagement than Emotional Exhaustion.

Discussion & Conclusion

Discussion

The main contribution of this study is the empirical direct comparison of two theoretically driven mediating mechanisms, namely behaviour-specific stress and generalized emotional exhaustion, in one structural model. Emotional Exhaustion's path to Employee Engagement was not significant even though Emotional Exhaustion was included in the model alongside of Behavior-Specific Stress, which remained significant. The appraisal-based mechanism captured by behavior-specific stress seems to be taking more of the explanatory load than the generalized resource-depletion mechanism captured by emotional exhaustion in at least this sample of IT employees. A possible reading in line with Affective Events Theory is that it is the appraisal placed on a specific act of the supervisor that affects how engaged employees are, rather than their general, holistic sense of emotional depletion; a second and complementary reading is that the appraisal of a specific act of the supervisor can account for much of the variance that a generalized exhaustion measure would; the appraisal of a specific act of the supervisor and its resulting emotion depletion are both mediated by the common factor of credit stealing.

Credit Stealing is also incredibly strong across both mediators ($\beta = 0.562$ to ST, $\beta = 0.707$ to EE), as well as having a strong direct path to engagement, thus confirming and extending the original model's finding that credit stealing is a uniquely potent form of abusive leadership. The present results indicate that credit stealing is also the most predominant predictor of generalized emotional exhaustion, indicating that stealing a subordinate's job-based accomplishment not only affects a cognition specific resource for this identity, but also a more general resource for emotions.

Two findings merit careful interpretation with transparency instead of an unproblematic interpretation as evidence for the hypothesized negative relationships. First, the direct path for Credit Stealing to engagement was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.684$) and not negative. Second, the Behavior-Specific Stress path to engagement was also positive ($\beta = 0.266$). Both results are contrary to the expected, intuitive relationship that stress response and abusive behavior would uniformly diminish engagement; they are also counter to the negative stress-to-engagement relationship that was observed in the original model's three-dimensional outcome of engagement. There are a few possible explanations. The second is the statistical suppression of the direct unmediated coefficient for Credit Stealing because Credit Stealing is highly correlated with Behavior-Specific Stress ($r = 0.562$) and both are included as direct predictors of Engagement. The second is the direct unmediated coefficient of Credit Stealing, as it is strongly correlated with Behavior-Specific Stress ($\beta = 0.562$) and both are entered simultaneously as predictors of Engagement, a well documented artifact of multi-predictor path models. The other possible interpretation is a reverse or reciprocal one: extremely stressed and/or resilient workers may be more likely to stay at high stress jobs with the credit stealing bosses, and consequently experience stress and continued engagement, not disengagement. The third explanation is related to differences in model specification between this extended model (Engagement as a single construct) and the original model (Engagement consisting of three separate constructs with

negative stress paths for each of them). Aggregation may mask divergent within-construct effects. An explicit limitation of this sign reversal is that it needs to be followed longitudinally or experimented upon to confirm the positive stress-engagement relationship.

By contrast, the negative direct effect of scapegoating on engagement ($\beta = -0.163$), which is also consistent with theoretical expectations, is significant and consistent with the original model as the scapegoating undermines the behavioral portion of engagement via withdrawal and avoidance. Belittling and Yelling's paths in this sample are not significant or at best only marginally so and must be used with caution because of the smaller sample size ($N = 202$) compared with the original study.

All four of these exploratory quadratic effects were not significant within this sample, suggesting that none of the major constructs of the study predicted a curvilinear (threshold or diminishing-returns) relationship; thus, a linear structural specification may be used with future replications of this model.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theory in three ways. First, it operationalizes and directly tests a dual-mediator structure, behavior-specific appraisal versus generalized resource depletion, that has been implicit but rarely made explicit in the abusive leadership literature. By showing that behavior-specific stress outperforms generalized emotional exhaustion when both are modeled together, the study offers evidence that appraisal-based, behavior-referent mediators may be theoretically and empirically superior to global strain indicators for explaining engagement outcomes, refining the Conservation of Resources account that has traditionally treated resource depletion as a single, undifferentiated pathway (Hobfoll, 1989; Chen et al., 2024).

Second, the study extends the emotional exhaustion literature, which has predominantly linked abusive supervision to exhaustion-mediated counterproductive behavior (Li & Xu, 2025), quiet quitting (Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 2026), and reduced well-being, by testing exhaustion specifically against a behavior-specific competitor within the engagement domain. The finding that credit stealing is disproportionately responsible for emotional exhaustion, relative to belittling, yelling, and scapegoating, adds behavioral specificity to a literature that has largely treated abusive supervision as a unitary antecedent of exhaustion (Wu et al., 2023).

Third, by retaining the four-behavior disaggregation of abusive leadership while adding a competing mediator, the study reinforces the original model's central theoretical claim, that abusive leadership should not be studied as a psychologically homogeneous construct, and extends it by showing that the same logic of specificity applies to the mediating mechanism, not only to the independent variable.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have implications for HR and leadership development practice, as credit stealing dominates both mediating pathways. Interventions targeting credit stealing behaviors (explicit recognition programs, explicit credit to specific behaviors in performance appraisals, and training managers in the behaviors of indicating recognition) may have

disproportionately high impact compared to interventions focusing on yelling or belittling alone because credit stealing seems to exhaust a performance appraisal resource as well as the individual's general emotional reservoir of performance resources.

Organizations might be better off pairing behaviour-referent stress-management interventions (e.g., training employees on how to process and respond to specific employee-related behaviours) with generic burnout prevention programs without giving up the latter, because although emotional exhaustion also relates to other negative outcomes (e.g., counterproductive work behaviours, turnover intention; Li & Xu, 2025; Wu et al., 2023), it still maintains its explanatory power on engagement when both are modeled together.

Lastly, the strong negative impact found for the scapegoating behaviors on engagement implies that HR policies should explicitly differentiate the behaviors that create uncertainty and lead to withdrawal (scapegoating) from the behaviors that occur more often and are more visible (e.g., yelling), so that the organization can focus its interventions on those behaviors for which the evidence suggests the highest engagement payoff.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some caveats to consider with these results. Firstly, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inferences, the paths Credit Stealing → Engagement and Behavior-Specific Stress → Engagement are in particular counterintuitive and therefore need to be replicated, either longitudinally or in the form of experience sampling, to rule out reverse causality, suppression artifacts, or common method variance as explanations. Second, the sample ($N = 202$) is smaller than the original study ($N = 450$) and is limited only to the IT sector and hence cannot be generalized across industries and different cultural contexts; future studies should test this dual-mediator model with larger and broader samples across different industries and cultural contexts. Third, the antecedent paths from Belittling, Yelling, and Scapegoating to Emotional Exhaustion were added by the stage of the PLS algorithm and not from the final bootstrapped structural table and thus should not be interpreted as confirmatory; future studies should bootstrap the entire set of antecedent-to-exhaustion paths explicitly. Fourth, as in the original study, other forms of destructive leadership (e.g., ostracism, passive-aggressive supervision) were not considered and modeled as potential moderators in this study that could attenuate the relationship between abusive supervision and employee exhaustion (as suggested by prior studies; Wu et al., 2023; Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 2026).

Conclusion

This research builds on an earlier model of abusive leadership, which included a behavior-specific stress response as a competing mediator; Emotional Exhaustion is added as a competing, theoretically-based mediator, in addition to Behavior-Specific Stress. The extended model was tested in the IT sector (202 employees) and accounted for 84.6% of the variance in Employee Engagement. When Behavior-Specific Stress was modeled alongside Emotional Exhaustion, the direct path between the two was still significant, while the direct path between Emotional Exhaustion and engagement was not—suggesting that in this context, the unique explanatory value of Emotional Exhaustion seems to be related to its association with engagement through the other variables in this model, rather than directly to engagement itself. The mediator that emerged as most likely to have led to the outcome was the same mediator, Credit Stealing, that

was the most psychologically consequential form of abusive leadership in the original model, and as such was the most dominant across both mediators and the outcome. The study also reveals two surprising positive direct effects of credit stealing and of behavior-specific stress on engagement, which we cautiously interpret as likely due to the effect of statistical suppression or a reciprocal process rather than evidence of a positive effect of stress on engagement, and recommend future studies to replicate these findings longitudinally. The results of this research do support a more specific, behavior-specific focus on independent and mediating variable constructs in the study of abusive leadership and can provide organizations with a basis grounded in evidence to focus on credit-stealing-specific interventions in leadership development programs.

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