



The Dark Side of *Guanxi* HRM Practices: Moral Disengagement and Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior

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Abstract

Guanxi, the use of personal relationships to influence workplace decisions, raises significant ethical concerns due to its potential to undermine merit-based practices and lead to institutional unfairness. *Guanxi* has been commonly applied in human resource management (HRM). Examples include recruitment, training opportunities, performance evaluation, and reward allocation based on personal relationships between employees and their immediate supervisors instead of merit. This study explores the unethical consequences of *guanxi* HRM practices, which remain underexplored. Drawing upon social information processing theory, we investigate how *guanxi* HRM practices lead to employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior, which is intended to benefit supervisors but contravenes ethical norms. We propose that moral disengagement mediates this relationship and that the effect is intensified when supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is strong rather than weak. Data from a three-wave field study of 383 employees support our hypotheses. By uncovering the cognitive mechanism and relational condition for the link between *guanxi* HRM and employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior, this study advances understanding of *how* and *when* informal relational systems shape (un)ethical outcomes within organizations.

Keywords *Guanxi* HRM practice · Unethical pro-supervisor behavior · Moral disengagement · Supervisor-subordinate *guanxi*

Introduction

Guanxi, the use of personal relationships to influence workplace decisions, has been widely studied in ethics-related topics, ranging from problems around *guanxi* closeness and employee knowledge hiding (Cheng et al., 2023), over expatriate managers' ethical evaluations of *guanxi* (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022) to the prevalence of *guanxi*-driven voting over justice-driven voting (Zhou et al., 2020). This body of scholarship has highlighted the unethical aspect of *guanxi*. Relatedly, and building on this previous work, HRM scholars

have started to investigate *guanxi* HRM practices (Chen et al., 2004); *guanxi* HRM practices indicate that recruitment, performance appraisal, and compensation practices are influenced by interpersonal relationships rather than by merit, particularly between employees and their managers or superiors (Yang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025). Examples of *guanxi* HRM include selecting or promoting employees based on their personal relationships with their managers, such as friendships or family ties (Zhang et al., 2025). In this regard, *guanxi* HRM practices violate norms of organizational justice and undermine the legitimacy of personnel decision-making (Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). Such intertwining of personal relationships with professional responsibilities can lead to unethical behaviors (Wu et al., 2019; Yao & Xiong, 2024). Although *guanxi* may be viewed positively in some contexts (Shen et al., 2022; Xian et al., 2019), its use within formal HRM processes still raises significant ethical concerns. Despite this, previous studies on *guanxi* HRM practices have primarily focused on their negative effects on employee trust, work involvement, and performance (Yang & Yang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b) and have largely disregarded their negative ethical consequences.

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Exploring the unethical implications of *guanxi* HRM practices is important because such HRM practices may lead to negative behaviors among employees and harm an organization's legitimacy. For example, several studies have found that unfair or unethical behavior of leaders (e.g., recruitment, promotion, and other HRM decisions) can lead to subordinates' (un)ethical actions (Mayer et al., 2009; Mesdaghinia et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2006). Correspondingly, existing studies have called for further research to examine the impact of HRM practices on employee unethical behavior (Alzola, 2018; Ghosh, 2023; Manroop et al., 2024; Ran & Zhou, 2024). Employees' unethical behavior poses significant risks to organizations, e.g., by affecting trust, financial performance, employee morale, legal standing, and reputation (Treviño et al., 2006; Veetikazhi et al., 2022). As such, exploring the unethical consequences of *guanxi* HRM practices on employees provides valuable insights to help understand this phenomenon and mitigate the negative impact of employees' unethical behavior on organizations.

The presence of *guanxi* HRM practices in the workplace shapes how employees interpret organizational cues and norms. This process can be explained through the lens of social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), which suggests that individuals rely on social context to make sense of acceptable behavior. Social information processing theory posits that individuals build their attitudes and behaviors based on social cues from their environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). HRM practices serve as a potent social signal guiding employees' understanding of what behaviors are valued or prohibited (Wu & Gu, 2024). When *guanxi* HRM practices are present, employees recognize that corporate decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, or rewards are rooted in personal relationships with the decision-maker (e.g., supervisor or line manager) rather than merit. Employees may then interpret such cues as implicit encouragement to engage in behaviors that benefit their supervisor, even if these behaviors violate ethical norms. Such behaviors are described as unethical pro-supervisor behavior (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Examples of employee unethical pro-supervisor behaviors include providing false reports, showing favoritism, or engaging in corrupt practices for their supervisors.

Beyond providing an explanation of the link between social cues and individual behavior (i.e., *guanxi* HRM and unethical pro-supervisor behavior in our study), social information processing theory suggests that such an influence operates through underlying psychological and cognitive mechanisms (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977, 1978). Thus, when employees interpret *guanxi* HRM practices as a social cue, they see prioritizing supervisors' interests, even at the cost of bending formal ethical codes, as justified. This cognitive shift allows employees to rationalize unethical actions as acceptable or even necessary. Such a process reflects moral

disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Yao et al., 2022), which is defined as the cognitive process through which individuals justify unethical behavior (Bandura, 1999; Hu et al., 2023). In such a situation, employees are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors that benefit their supervisors (Liu et al., 2023; Xu & Yao, 2025; Xu et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). Thus, moral disengagement is proposed to mediate the link between *guanxi* HRM practices and employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

Social information processing theory further suggests that personal and situational factors influence the depth of information processing, altering whether and to what extent social cues are translated into corresponding behaviors (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Zalesny & Ford, 1990). In this study, we propose that supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* is a key factor moderating the relationship between *guanxi* HRM and employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior; supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* refers to personal ties between supervisors and subordinates, built on interests, emotions, or identity obligations (Davidson et al., 2017; Law et al., 2000). Unlike leader-member exchange (LMX), which centers on formal, reciprocal, and work-related professional relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Wayne et al., 1997), supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* emphasizes the informal, affective, and sometimes non-work relationships (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2004; Law et al., 2000). This distinction is not merely conceptual, and it has direct implications for HRM ethics: Whereas LMX typically reinforces professional fairness norms, *guanxi* can blur the boundary between legitimate interpersonal support and ethically questionable favoritism in HR-related decisions. By embedding HRM within personal affect and ties, i.e., *guanxi* HRM, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* can lead employees to interpret these HRM practices as strong signals to prioritize supervisors' interests, even over formal ethical codes. This way, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* serves as both a personal experience and a situational source of information, thereby strengthening the impact of *guanxi* HRM on unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Figure 1 presents the theoretical model of our study.

This study offers three key theoretical contributions by investigating whether, how, and under what conditions *guanxi* HRM practices influence employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior. First, our study extends the application of *guanxi* HRM research into the domain of business ethics by linking *guanxi*-based management practices to unethical behavior. Such unethical and unfair aspects of HRM have received scant attention despite repeated calls for further inquiry (Yang & Yang, 2020; Yang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). Second, by examining the mediating role of moral disengagement, we unpack a cognitive mechanism through which *guanxi* HRM practices influence unethical pro-supervisor behavior. This is an important contribution

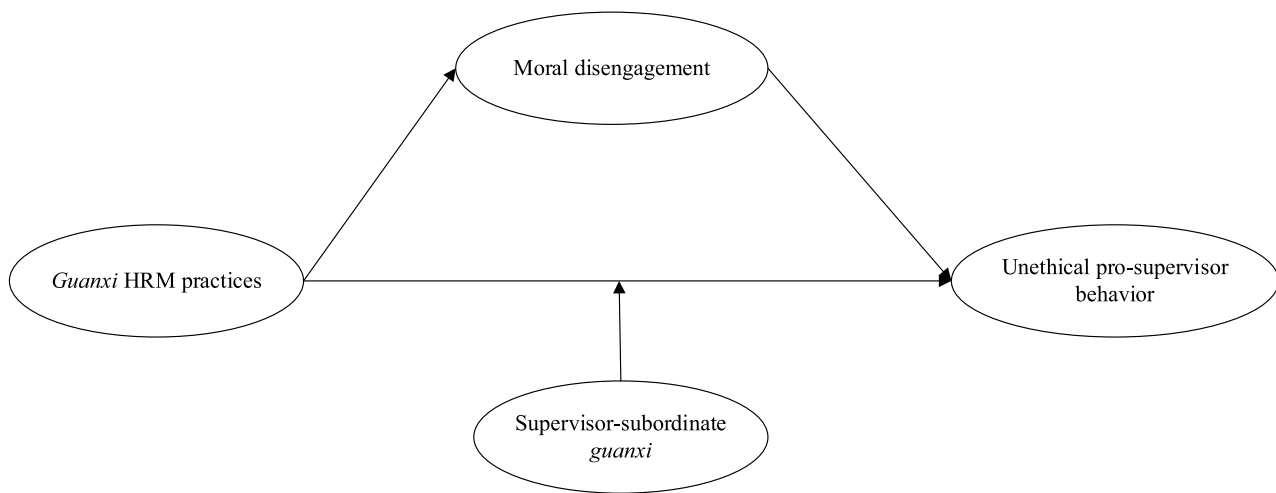


Fig. 1 Theoretical model

because it advances our understanding of how individuals cognitively process *guanxi* cues (i.e., *guanxi* HRM practices) and how these cues are then translated into behavior (i.e., unethical pro-supervisor behavior). Third, by identifying supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* as a critical boundary condition, our study highlights that *guanxi* HRM practices are more likely to trigger unethical behavior when supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* is high. In doing so, our study contributes to research on the conditional effects of *guanxi* in the workplace (Davidson et al., 2017; Ni et al., 2024). Overall, by revealing the cognitive mechanism (i.e., moral disengagement) and relational condition (i.e., supervisor-subordinate *guanxi*), our study deepens our understanding of *how* and *when* informal relationships influence employee unethical behaviors in organizations.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Guanxi and *Guanxi* HRM Practices

Guanxi is a concept grounded in traditional cultural characteristics of Chinese society, e.g., Confucian culture and other cultural influences (Hwang et al., 2009; Lin, 2011). The characteristics of *guanxi* include three core tenets: *guanxi* base, quality, and practice. *Guanxi* base refers to the common social identity shared between two individuals, such as kinship, being classmates, or having the same birthplace (Chen & Chen, 2004; Guthrie, 1998; Liu & Jia, 2021). *Guanxi* quality refers to the extent of *guanxi* between two individuals; e.g., a high level indicates a very close relationship between the two parties. Lastly, *guanxi* practice refers to “the use of social relationships to make exchanges, manufacture indebtedness, or accomplish

tasks” (Guthrie, 1998, p. 266), which refers to the utilization of *guanxi* (Guthrie, 1998; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). These three *guanxi* core components are intertwined and jointly affect individual attitudes and behaviors (Chen et al., 2013a, 2013b; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). *Guanxi* overlaps with other concepts, such as social capital, which is widely studied in Western countries (Burt, 1992, 2000; Fu et al., 2017; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005). However, these two concepts are distinct: whereas social capital primarily focuses on professional and ordinary connections among employees, *guanxi* emphasizes personal relationships at work that entail strong social obligations between individuals (Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). In this regard, this study focuses on the potentially problematic and unethical aspect of *guanxi*.

While *guanxi* originates in the Chinese context (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013a, 2013b), the broader influence of personal connections and human relationships on management decisions is evident across diverse cultural and institutional environments worldwide. For instance, *nepotism* (i.e., favoring family members) and *cronyism* (i.e., favoring close associates) are commonly studied workplace practices (Khatri & Tsang, 2003; Schilpzand et al., 2025). For example, nepotism has been documented globally across 29 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America, South America, and the Pacific Islands (see the review by Schilpzand et al., 2025), and cronyism has also been found not only in Asian countries but also in Western countries, such as France and the USA (Khatri & Tsang, 2003). Such global research suggests that *guanxi* HRM is part of a broader phenomenon of relationship-based HRM practices, which involve ethical implications, making it important to investigate its (un)ethical consequences.

Guanxi HRM practices refer to the extent to which *guanxi* influences HRM-related decisions in organizations, such as recruitment, promotion, performance evaluations, and rewards (Chen et al., 2004). *Guanxi* HRM practices are common in organizations, particularly in Asian contexts, and can take various forms (Chen et al., 2013a, 2013b). For example, subordinates may obtain more resources (such as higher performance evaluations and more generous bonuses) through *guanxi*-based relationships (e.g., kinships); supervisors may make unfair promotion decisions based on the quality of *guanxi* and *its underlying* base (Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). Such practices are deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of Chinese organizations (Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). *Guanxi* HRM practices may damage organizational reputation, justice, and internal cohesion (Chen & Chen, 2012), thereby threatening their survival and sustainable development.

Linking *Guanxi* HRM Practices With Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior

Given that *guanxi* HRM is rooted in the social context, we draw from social information processing theory to understand its impact on employees (Fulk et al., 1987; Meyer, 1994; Weick et al., 2005). Social information processing theory, initially formulated by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), suggests that the social context and the information available to individuals significantly influence their attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. This theory has attracted substantial attention in the fields of organizational behavior and HRM for its insights into how social cues and environmental factors shape employee behavior (Chen et al., 2013a, 2013b; Wu & Gu, 2024). In our study context, employees tend to regard these HRM practices as social cues. As such, employees recognize that decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, or rewards are often driven by personal relationships with decision-makers (e.g., supervisors or line managers) rather than by merit, competence, or other relevant factors. As a result, employees may interpret such cues as implicit encouragement to engage in behaviors that benefit their supervisors or line managers, potentially leading to unethical pro-supervisor actions.

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior refers to subordinates' actions that are aimed at benefiting their leaders but violate core societal values, morals, laws, or standards of proper conduct (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). For instance, employees engage in unethical behaviors to demonstrate loyalty and secure career advancement (Bryant & Merritt, 2021; Xian et al., 2019), even if these behaviors are unethical, to maintain or enhance their favorable position (Bryant & Merritt, 2021; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is more harmful to an organization than other forms of unethical

behavior, because the behavior will harm the immediate organization's interests (Bryant & Merritt, 2021; Johnson & Umphress, 2019). Due to the pro-supervisor nature of this behavior, it is often ignored, acquiesced, and even encouraged by supervisors (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Therefore, we urgently need to identify the antecedents of unethical pro-supervisor behavior to restrain it.

Drawing on social information processing theory, when employees perceive that the HRM context is heavily dependent on *guanxi*, they will interpret this information as a social cue and respond by seeking favoritism from their supervisors, who can influence their personnel decisions. Similarly, in such a context, supervisors will utilize their power and resources to support subordinates they wish to favor (Chen & Chen, 2012; Shen et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). As such, supervisors may primarily make decisions based on favoritism rather than on subordinates' work performance or ability (Cheng et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). This means that when subordinates seek to obtain more resources and a favorable performance evaluation, they must actively please their supervisor (Shen et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Subordinates may believe that by engaging in behavior that benefits their supervisors, even if it violates moral standards, they will receive favorable treatment or benefits in return. Moreover, by closely aligning with their supervisors' interests (i.e., protecting their supervisors' interests), subordinates may feel they are securing their positions or enhancing their prospects for promotion and other career advancement. Therefore, subordinates will actively display pro-supervisor behaviors to safeguard their supervisor's interests by adapting to and benefiting from *guanxi*-based HRM practices (Chen et al., 2013a, 2013b; Yang et al., 2018). In this regard, we propose:

Hypothesis 1 *Guanxi HRM practices are positively related to employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior.*

The Mediating Effect of Moral Disengagement

In addition to the direct link between social information and individual behaviors, social information processing theory suggests that such a relationship is mediated by psychological, cognitive, and complex processes (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977, 1978). These processes involve how individuals perceive social information (i.e., interpret and label it), evaluate it (i.e., determine values, judge alternatives, and make selections), and construct social reality (i.e., shape reality through social influence, comparisons, and their own behaviors). These processes ultimately

influence individual behaviors. In a review by Zalesny and Ford (1990), due to their conceptual ambiguity and lack of clear operationalization, such cognitive processes received little empirical attention between the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, scholars have begun to examine these complex pathways between social information and behavior in the fields of management and ethics to understand the indirect links between social cues and employee ethical behavior (Chen et al., 2013a, 2013b; Dong et al., 2025).

Applying social information processing theory to *guanxi* HRM practices, employees interpret these practices as social cues that trigger a cognitive sensemaking process. When employees perceive that promotions or rewards are based more on personal relationships than on merit, they may perceive these practices as acceptable. This process reflects moral disengagement, defined as a cognitive process through which individuals justify unethical behaviors and distance themselves from their moral standards without guilt (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Hu et al., 2023; Raza et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2023). *Guanxi* HRM practices provide specific social cues that facilitate moral disengagement. In particular, employees process and interpret *guanxi* HRM, in which HR decisions are made based on personal relationships rather than merit, and evaluate whether *guanxi* HRM violates formal ethical standards. As a result, they are likely to adjust their own values to align with organizational norms and benefit from the social context. In doing so, they construct their social reality and rationalize unethical values as socially necessary (e.g., “I had no choice”) or normative (e.g., “Everyone does this”; Liu & Jia, 2021; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). Thus, we anticipate that *guanxi* HRM leads to employee moral disengagement.

In turn, employee moral disengagement may prompt employees to exhibit more unethical pro-supervisor behavior. When morally disengaged, employees can justify unethical behaviors as serving a greater good, especially if these behaviors benefit their supervisors (Li et al., 2022; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Moral disengagement has been widely linked to unethical behaviors such as unethical pro-organizational behavior (Lian et al., 2022), unethical pro-family behavior (Yao et al., 2022), counterproductive work behavior (Zhao et al., 2022), and time theft (Xu et al., 2023). In alignment with existing research, we anticipate that employee moral disengagement will increase unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

Based on the above analysis, *guanxi* HRM practices act as social information cues for employees to interpret, evaluate, and construct their social reality. They motivate employee moral disengagement, which in turn increases unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 2 *Moral disengagement mediates the positive relationship between guanxi HRM practices and employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior.*

The Moderating Effect of Supervisor-Subordinate *Guanxi*

In addition to explaining how social cues shape employee behavior through cognitive mechanisms, social information processing theory also emphasizes that personal and situational factors influence the depth of information processing, i.e., the strength of the relationship between social information processing and subsequent behavior (Zalesny & Ford, 1990). When individuals experience strong personal or situational cues, they engage in deeper processing, thereby increasing the likelihood that social information is translated into corresponding behaviors. Personal factors, for example, refer to individual differences, such as the ability to process social information (Jabeen et al., 2022) or the personal relevance of social context (Zalesny & Ford, 1990). Situational factors, in turn, describe contextual differences that make it easier or harder for individuals to interpret social cues (Zalesny & Ford, 1990).

Guided by this framework, this study proposes that supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* functions as both a personal and situational factor shaping the relationship between *guanxi* HRM and employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* refers to informal personal relationships between employees and their supervisors, characterized by shared interests, emotions, and identities (Law et al., 2000). In a Chinese context, such relationships are reinforced by frequent work and non-work interactions that shape employees’ interpretations of organizational cues (Guan & Frenkel, 2019; Xu et al., 2023). Prior research has shown that *guanxi* with supervisors provides employees access to more resources (Chen et al., 2009; Davidson et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024) and shapes their attitudes toward organizational practices (Zhang et al., 2017).

As a personal factor, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* enhances employees’ ability and motivation to process social cues. When employees have close *guanxi* with supervisors, they gain access to information about HR practices and are more attentive to cues that have personal significance for their career outcomes (e.g., promotions and rewards). Because *guanxi* plays a central role in shaping employees’ career prospects, these cues become more personally relevant and more deeply processed. Consequently, the heightened motivation and information access embedded in strong supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* strengthen employees’ processing of the cues around *guanxi* HRM practices, thereby

increasing the likelihood that these cues are translated into unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

At the same time, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* also operates as a situational factor by creating a context of high communication quality, reduced uncertainty, shared understanding, and willingness to take care of each other (Miao et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). These conditions make it easier for individuals to be receptive to and interpret the social cues of *guanxi* HRM practices. With strong relationships with their supervisors, employees experience less ambiguity about organizational norms regarding *guanxi*, and thus interpret *guanxi* HRM practices as acceptable and credible signals to prioritize the supervisor’s wishes, even at the cost of unethical behavior. This situational clarity embedded in supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* further motivates employees to engage with unethical pro-supervisor behavior in response to *guanxi* HRM.

Based on the above analysis, we propose that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, as both a personal and situational factor, strengthens the impact of *guanxi* HRM practices on employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

Hypothesis 3 *Supervisor-subordinate guanxi moderates the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior, such that the relationship is stronger when supervisor-subordinate guanxi is high.*

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Our sample comprises business managers and full-time workers in organizations who have first-hand experience with *guanxi* HRM practices. We approached the sample participants by leveraging university networks, specifically contacting alumni members of a leading Chinese university for this project. Invitations were sent to 1422 members, and 582 accepted. Participants were briefed on the study’s purpose and procedures, assured anonymity, and informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. To minimize common method variance (CMV), we conducted data collection over three waves, each separated by a one-month interval. Participants were incentivized with a coffee voucher worth 30 RMB (approximately \$ 5 USD) for completing all three surveys. After each wave, we reviewed the questionnaires for completeness before processing them. We collected demographic data, as well as data on *guanxi* HRM practices and supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* in the first wave (Time 1), resulting in 521 valid responses. A month later (Time 2), data on moral disengagement were collected, with 467 participants responding,

yielding a 90% response rate. In the final wave (Time 3), we focused on gathering data on unethical pro-supervisor behavior, receiving 424 completed questionnaires, reflecting a 73% response rate.

After eliminating invalid questionnaires (e.g., those with the same answers or regular answers in all questions or in two consecutive wave questionnaires), we received 383 valid responses and matched respondents, yielding a response rate of 65.81%. Among the final sample, 46.48% of respondents were female. The average age of the participants was 31 years old, with SD of 4. Regarding education, 57% of participants had a bachelor’s degree, and 43% had a master’s degree or higher. The average tenure was 3 years (SD at 3). 47% of the participants worked in the service industry (e.g., law, education, training), 8% in the financial industry, 43% in the information and technology industry (e.g., telecommunications, media, and information materials), and 2% in other industries. Finally, private sector employment accounted for 28 percent of participants, public sector employment accounted for 58%, and 14% worked in the other sector, such as the semi- or not-for-profit sector.

Measures

Likert-5 scales were used for all core variables, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Moreover, we followed the translation and translator-back procedure strictly when translating the scale into Chinese (Behr, 2017).

Guanxi HRM Practices (T1)

A five-item scale was used to measure *guanxi* HRM practices in Chen et al. (2004). A sample item was “Many people got promoted through *guanxi*”. It was developed in the Chinese context and validated by many Chinese scholars, e.g., Yang et al. (2021) and Zhang et al., (2015a, 2015b). The alpha coefficient was .84.

Moral disengagement (T2)

We measured moral disengagement based on an eight-item scale developed by Moore et al. (2012). A sample item was “It is okay to spread rumors to defend those I care about”. This scale has also been proven suitable for a Chinese context (e.g., Xu et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). The alpha coefficient was .93.

Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior (T3)

The six-item Johnson and Umphress (2019) scale was used to assess unethical supervisory behavior. A sample item was “By necessity, I would withhold information from others

that might be harmful to my supervisor”. This scale has also been shown suitable for a Chinese context (e.g., Cui & Zhang, 2025; Li et al., 2022). The alpha coefficient was .91.

Supervisor-Subordinate *Guanxi* (T1).

A six-item scale developed by Law et al. (2000) was used to measure supervisor-subordinate *guanxi*. A sample item was “My supervisor invites me to his/her home for lunch or dinner”. As this scale was developed in the Chinese context and is highly consistent with the relationship between supervisors and subordinates in Chinese organizations, it is also widely used in the study of Chinese organizations (Chen et al., 2009; Han et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). The reliability alpha coefficient was .88.

Control Variables

According to previous literature on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, *guanxi* HRM practices, and unethical pro-supervisor behavior (Chen et al., 2004; Yao et al., 2022), we took the employee’s gender (0 = female; 1 = male), age, educational background (0 = undergraduate, 1 = postgraduate or above), working years with supervisors, industry (1 = financial industry, 2 = service industry, 3 = information technology industry, 4 = others), and sector (1 = private sector, 2 = public sector, 3 = other) as control variables. In addition, because unethical pro-supervisor behavior is unethical, participants may exhibit social desirability bias when self-reporting ethically related sensitive issues (Chen et al., 2016). Hence, we controlled for social desirability bias, which was measured based on Steenkamp et al. (2010) 10-item scale. A sample

item was “I sometimes tell lies if I have to”. The reliability alpha coefficient was .89.

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

For each variable, we calculated the mean, standard deviation, reliability, and correlation (see Table 1). Table 1 shows that a positive correlation exists between *guanxi* HRM practices and moral disengagement ($r = .25, p < .01$) and unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($r = .25, p < .01$), and employees’ moral disengagement is positively associated with unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($r = .27, p < .01$). These results preliminarily supported our hypotheses.

Measurement Model

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results for all variables are presented in Table 2. The five-factor model showed a very good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1153.22/550 = 2.10$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04). Following that, we compared the full measurement model with a series of alternative models based on CFAs. As shown in Table 2, the full measurement model performed better than all other models, indicating good discriminative validity and that CMV was not a serious concern.

Hypotheses Testing

In this research, we use structural equation modeling (SEM) due to its robustness in testing complex relationships

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Unethical pro-supervisor behavior(T3)	.91										
2 Moral disengagement(T2)	.27**	.93									
3 <i>Guanxi</i> HRM practices (T1)	.25**	.25**	.84								
4 Supervisor-subordinate <i>guanxi</i> (T1)	.07	.30**	.01	.88							
5 Social desirability bias	-.01	.08	.06	.00	.89						
6 Gender	.04	.02	.06	.03	.01	—					
7 Age	.01	-.02	.02	-.00	-.11*	-.01	—				
8 Educational background	-.07	-.11*	-.11*	-.05	-.02	-.03	-.03	—			
9 Tenure with supervisor	.03	-.08	-.03	-.02	.02	-.03	.34**	.03	—		
10 Industry	.01	-.01	-.01	.06	.01	-.02	-.01	.02	-.05	—	
11 Sector	.02	-.06	.02	-.01	-.09	.00	-.01	.02	-.02	.03	—
Mean	3.36	3.49	3.58	3.44	3.95	.54	3.72	.44	2.96	2.39	1.86
SD	.85	.84	.79	.77	.65	.50	4.07	.50	2.61	.65	.63

*Bold and slanted data on diagonal is Cronbach’s alpha for key variables in this study

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed test

Table 2 Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model	$\chi^2 (df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Five-factor model (GHRM, SSG, MD, UPSB, SDB)	1153.22(550)	.92	.91	.05	.04
Four-factor model (GHRM+SSG, MD, UPSB, SDB)	1880.07(554)	.82	.81	.08	.10
Three-factor model (GHRM+SSG, MD+UPSB, SDB)	3130.98(557)	.65	.62	.11	.13
Two-factor model (GHRM+SSG+MD+UPSB, SDB)	3969.62(559)	.53	.50	.13	.14
Single-factor model (GHRM+SSG+MD+UPSB+SDB)	5405.28(560)	.34	.29	.15	.17

**GHRM Guanxi* HRM practices, *SSG* Supervisor-subordinate *guanxi*, *MD* Moral disengagement, *UPSB* Unethical pro-supervisor behavior, *SDB* Social desirability bias. + represents the combination of two factors into one factor

involving multiple variables, both observed and latent, within a theoretical model (Dragan & Topolšek, 2014; Tarka, 2018). SEM is particularly well-suited for our study as it allows for the examination of direct and indirect relationships, including the mediation and moderation effects central to our model.

Our research suggests that *guanxi* HRM practices influence employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior, with moral disengagement serving as a mediator and supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* acting as a moderator. Given the multiple variables involved in this model, SEM provides a method to simultaneously test the entire system of relationships while accounting for measurement error, a significant advantage over simpler methods like regression analysis (Tarka, 2018).

Furthermore, the time-lagged design in our study further benefits from SEM, as it can assess temporal causality, confirming whether the relationships proposed in our model are not merely correlational but indicative of a dynamic, directional influence. Therefore, SEM not only supports the testing of our hypotheses but also enhances the rigor and validity of our findings. After controlling for gender, age,

educational background, co-working years, industry, nature of enterprise, and social desirability bias, Fig. 2 presents the results.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that there is a positive correlation between *guanxi* HRM practices and employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior. As shown in Fig. 2, *guanxi* HRM practices were positively correlated with unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1.

According to Hypothesis 2, moral disengagement mediated the relationship between *guanxi* HRM practices and unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Figure 2 demonstrates that *guanxi* HRM practices were positively related to moral disengagement ($\beta = .27, p < .001$) and moral disengagement was positively related to employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($\beta = .25, p < .01$). Regarding the mediation effect, we calculated the indirect effect based on bootstrapping tests. According to the results, the indirect impact of *guanxi* HRM practices on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behaviors via moral disengagement was .06, with a 95% confidence interval between .03 and .10, which excluded . These results indicated that moral disengagement mediated

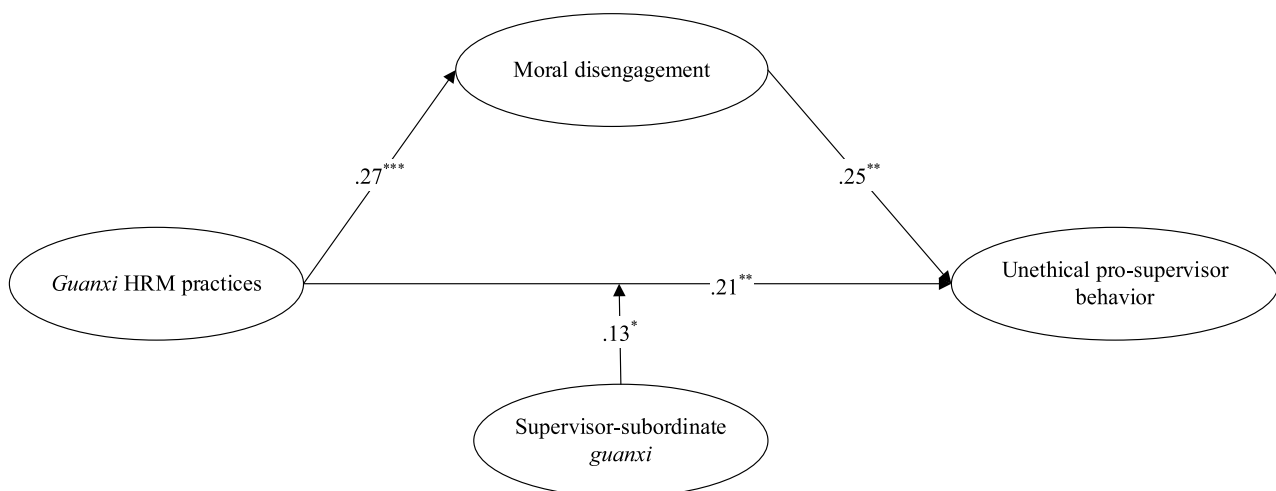


Fig. 2 Results of Model Testing. *SDB* Social desirability bias. $n = 383$, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

the relationship between *guanxi* HRM practices and employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* would strengthen the relationships between *guanxi* HRM practices and unethical pro-supervisor behavior. As shown in Fig. 2, the interaction term between supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* and *guanxi* HRM practices exerted a significant effect on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($\beta = .13, p < .05$). We plotted the interaction (Fig. 3) and conducted a simple slope test. The simple slope test showed that the *guanxi* HRM practices with high supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* exerted a stronger positive effect on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($B = .34, t = 2.40, p < .05$). In contrast, employees with a low level of supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* exerted an insignificant positive effect on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior ($B = .08, t = .03, ns$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Discussion

Drawing on social information processing theory, this paper developed a theoretical model to examine whether, how, and when *guanxi* HRM practices, as social cues, influence employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior. In our study, we found that *guanxi* HRM practices have a positive effect on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior, mediated by moral disengagement. Moreover, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* serves as a moderator of the relationship described above.

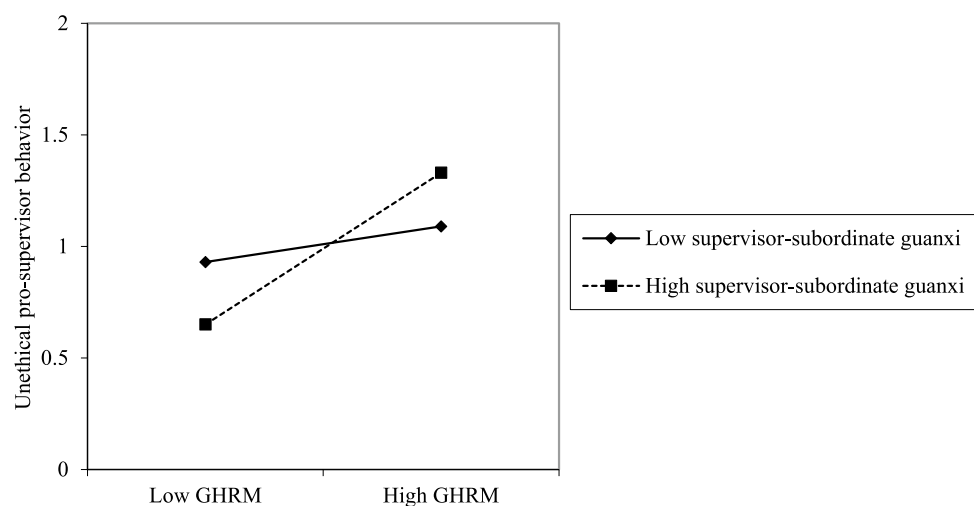
Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study make several important contributions to HRM, *guanxi*, and business ethics research.

First, this study extends *guanxi* HRM research into the domain of business ethics by examining its unethical implications. Existing HRM research has largely focused on high-performance or high-involvement systems that enhance employee commitment and organizational performance (Fu et al., 2017; Nishii et al., 2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). The unethical and unfair aspects of HRM, such as *guanxi*-based resource allocation, have received far less attention despite repeated calls for further inquiry (Yang & Yang, 2020; Yang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b). By showing that *guanxi* HRM undermines fairness and triggers unethical employee behavior, this study broadens the scope of HRM scholarship into business ethics research.

Relatedly, business ethics research has examined various forms of unethical behaviors such as pro-organizational (Alqhaiwi et al., 2024; Liao et al., 2024; Tacke et al., 2023), pro-family (Alqhaiwi et al., 2024; Yao et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2022), and pro-group behaviors (Ouyang et al., 2022; Thau et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2023). In comparison, unethical pro-supervisor behavior remains underexplored despite its prevalence and potential to generate substantial organizational harm. For employee unethical behaviors, prior research has mainly focused on leader-driven factors, including leader bottom-line mentality (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019), LMX (Li et al., 2024), perceived supervisor support (Li et al., 2022), and empowering leadership (Cui & Zhang, 2025). This study advances the literature by examining the impact of organizational *guanxi* HRM on employee unethical pro-supervisor behavior. By drawing on social information processing theory, we further contribute new theoretical insight to a research stream that has primarily relied on social identity, social exchange, and social comparison theories (Cui & Zhang, 2025; Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Li et al., 2024). Overall, these insights further integrate *guanxi* HRM within the broader business ethics domain by

Fig. 3 The interaction plot between *guanxi* HRM practices and supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* on unethical pro-supervisor behavior



demonstrating how *guanxi*-based practices shape employees' unethical behavior.

Second, by theorizing and revealing moral disengagement as a mediating mechanism, this study explains how *guanxi* HRM practices relate to employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Previous studies on *guanxi* HRM have primarily focused on its impact on employee emotional exhaustion (Yang et al., 2021) and creative performance (Yang & Yang, 2020). What has been overlooked so far is how *guanxi* HRM practices, involving unethical decisions that can shape employees' moral cognitions, lead to employee unethical behaviors. By applying social information processing theory, we demonstrate that *guanxi* HRM provides social cues that foster employees' moral disengagement, thereby promoting unethical pro-supervisor behavior. This cognitive explanation opens the "black box" of how employees interpret and internalize *guanxi* HRM practices, offering a more complete understanding of the psychological processes through which these practices produce unethical outcomes.

Finally, by theorizing and identifying supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* as a key boundary condition, this study demonstrates that the effects of *guanxi* HRM on unethical pro-supervisor behavior intensify when employees maintain strong personal relationships with their supervisors. Prior research on *guanxi* HRM boundary conditions has largely emphasized individual dispositions, such as social comparison orientation (Yang & Yang, 2020), and structural features, such as pay-for-performance systems (Yang et al., 2021). The informal relational context in which *guanxi* HRM is enacted has been overlooked. By showing that supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* strengthens the influence of *guanxi* HRM on employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior, our study highlights the relational contingencies under which informal HRM systems become especially ethically consequential. This contribution advances research on the conditional effects of *guanxi* in the workplace and underscores the importance of relational dynamics in shaping employees' ethical responses to *guanxi* HRM practices.

Practical Implications

This study also provides several practical implications for organizations. First, the finding that *guanxi* HRM promotes unethical pro-supervisor behavior underscores the need to systematically identify and reduce such practices. Because *guanxi*-based resource allocation (e.g., training opportunities, rewards, and promotions) is inherently unfair and can severely damage organizational interests, managers must recognize its risks and actively work to eliminate it. Organizations can establish clear policies that prevent leaders from recruiting or promoting individuals with whom they have personal ties. In addition to formal policies, organizations should develop training programs that support an ethical

and fair culture, encouraging managers to implement HRM practices based on merit rather than personal relationships. In collectivist cultural contexts where personal connections carry significant weight, managers, particularly in multinational firms, should anticipate substantial resistance. Therefore, organizations need to communicate the long-term harm of *guanxi*-based practices and continuously reinforce fair, equitable, and merit-based management systems.

Second, organizations need to pay closer attention to employees' moral disengagement, as it plays a central role in translating *guanxi* HRM practices into unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Moral disengagement allows employees to rationalize unethical actions as acceptable or necessary, making employees more vulnerable to engaging in behaviors that appear to benefit their supervisors but ultimately harm the organization. To mitigate this risk, managers should implement interventions that strengthen employees' moral awareness and reduce opportunities for cognitive justification, such as regular ethics training, scenario-based discussions, and clear communication of organizational values. Embedding ethical criteria in recruitment, promotion, and performance systems may also reduce employees' tendencies to morally disengage and help cultivate an ethical climate resistant to *guanxi*-based pressures.

Finally, based on our finding that supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* strengthens the effect of *guanxi* HRM on unethical pro-supervisor behavior, organizations should pay close attention to the relational context in which HR decisions are made. Strong local *guanxi* relationships increase the ethical risks associated with *guanxi* HRM by making employees more willing to engage in unethical behavior to support their supervisors. Because these informal ties cannot be directly regulated, organizations should introduce structural safeguards, such as rotating HR decision-making responsibilities, requiring dual approval for key personnel decisions, and increasing transparency in performance evaluations and HR decisions, to prevent relational closeness from overriding merit-based judgments. Recognizing and managing these relational dynamics can help organizations prevent *guanxi* from becoming a source of ethical vulnerability.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions to HRM and business ethics research, this study has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, all data were collected from a single source within a single cultural context, which may limit generalizability and raise concerns about CMV. Although our time-lagged design and CFA reduced CMV risk, future research should adopt multi-source or experience-sampling designs. Because *guanxi* HRM is rooted in Chinese cultural traditions (Chen et al., 2009; Liu & Jia, 2021; Zhang et al., 2015a, 2015b), China is an appropriate

setting. However, examining our model in countries with similar relational systems, such as *yongo* (Korea), *blat* (Russia), or *wasta* (Arab states), would help determine its cross-cultural applicability.

Second, while this study focused on the unethical consequences of *guanxi* HRM, it is important to acknowledge that not all *guanxi*-based management practices are unethical. Some forms of relational management (e.g., social capital or LMX mentioned earlier) can be effective, and recent research highlights defensive forms of *guanxi* morality (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022). Future research should further examine the ethical implications of *guanxi* HRM and compare it with related practices such as *nepotism* and *cronyism* to identify culturally specific versus universal relational mechanisms. Such work could also explore whether similar processes of moral disengagement and unethical pro-supervisor behavior arise in these systems.

Third, although we identify moral disengagement as a key mechanism linking *guanxi* HRM to unethical pro-supervisor behavior, other theoretical perspectives merit investigation. For instance, social exchange, social identity, and conservation of resources theories all suggest alternative pathways through reciprocity, identification, or resource accumulation (Blau, 1964; Hobfoll, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). Future studies should test these mechanisms to build a more comprehensive understanding of how *guanxi* HRM shapes employee behavior.

Finally, our findings indicate that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* strengthens the effect of *guanxi* HRM on unethical behavior, but other boundary conditions may also play a role. For example, power distance and moral identity could influence how employees interpret and respond to *guanxi* HRM (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Lee et al., 2000), with high power distance or low moral identity potentially making employees more susceptible to unethical behavior. Future research should examine these and other contextual factors and also explore the antecedents of *guanxi* HRM practices to better understand how they emerge and how they can be mitigated.

Conclusion

This study draws on social information processing theory and deepens our understanding of the ethical implications of *guanxi* HRM practices. We found that *guanxi* HRM practices are related to employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior, and this relationship works through the mechanism of moral disengagement. This linkage was intensified when supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is strong, underscoring the relational conditions under which *guanxi* HRM becomes especially unethical. By identifying the underlying cognitive mechanism (i.e., moral disengagement) and a key boundary

condition (i.e., supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*), this research identifies whether, how, and when *guanxi* HRM influences employees' unethical actions, thereby integrating *guanxi* HRM with business ethics research. Our study provides a foundation for expanded inquiry into the ethical challenges of relationship-based HRM and encourages future research to test and refine these insights across diverse cultural and organizational contexts.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

Research Involving Human and Animal Participants This paper and all authors' compliance with ethical standards, we are willing to accept all responsibility for any violation of ethical standards in the study.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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