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Perceived organizational politics, organizational disidentification, and counterproductive work behaviour: Moderating role of external crisis threats to work

Abstract

Purpose—This research seeks to unpack the relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational politics and their counterproductive work behaviour, by postulating a mediating role of organizational disidentification and a moderating role of perceived external crisis threats to work.

Design/methodology/approach—The empirical assessment of the hypotheses relies on survey data collected among employees who work in a large banking organization.

Findings—Perceptions that organizational decision-making is marked by self-serving behaviour increase the probability that employees seek to cause harm to their employer, because they feel embarrassed by their organizational membership. This mediating role of organizational disidentification is especially prominent when they ruminate about the negative impact of external crises on their work.

Practical implications—This study details an important danger for employees who feel upset with dysfunctional politics: They psychologically distance themselves from their employer, which then prompts them to formulate counterproductive responses that likely make it more difficult to take on the problem in a credible manner. This detrimental dynamic is particularly risky if an external crisis negatively interferes with their work functioning.

Originality/value—This study adds to prior research by detailing an unexplored but relevant mechanism (organizational disidentification) and moderator (external crisis threats) by which perceived organizational politics translates into enhanced counterproductive work behaviour.

Paper type—Research paper

Keywords—perceived organizational politics; organizational disidentification; counterproductive work behaviour; external crisis threats; conservation of resources theory

Introduction

Preoccupations about life-endangering crises—war, terrorism, natural calamities, the global proliferation of deadly viruses (Green *et al.*, 2010; Haq *et al.*, 2020; Oh and Oetzel, 2022; Qu and Yan, 2023)—have detrimental influences on the quality of people’s daily experiences. Due to their worries about such unavoidable crises, people tend to ruminate on imminent hazards to their personal well-being, suffer continuous concerns about the long-term effects on their private lives, or develop a general feeling that they are powerless to protect against future threats (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021b; Toker *et al.*, 2015). These difficulties are not restricted to the personal sphere but also can spill over into work realms, such that employees worry about the impact of the threats to their organization (Raja *et al.*, 2020; Sanders *et al.*, 2020). Recent research on work-related harms of COVID-19 indicates, for example, that perceived pandemic threats can lead to diminished work engagement (Liu *et al.*, 2021) and job performance (De Clercq *et al.*, 2022c) and also direct employees toward counterproductive work behaviour, due to their sense that their jobs are in jeopardy (Lin *et al.*, 2021). These employees might seek to cause harm to the employing organization, such as by stealing company resources, covering up mistakes, or intentionally slowing down work (Cohen, 2016; Kelloway *et al.*, 2002).

These prior studies highlight the direct adverse effects of external crisis threats on employees’ work functioning; to extend this research stream, the current study takes a complementary perspective and focuses on their possible *indirect* impacts on counterproductive work behaviour if employees also believe they operate in politically oriented organizational climates (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). Perceptions of organizational politics can stem from different sources, such as if employees believe that favouritism supersedes merit in decision-making, that their organization endorses a work-behind-the-scenes mentality, or that it is acceptable for

people to spend significant time “sucking up” to superiors to obtain desired outcomes (Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020). By focusing on the interplay between external crisis threats to work on the one hand and the connection between internal politics and negative work behaviour on the other hand, this study explicitly draws from and builds on prior research that shows, in particular, that perceptions of organizational politics can enhance counterproductive work behaviour (Cohen and Diamant, 2019; Wiltshire *et al.*, 2014) and that this link may be mediated by factors such as hostility (Meisler *et al.*, 2020) and stress (Nasurdin *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, this study provides additional insights into *why* perceived organizational politics may escalate into negative behaviours, as well as how external sources of work adversity may invigorate this escalation. The primary goal accordingly is to unpack the perceived organizational politics–counterproductive work behaviour link by providing novel insights into (1) the process through which dysfunctional political games lead to purposeful attempts to harm the organization and (2) how this process may be contingent on hardships that come from outside the organization, as a meaningful addition to the predominant focus in extant research on internal contingency factors (Ferris *et al.*, 2019; Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020).

First, this study proposes that beliefs about self-serving organizational decision-making may translate into counterproductive work behaviour because employees experience organizational disidentification, defined as the extent to which they “psychologically disconnect or distance themselves from the organization” (Zagencyk *et al.*, 2013, p. 289) and explicitly do not want to be associated with it (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). That is, organizational disidentification goes beyond employees’ lack of identification with an employer; it entails a distinct sense of embarrassment about and desire to hide their organizational membership from outsiders (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). This study predicts that perceptions of organizational

politics might lead employees to separate psychologically from their organization, and in this state, they might adopt more counterproductive work behaviours. As elaborated in the next section, such negative responses reflect the logic of conservation of resources (COR) theory, according to which employees seek to protect themselves against resource-depleting work conditions by venting frustrations about them, as a means to *cope* (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018; Pandey *et al.*, 2021).

Second, and also consistent with COR theory, this detrimental process could gain strength to the extent that employees suffer resource-depleting work adversity, such as in the face of external crisis situations (Chong *et al.*, 2020; Haq *et al.*, 2020). If employees experience strong external threats to their work, they likely consider organizational climates predicated on favouritism as especially detrimental to the quality of their work functioning, which translates into an even stronger sense of organizational disidentification and then also an even stronger desire to reject the organization, as manifested in counterproductive work behaviours (Lin *et al.*, 2021). External crises have strong, adverse impacts on employees' personal and professional well-being (Qu and Yan, 2023; Trougakos *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, to deepen understanding of this timely topic, this study theorizes about a possible indirect, detrimental role of work-related suffering from external crises, such that it increases the likelihood that perceptions of organizational politics grow into negative work-related feelings and activities.

Contributions

The study makes several contributions, in line with this theorizing. First, it postulates that an important, hitherto unexplored mechanism that connects perceived organizational politics with counterproductive work behaviour is the extent to which employees feel ashamed of their organizational membership (Rani *et al.*, 2018). Considerations of this explanatory mechanism are

compelling from a theoretical perspective, because it pinpoints how work-related hardships that come with self-serving decision-making processes may generate a deep sense of abjection among employees—a sense that is difficult to detect and therefore difficult to remediate (De Clercq, 2022; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). Notably, prior research reveals that organizational disidentification underpins the escalation of other adverse work conditions—such as having to undertake morally dirty work (Lai *et al.*, 2013) or experiencing organizational injustice (Jahanzeb *et al.*, 2021)—into negative work responses. This study extends such research by proposing a similar mediating role, related to how employees’ sense of embarrassment about their organizational membership gets triggered by an organizational climate predicated on self-centred decision-making. From a more general perspective, it points to a possible downward dynamic, in which employees may be inadvertently complicit: They feel upset about how decisions are made in their company, but their self-defensive responses, in the form of psychological separation from their employer and then counterproductive work behaviour, may deprive them of opportunities to exert influences on or improve organizational decision-making processes (Kwan *et al.*, 2022).

Second, this study establishes external crisis threats as important contingency factors that exacerbate this harmful dynamic, in response to ongoing calls to clarify the circumstances in which self-serving organizational decision-making might be more or less harmful (Arefin *et al.*, 2021; Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020). The extent to which perceived organizational politics produce counterproductive work responses varies according to personal factors, such as ingratiation skills (Azeem *et al.*, 2021) or self-regulation failure (Palmer *et al.*, 2020), as well as internal organizational factors, such as supervisor trustworthiness (Olson *et al.*, 2014) or formal communication practices (Bouckennooghe, 2012). To extend such research, the current study

explicates how work-related hardships that originate *outside* the organization can invigorate the translation of frustrations with dysfunctional politics into organizational disidentification, as well as the translation of such disidentification into counterproductive work behaviours. As noted, it thus complements research into the *direct* effects of crises, such as those stemming from terrorism (Raja *et al.*, 2020) or a pandemic (Liu *et al.*, 2021), on negative work beliefs and behaviours. The indirect effect outlined herein is no less important: External crisis threats can lead employees to respond to perceived organizational politics in problematic ways, which ultimately may harm them as much as the organization, by undermining their organizational standing.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Conservation of resources theory

When employees engage in counterproductive work behaviour, it compromises the quality of their organization's internal operations, with possible negative consequences for its competitive positioning and success (Carpenter *et al.*, 2021; Mackey *et al.*, 2021). Employees who engage in such behaviour may experience adverse impacts too, to the extent that they lose reputation among their colleagues if their dysfunctional activities come to light or they are disciplined for them (Azeem *et al.*, 2021; Rotundo and Sackett, 2002). Considering these negative implications, why would employees undertake counterproductive work activities?

Previous studies answer the question by identifying various *resource-draining* factors that may encourage employees to harm their company, such as family-to-work conflict (Ferguson *et al.*, 2012), hindrance job stressors (Zhang *et al.*, 2018), organizational injustice (Kakavand *et al.*, 2020), or perceptions of insufficient physical space in offices (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Sharifiatashgah, 2019). A common theme underlies these determinants: They all cause

frustration for employees related to the quality of their professional functioning, to which they react with negative behaviours to try to unleash their frustrations (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Yet another source of irritation that may spur counterproductive work behaviour is perceived organizational politics or beliefs by employees that decision-making in their organization is marked by self-serving behaviour (De Clercq *et al.*, 2016).

As mentioned in the Introduction, this study's key objective is to clarify the link between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour, by theorizing a mediating role of organizational disidentification and moderating role of external crisis threats to work. The arguments for these roles are grounded in COR theory, according to which employees' work-related feelings and activities reflect their motivation to protect their current resource bases and diminish the chances of additional resource losses when they confront resource-draining conditions (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). This logic sets the stage for two key tenets. First, the possibility of resource depletion, as arises with upsetting work experiences, steers employees toward sentiments and actions that enable them to counter the depletion and cope with the difficulties (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000; Pandey *et al.*, 2021). Thus, extant research has leveraged COR theory to illustrate, for example, how abusive supervision may evoke employees' counterproductive work behaviour, as a way to vent their disappointment and feel less bad about the difficult work setting (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Second, certain factors strengthen this process, particularly if they increase the chances that the challenges will generate real damage to the quality of employees' professional functioning (Cheng *et al.*, 2019; Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). De Clercq and Pereira (2021a), drawing from COR theory, show for example how work-induced insomnia can lead to dehumanization of organizational leaders and decreased

extra-role work efforts particularly powerfully when employees also feel constrained by overly strict organizational procedures.

The term “resources” is broadly defined in COR theory, such that it captures any “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right, or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 339). Yet a particularly pertinent resource, highly treasured by employees, according to Hobfoll’s (2001) influential theorizing and subsequent studies (e.g., Bentein *et al.*, 2017; Ye *et al.*, 2022), is organization-based self-esteem, or the extent to which they have a positive image of themselves in relation to their work. But employees exposed to dysfunctional organizational politics suffer a diminished work-related sense of self-worth, because they feel excluded from decision-making processes and experience job uncertainty (De Clercq and Pereira, 2022b; Hasan *et al.*, 2019). These employees then may seek to protect their self-esteem resources by assigning responsibility for their hardships to the company and expressing disappointment (Bergeron and Thompson, 2020). In their detailed discussion of COR theory, Hobfoll and colleagues (2018, p. 104) emphasize that employees who experience resource-draining conditions at work tend to “enter a defensive mode to preserve the self that is often aggressive and may become irrational.”

Consistent with the first COR tenet, employees’ organizational disidentification and subsequent counterproductive work behaviours may reflect, in their minds, justified responses to their perceptions of organizational politics. These responses convey employees’ desire to shield one of their key resources (organization-based self-esteem) and avoid self-deprecating thoughts about their work functioning (Bentein *et al.*, 2017; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). To be clear, the current study does not include a formal assessment of employees’ self-esteem resources but rather offers

the prediction that their depletion, due to perceptions of organizational politics, leads employees to express dismay with their organizational membership (Jahanzeb *et al.*, 2021) and then develop a desire to cause harm to their employer with negative work activities (Bowling and Burns, 2015). These responses, or self-protective coping strategies, help employees vent their irritation with self-centred approaches to organizational decisions (Abbas *et al.*, 2014; Dhar, 2009). The logic of the second COR tenet, in turn, predicts that perceptions of organizational politics are more likely to produce such coping strategies if employees also face external crises that challenge their work (Hite and McDonald, 2020). If the quality of their professional functioning already is threatened, employees likely experience organizationally self-centred decision-making practices as particularly damaging to their sense of self-worth (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). Thus, they react powerfully by psychologically distancing themselves from their employer and intentionally seeking ways to harm it (Krings *et al.*, 2021).

The proposed conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1. Its baseline hypothesis reflects the well-established positive link between employees' perceptions of organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour. Then as a unique contribution, this model includes a sense of embarrassment about organizational membership as a critical factor that underpins this link. Perceived external crisis threats to work, in turn, serve as a moderator that strengthens the two paths that constitute the mediated relationship. Given the study's interest in unpacking the hitherto unexplored mediating role of organizational disidentification in the perceived organizational politics–counterproductive work behaviour relationship (rather than other reasons that beliefs about dysfunctional political games might inform propensities to harm the organization), its conceptual focus is specifically on how these two constitutive paths might be moderated by external crisis threats to work, not the direct path between perceived organizational

politics and counterproductive work behaviour (Hayes, 2018).¹ Finally, and as detailed further in the Method section, this study leverages the COVID-19 context for the empirical test of the model, but the proposed relationships explicitly are *not* specific to the pandemic; they should apply to various external crises that threaten employees' professional well-being.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Perceptions of organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour

This study predicts a positive relationship between employees' perceived organizational politics and their engagement in counterproductive work behaviour. According to COR theory, employees use negative work behaviours to vent their disappointment with organizational treatments that compromise their work-related sense of self-worth (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). In prior applications of this theory, De Clercq and colleagues (2022c) explain how politically oriented climates can escalate into passive knowledge hiding among employees, in an attempt to protect their work-related self-esteem resources. Their frustration, due to being exposed to resource-draining organizational politics, similarly may steer them toward work behaviours that harm their organization, because this coping strategy allows them to release their irritation with an employer that seemingly endorses self-serving decision-making within its ranks (Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020). To the extent that employees' sense of self-worth is threatened by politically oriented organizational climates (Hasan *et al.*, 2019), they might seek to protect their remaining self-esteem resources by undertaking activities that undermine their organization's well-being (Wiltshire *et al.*, 2014). Formally,

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational politics and their engagement in counterproductive work behaviour.

¹ A robustness check, reported in the Results section, affirms that external crisis threats to work moderate the perceived organizational politics–organizational disidentification path and organizational disidentification–counterproductive work behaviour path but not the perceived organizational politics–counterproductive work behaviour path.

Perceptions of organizational politics and organizational disidentification

In addition to this imminent desire to cause harm to their employer, this effect might materialize through another, hitherto unexplored channel, namely, employees' sense of embarrassment about their organizational membership. In line with COR theory, the frustrations that employees experience when favouritism supersedes merit in organizational decision-making can drain their work-related self-esteem resources to such a degree that they do not want to have anything to do with their employer (Bowling *et al.*, 2010; Hasan *et al.*, 2019). Cognitive separation from the organization is a coping tactic, enabling employees to express their dismay and feel better about the unfavourable work situation in which they find themselves (Bentein *et al.*, 2017; Zagenczyk *et al.*, 2013). For example, if they are convinced that certain people in the organization always get their way, they may interpret it as a sign of disrespect for their own dedicated work efforts (Bergeron and Thompson, 2020). To diminish additional losses to their sense of self-worth, they express irritation with how the organization operates by distancing themselves from it (De Clercq and Pereira, 2022a). In a similar vein, employees may interpret favouritism-based decision-making as a malevolent strategy that the organization uses to keep them out of the loop, with possibly detrimental consequences for their future organizational membership (Grimland *et al.*, 2012; Kapoutsis *et al.*, 2012). They feel undervalued by, and thus justified in exhibiting psychological distance from, the organization. Accordingly:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational politics and their organizational disidentification.

Organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour

In turn, employees' embarrassment with their organizational membership may direct them toward counterproductive work behaviours. According to COR theory, employees who suffer resource-draining thoughts about their organizational membership seek to express their

annoyance by undertaking activities that compromise the welfare of their employing organization (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). For example, De Clercq (2022) details how organizational disidentification motivates employees to curtail voluntary work efforts that otherwise could enhance the organizational status quo. Applied to the current study context, if organizational disidentification combines with a possibility of causing damage to the employer, employees can more effectively cope with their irritations, in that they align their behaviours with their view of the unfit organization (Jahanzeb *et al.*, 2021). This logic, at its core, conveys the argument that self-deprecating thoughts about their organizational membership push employees to hurt their employer, as a means to express their disappointment (Bowling *et al.*, 2010; De Clercq *et al.*, 2022b). Similarly, COR theory suggests that work behaviours may reflect a desire by employees to generate resource gains to counter self-deprecating thoughts about their organizational membership (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). If employees have strong negative feelings about their organizational membership, counterproductive work behaviours may seem strongly justified and produce resource gains, in the form of a sense of personal fulfilment (De Clercq *et al.*, 2019; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). Therefore,

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between employees' organizational disidentification and their engagement in counterproductive work behaviour.

Mediating role of organizational disidentification

The integration of these arguments, grounded in COR theory, points to a notable mediating role of organizational disidentification. This mediating effect draws from but also extends the two previous hypotheses, by detailing how perceptions of organizational politics may translate into counterproductive work behaviour, *because* of the psychological separation that employees experience. That is, an important reason that perceptions of politicized decision-making escalate into behaviours that harm the organization is the sense of embarrassment that

employees feel about their organizational membership—and this sentiment fundamentally reflects their goal to protect their work-related sense of self-worth (De Clercq *et al.*, 2022b; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 200). Notably, factors other than organizational disidentification also may underlie the positive relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour, as reflected by the inclusion of Hypothesis 1 in the proposed framework. Thus, this study predicts a *partial* (instead of full) mediating role of organizational disidentification.

Hypothesis 4: Employees' organizational disidentification partially mediates the relationship between their perceptions of organizational politics and their engagement in counterproductive work behaviour.

Moderating role of perceived external crisis threats to work

This study also predicts moderating (invigorating) effects of perceived external crisis threats on the relationships between perceived organizational politics and organizational disidentification (Hypothesis 2) and between organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour (Hypothesis 3). These threats capture the extent to which employees cannot avoid negative thoughts about the impact of an external crisis on the quality of their work functioning (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Vu *et al.*, 2022).

First, COR theory predicts that the role of employees' organizational disidentification, as a means to safeguard their self-esteem resources in the presence of politicized organizational environments, should be more prominent to the extent that employees are concerned about the adverse consequences of an external crisis for their work (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). Recent research has shown that exposure to external crisis threats (e.g., COVID-19) can diminish people's self-esteem resources, because they feel helpless and unable to deal with the stresses imposed by the threats (Graupmann and Pfundmair, 2023; Manneville *et al.*, 2022). External

crisis threats similarly might exacerbate the self-deprecating thoughts that employees develop in the presence of dysfunctional organizational politics (Hasan *et al.*, 2019; Toker *et al.*, 2015). To be clear, the applied COR logic does not pertain to how perceived external crisis threats lead employees to develop negative perceptions about organizational decision-making processes; rather, it refers to how these threats cause employees to *respond* more powerfully to organizational politics, with psychological separation from their employer (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). An organizational climate predicated on favouritism likely is particularly intrusive to their professional functioning during external crises, and a strong sense of organizational disidentification offers a way to cope (Bentein *et al.*, 2017; Dhar, 2009). This invigorating role of perceived external crisis threats on the detrimental effect of perceived organizational politics aligns with COR-based predictions of negative resource loss spirals, in which different resource-depleting situations *reinforce* one another in spurring the work-related beliefs that employees use to unleash their frustrations with experienced hardships (Griep and Bankins, 2022; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Therefore,

Hypothesis 5: The positive relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational politics and organizational disidentification is moderated by perceived external crisis threats to work, such that this positive relationship is stronger at higher levels of such threats.

The logic of COR theory similarly suggests that employees' negative feelings about their organizational membership increase their engagement in counterproductive work behaviour even more if the quality of their work is undermined by an external crisis (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). When employees are not able to avoid negative thoughts about a crisis, they may find it particularly upsetting if they also cannot draw from the emotional support of an organization with which they feel close (Raja *et al.*, 2020; Trougakos *et al.*, 2020). In this scenario, it becomes especially meaningful for employees to use their sense of organizational disidentification as an

excuse to cause damage to the organization (Jahanzeb *et al.*, 2021; Mackey *et al.*, 2021). Here again, the COR-based logic does not speak to how external crisis threats may spur a sense of embarrassment about organizational membership. Instead, it predicts how this sense can *trigger* counterproductive responses to this sense. In line with the notion of negative resource loss spirals (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), employees who experience external crises as strong threats to their work likely feel highly upset when they also realize that they feel disconnected from their organization, so their desire to cause it harm, as a means to express themselves and protect their self-esteem, becomes especially prominent (Bowling *et al.*, 2010; Mackey *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, employees who have psychologically disconnected from their employer *and* find it difficult to keep external crisis threats out of their minds may fear for the quality of their future job situation (Hite and McDonald, 2020; Lai *et al.*, 2013), which may intensify their motivation to respond with seemingly justified counterproductive work behaviours. Accordingly:

Hypothesis 6: The positive relationship between employees' organizational disidentification and their engagement in counterproductive work behaviour is moderated by perceived external crisis threats to work, such that this relationship is stronger at higher levels of such threats.

Method

Sample and data collection

The hypotheses were empirically tested with survey data collected from employees who work in a banking organization in Mozambique. By focusing on a specific organization, sector, and country, the study avoids problems that stem from unobserved differences in organization-, industry-, or country-related factors that can influence counterproductive work behaviour (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the theoretical arguments are not specific to a particular organization, industry, or country, so the nature or signs of the hypothesized relationships should be robust across different organizations, industry sectors, or countries—even if the *strength* of these

relationships might vary. For example, Mozambican culture is marked by high levels of power distance (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010), which implies that employees may be more accepting of organizational climates in which decisions reflect the preferences of a few powerful people, so the work hardships that come with perceived organizational politics could be mitigated. This country focus thus provides a *conservative* test of the negative responses that employees formulate in the presence of favouritism-based decision-making. If empirical evidence emerges for the proposed mediated link in this study, it should *a fortiori* be the case in countries that are less power distant too. In addition, the data were collected in early 2022, when the COVID-19 crisis in Mozambique was at its highest peak since the outbreak in March 2020 (Betho *et al.*, 2022). The pandemic continues to have significant effects on organizations and their constituents in many parts of the world, including Africa (Morsy *et al.*, 2021; Ozili, 2022). By focusing on this specific crisis, this study limits the potential for unobserved differences with respect to crisis type, which might influence the *extent* to which employees suffer at work due to crises.

The survey was administered electronically, through an organizational license of the Microsoft Forms software held by the institution of one of the authors. The employees of the focal organization were familiar with this survey platform; the platform also complied with established standards in terms of the confidentiality of data collection and storage. Moreover, the online platform supported data collection without any physical contact between the research team and respondents, an important issue during the pandemic. Various measures provided protection of the participants' rights. In detail, they were told that their responses would be treated with complete confidentiality, that no personal data would ever be communicated, that the primary research interest was to identify broadband patterns in the data, and that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Finally, the researchers clarified that there were no good

or bad answers, that different people likely would provide varying answers to particular questions, and that it was instrumental for the validity of the study that everyone provide their honest responses (Malhotra, 2010). From the 400 initially contacted employees—randomly selected from an employee list provided by the organization’s senior management—the 229 received responses represent a response rate of 57%. The final sample included 44.4% men and 55.6% women; respondents had worked for their organization for an average of 12.6 years.

Measures

The constructs were measured with scales drawn from prior studies. These scales used seven-point Likert anchors that ranged between 1 (“strongly disagree”) and 7 (“strongly agree”).

Perceived organizational politics. Employees’ beliefs that organizational decision-making is marked by self-serving behaviours were measured with a four-item scale of perceived organizational politics (De Clercq *et al.*, 2016). For example, employees rated whether “There is a lot of self-serving behaviour going on in the organization” and “People are working behind the scenes to ensure that they get their piece of the pie” (Cronbach’s alpha = .92).

Organizational disidentification. To assess the extent to which employees feel ashamed about their organizational membership and have psychologically separated from their employer, the study relied on a six-item scale of organizational disidentification (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). For example, participants indicated whether “I am embarrassed to be a part of this organization” and “I have tried to keep the organization I work for a secret from people I meet” (Cronbach’s alpha = .93).

Counterproductive work behaviour. The measure of the degree to which employees undertake activities that cause harm to their employer used a ten-item scale of counterproductive

behaviours at work (Kelloway *et al.*, 2002). Two example items were: “I damage company equipment or merchandise” and “I intentionally work slowly” (Cronbach’s alpha = .93).

Perceived external crisis threats to work. To assess the extent to which employees experience the negative impact of an external crisis on their work functioning, this study applied a 13-item scale of perceived pandemic threats, as used in prior research on the COVID-19 crisis (De Clercq and Pereira, 2021b).² In light of the theoretical focus of this research, the items assessed whether external crisis threats compromise *work*, with items such as “The threat that the Covid-19 crisis poses to my work often enters my mind,” and “I often dwell on the threat of the Covid-19 crisis to my work” (Cronbach’s alpha = .94).

Control variables. The statistical models accounted for the effects of two demographic characteristics, gender (0 = male; 1 = female) and organizational tenure (number of years). Compared with their male counterparts, women may be less prone to undertake counterproductive work activities (Bowling and Burns, 2015). Employees who have worked for their organization for a longer time may be more confident that they can get away with these activities (Martinko *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, employees’ personal traits or attitudes may influence their propensity to undertake counterproductive work behaviours (Cohen, 2016; Mackey *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, this study includes one negative personal factor (the dark triad, which reflects employees’ levels of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy; Jonason and Webster, 2010) and one positive one (religiosity, defined as the extent to which their beliefs in a god occupy an important place in employees’ lives; Eaves *et al.*, 2008). The first factor might

² This measure is an adjusted version of a scale originally developed to gauge terrorism threats (Raja *et al.*, 2020)

make employees more upset and less forgiving when they face adverse work situations, whereas the second factor might have the opposite effect.³

Construct validity. The convergent and discriminant validity of the four focal constructs were assessed by estimating a four-factor measurement model with a confirmatory factor analysis. The fit of this model was good: $\chi^2(490) = 1,145.28$, comparative fit index = .91, incremental fit index = .91, Tucker-Lewis index = .90, root mean squared error of approximation = .08, and standardized root mean residual = .07. Evidence for the presence of convergent validity arose from the factor loadings of each item, which were strongly significant on the corresponding constructs ($p < .001$), and the average variance extracted (AVE) values, which exceeded the benchmark of .50 (values ranged between .52 and .76; Hair *et al.*, 2019). In support of discriminant validity, the AVE values also were greater than the squared values of the correlations between corresponding constructs, and the fit of six models that included restricted construct pairs (correlation between two constructs fixed to 1) was significantly worse than the fit of the associated unrestricted construct pair models (correlation between constructs free to vary) ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} > 3.84$, $p < .05$; Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Common source bias. Two well-recognized tests help determine if common source bias might be a problem. First, an exploratory factor analysis checked whether a one-factor model, in which the measurement items of the four focal constructs loaded on a single factor, could explain the majority of the total variance in the data (Sadiq, 2022). Instead, the first factor accounted for only 41% of the total variance. Second, a confirmatory factor analysis compared the fit of the

³ In light of the strong positive correlations among the three traits that constitute the dark triad, a composite 12-item score was calculated, with a Cronbach's alpha of .92. The reliability of the 16-item religiosity measure equalled .95. None of the four control variables was significant in the statistical models. Becker (2005) recommends checking whether theorized relationships are robust to the omission of the control variables; this was indeed the case for the current study. Moreover, the dark triad and religiosity variables arguably might moderate the relationships of perceived organizational politics with organizational disidentification or of organizational disidentification with counterproductive work behaviour, as well as the hypothesized invigorating effects of external crisis threats. However, checks confirmed that none of these alternative specifications was significant.

four-factor model with that of a single-factor model; it was significantly better ($\chi^2(6) = 2,848.24$, $p < .001$), offering additional evidence against the presence of bias due to a common respondent (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The likelihood of this bias also is substantially diminished when testing theoretical frameworks that include one or more moderating effects, because participants cannot easily discern the nature of these frameworks (including the constitutive hypotheses) and thus cannot adapt their responses according to *a priori* expectations (Malhotra, 2010).

Statistical analysis

The hypotheses were empirically assessed with the well-established Process macro (Hayes and Rockwood, 2020), which has been widely applied to statistically test conceptual frameworks that include first-stage and second-stage moderation of mediated relationships, similar to this study's proposed framework (Almeida *et al.*, 2021; Bayraktar and Jiménez, 2020; De Clercq *et al.*, 2022a). This approach also uses a bootstrapping technique, such that the estimations do not depend on whether the indirect or conditional indirect effects are normally distributed (Hayes, 2018). To assess mediation, the study estimated the indirect relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour, through organizational disidentification, along with the corresponding confidence interval (CI), based on Model 4 in the Process macro (Hayes, 2018). This first step also indicated the signs and significance levels of the direct paths between (1) perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour, (2) perceived organizational politics and organizational disidentification, and (3) organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour. To check for the presence of moderation, the conditional direct effects of the two paths that constitute the mediated link were estimated at distinct levels of perceived external crisis threats to work (i.e., 16th, 50th, and 84th percentiles, as specified in the Process macro). Reflecting the

theoretical model, Process macro Model 58 (Hayes, 2018) provided calculations of the moderating effect of perceived external crisis threats to work on the relationships between both perceived organizational politics and organizational disidentification and organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour.

Results

The zero-order correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics are in Table 1; the results for the direct and mediation-related effects, generated from Process macro Model 4, are in Table 2. These results provide support for the baseline Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour ($b = .105, p < .01$) and the corresponding CI does not span 0 $[.035; .176]$). There also is a positive relationship between perceived organizational politics and organizational disidentification ($b = .304, p < .001$), in support of Hypothesis 2, and a positive relationship between organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour ($b = .299, p < .001$), in support of Hypothesis 3. The effect size for the *indirect* relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour, through organizational disidentification, equals .091, and its corresponding CI does not span 0 $[.046, .146]$), in support of the presence of mediation by organizational disidentification. In combination with the significant direct link between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour relationship, this finding confirms that the mediating role is *partial* in nature (Hypothesis 4).

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here]

The next stage in the analysis tests whether employees' experience of an external crisis invigorates their frustrations with highly politicized decision-making (Hypothesis 5) and resulting propensity to separate psychologically from their organization (Hypothesis 6). The

results in Table 3 confirm a positive, significant effect of the perceived organizational politics \times perceived external crisis threats to work interaction term ($b = .101, p < .001$) in predicting organizational disidentification, together with a positive, significant effect of the interaction of organizational disidentification \times perceived external crisis threats to work ($b = .141, p < .001$) for predicting counterproductive work behaviour. According to the results obtained from the Process macro Model 58, the relationship between perceived organizational politics and organizational disidentification is stronger at higher levels of perceived external crisis threats to work (.142 at its lower level, .274 at an intermediate level, .467 at the higher level), in line with Hypothesis 5. Similarly, increasing effect sizes appear in the relationship between organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour at higher levels of the moderator (-.018 lower, .166 intermediate, .434 higher), in corroboration of Hypothesis 6.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Even if it was not explicitly hypothesized, it is also useful to check the presence of moderated mediation. At first glance, a moderated mediation dynamic may seem like a logical outcome of the other hypotheses, but it offers unique value, in that it can explicate the conditional nature of the *indirect* relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour through organizational disidentification at different levels of perceived external crisis threats to work (De Clercq *et al.*, 2022a; Hayes, 2018).⁴ The results of a post hoc test, as summarized at the bottom of Table 3, reveal stronger indirect effect sizes at increasing levels of the moderator: from -.003 at the lower level, to .045 at its intermediate level,

⁴ Muller *et al.* (2005) explicitly distinguish mediated moderation, which refers to “the process through which [an] overall moderated treatment effect is produced” (p. 853), and moderated mediation, which pertains to whether “the mediating process that is responsible for producing the effect of the treatment on the outcome depends on the value of a moderator variable” (p. 854). This study’s focus is on the latter, that is, the invigorating effect of external crisis threats to work on the translation of perceived organizational politics into counterproductive work behaviours *through* organizational disidentification.

to .203 at its higher level. The CI includes 0 at the lower level ([-.031; .017]), indicating a non-significant effect, but the CIs do not include 0 at the intermediate and higher levels ([.015; .078] and [.110; .290], respectively). As an additional robustness check, Process macro Model 59, run with three moderating effects, confirms that (1) the *direct* link between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour is not significantly influenced by perceived external crisis threats to work ($b = -.019$, *ns*) and (2) perceived external crisis threats to work invigorate the two relationships that constitute the mediated link ($b = .101$, $p < .001$ and $b = .153$, $p < .001$, respectively), in support of the overall conceptual model.⁵

Discussion

Theoretical implications

As this study details, employees' perceptions of organizational politics can spur their counterproductive work behaviour, and relevant factors explain or trigger this process. Prior research demonstrates that beliefs about highly politicized organizational environments can escalate into counterproductive work activities (Cohen, 2016; Wiltshire *et al.*, 2014), but there is continued need to explicate why (Meisler *et al.*, 2020), as well as to address the timely issue of the potential role of external crisis threats in this process (Hite and McDonald, 2020; Qu and Yan, 2023). Drawing on COR theory, this study predicts that (1) employees' frustrations with self-centred decision-making processes translate into purposeful attempts to damage their company because they feel embarrassed by their organizational membership, and (2) the negative interference of external crisis situations with their work reinforces this translation. The empirical findings affirm these predictions.

Accordingly, this study establishes the theoretical insight that an important reason that employees who are exposed to resource-depleting organizational politics might damage their

⁵ The detailed results of this robustness check with Process macro Model 59 are available on request.

employer is that they have psychologically distanced themselves from it (Lai *et al.*, 2013). This mediating role of organizational disidentification is interesting from a theoretical angle, in light of prior research that shows how employees who build high-quality relationships with organizational leaders are better placed to protect themselves against the hardships that come with politicized decision-making (Azeem *et al.*, 2021; Olson *et al.*, 2014). But the current findings point instead to a possible negative dynamic that employees inflict on themselves, as well as their organization, perhaps without realizing it. That is, their embarrassment about their organizational membership, which emerges as a means to cope with resource-depleting organizational politics (Grimland *et al.*, 2012), stimulates them to sabotage their company, which likely diminishes their ability to leave positive impressions on leaders (Kwan *et al.*, 2022). These saboteur employees then cannot improve organizational decision-making processes, because their own destructive behaviours undermine their reputations (Azeem *et al.*, 2021).

Another theoretical take-away of this study is that the mediating role of organizational disidentification is more pronounced when employees also feel threatened by external crises. Organizational disidentification is a more powerful channel through which perceived organizational politics translate into counterproductive work behaviours if employees cannot avoid bringing crisis-related hardships to work (Chong *et al.*, 2020). This finding is in line with the COR-based argument that resource-depleting external threats *invigorate* the frustrations that emerge from dysfunctional organizational decision-making and the resulting desire to avoid being associated with the company (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). By highlighting this invigorating role of perceived external crisis threats to work, in combination with the harmful intermediate effect of organizational disidentification, the study provides unique insights into how the aforementioned downward loop of self-inflicted negative effects can intensify during times of

crisis (Chong *et al.*, 2020; Karatepe *et al.*, 2021). This invigorating role also provides a useful complement to previous studies that pinpoint *direct* negative consequences of employees' exposure to crises on the likelihood that they seek to harm their employer (Lin *et al.*, 2021; Shah *et al.*, 2020).

Practical implications

This examination of the combined roles of perceived organizational politics and perceived external crisis threats to work has important value for organizational practice. Employees should be aware of a significant risk that might arise when their beliefs about politically oriented climates escalate into negative feelings about their organizational membership and then counterproductive work behaviour: It can undermine their own integrity and capacity to demand changes in how decisions are made (Rotundo *et al.*, 2002). An additional complication herein is that once employees have determined that organizational decision-making processes are overly political, they may be unwilling to raise any complaints, to avoid falling out of favour or making things even worse for themselves (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). To help employees deal with the associated hardships, senior managers could implement company-wide knowledge-sharing sessions, to encourage employees to talk about any work challenges they are experiencing due to favouritism-based decision-making processes (Lee *et al.*, 2021). They also could facilitate one-on-one sessions with specially appointed ombudspersons who guarantee complete confidentiality to employees who file complaints about how their organization's decision-making compromises their professional well-being (Myers and Witzler, 2014).

The invigorating effect of perceived external crisis threats to work reveals that the adversity created by politicized decision-making becomes even more aggravated when employees cannot stop thinking about the negative consequences of crises on their work

functioning (Lian *et al.*, 2022). In general, organizations should seek solutions to diminish employees' concerns about external crisis situations. But this study is particularly useful for organizational leaders who might find it really difficult to obtain such a goal, in light of the excruciating impacts that substantial crises tend to exert on employees' professional well-being (Raja *et al.*, 2020). The risk that employees' frustrations with politicized decision-making translate into negative work-related feelings and behaviours is amplified to the extent that they also ruminate on the influences of uncontrollable, external crises on their work (De Clercq and Pereira, 2021b). Even if this study did not directly assess employee skills, this risk likely can be contained if employees can leverage pertinent skills to cope with the dual hardships, such as creative self-efficacy (Christensen-Salem *et al.*, 2021), emotion regulation (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021a), or resilience (Caniëls and Hatak, 2022). Highly politicized organizations that also face external crisis threats accordingly could benefit from formal training programs or on-the-job-training initiatives that nurture such skills (Ahadi and Jacobs, 2017). Ultimately, any measure that boosts employees' capabilities to weather the combined challenges of internal and external sources of work hardship can limit the danger that employees shoot themselves in the proverbial foot, by engaging in negative work behaviour that makes it less likely that organizational leaders will help them deal with their suffering.

Limitations and further research

As with any research, this study has some limitations that indicate opportunities for further investigation. First, the cross-sectional design suggests that some caution is needed in terms of causality. To the extent that employees get reprimanded for their counterproductive work behaviour, they may develop negative beliefs about their organizational membership in general, as well as about how decisions are made. Even if the theoretical arguments are based on

the well-established logic of COR theory—according to which resource-depleting organizational practices direct employees toward self-defensive beliefs and behaviours (Bentein *et al.*, 2017; Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000)—longitudinal studies that assess *each* of the constructs that constitute the proposed mediated link at various points in time could offer more formal assessments of causality. Sequential mediation models also might capture employees’ desire to protect their work-related self-esteem resources, in response to perceptions of organizational politics and a sense of organizational disidentification (Bowling *et al.*, 2010).

Second, the conceptual framework contains only one mediator. Its particular focus on organizational disidentification reflects the well-established role of this work-related feeling as a coping tactic for employees who face resource-draining work situations (Bentein *et al.*, 2017). As indicated in the Results section, its partial mediation role, as found herein, reflects that other factors could inform the conversion of perceived organizational politics into counterproductive work behaviour too, including previously examined mediators such as hostility or stress (Meisler *et al.*, 2020; Nasurdin *et al.*, 2014) and alternative ones such as beliefs about psychological contract violations (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021a) or moral disengagement (Almeida *et al.*, 2021). Further research could estimate *parallel* mediation models to evaluate the relative explanatory power of each of these mediators.

Third, this study includes one factor, perceived external crisis threats to work, as a moderator of the mediated relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour. Additional research could test the invigorating roles of other resource-depleting factors, whether external (e.g., family incivility; Cheng *et al.*, 2019) or internal (e.g., distrust in management; Coleman Gallagher *et al.*, 2016). It would be useful to compare the relative potency of all these factors as potential triggers. Although a post hoc

analysis included in the current research effort did not offer support for significant moderating roles of the dark triad or religiosity (see Footnote 3), further research could consider the contingency roles of other relevant personality traits, attitudes, or emotional states, such as neuroticism (Li and Takao, 2020), negative reciprocity beliefs (Yao *et al.*, 2022), or state anger (Harmon-Jones and Sigelman, 2001).

Conclusion

This study extends prior research by explicating the detrimental effect of a critical source of work-related frustration, an organizational climate that is overly political, on counterproductive work behaviours, as well as the roles of organizational disidentification and perceived external crisis threats to work in this negative dynamic. Employees' propensity to distance themselves psychologically from their employer provides a relevant explanation for why strongly politicized environments direct them toward counterproductive work behaviours. This explanatory mechanism gains vigour to the extent that employees experience adverse influences of external crisis situations on their work functioning. Ideally then, this study can serve as a launch pad for additional research into how organizations can disrupt a counterproductive loop in which employees' frustrations with dysfunctional politics, in combination with difficulties that spill over from the external environment, turn them into saboteurs of their own companies.

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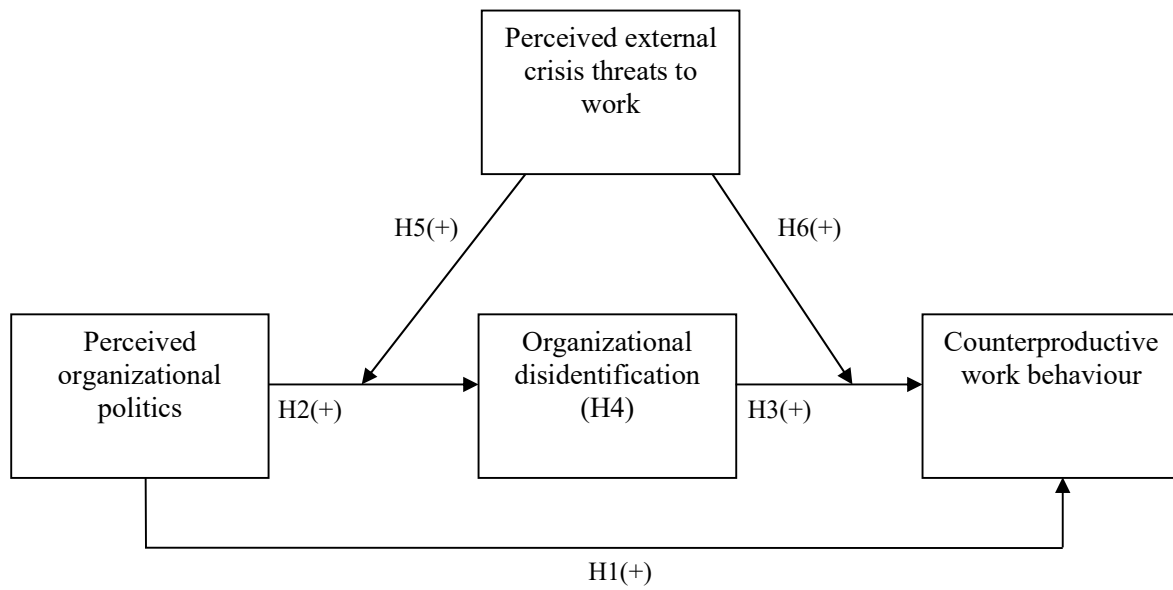
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Figure 1: Conceptual model



Notes. H4 refers to the mediating role of organizational disidentification.

Table 1. Correlation table and descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Perceived organizational politics								
2. Organizational disidentification	.445**							
3. Counterproductive work behaviour	.419**	.586**						
4. Perceived external crisis threats to work	.288**	.340**	.465**					
5. Gender (1 = female)	-.097	-.105	.018	.066				
6. Organizational tenure	.166*	.087	.018	.001	-.188**			
7. Dark triad	.002	.052	-.058	-.046	-.231**	-.052		
8. Religiosity	-.046	-.054	-.100	-.070	.146*	.021	-.052	
Mean	4.266	3.337	3.120	3.604	.555	12.624	2.010	6.101
Standard deviation	1.533	1.290	.962	1.459	.498	7.977	1.241	1.187

Notes: n = 229.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Mediation results (Process macro Model 4)

	Organizational disidentification	Counterproductive work behaviour		
Gender (1 = female)	-.157	.109		
Organizational tenure	.005	-.003		
Dark triad	.032	-.050		
Religiosity	-.019	-.052		
Perceived organizational politics	.304***	.105**		
Perceived external crisis threats to work	.206***	.171***		
Organizational disidentification		.299***		
	R ²	.434		
<i>Direct relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour</i>				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
	.105	.036	.035	.176
<i>Indirect relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour</i>				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
Indirect effect	.091	.026	.046	.146

Notes: n = 229; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Moderated mediation results (Process macro Model 58)

	Organizational disidentification	Counterproductive work behaviour		
Gender (1 = female)	-.148	.123		
Organizational tenure	.003	-.004		
Dark triad	.028	-.034		
Religiosity	-.001	-.054		
Perceived organizational politics	.304***	.095**		
Perceived external crisis threats to work	.180***	.161***		
Perceived organizational politics × perceived external crisis threats to work	.101***			
Organizational disidentification		.207***		
Organizational disidentification × perceived external crisis threats to work		.141***		
R ²	.294	.542		
Conditional <i>direct</i> relationship between perceived organizational politics and organizational disidentification				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	.142	.069	.006	.278
Mean	.274	.051	.174	.374
+1SD	.467	.069	.330	.603
Conditional <i>direct</i> relationship between organizational disidentification and counterproductive work behaviour				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	-.018	.060	-.136	.099
Mean	.166	.044	.079	.252
+1SD	.434	.044	.348	.521
Conditional <i>indirect</i> relationship between perceived organizational politics and counterproductive work behaviour				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	-.003	.012	-.031	.017
Mean	.045	.016	.015	.078
+1SD	.203	.046	.110	.290

Notes: n = 229; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.