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The moderating role of message framing on the links between organizational identification and unethical pro-organizational behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine how – if any – does message framing moderates the previously documented positive effect of organizational identification on unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB).

Design/methodology/approach – The authors used vignette methodology to manipulate message framing and organizational identification in a 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design to test research hypotheses. In total, 332 undergraduate students in the senior year of banking and management participated in the experiment. Two-way analysis of variance was used for data analyses.

Findings – Message framing is found to moderate the effect of organizational identification on UPB. Organizational identification posed a stronger effect on intentions to engage UPB when a supervisor announces a critical situation by using a positively framed message than (s)he frames it negatively.

Research limitations/implications – Using undergraduate students as subjects is an important limitation to external validity and generalizability of the findings. More realistic field experiments can be conducted by using real employees and factual firms in future studies.

Practical implications – Managers should be careful when using over-motivating language to employees on critical issues. Under intense stress, a managerial message over-emphasizing "gain" can prompt highly identified employees to conduct misbehavior.

Social implications – Unethical behavior brings negative consequences for organizations, even if it is conducted for the benefit of the organization. To prevent any tendency toward UPB, management communication must clearly highlight the delicate boundary between being attached to the organization and going beyond the rules for the organizational goals.

Originality/value – The study findings shed more light on the relationship between organizational identification and UPB, allowing us to see that the relationship is not always linear. In addition to over-identification, reciprocity and neutralization processes, the framing may be another explanation to varying effect of organizational identification on UPB. Supervisors' communication style can influence employee behavior in controversial issues linked to UPB.

Keywords Organizational identification, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Message framing, Framing effect, Vignette methodology, Organizational behavior, Deviant workplace behavior, Management communication

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Introduction

Studies on organizational ethics generally focus on the positive effects of employees' ethical behavior on the organization, or the negative consequences of unethical behavior (Weeks and Nantel, 1992; Babin *et al.*, 2000; Schwepker, 2001; Mulki *et al.*, 2007). However, there is one particular category of unethical employee behavior that does not intend to harm the organization. Recently, an increasing number of studies investigated how and why employees commit unethical behavior intended to aid the organization (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004; Liu and Qiu, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2018; Zhang and Xiao, 2020; Mishra *et al.*, 2021). Such behavior is referred to as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). UPB refers to ethically questionable actions that can be accepted as a voluntary extra-role behavior in favor of the organization. Such activities may include, but are not limited to, misrepresenting the truth to make the organization look good, reflecting the facts about the organization's products and services to customers better than they are and concealing negative information about organization's products and services from customers (Umphress *et al.*, 2010; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Recent studies have demonstrated that this kind of behavior may also occur with the purpose of protecting and promoting the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Vadera *et al.*, 2013; Bryant and Merritt, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2021) or the leader (Vriend *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2020).

One of the potential drivers of UPB is organizational identification, which is defined by Ashforth and Mael (1989) as the perceived oneness of an employee with the organization. Organizational identification is also conceptualized as "a feeling of attachment, belonging, and pride in being an organizational member, loyalty to the organization, and a perception that the employee and the organization are similar in terms of shared values and goals" (Cheney, 1983). Based on the social identity theory, one can argue that when an employee is identified with an organization, (s)he feels the success/failure of the organization as own success/failure. Therefore, it may be possible for a highly identified employee to involve in UPB when necessary for the success of the organization.

Extant literature has several studies documenting the positive effect of organizational identification on UPB (Umphress *et al.*, 2010; Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Ploeger and Bisel, 2013; Effelsberg *et al.*, 2013; Vadera *et al.*, 2013; Effelsberg and Solga, 2015; Kong, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2016; Bryant and Merritt, 2019). However, the relationship between organizational identification and UPB may not always be simple and linear. There may be various individual, organizational and administrative factors affecting the relationship between organizational identification and UPB. Studies examining the possible factors to influence this relationship are scarce and need further explanation. Research indicates that the type, format and content of organizational communication may affect employee behavior (Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 1998; Bartels *et al.*, 2010; Whiting *et al.*, 2012). How the message is framed in management communication has a prominent effect on the responses of employees (Graham *et al.*, 2015). The way leaders or policy-makers frame messages to individuals can have important implications for individual behavior (Grant and Hofmann, 2011; Ruben and Gigliotti, 2017) and how problems are framed – and interpreted – can affect ethical decision-making (Bastons, 2008). Framing is a type of discourse analysis that was developed from research on social interaction. The expression of the same information in different ways (i.e. gain or loss) arouses different emotions in individuals and its reflection on individuals' decisions is expressed as framing effect (Kahneman, 2011). In organizational communication, the way supervisors frame messages can also affect the likelihood of employees adopting extra-role behavior. Thus, as an extra-role behavior, UPB is also susceptible to message framing. Even though it has recently attracted attention from the fields of business ethics, human resources management and organizational behavior, UPB is

a neglected topic in the fields of organizational and management communication. Excluding Graham *et al.* (2015), there is hardly any study in the literature probing the effects of management communication on employees' intentions to engage in UPB.

The purpose of this study is to examine how – if any – does message framing moderate the previously documented positive effect of organizational identification on UPB. The results of this study have a potential to contribute understanding UPB in several ways. First, the findings will shed more light on the relationship between organizational identification and UPB, allowing us to see the boundary conditions. Second, the study will link business communication and UPB literature by demonstrating how message framing affects employees' intentions to engage in UPB. Third, from the practical sense, the study findings will contribute to the understanding of how supervisors' communication style can influence employee behavior in controversial issues linked to UPB. Even if employees intend to benefit the organization by engaging in UPB, they may pose serious risks to the organization by damaging corporate reputation and customer trust (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to understand how employees perceive and respond to messages from managers (as their moral actors) in critical situations. This knowledge may help supervisors to execute more effective communication on such instances within the organization. To this end, we conducted an experimental study to examine the joint effects of message framing and organizational identification on UPB.

The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops research hypotheses. Following that, research methods, experimental design and data analyses are provided. The last section presents and discusses the study findings along with conclusions, implications, study limitations and future research directions.

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)

There is an extensive literature on workplace deviance in the fields of organizational psychology, organizational behavior and business ethics. Several researchers have examined counter-productive work behavior at the workplace (Spector and Fox, 2002; Penney and Spector, 2005; Spector and Fox, 2010). A vast majority of the studies have focused on the causes and consequences of unethical behavior that is detrimental to the organization or to other employees (Jones and Kavanagh, 1996; Moore *et al.*, 2012). However, it is also noteworthy that the employees may engage in unethical activities that may result in the company's favor. Typical examples of unethical behavior (misusing company time, wasting resources, lying, theft, abusing, violating company policies, etc.) are carried out to harm the organization or other employees. Unlike these, some unethical activities are carried out in the name of the organization with an intention to benefit the company (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). With the frequent occurrence of these activities in organizations, a new phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers. This new phenomenon is termed as UPB by Umphress *et al.* (2010). They defined UPB as "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g., leaders) and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct." Concealing product flaws, destruction of the accusatory information about the organization, exaggerating the truth about the organization's products to customers are typical forms of UPB. Although UPB is an unethical behavior, it is different from other forms of deviant workplace behavior. It is a voluntary extra-role behavior performed with the intention of benefiting rather than harming the organization (Kong, 2015). However, it may also bring serious risks to the organization. As seen in the Volkswagen emission scandal (2015) in which employees manipulated emission tests to support the firm's viability, UPB may harm external stakeholders, and once disclosed, it can have disastrous effects on the company. Such

incidents ultimately can impact employees, management and shareholders. Volkswagen stock was down by 30% after the scandal was unfolded, and it took significant time to regroup the declined sales. Another dramatic example was the Wells Fargo account fraud scandal (2016) where employees created millions of fraudulent savings and checking accounts on behalf of clients without their consent, to have an image of stability on the Wall Street. The scandal costed the bank nearly US$3bn, and 5,300 employees were fired between 2011 and 2016 as a result of fraudulent sales. Additionally, some Wells Fargo branch-level bankers encountered difficulty gaining employment at other banks.

UPB contains two main descriptive components. The first is that the UPB are unethical behaviors or actions that are illegal or morally unacceptable to the majority of society. Secondly, these behaviors are neither formally stated in job descriptions nor explicitly requested by managers, but they benefit or help the organization (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). As these behaviors are carried out to commit both organizational and personal interests, UPB can be called as a type of workplace violation for the benefit of an organization (Graham *et al.*, 2015). UPB comprises actions that violate ethical norms while performing for the benefit of the organization and have the potential to harm the interests of external stakeholders and the whole society (Effelsberg *et al.*, 2013). Unethical behavior for the benefit of the organization is not expected to be as extreme as covering up serious crimes. This may include lying to customers, concealing negative information from the public and exaggerating the benefits of the products and services. All these behaviors are carried out to help the organization achieving its goals (Graham *et al.*, 2015, p. 423). Umphress and Bingham (2011) identified three conditions that do not cover with this scope: unethical actions of employees:

- without any specific intentions to benefit or harm;
- aimed at benefiting the organization but not achieving the ultimate goal; an
- performed with the intent to benefit only themselves.

Considering these boundaries, an unethical behavior can be regarded as UPB if it is committed consciously, benefits the organization and aims to protect the interests of the whole organization.

As UPB is an extra-role behavior that may create significant personal and organizational outcomes, understanding the antecedents and consequences of UPB is critical. "What drives the employees to perform UPB?" Several individual, organizational and leadership factors have been examined in the literature as the antecedents of UPB (Zhang and Xiao, 2020; Mishra *et al.*, 2021, for extensive reviews). One potential explanation about the underlying motives for engaging in UPB is based on the theory of social exchange (Emerson, 1976). According to Umphress and Bingham (2011), "employees may reciprocate positive exchange relationships with their employers by engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors." Another possible motive for engaging UPB may stem from a strong identification with the organization. According to the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), which posits that individuals define themselves based on their social group memberships, as organizational identification becomes stronger, organizational values and work-related practices become more salient to employees. In some challenging situations, a strong organizational identification may drive employees to disregard ethical standards to help the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Blader *et al.*, 2017; Conroy *et al.*, 2017). Thus, understanding the links between UPB and organizational identification is necessary.

Organizational identification and unethical pro-organizational behavior

According to the social identity theory, people tend to classify themselves and others into various social groups and part of an individual's self-concept derives from membership with the social group (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Organizational identification, as a special form of social identification, is an employee's perception of belonging and membership to his/her employing organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). A high organizational identification leads employees to feel the success of the organization as their own success, and the failure of the organization as their own failure (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Dutton *et al.* (1994) defined organizational identification as the degree to which a member defines him/herself by the same attributes that (s)he believes to define the organization. Thus, organizational identification is the process in which employees' own values and organizational values incorporate. It establishes the sense of oneness between employees and the organization or the perception of belonging to the organization (Riketta, 2005). In this respect, organizational identification is a psychological bond that one feels socially, emotionally and cognitively toward the organization (Edward and Peccei, 2007). With organizational identification, it is ensured that the values and goals of the organization become part of the employee's self-concept (Van Dick, 2001) and goals of the organization and those of the employee become increasingly integrated or compatible (Hall *et al.*, 1970).

Organizational identification has become a prominent topic in organizational studies because it is correlated with a wide range of work-related attitudes, behaviors and context variables (Riketta, 2005). It creates many individual and organizational positive outcomes (i.e. decreases intention to leave and absenteeism; increases job involvement, motivation, loyalty, satisfaction, performance and several extra-role behaviors, including organizational citizenship (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008; Edward and Peccei, 2007)). Employees who strongly identify with their organization have a higher propensity to show favorable work attitudes and behavior, and they make their best effort to benefit the organization. Employees who show high identification because of integration with the values and norms of their organizations, even though they are not subject to formal difficulties such as contracts or control mechanisms, act in accordance with the values and norms of their organizations, and this maintains psychological satisfaction (Gautam *et al.*, 2004).

There is a strong theoretical foundation and several empirical studies documenting the positive relationships between organizational identification and UPB (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Chen *et al.*, 2016; Naseer *et al.*, 2020). According to the social identity theory, employees behave in ways intended to maintain or enhance the positive self-image of being affiliated with their organization (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). A positive identification with the organization (as an in-group) for its internal integration and external competition can push highly (over) identified employees into gray areas in which pro-organizational behaviors are performed (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Vadera *et al.*, 2013; Conroy *et al.*, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2019). Umphress *et al.* (2010) showed that highly identified employees with their organization were more likely to participate in UPB when they had strong positive reciprocity beliefs. Thus, high levels of organizational identification may motivate employees to ignore some moral values and engage in misbehavior to favor the organization (Dukerich *et al.*, 1998; Moore *et al.*, 2012; Effelsberg *et al.*, 2013; Vadera *et al.*, 2013). Blader *et al.* (2017) argued that highly identified employees may engage in UPB to signal and reaffirm their belongingness and membership in the organization (affiliative concerns). A strong sense of association may make them immune to immoral behavior and indifferent to ethical standards to help the organization (Naseer *et al.*, 2020). Further, in a highly competitive environment, where employees are under intense stress, they may engage in a cognitive rationalization, known as "neutralization," which removes the ethicality associated with unethical actions

(Umphress and Bingham, 2011). On this theoretical basis, and previously documented empirical evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. A strong organizational identification will lead to a higher intention to engage in UPB compared to a weak organizational identification.

The moderating effect of message framing

In a competitive and stressful business environment, messages from managers are intrinsic guides for employees to interpret which situation is critical for the organization to survive. Business ethics literature documented that cultural norms affect perceived ethical situations and ethical decision making (Hofstede, 1980; Hunt and Vitell, 1986). Especially in cultures with a large power distance, a greater importance is given to the cues of superiors (Vitell *et al.*, 1993), and thus, messages from managers can unintentionally lead employees to engage in ethically questionable behavior (Tian and Peterson, 2016). Therefore, it is likely that the management's communication style may play a role on the relationship between organizational identification and UPB.

Leadership communication is a major component of the internal communication system of an organization (Men, 2014). Beyond leaders' communication styles, the content and delivery of the message given by the managers, as the moral actors, significantly influence employees' attitudes, behavior and performance (Holladay and Coombs, 1993; Mueller and Lee, 2002; Men, 2011). Among other variables, an important factor that determines the responses of employees in organizational communication is message framing. Message framing refers to the persuasive strategy either to highlight benefits and rewards from compliance with the message advocacy or to emphasize the costs and punishments associated with noncompliance (Shen and Mercer Kollar, 2015). Managers can also use framing as a tool to influence employees' shaping their understanding and deciding what to think and do.

Framing effect originates from the "Prospect Theory" proposed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). The prospect theory posits that individual judgment and decision can be influenced dramatically by the way information is presented. Even if the meaning of the given message is the same, individuals can give different answers to the same questions or choices according to different ways of presentation (McCaffery and Baron, 2006). Especially in risky situations, people often make decisions based on how expected outcome is framed. For example, the possible outcome of a situation may be presented as a gain (positive) or loss (negative) (Kühberger, 1995). The framing effect arouses when expressing the same information in different ways and creates different emotions in individuals reflected in their decisions (Kahneman, 2011). Researchers in the framing literature have identified and examined different ways of message framing, such as positive–negative, fear–hope, rational–emotional and guilt–pride (O'Keefe and Jensen, 2009). Levin *et al.* (1998) proposed a typology of framing effects and distinguished three types as risky choice, attribute and goal framing. Among these, goal framing is particularly important for organizational behavior because it aims to focus attention on either gaining a benefit or preventing a loss.

The "goal framing effect" involves the idea that differences in framing can influence the implicit goals of the individual depending on whether the message is positive or negative. Goal framing stresses positive consequences as a result of performing a behavior (gain framing) and negative consequences as a result of not performing that behavior (loss framing). Although it is generally subject to empirical studies on health-related issues (Meyerowitz and Chaiken, 1987; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Rothman *et al.*, 1993), goal framing has also been examined in the field of organizational behavior (Rutte *et al.*,

1987; Thorsteinson and Highhouse, 2003). Nevertheless, research on goal framing has revealed contradictory findings (Kühberger, 1998). Some studies concluded that loss-framed messages are more effective (Meyerowitz and Chaiken, 1987; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990), while others have shown that gain framing is more effective (Thorsteinson and Highhouse, 2003; Rothman *et al.*, 1993) depending on the context and other intervening variables like involvement, regulatory focus and need for cognition. Facing a critical situation that may affect organizational survival creates a high issue involvement among employees. In such a situation, the urge to do something for the benefit of the organization becomes more salient with a positively framed message from the leader. Although the leader does not intend to promote unethical behavior, overemphasis on achieving organizational goals and gain may lead followers to ignore some ethical boundaries. Thus, we propose that, expressing a critical situation with positively framed messages will pose a stronger effect on employees, and it may increase their intention to commit UPB, compared to using a negatively framed message.

H2. Positively (gain) framed goals will result in a higher intention to commit UPB compared to negatively (loss) framed messages.

Further, we expect that the likelihood of highly identified employees to engage in UPB will be significantly increased when a critical situation is communicated within a gain framework. Highly identified employees have high emotional attachment to the organization and the perception of "we feeling" is stronger among these employees. They internalize the organization's goals, and they are intrinsically motivated for organizational success (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). Further, they may exhibit a higher intention to engage in UPB to achieve organizational gains, because being a member of a successful (prestigious) organization will be positively transferred to their self-esteem and enhance their self-concept (Van Dick, 2001). "We will gain together by working together" approach will be more effective on employees with high organizational identification.

On the other hand, employees with a low level of organizational identification will be more sensitive to the messages given within a loss framework because the risk of losing something is more prominent for them (Levine, 2000; Vadera *et al.*, 2013). Those who have not sufficiently internalized the success of the organization will focus on what they can lose individually in case of failure, rather than focusing on organizational gains. From this point of view, they may engage in UPB to avoid individual losses. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis about the moderating effect of message framing:

H3. Message framing moderates the link between organizational identification and intentions to commit UPB. Specifically, positively (gain) framed messages will create stronger intentions to commit UPB under high organizational identification, while negatively (loss) framed messages will create stronger intentions to commit UPB under low organizational identification.

Methodology

Subjects and design

Study hypotheses were tested using a 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design. A total of 332 undergraduate students (168 male, 164 female, average age 23,1 years, SD = 1,56) enrolled at a Turkish state university participated in the study. The participants were either management or banking majors at their final year of study and volunteered to take part in the study in return for extra course credits. Although the use of student samples in social

science research has been criticized because of external validity and generalizability issues (Peterson, 2001), it is a widely used strategy in experimental studies because it enables researchers to have homogeneous sub-samples and facilitates the control of extraneous variables that could potentially confound the results (Calder and Tybout, 1999).

Because UPB is a sensitive topic that cannot be objectively observed or easily measured, a situational manipulation was applied to the participants using the experimental methodology. Another reason to use the experimental design is to manipulate the independent variables examined in the research in a controlled manner. We developed a survey-based 2 (organizational identification: high vs. low) × 2 (message framing: gain vs loss) between-subjects experiment by using four different vignettes as the experimental stimuli. Organizational identification and message framing were manipulated by vignettes. As this is an exploratory study, to manipulate their level of identification with a company that does not exist, the participants were asked to put themselves in the place of the employee described in the vignette and the question "what would you do if you were in hihe/sher place" was asked.

A vignette is a brief, carefully written description of a situation designed to simulate key features of a real-world scenario that allows the researcher to manipulate specific aspects of a written stimulus while controlling others (Atzmüller and Steiner, 2010). The vignette method is used in social science research to examine contentious topics, permitting researchers to effectively study sensitive issues in a controlled manner (Kandemir and Budd, 2018; McInroy and Beer, 2021). Vignette-based experimental designs offer a glimpse into how individuals' thoughts, feelings, behaviors and decisions are affected by factors that may not be easily accessible in real-life situations (Evans *et al.*, 2015).

Four different versions of an online questionnaire, with analogous questions, were used to collect the data. The online questionnaire had three sections. The first part included demographic questions. Next, subjects were provided with one of the four scenarios (vignettes). The last part included questions to elicit participants' intentions to engage in UPB, along with the manipulation check questions.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. After responding the demographic questions, participants were instructed as to "carefully read the vignette which is a truly experienced event, and imagine yourself in that situation, and then answer the succeeding questions in the next page." The vignette depicted an incident that happened to a recently graduated bank officer Mr(s). X in the bank branch (s)he works. At their weekly staff meeting, the branch manager informs the employees about a new insurance product launched by the bank and tells that the sales targets defined to their branch must be met in relation to this new product. However, to sell this pack, which is more expensive than similar products, it may be necessary to exaggerate some features of the product or hide some negative information about it. This situation creates a dilemma where fostering organizational success happens to be at the expense of customers. Four versions of this vignette are developed by manipulating Mr(s). X's level of organizational identification (high vs low) and the way the branch manager explains the issue to his employees (gain vs loss framing) (Appendix). The main reason for using such a scenario is that the banking and insurance sector appears as an emerging sector where ethical issues are frequently observed (Vujnović-Gligorić *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, a significant portion of our study sample is likely to work in the banking and finance industry after graduation. The story was developed by the researchers, based on a qualitative study with entry-level employees of the banking industry, reflecting their real-life experience. Alternative scenarios were created through interviews with experts in the organizational behavior field. Table 1 shows the experimental groups and gender distribution of the participants.

The key dependent variable was intentions to engage in UPB. Study participants were instructed to assume the role of Mr(s). X and indicate their willingness to engage in UPB to reach sales targets. The six-item scale developed by Umphress *et al.* (2010) was used to measure employee willingness to engage in UPB on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included "If it would help my bank to reach the sales target, I would exaggerate the truth about this new product to customers" and "If it would benefit my bank, I would withhold negative information about the product from customers and clients."

To check the effectiveness of experimental manipulations, subjects' levels of agreement with two statements were captured. At this stage, respondents were not allowed to go back and read the vignette again. The first statement was "Mr(s)X has a strong organizational identification with the bank," and the second statement was "The branch manager used a gain framing to explain the issue to the employees," Responses were taken on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Findings

Manipulation checks

An independent samples *t*-test was performed on the manipulation check questions to verify if the respondents rated Mr(s). X's level of organizational identification differently in the experimental conditions. The mean score of the level of perceived organizational identification in the "High Organizational Identification" conditions (Groups 1 and 2) was 4.356 (SD = 0.79), whereas it was 1.846 (SD = 1.03) in the "Low Organizational Identification" conditions (Groups 3 and 4). The difference between the mean scores was in the expected direction, and it was statistically significant [$t_{(330)} = 24.758, p < 0.01$]

Another independent samples *t*-test was performed to verify if gain vs loss framing manipulation worked properly. The mean score of the responses to the manipulation check question (*The branch manager used a gain framing to explain the issue to the employees*) in the "Gain Framing" conditions (Groups 1 and 3) was 3.947 (SD = 1.05), whereas it was 2.288 (SD = 0.97) in the "Loss Framing" conditions (Groups 2 and 4). The difference between the mean scores was in the expected direction, and it was statistically significant [$t_{(330)} = 14.883, p < 0.01$]. These results indicated that the experimental manipulations were successful.

Factor and reliability analyses

Factor and reliability analyses were carried out to examine the dimensionality and reliability of the dependent variable. A principal components analysis on UPB scale suggested a single factor, which explained 69.5% of the total variance (eigenvalue 4.17). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is calculated as 0.875. All of the scale items were highly loaded on the unrotated factor (Table 2). The scale exhibited a high

Table 1. Experimental groups and gender distribution of the participants

Group no.	Experimental conditions	Female	Male	Total
1	High organizational identification–gain framing	36	47	83
2	High organizational identification–loss framing	44	36	80
3	Low organizational identification–gain framing	41	45	86
4	Low organizational identification–loss framing	43	40	83
		164	168	332

UPB scale items	Factor loadings
If it would benefit my bank, I would withhold negative information about its products from customers and clients	0.882
If it would help my bank, I would misrepresent the truth to make my bank look good	0.871
If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my bank	0.840
If it would help my bank to reach the sales target, I would exaggerate the truth about my bank's products or services to customers and clients	0.837
If my bank needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged	0.783
If my bank needed me to, I would give a good recommendation on the behalf of an incompetent employee in the hope that the person will become another bank's problem instead of my own	0.783
Total variance explained/eigenvalue	69.50%/4.175
Cronbach α	0.911

Table 2. Factor and reliability analyses

degree of reliability (α = 0.91). Hence, the mean score of the corresponding items on UPB scale were averaged to test study hypotheses.

Hypotheses testing

To test *H1*, we ran an independent samples *t*-test and compared the mean scores of UPB according to high vs low organizational identification conditions. As shown on Table 3, intention to engage in UPB mean score in the high organizational identification condition was 3.09 (SD = 1.229), whereas it was 2.15 (SD = 0.67) in the low organizational identification condition. There was a significant difference between the mean scores: ($t_{(330)}$ = –8.675, $p < 0.01$). Participants who were exposed to high organizational identification condition indicated a higher intention to engage in UPB than others who were exposed to low organizational identification condition. Therefore, *H1* was supported.

To test *H2*, proposing that positively (gain) framed goals will result in a higher intention to commit UPB compared to negatively (loss) framed messages, we ran another independent samples *t*-test. Table 4 shows that intention to engage in UPB mean score in the gain framing condition was 3.09 (SD = 1.229), whereas it was 2.15 (SD = 0.67) in the loss framing condition. There was a significant difference between the mean scores: ($t_{(330)}$ = –12.504, $p <$ 0.01). Participants who were exposed to gain framing condition indicated a higher intention to engage in UPB than others who were exposed to loss framing condition. Thus, *H2* was also supported.

Organizational Identification	*N*	Mean	SD	*t*	*p*	95% CI of mean difference Min	Max
Low	169	2,1558	0.67533	−8.675	< 0.001	−1.15351	−0.72708
High	163	3,0961	1.22990				

Note: Dependent variable: intentions to engage in UPB

Table 3. Independent samples *t*-test: organizational identification and UPB

Finally, to test the moderation hypothesis (*H3*), we ran a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations of intention to engage in UPB across different experimental groups. Before conducting two-way ANOVA, the homogeneity of variance assumption was tested. Levene's F test was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that group variances were not homogenous. An examination of the standard deviations revealed that none of the largest standard deviations was more than four times the size of the corresponding smallest, suggesting that the ANOVA would be robust in this case (Howell, 2013, p:344).

There was a significant main effect of organizational identification on the intentions to engage in UPB, $F_{(1, 328)} = 172.715$, $p < 0.001$, $\omega^2 = 0.345$. The intentions to engage in UPB were significantly higher in the case of a high organizational identification. There was a significant main effect of message framing on the intentions to engage in UPB $F_{(1, 328)} = 316.865$, $p < 0.001$, $\omega^2 = 0.491$. Positive (gain) framed messages resulted in a higher intention to engage in UPB, compared to negative framed (loss) messages. Yet, the main effect of message framing was stronger than that of organizational identification.

There was a significant interaction effect (organizational identification × message framing) on the intentions to engage in UPB $F_{(1, 328)} = 146.450$, $p < 0.001$, $\omega^2 = 0.309$. This indicated that employees with varying levels of organizational identification were affected differently by message framing. Specifically, when the message was framed negatively (loss framing), UPB intentions of the participants in the high organizational identification condition (M = 2.02, SD = 0.83) were only slightly stronger than the intentions of the participants in the high organizational identification condition (M = 1.95, SD = 0.57). However, when the message was framed positively (gain framing), UPB intentions of the respondents who were exposed to high organizational identification condition (M = 4.12, SD = 0.34) were significantly higher than the intentions of those who were exposed to low organizational identification condition (M = 2.35, SD = 0.71). These findings were partly in accordance with *H3*, which proposed a moderation effect of message framing. We found support for the proposition that positively (gain) framed messages would create stronger intentions to engage in UPB under high organizational identification. But, we could not find

Table 4. Independent samples *t*-test: message framing and UPB

Message framing	*N*	Mean	SD	*t*	*p*	95% CI of mean difference Min	Max
Loss	163	1,9877	0.71304	−12.504	< 0.001	−1.43176	−1.04249
Gain	169	3,2249	1.0513				

Note: Dependent variable: intentions to engage in UPB

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for intentions to engage in UPB across experimental groups

Organizational identification	Message framing	*N*	Mean	SD
Low	Loss	83	1.9518	0.57354
	Gain	86	2.3527	0.71007
High	Loss	80	2.0250	0.83569
	Gain	83	4.1285	0.34268

Note: Dependent variable: intentions to engage in UPB

enough support for the proposition that negatively (loss) framed messages would create stronger intentions to engage in UPB under low organizational identification. Figure 1 delineates the interactive effects of organizational identification and message framing on the intentions to engage in UPB.

Discussion

Although ethical issues in the businesses place have been discussed for a long time, a specific type of unethical behavior has recently been subject to scrutiny. Employees may commit unethical practices in the business environment to achieve some results for the benefit of the organization. The issue of UPB, which was first introduced by Umphress (2003), has recently attracted the attention of many researchers in the fields of business ethics, human resources management and organizational behavior. However, this topic is neglected in the fields of organizational and business communication.

Previous studies suggested that both the social exchange and social identity theories could help explain why employees engage in such behavior. In addition to the expectation of a positive social exchange between the employee and the organization (i.e. reciprocity), a strong identification with the organization may also drive employees to engage in unethical behavior to benefit the organization (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). When employees internalize the organization's success and failure as their own, they may engage in UPB to further the organization's goals, which facilitates their own goals (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). However, the question "how management

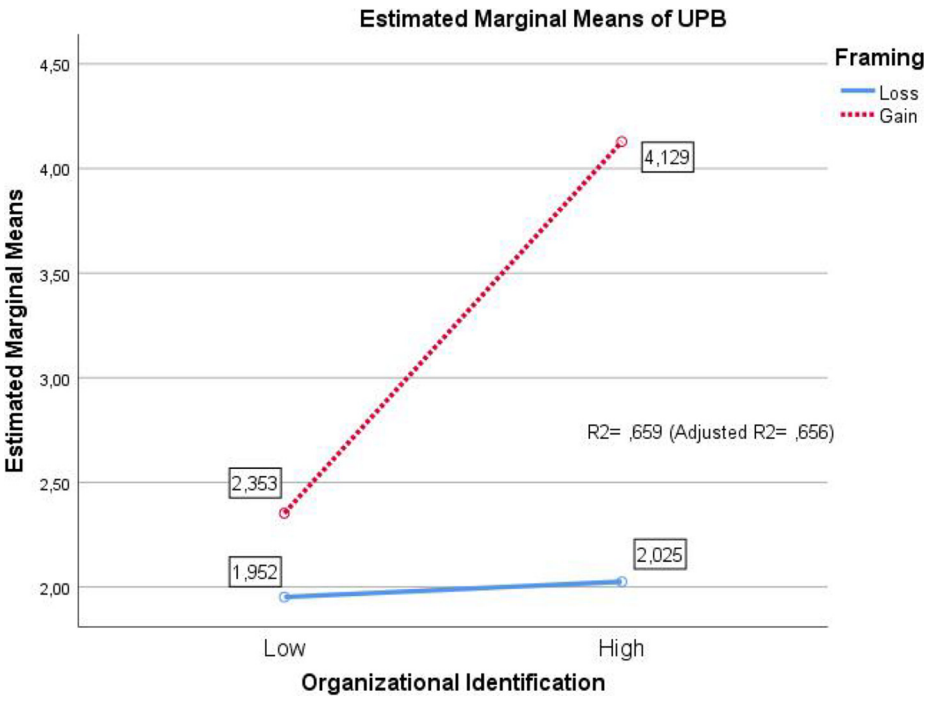

Figure 1.
Effects of organizational identification and message framing on UPB

communication may influence employees' intentions to engage in UPB" has yet to be adequately explored.

The aim of this research is to further investigate the relationship between organizational identification and UPB, which has been documented in the extant literature, from the perspective of internal business communication. We proposed that how administrators frame a message would moderate the known relationship between organizational identification and UPB. To the authors' knowledge, this study is the first attempt to probe the effect of message framing on the relationship between identification and UPB. Through an experimental study based on vignettes, we demonstrated that:

- a high level of organizational identification results a higher propensity to engage in UPB;
- positively framed (gain) messages from administrators create higher intentions to engage in UPB to reach organizational goals; and
- positively framed (gain) messages from administrators amplify the intentions of highly identified employees to engage in UPB to help reaching organizational goals.

We discussed the implications of these findings and proposed future research directions along with the limitations of the current study in the following section.

Implications

This study provides a number of contributions to the existing theory on UPB. First of all, we contribute to the identification literature by confirming the links between organizational identification and UPB in a developing country context. By experimentally showing that a high organizational identification results in a higher intention to engage in UPB, we reached conclusions supporting previous findings (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Chen *et al.*, 2016; Naseer *et al.*, 2020). Strong forms of organizational identification may drive employees toward gray areas. When employees feel a strong unity of purpose, they are more likely to engage in UPB to protect or benefit their organization. We also contribute to the organizational identification literature by providing additional evidence on the malevolent side of a high identification (Naseer *et al.*, 2020; Conroy, *et al.*, 2017). Managers need to be alert to such negative outcomes of overidentification or extreme forms of organizational identification. They should take the necessary measures to prevent UPB without indulgence and clearly inform employees that unethical behavior will not go unpunished, even if it benefits the organization. Otherwise, employees attempting UPB may feel appreciated. Everyone should know very well that even if UPB is conducted for the benefit of the organization, it can have detrimental effects on company reputation and consumer confidence.

The second finding of this research shows that the mode of management communication may influence the likelihood of employees to engage in UPB. Beyond the unity of purpose, communication that emphasizes a possible gain or loss evokes UPB intentions in different magnitudes. Our analysis indicates that positive message framing emphasizing potential gains may incline employees to engage in UPB to achieve organizational goals. This finding links the business communication, identification and business ethics literature and points out that managers should be careful when using over-motivating language to employees on critical issues. Under intense stress, a managerial message overemphasizing "gain" can prompt employees to

conduct misbehavior. Executives should pay attention to what they say and how they say it.

The third and most important finding of this study is that message framing moderates the link between organizational identification and intentions to engage in UPB. When managers use a positively framed (gain) message to communicate a critical situation, employees' reaction varies depending on their level of organizational identification. Highly identified employees react to positively framed gain messages with a very high UPB intention compared to low identified employees. These findings show that the relationship between identification and UPB is not always linear. In addition to overidentification (Vadera *et al.*, 2013), reciprocity and neutralization processes (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), the framing may be another explanation to varying effect of organizational identification on UPB.

We proposed that employees with a low level of organizational identification will focus on aversion to personal losses and, because the risk of losing something is more prominent for them, they will be more sensitive to negatively framed (loss) messages. Consequently, we expected that being exposed to negatively (loss) framed messages, low identified employees would have stronger intentions to commit UPB to avoid risk of their interests being harmed. However, we could not find empirical support for this proposition. Loss-framed messages created almost identical poor levels of UPB intentions in both high and low organizational identification conditions. Employees do not tend to engage in UPB to avoid personally losing something. Committing unethical acts for the benefit of the organization stems from the instinct to protect the interest of the in-group, rather than the fear of individual loss. However, examining the effect of situational factors such as perceived job insecurity may reveal different findings regarding the impact of loss-framed messages on UPB intentions of under-identified employees.

Unethical behavior brings negative consequences for organizations, even if it is conducted for the benefit of the organization. Such behavior reduces the trust of all stakeholders and even causes great harm to corporate image and reputation. Employees who are highly identified with their organizations may sometimes ignore ethical principles and misbehave in the name of their organizations. Considering such negative consequences of organizational overidentification (Vadera *et al.*, 2013; Naseer *et al.*, 2020), managers should be careful in their communication with employees and the words they use. To prevent any tendency toward UPB, managers must clearly highlight the delicate boundary between being attached to the organization and going beyond the rules for the organizational goals.

Limitations and future research directions

The study has a number of notable limitations. First of all, using undergraduate students as subjects is an important limitation to external validity and generalizability of the findings. However, it would not be wrong to assume that undergraduates studying banking and business will behave similarly to real employees in such instances. Yet, randomly assigning subjects to experimental groups provided homogeneous sub-samples and facilitated the control of extraneous variables. Future studies may use more representative samples of non-student participants (actual employees).

A second limitation comes from the use of artificial narratives about a hypothetical employee and asking respondents to put themselves in the place of the employee in the

story. More importantly, organizational identification was manipulated by the scenarios, instead of being measured. It was practically difficult for the respondents to identify with a fictitious institution. Thus, instead of measuring the organizational identification of the participants, we measured their perceptions of the extent to which the employee in the story was identified with the employing organization. Then, we asked the participants to put themselves in the place of the person in the story. Upon completion of the study, the participants are debriefed and interviewed about the scenarios. Most participants said that they thought that such an event really happened in the banking industry. However, in future research, more realistic field experiments can be conducted by using real employees and factual firms so that organizational identification can also be measured among other variables. Due to this limitation, it would be appropriate to evaluate this study as an exploratory research and interpret the findings accordingly.

Another limitation is about the willingness scale we used to measure participants' UPB intentions. We adapted Umphress and Bingham's (2011) scale to our context. The scale does not measure the actual behavior; instead, it aims to capture the intentions to engage in UPB. Future studies should focus on measuring actual UPB. Furthermore, because of the sensitive nature of the UPB, respondents may be reluctant to state their true intentions. To analyze UPB more profoundly, qualitative research methods and advanced neuro-science techniques (EEG, fMRI) can be used in future studies.

Finally, future research should take individual, organizational and cultural factors into consideration when examining UPB. Personal characteristics (demographics, psychographics, personality traits, moral disengagement and job-related attitudes, cognitions) in addition to organizational features (ethical climate, leadership communication, organizational support, trust and justice, etc.) may play a significant role on UPB. More importantly, cultural characteristics will influence individuals' ethical decision-making. This study was conducted in a collectivistic and predominantly feminine culture with a high power-distance and high uncertainty avoidance. From this point of view, it is not possible to generalize the findings to societies with different cultural characteristics. The effect of national culture and religion on UPB is a particular issue that needs to be further explored.

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Further reading

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Appendix

High organizational identification: Short after graduation, Mr(s). X started to work as a marketing staff at a local branch of ABC bank. (S)he had been dreaming of working for this company. Since the day (s)he started working there, (s)he had been feeling part of the family. (S)he quickly integrated with the team and became a loyal employee. (S)he had a strong bond with the bank and regarded the bank's goals and success as her own. When someone criticized the bank, it affected Mr(s). X a lot. (S)he was happy to be an employee of the bank and wanted to continue working there	Low organizational identification: Short after graduation, Mr(s). X started to work as a marketing staff at a local branch of ABC bank. Since the day (s)he started working there, (s)he did not feel as a part of the family. (S)he could not integrate with the team in any way and could not be a loyal employee. (S)he did not have a strong bond with the bank and focused on pursuing own goals rather than the bank's goals. Therefore, (s)he did not see the success of the bank as his/her own. When someone criticized the bank, this was of little concern to him. (S)he was not happy to be an employee of the bank, but (s)he was still working there
Mr(s). X's branch manager holds a staff meeting every Monday morning. That day, at the meeting, the manager talked about the recently launched insurance package. After giving information about this highly profitable product, (s)he asked for a special attention to the sale of this product to keep the target defined for their branch. (s)he said that the sales target for this new product should definitely be met. However, the new product was a difficult product to sell because its price was higher than its peers, while it did not offer any additional features. To be successful in the sale of this product, it may be necessary to exaggerate the features of the product a little while introducing it to customers, or to hide some negative information about the product by reflecting its features better than it actually is. Mr(s). X realized that, to achieve the sales goal, (s)he might have to present some facts to the customer differently	
Loss frame: At the end of the meeting, the branch manager stated that the headquarters paid great attention to the sales figures of this new product, and if they cannot meet the target, the prestige of the branch will drop considerably. (S)he emphasized that, in case of a negative result, the responsibility belongs to all branch staff, and everyone will be negatively affected. (S)he ended his speech by telling that (S)he trusted his/her staff	Gain frame: At the end of the meeting, the branch manager stated that the headquarters paid great attention to the sales figures of this new product, and if they can meet the target, the prestige of the branch will increase considerably. (S)he emphasized that in case of a positive result, this will be the success of all branch employees, and everyone will be positively affected. (S)he ended his speech by telling that (S)he trusted his/her staff.

Table A1. Experimental scenarios

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