

The compounding effects of accumulated perceived employer exploitation when tough business decisions must be made

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Funding information

This study was funded by The College of the Liberal Arts and the School of Labor and Employment Relations at The Pennsylvania State University, as well as The University of Birmingham.

Abstract

We examine how a single exploitative employer decision event, conceptualized as a shock, interacts with employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation to amplify feelings of violation and influence adverse employee reactions. This interaction effect, and its boundary conditions, constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of the study. Drawing primarily on social exchange theory and informed by psychological contract theory, and the unfolding model of turnover as complementary explanatory lenses, we test this model across two experiments and find that feelings of violation resulting from an exploitative employer decision are stronger if the event occurred in the context of a more exploitative employment relationship. The mediating effects of feelings of violation on the relationship between accumulated perceived employer exploitation and an exploitative employer decision, and the employee reactions of turnover intentions and loyal boosterism are novel. Together, these results contribute to advancing research and theory on employer exploitation, psychological contracts, social exchange theory, and the unfolding model of turnover by establishing boundary conditions for the relationship among an affective event, exploitative employment relationship perceptions, and employee reactions. These results advance employer exploitation research by establishing that accumulated exploitative relationship history moderates the intensity of employee reactions to discrete shock events, a distinction prior research has not empirically tested.

KEYWORDS

decent work and economic growth, employer exploitation, feelings of violation, loyal boosterism, motivation, turnover intentions, USA, work psychology

INTRODUCTION

Exploitation in the workplace constitutes “a serious moral wrong” (Kim, 2018, p. 28) that remains a common phenomenon, despite advancements in labor protections. While employer exploitation of employees can manifest in various forms, including forced labor, mandated extended work hours, sweatshops, and compromised employee safety (Boufkhed et al., 2024; Loyens & Paraciani, 2023), the present study focuses specifically on employees' *feelings of violation* resulting from such exploitation. Employer exploitation is often rooted in tough employer decisions that involve, or may appear to involve, ethical tradeoffs between business and employee interests. Despite

rich research streams on worker exploitation in the sociology and industrial relations fields (e.g., Friedman & Lee, 2010), organizational behavior research has focused mostly on leaders' exploitative behaviors, such as abusive supervision (e.g., Lyu et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023).

Extending these approaches, Livne-Ofer, Coyle-Shapiro, and Pearce (2019, p. 1992) introduced the concept of exploitative employer–employee relationship perceptions (hereafter perceived employer exploitation), or “employees' perceptions that they have been taken advantage of purposefully in their relationships with their organization, to the benefit of the organization itself.” Highlighting the importance of employees' perceptions rather than a more objective view of the employer–

employee relationship is consistent with scholarly work emphasizing that the morality of employer decisions and practices is contingent upon the individual moral philosophies (Forsyth, 1992), which frame individual perspectives on what might constitute exploitative employer–employee relationships. Research on organizational justice (see Adamovic [2023] for a recent review) has found support for the existence of a relationship between perceived employer exploitation and important employee attitudes and behaviors such as commitment and psychological withdrawal (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019). This aligns with arguments that counterproductive work behaviors can be a form of employee revenge (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). Therefore, exploitative employer decisions may elicit strong emotional reactions including feelings of violation which, as we discuss, can precede rather than follow cognitive appraisal of breach in the case of extreme shock events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and ultimately lead to negative outcomes for employees. However, it is important to consider whether the effects of such decisions are comparable across employees and what might cause these reactions to differ. As employers must often make tough business decisions that are or could be perceived as exploitative by their employees, even if that is not the employers' intent, the question of how to minimize negative reactions is important both practically and theoretically.

According to Livne-Ofer et al. (2019), the employer–employee relationship must meet two main criteria to be perceived as exploitative by employees. First, the employer's actions must be perceived as intentional and involve some gain for the employer (e.g., financial). Second, its decisions need to be perceived as harmful to employees. For instance, an employer's decision to remove or refrain from adopting safety measures (e.g., a decision to continue operations while there is a warning for a natural disaster) as an attempt to control costs, boost business, or enhance profits while simultaneously putting the well-being of employees and even their families at risk can be perceived as exploitation.

Although Livne-Ofer et al. (2019, p. 1992) acknowledge that a “perception of exploitation could potentially arise from a single event that shifts attentional focus, or from repeated events,” the focus of their study as well as other subsequent studies (e.g., Guo et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023; Lyu et al., 2023) was on the consequences of continuous perceived employer exploitation rather than the effects of a single event. However, an extreme employer decision related to something of importance for employees can be a “shock” that triggers immediate perceptions of violation regardless of the perceived exploitative nature of the existing employment relationship. For example, an employer might decide to stay open as a natural disaster approaches or might decide to discontinue a certain type of employee benefit such as health coverage because the costs would require price increases for customers, which would jeopardize the company's competitiveness. Lee and Mitchell (1994, p. 60) define a shock as

“a very distinguishable event that jars employees toward deliberate judgments about their jobs and, perhaps, to voluntarily quit their job.” They explain that a shock can be positive, negative, or neutral and what constitutes a shock differs across people based on their individual differences and experiences and how the event is integrated into their belief system (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Some events, such as a decision that puts employee safety at risk, are likely to be a shock to all employees because employees' health and sense of well-being are threatened, both of which are considered universally important primary resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

This research builds upon and extends the work of Livne-Ofer et al. (2019) by emphasizing the crucial distinction between isolated exploitative events and continuous perceived employer exploitation. This distinction between a single exploitative shock event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation is the conceptual centerpiece of our model and its primary theoretical contribution. Social exchange theory explains the main mechanisms through which this distinction operates, and is complemented by psychological contract theory and the unfolding model of turnover. Together they form the theoretical scaffolding supporting our primary argument.

Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the unfolding model of turnover (Holtom et al., 2012; Lee & Mitchell, 1994), we argue that even though this “shock” may elicit strong employee reactions, the history of the employer–employee relationship may play a significant role in either attenuating or intensifying employees' responses to the shock event. Consistent with this proposition, previous research on psychological contracts has found that when an employer scores low on previous breach of psychological contract, a subsequent breach has a stronger negative influence on employees' feelings of violation and subsequent motivation (Zhong et al., 2023). Specifically, we propose that employees' perceptions of how much their employer has previously breached their psychological contract by exploiting them will influence the relationship among an exploitative decision event, feelings of violation, and subsequent employee reactions. As Livne-Ofer et al. (2019, p. 1993) show, when employees perceive that their employer is generally “intentionally exploiting them for self-gain,” they are likely to experience greater feelings of violation, anger, and hostility toward the employer. Critically, in our model, accumulated perceived employer exploitation does not directly generate feelings of violation; rather, it lowers the threshold for violation when a discrete exploitative shock event occurs. Feelings of violation are the acute affective response to a shock event, amplified by the pre-existing relational lens.

While discrete employer exploitation events are undoubtedly harmful, the perception of a sustained, intentional pattern of exploitation might have far more profound and enduring consequences for employee attitudes and behaviors. This study investigates the

psychological mechanisms underpinning employees' reactions to perceived employer exploitation, drawing upon psychological contract theory and social exchange theory to elucidate these processes. The purpose of this research is to build on the limited literature addressing the antecedents and consequences of perceived employer exploitation. By disentangling the independent and interactive effects of an exploitative event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation, we respond to calls for further research on organizational justice (Adamovic, 2023) and on the impact of affect on employee reactions to company wrongdoings (Dufour et al., 2019). In seeking to understand why employees react differently to a single exploitative employer decision and how the subsequent, potentially negative reactions might be reduced, our primary research question is: *Does a single exploitative shock event interact with an employee's accumulated perceived employer exploitation such that it influences feelings of violation and subsequent employee outcomes?*

We focus on two important organizational outcomes: loyal boosterism and turnover intentions. Loyal boosterism, which is defined as the extent to which employees actively engage in promoting a positive image for the organization (Blakely et al., 2003), is an important dimension of organizational citizenship behavior (Moorman & Blakely, 1995). Loyal boosterism has become even more critical given the widespread use of the internet and social media, enabling employees to anonymously communicate either negative or positive comments about their employers. Additionally, turnover intentions are one of the strongest predictors of turnover (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009) and have been found to have a significant impact on organizational performance (Shaw et al., 2005).

To test our hypothesized model, we conducted two experiments in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This context was deemed appropriate, as employers often had to make decisions regarding the implementation or removal of safety measures (e.g., social distancing and mandatory facemask use) to balance the physical and psychological safety of their employees and the continuation of their operations (Collings et al., 2021). Such a decision meets Livne-Ofer et al.'s (2019) two main criteria for a single exploitative event: there are important consequences related to employees' health and there is financial gain for the business.

Our two studies make one primary and several secondary contributions. Primarily, while extant research has focused exclusively on accumulated perceived employer exploitation (Guo et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023; Livne-Ofer et al., 2019), we disentangle and test the interactive effects of a single exploitative decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation. By looking at the independent and interaction effects of a single exploitative decision event and accumulated perceived exploitation, we demonstrate that the same shock can produce differential outcomes depending on relational history. Secondarily, (1) we extend the unfolding model of turnover by showing

that shock effects are conditioned by accumulated exploitative history and are not uniform across employees; (2) we establish feelings of violation as a mediating mechanism among a negative workplace shock, accumulated exploitation perceptions, and employee reactions; (3) we contribute to the psychological contract breach literature by showing that affective violation can emerge directly from extreme shock events prior to cognitive appraisal; and (4) we demonstrate that communication of employer decision controllability buffers these effects. From a practical standpoint, our theory and findings are also significant, as they suggest that investing in creating long-term, less-exploitative employment relationships and communicating the employer's lack of control over such decisions, when appropriate, may help to buffer the negative effects of a perceived employer exploitation event on employees' retaliatory behavioral intentions and actual behaviors.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Social exchange theory provides the primary framework for understanding how employees respond to perceived employer exploitation (Basaad et al., 2023). It posits that individuals form relationships through a cost-benefit analysis, seeking to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). In an employment context, employees contribute their time, effort, and skills in exchange for tangible benefits, such as pay and promotion, as well as intangible benefits such as recognition, trust, and support (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When employees perceive that they are being exploited, they experience an imbalance in the exchange relationship, where their contributions outweigh the benefits they receive. The perception of being exploited creates a sense of inequity and injustice, which can trigger a range of negative reactions, including withdrawal behaviors, such as absenteeism and reduced effort, as well as retributive behaviors such as theft, sabotage, and even acts of aggression.

Rooted in the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), social exchange theory assumes that individuals engage in sequential transactions where they give others something of value with the expectation of receiving something of comparable value in return (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2012). Unlike economic exchanges, social exchange relationships are not simple *quid pro quo* transactions, nor are they bound by strict timelines or fixed exchange values. Employees and employers engage in a sequence of exchanges with the timing and value of the exchanges depending on the volition of the giver (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Organ, 1988). In essence, resources are exchanged through reciprocity, whereby one party "repays" the good (or bad) treatment by the other party (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Parties desiring to

maintain a mutually beneficial social exchange relationship must continually meet partner expectations (Bordia et al., 2017). According to the norm of reciprocity, someone receiving desirable treatment from others, including from their employer, is likely to feel obligated to reciprocate (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960; Wayne et al., 2002). Similarly, receiving unfavorable treatment in one's exchange relationship with an employer has been found to be related to various negative employer outcomes including counterproductive work behaviors (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). Employer decisions that exploit employees can trigger social exchange mechanisms that aim to restore the balance in the exchange relationship.

Importantly, social exchange theory predicts that employees who perceive employer exploitation will seek to restore balance in the exchange relationship. They may reduce their contributions to match the perceived lack of benefits, engaging in behaviors such as reduced effort, decreased productivity, and increased absenteeism (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Alternatively, they may engage in retributive behaviors aimed at punishing the employer or recouping perceived losses (Ahmad et al., 2023). These behaviors can manifest as theft, sabotage, or even acts of aggression (Cropanzano et al., 2017). In some cases, employees may redirect their anger toward the organization, subordinates, or peers when direct retaliation against a supervisor is not possible (Hollinger & Clark, 1983; Phillips et al., 2025; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

A commonly studied form of social exchange in the employer–employee relationship is the psychological contract (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003). While psychological contract theory falls under the broad umbrella of social exchange theory (or theories according to Cropanzano et al., 2017), the two theories are complementary. Psychological contract theory posits that employees and employers have beliefs about mutual obligations that shape their perceptions of fairness and reciprocity in the employment relationship (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1989). However, it does not require that both parties hold the same expectations (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). Unlike social exchange theory, which focuses on the reciprocity of the exchange in the employer–employee relationship (e.g., Cassar & Briner, 2011), psychological contract theory centers on the cognitive (psychological contract breach) and affective (feelings of violation) consequences of the perceived obligations of each party that remain unfulfilled (Rousseau, 1989).

In essence, social exchange theory provides the macro-level logic of why exploitation triggers retaliation because of the disruption of reciprocal exchange equilibrium while psychological contract theory specifies the micro-level psychological pathway through which a perceived breach of social exchange (a breach of expected obligations) generates cognitive and affective responses (violation) that translate into behavioral outcomes. Social exchange theory explains the motivational force behind retaliation, whereas psychological contract theory

explains the specific cognitive-to-affective mechanism through which a discrete exploitative event becomes psychologically meaningful to the employee. Together, these frameworks are complementary. Social exchange theory predicts that employees will respond to exploitation to restore balance, and psychological contract theory explains the affective route through which that process operates (via feelings of violation).

The three constructs central to this model, accumulated perceived employer exploitation, psychological contract breach, and feelings of violation, are related but conceptually and temporally distinct. Accumulated perceived employer exploitation is a cognitive, relational assessment that reflects employees' ongoing belief that their organization intentionally takes advantage of them for organizational gain (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019). It is a cumulative cognitive schema formed through repeated asymmetric exchanges in which employees perceive systematic under-reward relative to their contributions and is a perception about the character of the employment relationship, not an emotional state. Psychological contract breach is also cognitive: it is an employee's belief that specific obligations have gone unfulfilled (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Feelings of violation are the affective consequence that may, but do not always, follow a breach (Rousseau, 1989). Critically, Weiss, and Cropanzano (1996) demonstrate that a sufficiently extreme negative event can elicit feelings of violation directly, bypassing deliberate cognitive appraisal of breach. In our model, accumulated perceived employer exploitation functions as a moderator of the relationship between an exploitative shock event and feelings of violation: it is a pre-existing relational lens through which the shock is interpreted, not an emotional response to it.¹

When employees perceive that their employer has failed to fulfill their obligations, a psychological contract breach occurs. A psychological contract breach refers to an individual's belief that the other party has not fulfilled promised obligations, and this can stem from either an actual intentional failure to meet these expectations (reneging) or because of incongruent perceived obligations (incongruence; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Wolfe Morrison, 2000). Psychological contract breach can lead to feelings of violation and negative outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and increased turnover intentions (Perera, Chew, & Nielsen, 2016). Specifically, feelings of violation are a subsequent emotional reaction that may follow such a breach (Rousseau, 1989). Feelings of violation can involve resentment, anger, mistrust, or unfairness because of the cognitive perception that a promise has been broken (e.g., Bordia et al., 2008). A psychological contract breach does not always result in feelings of violation. This

¹Empirically, these constructs are confirmed as distinct in both studies. In Study 1, cross-loadings between accumulated perceived employer exploitation and feelings of violation were ≤ 0.23 ; in Study 2, ≤ 0.17 , well below acceptable thresholds for discriminant validity.

emotional response depends on the person's expectations, the importance of the unfulfilled promise, and the explanations provided for the breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Feelings of violation have a stronger impact on employees' attitudes and behaviors than the cognitive element of psychological contract breach. Meta-analysis results show that feelings of violation explain a significantly higher percentage of variance in several attitudinal (e.g., job satisfaction and organizational commitment) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., organizational citizenship behaviors) than the cognitive elements of psychological contract breach (Zhao et al., 2007). It is thus important to focus on feelings of violation.

As Livne-Ofer et al. (2019) note, when employees perceive that their employer is trying to exploit them, an intense emotional reaction is likely to occur. This reaction, however, is not the same as feelings of violation; it is the trigger for them. Accumulated perceived employer exploitation is a cognitive relational assessment or a sustained belief that one's employer intentionally takes advantage of them. This pre-existing cognitive state lowers the threshold for experiencing feelings of violation when a new exploitative event occurs because the new event is interpreted through an already-suspicious relational lens rather than as an isolated surprise. Feelings of violation, the emotional state of betrayal, anger, and resentment (Morrison & Robinson, 1997), are the affective outcome of this interpretive process, not a component of accumulated exploitation itself.

In line with social exchange theory and psychological contract theory, we propose that an employer's exploitative decision event will lead to feelings of violation, reflecting a conglomeration of feelings including anger, betrayal, disappointment, frustration, and resentment (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Raja et al., 2004; Rousseau, 1989). Typically, feelings of violation have been viewed as either the affective dimension of psychological contract breach or a distinct construct that follows the cognitive evaluation of a failed employer promise or obligation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) explain, however, that an important employment event, particularly a negative one, does not necessarily trigger an immediate psychological contract breach or a deliberate, cognitive appraisal. Instead, an affective response may emerge first (Zhao et al., 2007). Accordingly, we propose that

Hypothesis 1. An employer's exploitative decision event will be positively related to employees' subsequent feelings of violation.

Although an employer's exploitative decision can constitute a distinguishable shock event with the potential to elicit feelings of violation among employees, the nature and quality of the ongoing employer–employee relationship may either attenuate or intensify employees' emotional responses. If the employer is already perceived to be

exploitative, the existing psychological contract is likely to be weak or broken, and a single exploitative decision event may therefore evoke stronger feelings of violation than if the ongoing employer–employee relationship was not previously perceived as exploitative and the psychological contract remained intact. This is because a pre-existing pattern of exploitation sensitizes employees such that each new event is interpreted not as an isolated surprise but as confirmatory evidence of the employer's exploitative character, a process consistent with sensitization rather than habituation (Zhong et al., 2023).

Feelings of violation can significantly impact employee morale, trust, and motivation (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). For example, Lynch et al. (1999) found that, when deciding how much effort to put into their work, reciprocation-wary employees considered how much their employer cared about their well-being. Similarly, we propose that a single exploitative employer decision event and employees' accumulated overall perceptions regarding the exploitative nature of their employment relationship will interact such that the exploitative decision event can be the tipping point for employees who already perceive high levels of employer exploitation and a weak or broken psychological contract. Accumulated exploitation perceptions reflect a latent cognitive stock that increases the likelihood that subsequent events are interpreted as violations. This explains delayed employee reactions to mistreatment and disproportionate reactions to seemingly small triggers. Social exchange theory explains that the maintenance of a mutually beneficial social exchange relationship requires partner expectations to be met over time (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Organ, 1988). If one party has not been upholding their half of the exchange relationship, the existing psychological contract is likely to be weak or broken and the other party will perceive an ongoing breach in the relationship and be sensitive to further transgressions that move the relationship even farther from equilibrium.

After a 'shock' exploitative decision event, reactions will be intensified in the context of an ongoing exploitative relationship where the existing psychological contract is weak or broken. In this case, the feelings of violation resulting from an acute exploitative event are likely to be even stronger than if the event occurred in the context of a less-exploitative employment relationship, affecting employees' turnover intentions and willingness to publicly support the employer. Therefore, we propose that

Hypothesis 2. Employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation will moderate the relationship between an employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation. This interaction will be such that higher accumulated perceived employer exploitation will strengthen the relationship between the exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation.

Because organizations have a variety of inhibitory mechanisms that can block employees' ability to respond to social exchange and psychological contract violations, such as disciplinary action or even termination, it is important to investigate a variety of employee responses to feelings of violation and forms of employee retaliation (Phillips et al., 2025). A particularly damaging form of employee retaliation against an employer is publicly disparaging the employer. Spreading information regarding the mistreatment of employees and reports of employee unhappiness can harm an organization's reputation in the eyes of both customers and job applicants. For example, in Glassdoor reviews, employees openly criticize what they perceive to be problematic organizational cultures (Sull et al., 2022), which can damage employers' reputations.

Conversely, loyal boosterism is focused on positively influencing external organizational stakeholders (Blakely et al., 2003; Moorman et al., 1998), encompassing activities such as talking favorably about the employer and publicly defending the employer when it is facing criticism (Farooq et al., 2017; Moorman & Blakely, 1995). Loyal boosterism is, thus, an important yet understudied indicator of employee satisfaction (Organ et al., 2005), and low or no levels of loyal boosterism can be a form of retaliation. Loyal boosterism is particularly important to modern organizations because the widespread use of the internet and social media enables the instantaneous worldwide broadcast of positive or negative organization-related information. For instance, the decision of CD Project SA to implement 6-day workweeks (called "crunch-time") to meet the pre-announced release date for the widely anticipated videogame "Cyberpunk 2077" prompted negative commentary from business analysts. However, numerous employees engaged in an online crusade to clear the company's name, expressing their support for the company's decision.

Given the nature and consequences of a work environment perceived as less safe, feelings of violation are a likely response to an employer's decision that increases safety risks. Unlike being treated rudely by a supervisor or being denied a raise, which can violate expectations of how one should be treated at work, a decision to remove safety measures can result in feelings of violation because of increased physical safety and health risks—an actual harm to employees' well-being. Because loyal boosterism involves a deliberate, outward-facing behavior (defending

or speaking positively about the employer), it is unlikely to be affected directly by an exploitative decision event without an intervening psychological process. Consistent with psychological contract theory and social exchange theory, an exploitative decision event becomes meaningful only when employees perceive it as a breach of expectations. That perception, in turn, generates feelings of violation, mistrust, or betrayal. For example, in Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson and Wayne (2008, p. 1079), feelings of "violation fully mediated the effects of breach on commitment and trust." Without feelings of violation, employees may not withhold loyal boosterism; rather, they may continue public endorsement either out of inertia, loyalty belief, or fear of repercussions. In sum, the subsequent decision of whether to support or defend the employer to others requires a deeper cognitive evaluation and response than an immediate reaction such as yelling in anger or impulsively quitting. Thus, rather than a negative safety decision having a direct effect on loyal boosterism, we propose that feelings of violation will mediate this relationship (Dulac et al., 2008; Raja et al., 2004; Restubog et al., 2013). We propose that

Hypothesis 3. Employees' feelings of violation will mediate the negative relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and employees' loyal boosterism intentions such that higher feelings of violation will strengthen the relationship.

Figure 1 depicts these hypotheses and the hypothesized model.

STUDY 1: METHOD

Study 1: sample and procedures

After obtaining ethics approval from the leading author's university, we employed an online survey to test the hypotheses and proposed model. Qualtrics provided responses from 226 employees over the age of 18 located in the United States. Five participants missed the attention checks and were removed from the sample. The final sample of 221 participants was 50.2% male, with an average age of 54.84. One hundred eighty-seven respondents

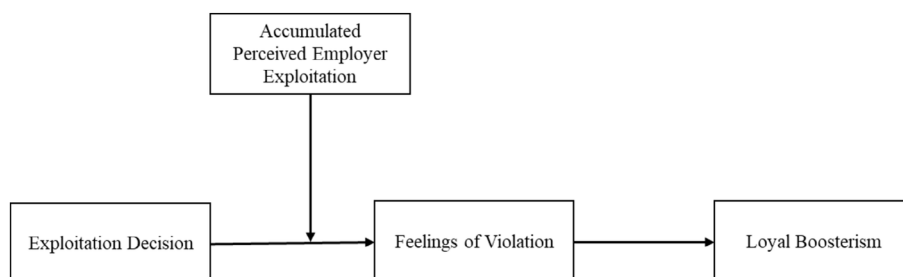


FIGURE 1 Study 1: conceptual model.

(85%) identified as White, 8 (4%) as Black, 19 (9%) as Asian, and 7 (2%) with other races.

Upon reading a brief description of the voluntary survey on Qualtrics, the participants gave their consent to participate in exchange for receiving payment of \$3. Respondents were first asked about their perceptions of their current employer's exploitation of employees. The survey then randomly assigned them to one of three vignettes. Respondents were asked to think of the vignette as something that occurred in their workplace. We then asked them to report their feelings of violation and loyal boosterism toward their current employer as if the situation described in the vignette had just occurred. Demographic information was collected at the end of the questionnaire.

We employed a randomized experiment to prioritize internal validity, to control for extraneous explanatory variables, and to maximize inferences of causality (Aguinis & Vandenberg, 2014). Additionally, vignettes are commonly used to minimize alternative explanations and to study sensitive and potentially harmful research topics such as perceived employer exploitation. The results of studies employing vignettes tend to replicate those of similar field studies. Anderson et al.'s (1999) review of 38 meta-analyses including lab and field effect sizes revealed a correlation of 0.73 between the two. Cohen-Charash and Spector's (2001) meta-analysis of the justice literature found a correlation between the 10 lab and field effect sizes of 0.97, indicating a high degree of generalizability from lab to field.

To counteract the potential for common method bias, we utilized the proximal separation technique (Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012) by introducing measures between the moderator and the mediators. In addition, Harman's single factor score was 37.46%, which is below the cut-off point of 50% and indicative of a low likelihood of common method bias (Djajadikerta et al., 2015).

Study 1: manipulations

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to test our hypothesized model. During the pandemic, employers faced the challenge of maintaining the viability of their business while ensuring the physical and psychological health and safety of their employees (Collings et al., 2021). To protect their employees, customers and local communities, employers adopted various health and safety measures, including remote work, social distancing, and facemask policies. Although intended to slow the spread of the virus, these measures threatened the profitability and even viability of many businesses (Wenzel et al., 2020). When governments started to relax or remove various safety measures, employers faced a critical decision about whether to retain or remove some or all these measures. Thus, *whether* and *when* to remove workplace safety measures after government-mandated COVID-19 requirements had been reduced or removed was a critical decision. Removing safety protections was

an instantiation of a single, extreme, exploitative "shock" event, as the employer was risking employees' physical and psychological health and safety for financial gain. Removing these protections meets Livne-Ofer et al.'s (2019) two main criteria for an employer–employee relationship to be considered exploitative by employees: it is intentional and involves employer gain to the detriment of employee well-being. Reducing employee safety during an active pandemic can also be considered "a very distinguishable event" that is "sufficiently jarring and cannot be ignored" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994, p. 60), and a unique opportunity to inform the theoretical debate on employer exploitation (Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2022).

As data collection took place near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (the first week of May 2020), the vignettes reflected real-life business decisions that were being made at the time rather than being purely hypothetical. Specifically, we developed the vignettes by drawing on similar company announcements identified online or shared within our social networks. The first vignette was the control condition, describing a situation in which the governor mandated the retention of existing measures, and the employer complied. The second vignette presented participants with the hypothetical scenario of the governor removing the state-mandated COVID-19 safety measures, but the participant's employer deciding to retain the measures. Finally, the third vignette reflected a hypothetical situation where the governor removed the state-mandated COVID-19 safety measures, making them optional, and the participant's employer decided to remove them, too. We did not use a vignette in which the governor retained the mandatory COVID-19 safety measures, but the employer removed them, as at the time of the survey this was illegal and seen as unrealistic. The three vignettes are included in the Appendix.

Study 1: manipulation check

To assess whether participants understood the manipulation that occurred in their vignette in terms of whether the employer had control over the decision to retain or remove the COVID-19 safety measures, at the end of the survey respondents were asked to recall the vignette they had read and respond to a set of four questions using a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. These items were adapted from McAuley et al. (1992) and a sample item is, "The employer has full control over its COVID-19 policy decisions." Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.80.

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated statistically significant mean differences on the responses of participants who read the three vignettes ($F[2,218] = 10.152, p < .001$). The corresponding effect size was $\eta^2 = .085$ (calculated as $SS_{\text{between}}/SS_{\text{total}}$), indicating a medium sized effect (Cohen, 1988), which confirms the experimental manipulation produced not only statistically

significant but also substantively meaningful differences across conditions as intended. The average perceived employer control over the implemented measures differed significantly among participants who read the control vignette (vignette 1) where the governor decided to retain the COVID-19 measures ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.18$), those who read vignette 2 where the governor decided to remove the safety measures but the employer decided to retain them ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.29$), and participants who read vignette 3 where both the governor and the employer decided to remove the COVID-19 safety measures ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.37$). Thus, the manipulation of control over the protective measures worked as expected.

Study 1: Measures

Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Accumulated perceived employer exploitation

To assess whether the participants believed that their employer had exploited them prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we used four items of Livne-Ofer et al.'s (2019) perceived exploitative employer–employee relation scale. Specifically, as our interest was in accumulated perceived employer exploitation, we used the four items that clearly indicate continuous exploitation throughout participants' current employment relationship. The items we used are: "As long as I work in my organization, it will keep taking advantage of me," "My organization will never stop using me," "My organization doesn't care if it harms me, as long as it benefits from my work," and "My organization has taken advantage of me more than once." We used a four-item reduced scale drawn from items most clearly reflecting accumulated, continuous exploitation to increase response rates and minimize fatigue effects (Credé et al., 2012). Short forms of established scales have been

shown to retain acceptable reliability and validity when items are carefully selected to represent the full construct domain (Smith et al., 2000). As we discuss later, the full 14-item scale was used in Study 2 to enable a more comprehensive and rigorous test of accumulated perceived employer exploitation as part of the multi-wave design. The four-item version yielded $\alpha = 0.92$, comparable to the full scale's reliability in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.97$), supporting its validity for Study 1's purposes.

Feelings of violation

We used Robinson and Wolfe Morrison's (2000) four-item scale to assess participants' feelings of violation after reading the randomly assigned vignette. A sample item is, "I feel betrayed by my organization." Coefficient alpha reliability was 0.95.

Loyal boosterism

We measured the participants' willingness to continue to publicly support their employer with Moorman and Blakely's (1995) four-item scale after they read their randomly assigned vignette. A sample item is, "I will defend the organization when other employees criticize it." Coefficient alpha reliability was 0.92.

STUDY 1: ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and intercorrelations among the study's variables. We also examined the discriminant validity between accumulated perceived employer exploitation and feelings of violation using the cross-loading criterion. Each item loaded more strongly on its intended construct (accumulated perceived employer exploitation: item loadings ranging between 0.78 and 0.89; feelings of violation: loadings ranging between 0.92 and 0.96) than on the alternative construct (cross-

TABLE 1 Study 1: correlations and descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Low exploitation decision (X1)	0.38	0.49							
2. High exploitation decision (X2)	0.24	0.43	−0.454**						
3. Loyal boosterism	5.03	1.33	0.156*	−0.118	(0.92)				
4. Feelings of violation	2.95	1.86	−0.319**	0.238**	−0.335**	(0.97)			
5. Accumulated perceived employer exploitation	3.13	1.64	−0.082	0.059	−0.368**	−0.37**	(0.92)		
6. Gender	0.50	0.501	−0.071	−0.082	0.001	−0.089	−0.168*	(−)	(−)
7. Age	54.84	12.1	0.103	0.080	0.072	−0.228**	−0.255**	−0.070	

$N = 221$. For low exploitation decision (X1), 1 = company retained COVID-19 protective measures and all else 0; for high exploitation decision (X2), 1 = company removed COVID-19 protective measures. Cronbach's α is reported in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

loadings ≤ 0.23). This supports the distinctiveness of the two constructs. We tested our hypotheses and overall model with a path analytic procedure and bootstrapping that allows for assessing indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2007). We used the SPSS macro PROCESS to test our model (Model 7; Hayes, 2017). Following Hayes and Preacher's (2014) procedures for analyzing multi-categorical independent constructs, two dummy variables were created. X1 refers to the low exploitation employer decision (vignette 2, in which the employer decided to retain the COVID-19 safety measures, was coded 1 and all else was coded 0). X2 refers to the high exploitation employer decision (vignette 3, in which the employer decided to remove the COVID-19 safety measures, was coded 1 and all else was coded 0). Table 2 presents the results.

Hypothesis 1 posited that an employer's decision to remove safety measures following the governor's decision to make them optional (high exploitation, vignette 3) would be positively related to employees' feelings of violation. A positive relationship was found between the high exploitation decision (X2) and feelings of violation ($B = 1.66$, $p = .01$, CI [0.45, 2.87]). In addition, the relationship between the low exploitation decision in vignette 2 (X1) and feelings of violation was negative, but not statistically significant ($B = -0.31$, $p = 0.58$, CI [-1.41, 0.79]). Because only one of the independent variables needs to have statistically significant results for a hypothesis to be supported when a multi-categorical independent variable is used (Hayes & Preacher, 2014; Windscheid et al., 2016), Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 posited that the relationship between an exploitative employer decision event (vignette 3, both remove the safety measures) and feelings of violation would be moderated by employees' accumulated perceived

employer exploitation such that when the relationship was perceived as more exploitative, the relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation would be stronger than if the accumulated relationship were perceived as less exploitative. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the results show a statistically significant interaction between the high exploitation event (X2) and employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation ($B = -0.37$, $p = 0.03$, CI [-0.70, -0.04]). The test of equality of conditional means reveals a statistically significant difference in the feelings of violation means among the three vignettes for the three different levels of perceived employer exploitation (mean -1 SD: $F(2, 215) = 9.27$, $p < 0.01$; mean: $F(2, 215) = 13.71$, $p < 0.01$; mean +1 SD: $F(2, 215) = 6.43$, $p < 0.01$). In all three cases, the high exploitation decision event (vignette 3, both remove the safety measures) had a higher estimated conditional mean for feelings of violation compared to the low exploitation decision event (vignette 2, employer retained the safety measures despite the governor's decision to remove them). Lower accumulated perceived employer exploitation was related to lower feelings of violation regardless of the nature of the safety decision event. Figure 2 illustrates this interaction and shows that both accumulated perceived employer exploitation and the exploitative employer decision event influenced feelings of violation. When the prior employment relationship was perceived as more exploitative, feelings of violation were comparable for the control group (retaining mandatory measures) and the high exploitation event decision (removing optional measures). Only the low exploitation decision event (maintaining optional measures) resulted in reduced feelings of violation, whereas the effects of the exploitative event were stronger when accumulated perceived employer exploitation was higher. When the prior

TABLE 2 Study 1: results for the proposed model.

First stage dependent variable = feelings of violation					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Low exploitation decision (X1)	-0.31	0.56	-0.55	0.58	[-1.41, 0.79]
High exploitation decision (X2)	1.66	0.61	2.70	0.01	[0.45, 2.87]
Accumulated perceived employer exploitation	0.57	0.11	4.96	0.00	[0.34, 0.79]
X1 $\times$ accumulated perceived employer exploitation	-0.19	0.16	-1.19	0.23	[-0.51, 0.13]
X2 $\times$ accumulated perceived employer exploitation	-0.37	0.17	-2.20	0.03	[-0.70, -0.04]
<i>F</i>	14.00**				
<i>R</i> ²	0.25				
Second stage dependent variable = loyal boosterism					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Low exploitation decision (X1)	0.12	0.20	0.62	0.54	[-0.27, 0.52]
High exploitation decision (X2)	-0.07	0.22	-0.31	0.76	[-0.51, 0.37]
Feelings of violation	-0.22	0.05	-4.64	0.00	[-0.33, -0.13]
<i>F</i>	9.40**				
<i>R</i> ²	0.12				

Note: *N* = 221, CI = confidence interval, X1 = low exploitation decision, X2 = high exploitation decision.

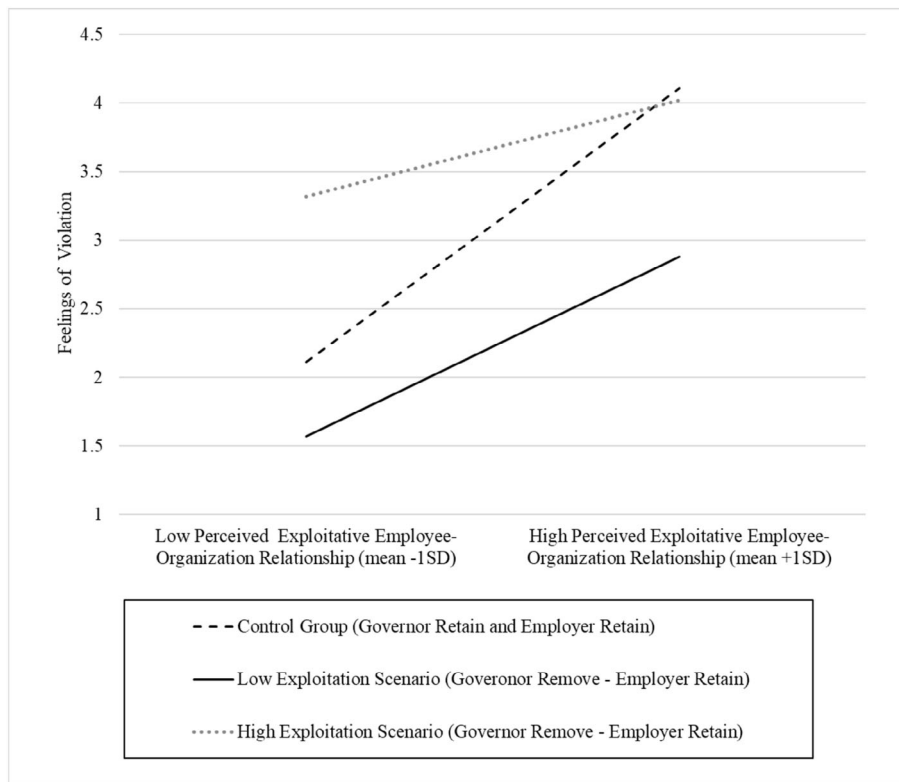


FIGURE 2 Interaction effect of accumulated perceived employer exploitation and experimental conditions on feelings of violation.

employment relationship was perceived as less exploitative, feelings of violation were comparable for the control and low exploitation vignettes, but considerably higher for the high exploitation decision vignette.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that feelings of violation would mediate the relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and employees' loyal boosterism. Supporting Hypothesis 3, the indirect effect via feelings of violation was statistically significant for participants reading the high exploitation decision vignette (the feelings of violation to loyal boosterism path is statistically significant; $B = -0.22$, $p = 0.00$, CI $[-0.32, -0.13]$), supporting full mediation. Figure 3 reports the results for the observed model.

RATIONALE FOR STUDY 2

Although the results of Study 1 are an important first step in gaining a better understanding of the interaction between an exploitative decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation on important employment outcomes, Study 1 had several limitations that we address in Study 2. First, at the time we conducted Study 1, we believed that the most exploitative decision vignette in which employers removed the COVID-19-related safety measures while the government was still mandating them was unrealistic, as this would be illegal. Unexpectedly, some employers openly defied government-mandated safety measures and never implemented them or removed

them prior to the mandates being lifted (e.g., Healy et al., 2020). For example, in Oregon, over 200 employers were fined in the first 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic for violating government-mandated safety measures, and many of these violations were willful. In fact, there were so many cases of employer violations of government-mandated safety measures in the US that The Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had to start penalizing large employers who were not complying with federal measures (Kim, 2022). Therefore, in Study 2, we incorporated a fourth vignette in which the governor keeps the safety measures mandatory, but the employer decides to remove them anyway. This new vignette allowed us to fully disentangle the effects of the level of exploitation of the employer decision event by including the most exploitative situation in our study. It also allowed us to investigate the role of a decision to break the law to exploit employees, a decision under the most control of the employer. The employee's perception of the controllability of the employer's decision can moderate the relationship between employer exploitation and these outcomes. When employees believe that the organization has deliberately taken advantage of them for its own gain, their reactions are likely to be more intense and negative.

Second, to maximize the contribution of this research to the nascent literature on employer exploitation, we also wanted to generalize and test our model in the context of an employee outcome requiring less cognitive processing and having more significant personal consequences. Loyal

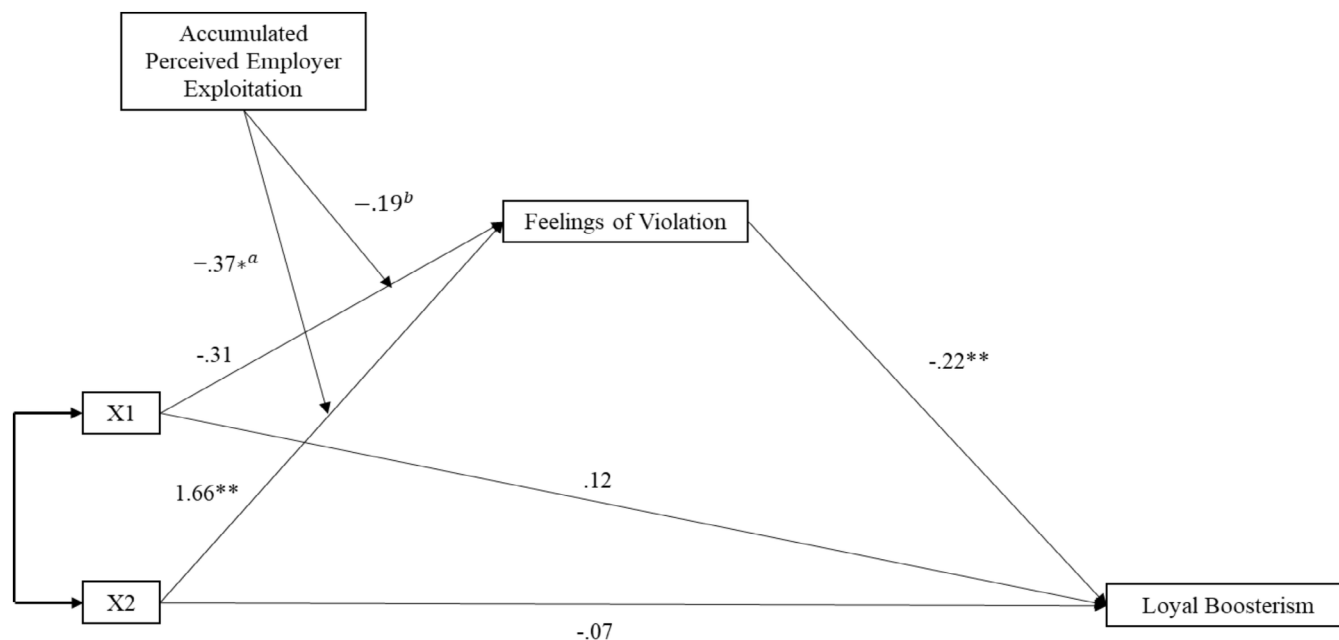


FIGURE 3 Study 1: Observed model. $X1$ = low exploitation scenario. $X2$ = high exploitation scenario. ^a refers to the two-way interaction between accumulated perceived employer exploitation and $X2$. ^b refers to the two-way interaction between accumulated perceived employer exploitation and $X1$. $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

boosterism requires future-oriented reflection on one's willingness to publicly defend or support the employer. It requires greater cognitive processing than does the more proximal response of intending to quit, which also has strong personal consequences. Accordingly, in addition to replicating the analyses of Study 1 with loyal boosterism as the dependent variable, Study 2 extends our model to the outcome of turnover intentions.

Third, the manipulation check we used in Study 1 did not evaluate the extent to which participants perceived the employer's decision to remove the safety measures to be exploitative, so Study 2 addresses this limitation. Fourth, because Study 1 was a single-wave study, to alleviate any potential concerns regarding common source or method variance, Study 2 data collection occurred in two waves. Fifth, because Study 1 was conducted at a relatively early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, the temporal context could have influenced the results. It was important, therefore, to test the generalizability of the results to a time when vaccines and information regarding the virus were more widespread. Specifically, the data collection for Study 2 was conducted approximately 1 year after Study 1 (April–May 2021).

STUDY 2: HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Study 2 replicates the core theoretical model from Study 1 and extends it by adding a fourth vignette representing the most exploitative and employer-controllable condition (removing legally mandated safety measures) and by introducing turnover intentions as an additional outcome.

Hypotheses 4 and 6 replicate Hypotheses 1 and 2 from Study 1 in this expanded context and are not re-derived here. Study 2 adds Hypothesis 5, which addresses the moderating role of employer decision controllability, a dimension not testable with Study 1's three-vignette design.

Drawing on attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Martinko et al., 2011) and Helzer and Rosenzweig's (2020) call for research on whether intentionality moderates harm-exploitation judgments, we propose that the relationship between the exploitative decision event and feelings of violation will be moderated by perceived employer control. When the employer has full decision discretion, particularly when removing measures they are legally required to maintain, the decision signals deliberate, willful exploitation, intensifying feelings of violation beyond what occurs when the decision is partially externally constrained. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 4. (same as Hypothesis 1 in Study 1): An employer's exploitative decision event will be positively related to employees' feelings of violation.

Hypothesis 5. The employer's control over their exploitative decision event will moderate the relationship between this decision event and employees' feelings of violation. This interaction will be such that when the employer has more control over the decision, the positive relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation will be strengthened, but when the

employer has less control over the decision event, the relationship will be weakened.

The unfolding model of turnover

The unfolding model of voluntary turnover suggests that, aside from employees' cognitive evaluations of their job satisfaction that can prompt them to leave (first path), there are three additional paths that can lead to turnover, which involve shocks (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). A "shock" (in this case, an exploitative employer decision event that puts employee safety at risk) can be "a very distinguishable event that jars employees toward deliberate judgments about their jobs and, perhaps, to voluntarily quit their job" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994, p. 60). The first of the three possible shock-initiated turnover paths involves the shock initiating a preexisting plan or script. The second shock-initiated path involves the employee comparing their current job to another opportunity (pull factors) because of the shock. The last path is initiated when a negative workplace-related shock occurs, prompting the employee to experience either strong dissatisfaction that results in impulsively quitting the job on the spot or conducting a job search and then quitting (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Mitchell & Lee, 2001).

Events that can be classified as shocks are particularly important in predicting turnover intentions and actual turnover. Previous research indicates that over 60% of voluntary turnover events can be attributed to shocks (Holtom et al., 2005). Moreover, as Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, and Ahlburg (2005, p. 655) show, the relationship between a shock event and turnover need not be "mediated by work attitudes or deliberative search processes." Thus, an employer's decision to remove protective safety measures may be considered an exploitative event that can be perceived as a shock and influence employees' intentions to quit (see Hobfoll et al., 2018). This effect can occur because of an intense affective reaction, which in turn influences turnover intentions, or by evoking an immediate attitudinal response of greater turnover intentions. Because the effect of the exploitative decision to remove safety measures is not as immediate as being told that a promotion was denied or a supervisor yelling at an employee, we propose that feelings of violation will mediate the relationship between the exploitative decision event and turnover intentions.

In addition to single event shocks, Lee and Mitchell (1994, p. 76) emphasize that "sequences of shocks seem very likely to occur and should be considered." Therefore, it is important to understand the effects of employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation in combination with a shock. It is possible that small events that might not individually trigger feelings of violation or turnover intentions might trigger negative employee reactions when they reoccur. For example, Conroy et al. (2021) showed that reoccurring pay volatility (changes in pay) across weekly pay

checks is related to higher turnover. Similarly, it is possible that when employees perceive higher levels of accumulated employer exploitation perceptions, the positive relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and feelings of violation, which are positively related to turnover intentions, will be stronger. We propose that an exploitative shock event can influence turnover intentions directly and in combination with employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation. In sum, consistent with Study 1, we hypothesize that

Hypothesis 6. (same as Hypothesis 2 in Study 1): Employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation will moderate the relationship between an employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation. This interaction will be such that higher accumulated perceived employer exploitation will strengthen the relationship between an employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation.

Hypothesis 7. Employees' feelings of violation will mediate the positive relationship between an employer's exploitative decision event and their (a) turnover intentions and (b) the negative relationship with loyal boosterism, such that higher feelings of violation will strengthen each relationship.

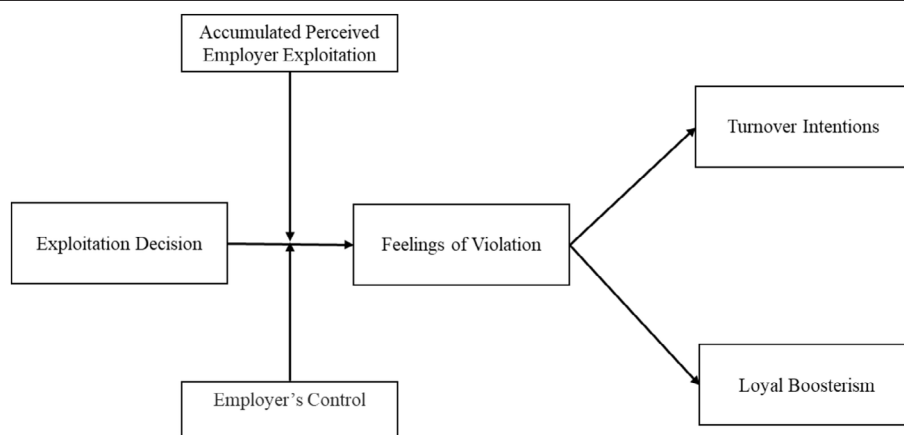
Figure 4 depicts the conceptual model we test in Study 2.

STUDY 2: METHODS

We employed a 2×2 between subjects design, where the employer makes either an *exploitative decision* by removing COVID-19 restrictions and safety measures or a *non-exploitative decision* by retaining them, and where this decision is either *mandatory* and imposed by the Governor (which is the highest employer decision control vignette because the employer would have to break the law in order to not comply), or *optional* (which is the next highest employer decision control).

We used the same three vignettes from Study 1 to ethically manipulate the employer and Governor safety decisions in a realistic manner and introduced a fourth vignette (vignette 4, the highest employer decision control), where keeping safety measures is mandatory by law but the employer decides to remove them anyway. The fourth vignette was considered unrealistic at the time of Study 1 but reflected real-life business decisions being made during a later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic when Study 2 was conducted.

We again obtained ethical approval and followed consent procedures. We pretested the new experimental

FIGURE 4 Study 2: conceptual model.

manipulations (the four vignettes can be found in the Appendix) using a sample of 118 employees recruited via Prolific. The new manipulation checks directly assessed whether participants perceived the vignette to be an exploitative employer decision event. We used six items that we considered the most closely related to the form of exploitation we intended to capture in our vignettes, which were adapted from Livne-Ofer et al. (2019) to fit our manipulations. The six items are the following: (1) This employer's COVID-19 policy decisions exploit its employees. (2) This employer's COVID-19 policy decisions may harm its employees. (3) This employer focuses on profits rather than protecting the safety of its employees. (4) This employer intentionally made COVID-19 policy decisions that put its employees' safety at risk. (5) This employer made COVID-19 policy decisions that unilaterally benefit the employer. (6) This employer does not care if it harms its employees with their COVID-19 policy decisions, as long as it benefits from their work.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed that there were statistically significant differences across the four vignettes as intended ($F[3,336] = 0.204$, $p < .001$). Specifically, the vignette where the employer had the highest control over the exploitative decision (the Governor retained the safety measures but the employer decided to remove them illegally) had the highest average perceived exploitation ($M = 5.79$), followed by the vignette where the employer had the next highest control over the exploitative decision (the Governor removed the mandatory safety measures and the employer removed them as well, $M = 5.01$), while the vignettes where the employer did not exploit employees and retained the protective measures had significantly lower means (when retaining the protective measures was mandated by the Governor, highest control, $M = 2.20$; when this was optional, next highest control, $M = 2.21$).

We then recruited 340 participants (average age: 35, 39% female) for the main study. The participants were living and working in the United States at the time of Study 2 and received a payment of \$4 via Prolific for

their participation. We implemented a 7-day time lag between measuring the independent variables and the moderators and dependent variable to induce temporal separation (Podsakoff et al., 2012) and reduce common source bias. For the analysis, the exploitative decision event was coded as 1 = retain safety measures and 2 = remove safety measures, and employer control was coded as 1 = mandatory and 2 = optional.

Study 2: measures

Exploitation decision

The scenarios where the employer decided to keep protective measures were coded as 1 and those where the employer decided to remove them were coded as 2.

Employers control

The scenarios where the Governor decided to keep protective measures as mandatory (lower employer decision controllability) were coded as 1 and those where the Governor decided to make them optional (higher employer decision controllability) were coded as 2.

For the rest of the participating variables, the participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Accumulated perceived employer exploitation

To assess whether participants believed that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic their employer intentionally exploited them, we used Livne-Ofer et al.'s (2019) 14-item scale. A sample item is, "As long as I work in my organization, it will keep taking advantage of me." Coefficient alpha reliability of the scale was 0.97.

Feelings of violation

As in Study 1, we used Robinson and Wolfe Morrison's (2000) 4-item scale to assess participants' feelings of violation after reading the randomly assigned vignette. A sample item is, "I feel betrayed by my organization." Coefficient alpha reliability was 0.97.

Turnover intentions

Turnover intentions were measured with four items adapted from Landau and Hammer (1986). A sample item is, "If the scenario I just read happened at my current place of work, I would be actively looking for a job outside this employer." Coefficient alpha reliability was 0.92.

Control variables

Perceptions of the necessity of COVID-19 safety measures likely vary and could influence the proposed relationships. Contracting COVID-19 might be an acceptable risk for some individuals while others with pre-existing medical conditions and/or who are afraid of suffering more severe or longer symptoms if infected are likely to favor stricter rules and safety measures. Therefore, we incorporated perceived vulnerability to COVID-19 as a control variable slightly adapting Yuan et al.'s (2020) measure of perceived COVID-19 risk on a 7-point scale ranging from *extremely unlikely* to *extremely likely* and adding a third item. The three items used were "How likely do you believe it is that you would contract COVID-19 in the current outbreak," "How likely do you believe it is that you would suffer severe COVID-19 symptoms if infected?" and "How likely do you believe it is that you would suffer long-term COVID-19 symptoms if infected?" Coefficient alpha reliability was 0.75.

Acknowledging that our studied variables may be affected by the seniority of the employee and the industry in which they work (Schmid et al., 2019; Sharma & Gupta, 2020), we also controlled for job level and industry. For job level, we asked the participants to choose whether they were entry-level, intermediate-level, first-level, middle-level, or senior-level management. We clustered industries into broader categories based on the US Census Bureau North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) to facilitate concise participant classification and data analysis. These three control variables were selected based on their theoretical relevance to the proposed model. Perceived COVID-19 vulnerability was controlled because employees with greater personal health risk were expected to respond more intensely to safety decisions regardless of exploitation perceptions (Hobfoll et al., 2018), potentially confounding the relationship between the exploitative decision event and feelings of violation. Job level was controlled because supervisory and

senior employees may have greater insight into or tolerance of business-driven decisions (Schmid et al., 2019) and thus may perceive exploitation differently across organizational levels. Industry was controlled because safety norms and the prevalence of hazardous work conditions vary substantially by sector (Sharma & Gupta, 2020), which could differentially influence the baseline threshold for perceiving a safety decision as exploitative.

Manipulation check

To check whether our manipulation was successful, we measured perceived employer exploitation as described in the pre-test. Coefficient alpha reliability was 0.97. ANOVA results indicated that the four scenarios were viewed differently, and the results were statistically significant and as intended: $F(3,336) = 204, p < 0.001$. This corresponds to $\eta^2 = 0.65$, a very large effect size (Cohen, 1988), reflecting strong differentiation in perceived exploitation across the four vignette conditions and providing robust validity evidence in support of the intended manipulations. The average means of perceived employer exploitation are (1) Governor makes protective measures mandatory, employer removes them (highest employer control over the decision), $M = 5.79$; (2) Governor makes protective measures optional, employer removes them (next highest employer control over the decision), $M = 5.01$; (3) Governor makes protective measures mandatory, employer retains them (highest employer control over the decision), $M = 2.20$; and (4) Governor makes protective measures optional, employer retains them (next highest employer control over the decision), $M = 2.21$.

STUDY 2: ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Table 3 reports the means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and scale reliabilities for the variables in Study 2. Similar to Study 1, the discriminant validity of accumulated perceived employer exploitation and feelings of violation was examined using the cross-loading criterion. Each item loaded more strongly on its intended construct (accumulated perceived employer exploitation: loadings ranged between 0.62 and 0.88; feelings of violation: loadings ranged between 0.91 and 0.97) than on the alternative construct (cross-loadings ≤ 0.17). This supports the distinctiveness of the two constructs. In addition, accumulated perceived employer exploitation was measured with Survey 1, while feelings of violation were captured in Survey 2 (administered a week after Survey 1) and in response to the vignette that was introduced in the second survey. We tested the proposed model depicted in Figure 4 using a bootstrapping approach (Preacher et al., 2007), and the SPSS macro-PROCESS Model 9 (Hayes, 2017). Table 4 shows that the exploitative

TABLE 3 Study 2: correlations and descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Exploitation decision ^a	1.49	0.50										
2. Employer's control ^b	1.48	0.50	−0.013									
3. Accumulated perceived employer Exploitation	2.55	1.39	−0.038	0.012	(0.97)							
4. Feelings of violation	3.18	1.96	0.55**	−0.16**	0.22**	(0.97)						
5. Turnover intentions	3.73	1.94	−0.10	0.030	0.57**	0.205*	(0.92)					
6. COVID-19 vulnerability	4.03	1.12	−0.002	−0.001	0.30**	0.073	0.153*	(0.75)				
7. Industry	8.13	1.92	0.053	0.038	0.006	0.062	0.042	0.035	(−)			
8. Job level	2.68	1.17	−0.042	−0.054	0.008	−0.027	−0.016	−0.054	0.02	(−)		
9. Gender	1.4	0.526	0.049	−0.084	0.051	0.046	0.041	0.044	0.15*	−0.16*	(−)	
10. Age	35.13	8.85	0.54	0.055	−0.24	0.012	−0.1	0.045	0.026	0.41*	−0.13*	(−)

N = 336. Cronbach's α is reported in parentheses.

^aThe scenarios where the employer decided to keep protective measures were coded as 1 and those where the employer decided to remove them were coded as 2.

^bThe scenarios where the Governor decided to keep protective measures as mandatory (lower employer decision controllability) were coded as 1 and those where the Governor decided to make them optional (higher employer decision controllability) were coded as 2.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 4 Study 2: results for the proposed model.

	Feelings of violation (<i>M</i>)		Turnover intentions (<i>Y</i>)		Loyal boosterism (<i>Y</i>)	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	−3.02*	1.03	0.86	0.51	6.5**	0.46
Exploitation decision (<i>X</i>)	4.10**	0.61	0.72**	0.21	−0.50**	0.19
Feelings of violation (<i>M</i>)			0.46**	0.06	−0.40**	0.05
Accumulated perceived employer exploitation (<i>W1</i>)	0.78**	0.19				
Employer's control (<i>W2</i>)	0.60	0.53				
<i>X</i> × <i>W1</i>	−0.29*	0.12				
<i>X</i> × <i>W2</i>	−0.79*	0.34				
Vulnerability to COVID-19	−0.03	0.07	0.01	0.08	−0.01	0.07
Job level	−0.03	0.07	−0.001	0.01	0.06	0.01
Industry	0.03	0.04	0.001	0.07	−0.05	0.07
	$R^2 = 0.41$		$R^2 = 0.36$		$R^2 = 0.32$	
	$F(8,325) = 27.71$		$F(5,328) = 37$		$F(3,328) = 30.6$	

N = 336, CI = confidence interval, *X1* = low exploitation decision, *X2* = high exploitation decision.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

employer decision event (i.e., remove the protective safety measures) was positively and significantly related to employees' feelings of violation ($\beta = 4.10$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 4. Although employer decision controllability (optional vs. mandatory safety measures) did not directly affect feelings of violation ($\beta = 0.59$, ns), it interacted with the employer's exploitative decision event ($\beta = -0.78$, $p < 0.05$) such that the positive relationship between the exploitative decision event and feelings of violation was stronger when the event was more

under the employer's control and, thus, seen as more exploitative (vignette 4, removing mandatory measures).

As proposed and illustrated in Figure 5, feelings of violation were highest when the employer illegally removed the safety measures contrary to the governor's mandate (the employer's decision control was highest; $M = 4.77$) and perceived employer exploitation was therefore highest, supporting Hypothesis 5. The nature of this interaction was such that the positive relationship

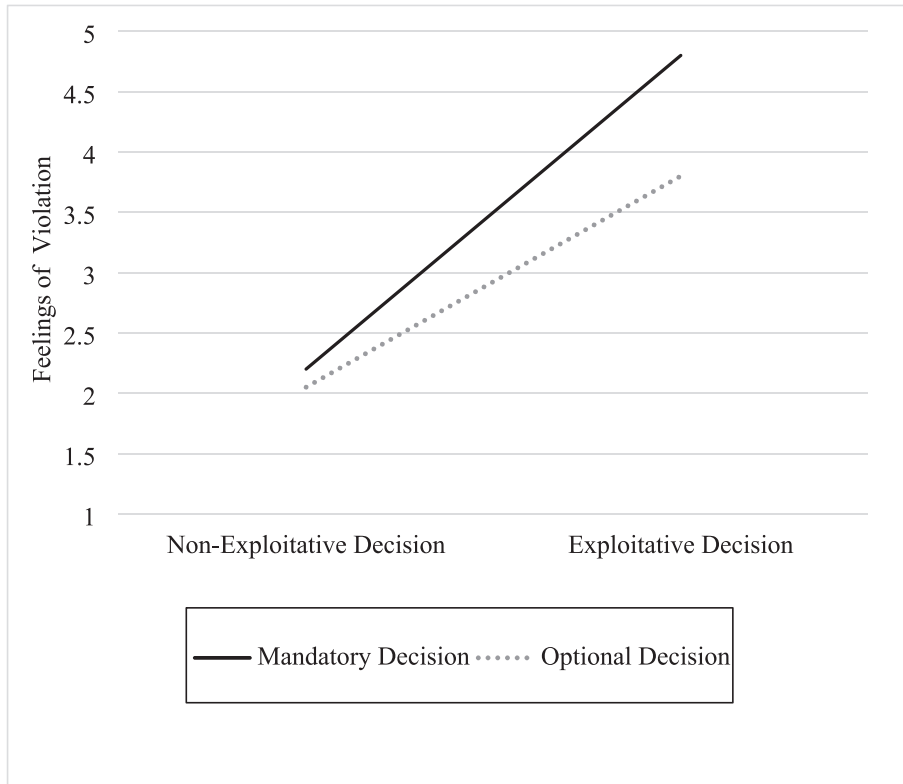


FIGURE 5 Interaction effect of experimental conditions: exploitation and decision controllability.

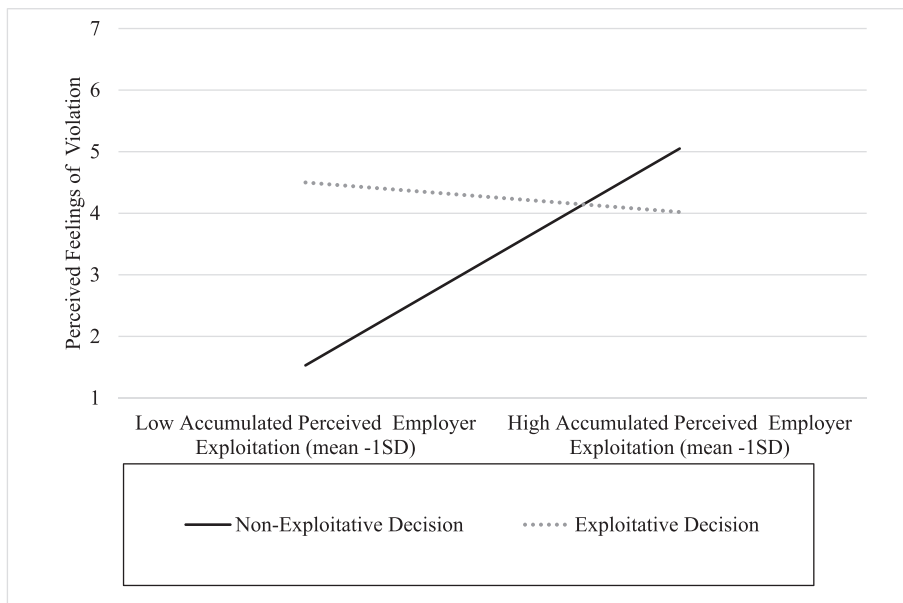


FIGURE 6 Interaction effect of accumulated perceived employer exploitation and exploitive employer decision.

between the employer's decision to remove the protective measures and feelings of violation was stronger when doing so was illegal and the employer's decision was under their highest control and, thus, more exploitative.

The interaction between the employer's exploitative decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.05$), with the highest employee feelings of violation reported when the employer decided to remove protective

measures, and the employment relationship was already perceived as highly exploitative. Hypothesis 6 was, thus, supported, and the interaction is illustrated in Figure 6. The positive relationship between the employer removing the protective measures and feelings of violation was stronger when the existing employer relationship was perceived as more exploitative. An employment relationship perceived as less exploitative was related to reduced feelings of violation regardless of the exploitative nature of

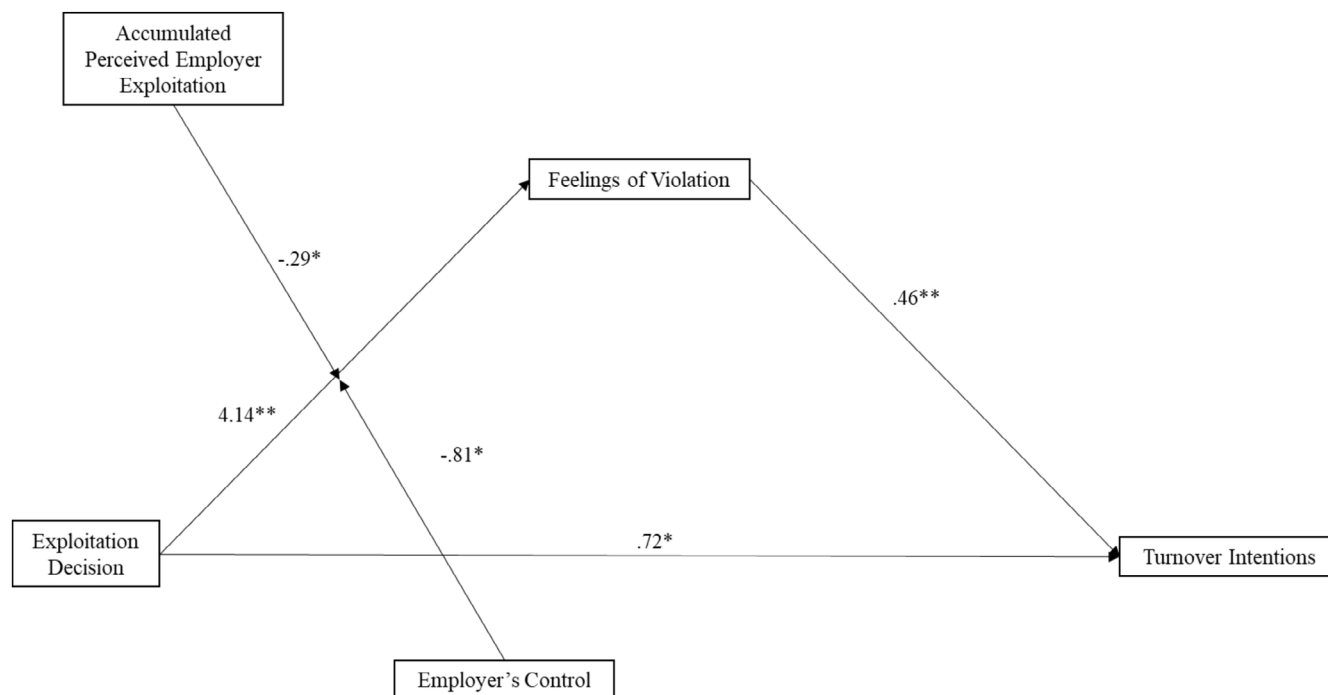


FIGURE 7 Study 2: observed model with turnover intentions as the dependent variable.

the safety decision. Feelings of violation were lowest in the context of an employment relationship perceived as less exploitative and a safety decision event that protects employees, and highest when both the existing relationship and the safety decision event were more exploitative. As shown in Figure 7, the relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and turnover intentions is partially mediated by employees' feelings of violation, partially supporting Hypothesis 7a.

The indices for the moderated mediation did not include zero (conditional indirect effect = -0.35 , $SE = 0.17$, 95% $CI = [-0.71, -0.03]$ and -0.14 , $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [-0.27, -0.02]$ for the governor decision and existing perceptions of their employer's exploitation of employees, respectively), supporting the proposed model shown in Figure 7. Overall, the results suggest that feelings of violation are stronger when an employer makes an exploitative decision that is under their full discretion. Feelings of violation were significantly lower if the existing employment relationship was not perceived as exploitative prior to that particular decision event. Feelings of violation were, in turn, positively related to turnover intentions.

We also tested the Study 2 model using loyal boosterism as the dependent variable to replicate the results of Study 1 and test Hypothesis 7b (see Figure 8). The employer's exploitative decision event was positively and significantly related to employees' feelings of violation ($\beta = 4.11$, $p < 0.001$). The degree of employer control over the decision did not directly affect feelings of violation ($\beta = 0.59$, ns), but it interacted with the employer's decision ($\beta = -0.76$, $p < 0.05$) such that feelings of

violation are stronger when the exploitative decision event is also perceived as being under the employer's control, and strongest when the decision violates government laws or safety policies. The interaction between the employer's decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.05$), with the highest employee feelings of violation reported when the employer made an exploitative decision and when the employment relationship was already perceived to be highly exploitative. Further, the employer's exploitative decision event negatively affected loyal boosterism directly ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.05$) and indirectly via employees' feelings of violation, as the indices for the moderated mediation did not include zero (conditional indirect effect = 0.31 , $SE = 0.15$, 95% $CI = [0.03, 0.63]$ and 0.12 , $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [0.006, 0.229]$ for the optional vs. mandatory nature of the decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation, respectively), confirming Hypothesis 7b. In both cases, controlling for vulnerability to COVID-19, job level, and industry type did not affect the results.

OVERALL DISCUSSION

While extant research has solely focused on the effects of accumulated perceived employer exploitation on employees' reactions, we answer relevant calls (e.g., Livne-Ofer et al., 2019) to address the direct impact of a single exploitative decision event and its interplay with accumulated employer exploitation perceptions. We move beyond

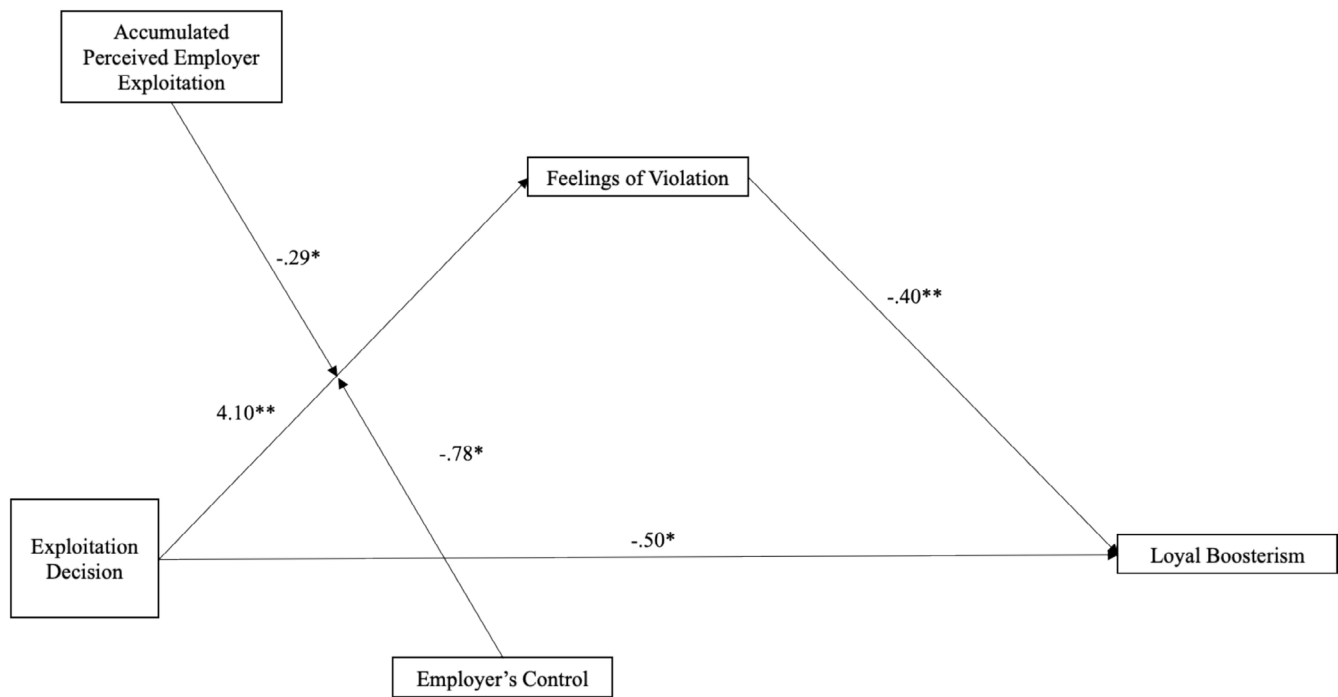


FIGURE 8 Study 2: observed model with loyal boosterism as the dependent variable.

event-based accounts of workplace mistreatment by introducing a dynamic, accumulation-based framework that explains how repeated exchanges give rise to threshold-triggered affective reactions, focusing on two important organizational outcomes: loyal boosterism and turnover intentions. While turnover intention and feelings of violation are indeed established constructs, our choice of outcomes is guided directly by social exchange theory, which suggests that when exchange obligations are violated, employees may respond with withdrawal behaviors (e.g., turnover) or with reciprocal, retributive behaviors (e.g., reducing or withholding loyal boosterism). Loyal boosterism, or the extent to which employees actively engage in promoting a positive image of the organization (Blakely et al., 2003), is an important dimension of organizational citizenship behavior (Moorman & Blakely, 1995). It has become even more critical given the widespread use of the internet and social media, enabling employees to anonymously communicate either negative or positive comments about their employers. Turnover intention is one of the strongest predictors of turnover (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009) and has been found to have a significant impact on organizational performance (Shaw et al., 2005). But our model does not simply revisit existing outcomes. Instead, it integrates them into a new framework that highlights the understudied reputational implications of employer exploitation, while also connecting them to the classic withdrawal literature. Using well-established outcome variables (turnover intentions and loyal boosterism) when introducing a new framework for understanding exploitation in organizations enables us to isolate and

evaluate the contribution of our proposed framework more clearly, by focusing on the distinction between a single exploitation decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation.

To enhance the robustness of our findings, we followed the approach of triangulation, by testing the studied phenomenon through multiple lenses to reduce the risk that observed results are because of a single method or scenario (Jick, 1979). In Study 1, we tested three scenarios that varied in employer's control and intended exploitation, while in Study 2, we added a more extreme, fourth vignette where the employer ignored government mandates. Finding consistent results across different vignettes and distinct manipulations, samples, and time points (i.e., early vs. late in the pandemic) increases our confidence that the reported results are attributable to perceived exploitation and violation, rather than based on contextual grounds.

Study 1 found that the positive relationship between an employer's exploitative decision and feelings of violation was moderated by employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation such that when the existing employment relationship was perceived as more exploitative, the relationship between the employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation was stronger than if the relationship was seen as less exploitative. This effect was replicated in Study 2. Lower accumulated perceived employer exploitation was related to lower feelings of violation regardless of the nature of the decision, and the effects of the decision event were stronger when accumulated perceived employer exploitation was higher.

In Study 2, we added the most exploitative and employer-controllable condition of an employer removing safety measures despite being legally mandated to retain them. Study 2 also investigated the moderating role of employer controllability over the decision event in the relationship between an employer's exploitative decision and employees' feelings of violation. As hypothesized, the more control the employer was perceived to have over an exploitative decision event, the stronger the feelings of violation. In Study 1, employees' feelings of violation mediated the relationship between the employer's decision event and employees' loyal boosterism. In Study 2, the employer's decision negatively affected loyal boosterism both directly and indirectly via employees' feelings of violation. The relationship between the employer's decision event and turnover intentions in Study 2 was partially mediated by employees' feelings of violation.

This research establishes how an employer's single exploitative decision interacts with employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation to impact loyal boosterism and turnover intentions through feelings of violation. These findings suggest that when employers must make a tough business decision involving perceived tradeoffs with employee well-being, which for many employers might be inevitable at times, having a history of not exploiting employees helps to reduce the negative consequences of the decision.

Implications for theory

As Livne-Ofer et al. (2019, p. 1989) conclude, "organizational behavior research has lagged behind other sciences in seeking to understand how employees respond to an exploitative employment relationship," with much of the relevant literature focusing on abusive or exploitative leaders and supervisors (Özen et al., 2016). These two studies contribute to the nascent theory and research on the consequences of exploitative employment relationships and, more generally, of negative employer-employee relationships. First, we establish employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation as a boundary condition for the effects of a workplace safety decision on loyal boosterism and turnover intentions. In doing so, we show that a single shock event in the form of an exploitative decision can reinforce or weaken the effects of existing perceptions of employer exploitation that have built up over the course of an employment relationship. Importantly, accumulated perceived employer exploitation is a cognitive construct reflecting relational attributions about organizational gain. It captures what employees believe about their employer's character, not how they currently feel in response to an event. Feelings of violation, by contrast, are acute affective responses triggered by specific events. The two may co-occur in high-exploitation relationships, but they remain theoretically and empirically distinct, as confirmed by our discriminant validity results in both studies.

This research also makes original contributions to nascent literature on employer exploitation by highlighting the importance of employees' feelings of violation as a mediating variable in the relationship among a negative workplace shock, exploitation perceptions, and employee reactions. Therefore, this research answers important questions posed by Livne-Ofer et al. (2019) regarding whether the role of an exploitative decision event can influence employee attitudes and behaviors, and if accumulated perceptions of the employment relationship as exploitative influence the relationships between these variables. In fact, we show that a single employer decision event amplifies or attenuates feelings of violation such that greater accumulated perceived employer exploitation is associated with stronger feelings of violation following a shock event. These findings are significant in that they extend what is known about the exploitation of employees and reinforce the importance of establishing a strong, positive psychological contract to mitigate the negative effects of single exploitative decision events.

This research also contributes to the small but growing literature on psychological contract breach trajectories. These findings are consistent with previous findings that an increase in employees' perceptions of a psychological contract breach is positively related to undesirable employee outcomes, whereas a decline in perceptions of an employer's breaching of the psychological contract is related to more positive employee outcomes (Zhong et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2017).

Employee reactions to exploitative employer decisions can be understood more broadly through the lens of employee motivation and organizational behavior. Foundational theories of motivation emphasize the importance of perceived fairness and reciprocity in shaping employee effort and commitment. For example, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) argues that employees are most motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, whereas exploitative practices undermine these needs and reduce intrinsic motivation. Similarly, expectancy theory highlights that when employees perceive that their efforts will not lead to valued outcomes, their motivation diminishes. By linking exploitative employer decisions to unmet needs and diminished expectancy, our work situates exploitation as a key contextual factor that undermines employee motivation and shapes both discretionary effort and organizational citizenship behaviors.

Our study also extends broader organizational behavior research. Much of the existing literature focuses on negative employee reactions such as counterproductive work behaviors, withdrawal, or turnover following perceptions of unfairness. Our study builds on this literature by examining loyal boosterism, a positive discretionary behavior directed toward external stakeholders, as an outcome of exploitative decisions. Loyal boosterism is particularly important in the modern organizational landscape, where the widespread use of social media enables rapid and far-reaching

dissemination of positive or negative messages about employers. By highlighting how exploitative decisions undermine motivation, disrupt social exchanges, and trigger psychological contract breaches, our work contributes to ongoing discussions in organizational behavior about how employees regulate their responses to negative treatment and the implications of those responses for organizational reputation.

This research also has significant implications for our understanding of psychological contract breaches, as it highlights the buffering role of employer control over the decision. Our findings also enhance existing understanding of the antecedents of loyal boosterism. Further, previous research has found that trust in the organization (Fan et al., 2024) and perceptions of organizational support can mediate the link between perceived organizational exploitation and negative work outcomes. Typically, feelings of violation are considered an affective reaction of the cognitive evaluation of an event that contradicts the psychological expectations employees have of their employers (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). These studies evidence the limited line of research in this area (e.g., Zhao et al., 2007), arguing that affective response (feelings of violation) may emerge directly after an extreme event. Thus, managing long-term employee relationships and respecting the psychological contract should help mitigate the likelihood of decreased trust in the employer when a future tough decision is made, helping to maintain employee goodwill toward their employer, including loyal boosterism, and reducing turnover intentions.

Further, our findings extend the unfolding model of turnover in a theoretically important way. The unfolding model treats shock events as triggering uniform deliberative or impulsive responses that differ across employees primarily because of individual differences such as image violation or job embeddedness (Holtom et al., 2012; Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Our study demonstrates a different source of variability: the same objective shock produces systematically different feelings of violation and downstream behavioral intentions depending on employees' accumulated relational history with the employer. This relational history, accumulated perceived employer exploitation, functions as a moderating lens through which the shock is interpreted, not simply as background noise. This advances the unfolding model of turnover by integrating social exchange and psychological contract dynamics into its shock-processing framework, establishing that the relational context of an employment relationship is a meaningful boundary condition for shock-initiated turnover pathways.

An important alternative explanation for our moderation finding warrants acknowledgment. One might expect that employees who have endured high levels of accumulated exploitation would become habituated or desensitized, reacting less intensely to a new exploitative event. However, our findings consistently show amplification rather than dampening. This pattern is consistent with a

sensitization account rooted in psychological contract theory. When the psychological contract has already been repeatedly violated, the contract itself becomes fragile or functionally broken (Zhong et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2017). A new exploitative event then carries multiplicative interpretive weight as it confirms, rather than surprises, an established pattern of intentional exploitation, transforming the event from an isolated breach into further evidence of the organization's exploitative character. Social exchange theory supports this interpretation. Employees maintaining a severely unbalanced exchange relationship have fewer relational resources to absorb new violations (Bordia et al., 2017), making each new transgression proportionally more damaging. Future research should directly test the sensitization-versus-habituation boundary, potentially by examining whether the compounding effect diminishes when accumulated exploitation is extreme enough to produce learned helplessness or emotional numbing (Seligman, 1975).

Implications for practice

This research has important implications for practice. These findings establish a positive relationship between an employer's exploitative decision event and employees' feelings of violation. Moreover, the greater the employee's accumulated perceived employer exploitation, the higher their feelings of violation. Conversely, the lower the employee's accumulated perceived employer exploitation, the lower their feelings of violation. This finding highlights the importance of managing and reducing employee perceptions of exploitation to buffer the negative effects of any events or decisions that are or that employees might perceive as potentially exploitative. It also highlights the role of employees' perceptions of discretionary or mandatory employer decisions on feelings of violation, suggesting that if a controversial decision is to be made, it is in the employer's best interest to communicate to employees its necessity and whether it is mandated legally or otherwise. If an employer has no control over a decision that can be perceived to exploit employees, this should be clearly communicated. Making a decision that could be perceived to exploit employees and that violates existing government regulations and laws should be avoided both for legal reasons and for its particularly strong effect on subsequent feelings of violation.

Employers sometimes face ethically difficult decisions involving policies that increase, or appear to increase, employees' safety risks. While these decisions may look financially motivated, that framing is often incomplete. For example, a pandemic-era employer who reduced costly protective measures may have performed so partly to preserve jobs, not merely to cut expenses. Transparent communication is key in such situations. Explaining the rationale behind a safety decision, acknowledging trade-offs, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to employee well-

being can prevent perceptions of exploitation and reduce feelings of psychological contract violation. When an exploitative decision is beyond the employer's control, such as one mandated by new legislation or industry regulation, communicating that lack of control can further buffer employees' negative reactions. Ultimately, cultivating long-term, equitable employment relationships and being open about decision-making constraints may help mitigate the retaliatory attitudes and behaviors that subjectively exploitative events can otherwise provoke.

It should be noted that the buffering effect of communication has meaningful limits. When the tradeoff between business interests and employee well-being is sufficiently severe, such as when employee health, safety, or dignity is acutely at risk, even transparent communication may fail to fully attenuate feelings of violation. In such cases, employees may acknowledge the employer's explanation while still experiencing moral outrage at the decision itself, particularly if accumulated perceived employer exploitation is high. Employers should not assume that explaining a decision is sufficient to neutralize its reputational and relational consequences. Rather, communication is most effective as a buffer when (1) the decision is genuinely beyond the employer's control, (2) the employer has a history of non-exploitative treatment that confers credibility to their explanation, and (3) the decision does not cross employees' minimum thresholds for acceptable treatment of their health, safety, or dignity. Future research should identify at what point the severity of tradeoffs renders communication insufficient as a buffering strategy.

Limitations and future research directions

As is the case with all research, these two studies have several limitations. First, the use of vignettes, although necessary, may have decreased participants' affective reactions despite their being asked to think of the vignette as if it were occurring in their current workplace. Despite the ability to infer causality and the inherent internal validity characterizing studies using vignettes (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), results based on hypothetical scenarios are susceptible to the impact of participants' implicit theories. While the removal or retention of COVID-19 safety measures was a decision many employers were making at the time of the study, increasing the relevance of the fictitious exploitative event to participants, future research should utilize additional methods of ethically manipulating the exploitative nature of employer decisions. We also suggest that future research assess participants' actual behaviors rather than their intentions.

Although both studies were conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the exploitation decision event was a rather extreme decision that could impact employees' health, the interactive effects between accumulated perceived employer exploitation and extreme

exploitative events should be tested in other contexts. For example, in the presence of accumulated perceived employer exploitation, it is possible that even relatively minor employer decisions that affect employee health and safety risks will influence feelings of violation. It is also possible that the presence of accumulated perceived employer exploitation might make smaller violations seem normal and less likely to lead to feelings of violation. If the latter is true, it might be interesting to investigate what other employment consequences might result from the continued exploitative treatment of employees even in the absence of a shock resulting from a particularly impactful decision affecting employees' health and safety.

Because employees' perceptions of their employer's intent to exploit them can result from personality-based factors (e.g., reciprocation wariness) or from direct experience with the employer (Lynch et al., 1999), another promising area for future research concerns the role of additional individual differences in perceptions of the exploitative event and ongoing relationship and reactions to exploitative events. For example, employees higher in external work locus of control might expect their employer to look out for them and feel particularly violated if the employer makes a decision that compromises their health and safety. It is also possible that employees with a higher internal work-related locus of control perceive lower feelings of violation or respond less to negative safety decisions than employees with a lower internal work locus of control because they believe they can independently influence their risks and health outcomes at work. In light of Mitchell and Ambrose's (2007) discussion of the effect of holding a negative reciprocity orientation, or the belief that it is appropriate to repay others' negative behaviors on the willingness to negatively reciprocate, this is another individual difference worth exploring further (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Because people also vary in their individual perceptions, including perceptions of exploitation, future research might also assess whether employees already perceiving their existing employment relationship as exploitative might have a higher threshold for "shock" events. In the case of decisions influencing health and safety, factors such as pre-existing health conditions might also influence the threshold for employees' perceiving a shock. Future research should explore what affects the degree to which a shock event is experienced as shocking to different people under different circumstances to better understand perceived employer exploitation. In addition, there are likely industry and job influences over the controllability of at least some employer decisions that could be considered exploitative. For example, because of increased government safety regulations protecting workers, better understanding of the role of the employer's perceived control over a decision that employees might perceive as exploitative is also important.

Echoing Livne-Ofer et al.'s (2019) call to better understand whether extreme events or accumulated perceived employer exploitation lead to changes in

employees' attitudes and behaviors, future research might investigate how perceived exploitative employment relationships evolve. Perceptions of greed might play an explanatory role in this process because, as Helzer and Rosenzweig (2020) highlight, organizational decisions or practices that are viewed as pursuing resources can be judged as greedier when they cause harm to others. Another line of inquiry might be to examine the role of motives in decisions that employees interpret as exploitative. Future research should also investigate additional types of situations in which psychological contract breach and perceptions of violation occur.

CONCLUSION

This work corroborates the expectation that exploitative employment relationships can lead to negative employer outcomes while addressing the paucity of research on the impact of a single exploitative employer decision on employment relationships. The two studies presented here extend existing theory and research addressing accumulated perceived employer exploitation and single "shock" events in the form of employer decisions that can be perceived as exploitative. They do so by disentangling the interactive effects of an exploitative decision event and accumulated perceived employer exploitation, establishing how a single exploitative employer decision event, conceptualized as a shock, interacts with employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation to amplify feelings of violation and influence adverse employee reactions. The observed mediating effects of feelings of violation on the relationship among accumulated perceived employer exploitation, exploitative employer decision events, and employee reactions are novel and advance existing research and theory on employer exploitation primarily through the lens of social exchange theory and informed by psychological contract theory, and the unfolding model of turnover. They do so by establishing boundary conditions for the relationship among an affective "shock" event, employees' accumulated perceived employer exploitation, and employee reactions. This research also makes original contributions to the literature on psychological contracts and the nascent literature on employer exploitation by highlighting the importance of employees' feelings of violation and employer control over a decision as mediating variables in the relationship among a negative workplace shock, accumulated perceived employer exploitation, and employee reactions. These findings demonstrate that maintaining an employment relationship that is not perceived as exploitative and, when appropriate, communicating the employer's lack of control over a decision that is or could be perceived as exploitative can serve as buffers to the negative effects of the decision. The findings also establish that managing perceptions of employer control over an exploitative decision can help reduce subsequent feelings of violation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. Some data may not be publicly available because of privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research methods presented in this article received an exemption from formal IRB review by the Office for Research Protections at The Pennsylvania State University on 5/4/20 (Study #00015145).

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How to cite this article: Roumpi, D., Magrizos, S., Phillips, J.M. & Moraes, C. (2026) The compounding effects of accumulated perceived employer exploitation when tough business decisions must be made. *European Management Review*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.70087>

APPENDIX

Study 1 – Vignettes.

Vignette 1 – Control condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they recognize how disruptive the mandated COVID-19 restrictions have been and that they considered removing them. The Governor believes that although these restrictions have been disruptive to business, they are still needed and has decided to leave all the COVID-19 restrictions in place, including whether the business can open, personal distancing, and whether to wear facemasks.

Vignette 2 – Low exploitation decision condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they have removed all formal COVID-19 restrictions and that it is now employers' choice whether and how to manage the risks to their employees and customers. Your employer believes that although these restrictions have been disruptive to business, they are still needed and have decided to leave all the COVID-19 restrictions in place regarding whether the business can open, how much personal distance to maintain, and whether to wear facemasks.

Vignette 3 – High exploitation decision condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they have removed all formal COVID-19 restrictions and that it is now employers' choice whether and how to manage the risks to their employees and customers. Your employer believes that the disruption to business has been too great and has decided to allow employees and customers to use their best judgment in deciding things like whether the business can open, how much personal distance to maintain, and whether to wear facemasks.

Study 2 – Vignettes.

Vignette 1 – High exploitation and optional condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they have removed all formal COVID-19 restrictions and that it is now employers' choice whether and how to manage the risks to their employees and customers. Your

employer believes that the disruption to business has been too great and has decided to let employees and customers use their best judgment in deciding things such as how much personal distance to maintain and whether facemasks are required.

Vignette 2 – Low exploitation and mandatory condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they recognize how disruptive the mandated COVID-19 restrictions have been and that they considered removing them. The Governor believes that although these restrictions have been disruptive to business, they are still needed. Your employer complies with the Governor's announcement and has decided to leave all the COVID-19 restrictions in place regarding things such as how much personal distance to maintain and whether facemasks are required.

Vignette 3 – Low exploitation and optional condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they have removed all formal COVID-19 restrictions and that it is now employers' choice whether and how to manage the risks to their employees and customers. Your employer believes that although these restrictions have been disruptive to business, they are still needed. Your employer has decided to leave all the COVID-19 restrictions in place regarding things such as how much personal distance to maintain and whether facemasks are required.

Vignette 4 – High exploitation and mandatory condition: Imagine that today your state Governor announces that they recognize how disruptive the mandated COVID-19 restrictions have been and that they considered removing them. The Governor believes that although these restrictions have been disruptive to business, they are still needed. Your employer, however, believes that the disruption to business has been too great and has decided to open anyway and let employees and customers use their best judgment in deciding things such as how much personal distance to maintain and whether to wear facemasks.