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# Empirical Study on the Relationship Between Performance Pressure and Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior of Sales Staff -- The Mediating of Professional Identity

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**Abstract:** *Background:* In recent years, an increasing number of corporate unethical incidents have come to light, which has led people from various industries to seriously consider and examine the ethical responsibilities that companies should take. Based on emotional cognitive appraisal theory and self-control resource theory, this study explores the linkage between professional identity, sales staff unethical pro-organizational behavior, and sales staff performance pressure. *Objective:* The purpose of this study is to investigate the mechanisms underlying the influence of sales staff performance pressure mediated by professional identity on sales staff unethical pro-organizational behavior, to assist companies in effectively identifying employee unethical pro-organizational behavior, and suggest targeted strategies to inhibit unethical pro-organizational behavior so as to ensure the long-term and sustainable development of companies. *Methods:* A questionnaire survey on performance pressure, professional identity, and unethical pro-organizational behavior was conducted with sales staff and internship college students. A total of 266 questionnaires were collected, with 219 valid questionnaires. The relationship between the three variables was explored through analysis of variance, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation effect analysis. *Conclusion:* performance pressure positively influences sales staff's unethical pro-organizational behavior and has a significant predictive effect on it; performance pressure can indirectly influence sales staff's unethical pro-organizational behavior by affecting professional identity, and professional identity plays a fully mediating role between these variables.

**Keywords:** Performance Pressure, Professional Identity, Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior, Sales Staff

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, organizational and work ethics issues are frequently occurring, moral and ethical issues are gradually receiving attention from scholars, and employee behavior in the workplace has been widely discussed. With the frequent occurrence of negative incidents such as internal negativity, workplace bullying, and falsification of data, the unethical behavior of employees has led people from all walks of life to seriously consider and examine the ethical responsibilities that companies should assume. Although the starting point of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) of sales staff is pro-organizational, in the long run, this behavior is not

conducive to the development of good relations between the company and its partners, and will have a negative impact on the company's reputation, and is not conducive to the sustainable development of the company. Therefore, it is important to identify and reduce the unethical pro-organizational behavior of employees, find out the causes of the unethical pro-organizational behavior of employees and its influence mechanism, so as to control it.

This study analyzes the performance pressure, professional identity and UPB of sales staff based on the real-life problem of frequent unethical incidents in enterprises, and explores how the performance pressure and professional identity of sales staff affect and how they influence their UPB,

innovatively using professional identity as a mediator to enrich the theoretical research related to UPB. At the same time, the analysis and research suggest targeted strategies for companies to promote effective, healthy and sustainable development in the long term.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypothesis

### 2.1. Sales Staff Performance Pressure and UPB

Performance pressure was initially viewed as an attitudinal system in which individuals were prone to adopt a negative evaluative orientation, believing that current performance was not sufficient to achieve desired goals, leading to a range of negative affective responses [20]. Performance pressure is a "double-edged sword", when performance pressure is reasonable, it will motivate sales staff to participate more actively in corporate marketing activities, so that employees spontaneously generate a strong desire to achieve corporate performance and efforts. On the contrary, if the pressure is so high that salespeople do not expect, it will lead to performance pressure is seen as a pure threat, which will prompt employees to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals [1]. Umphress *et al.* were the first to introduce the concept of pro-organizational unethical behavior, defining it as "behavior that is motivated by the interest of the organization, but that would violate social moral norms or even the law" [18]. This behavior is twofold in connotation: pro-organizational in motive and unethical in substance.

On the one hand, when facing performance pressure, corporate salespeople work hard to create value for the company because they do not want to be criticized and chastised by the organization; on the other hand, because excessive performance pressure makes corporate salespeople often in a state of high mental tension, the decline of thinking, deciding and other abilities lead salespeople to ignore ethics and morality and make unethical decisions more easily. It has been found that performance pressure triggers violations such as employee data test falsification and bid rigging, and these violations are conceptually similar and consistent with UPB [10]. Thus, this study proposes that hypothesis 1: Sales staff performance pressure is positively associated with UPB.

### 2.2. Sales Staff Performance Pressure and Professional Identity

Professional identity is a special form of social identity, and different experts have different views on the question of whether professional identity will change [11]. Some scholars believe that professional identity is a relatively stable state, while others believe that the construct of occupational identity changes in response to social processes, studies and experiences [7, 8, 13]. Most research states that individual behaviors arise differently depending on the type of cognitive evaluation of the individual. De Rooij *et al.* indicated that positive emotions of salespeople can promote innovative

employee behavior, while positive emotions can be influenced by challenging evaluations; negative emotions of sales staff can inhibit innovative employee behavior, while negative emotions can be influenced by threatening evaluations [15]. Rasool argues that occupational stress is the stigma of facing stress in the workplace and that employees can be most productive if they are happy and healthy [14]. According to the theory of emotional cognitive evaluation we can conclude that excessive performance pressure usually cannot be accomplished by salespeople, which leads to threatening evaluation by individuals, and threatening evaluation leads to negative emotional experience by individuals, and when sales staff are in such a state of negative emotional experience for a long time, the professional identity of sales staff will be reduced, which leads to hypothesis 2: Sales staff performance pressure is negatively related to professional identity.

### 2.3. Sales Staff Professional Identity and UPB

McGowen and Hart considered professional identity as a subjective self-concept, specifically the attitudes, values, beliefs, knowledge, and skills closely related to the occupation that are shared by members of the occupational group [12]. One study illustrated from a physiological perspective why salespeople in a state of ego depletion would engage in unethical behavior that is inconsistent with their daily behavior [3]. The study found that when a person is in a state of ego depletion, the activation level of the early left frontal area is affected by ego control depletion, and the higher the level of ego control depletion, the lower the activation level of the early left frontal area will be, which will lead to a decrease in the individual's ability to resist temptation and identify conflict, thus making this type of person irrational in making decisions and ultimately leading to a series of unethical behaviors. Based on the core point of self-control resource theory: the basic self-control resources of different individuals may be different, this study argues that sales staff with higher professional identity have more self-control resources when they perform sales work, that is, sales staff with high professional identity can better control their own behavior and reduce impulsive decisions due to the depletion of self-control resources, thus reducing pro-organizational. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is proposed: Professional identity of sales staff is negatively related to the UPB.

### 2.4. The Mediating Effect of Professional Identity in Sales Staff Performance Pressure and UPB

This research argues that although performance pressure causes UPB in sales staff, such influence mechanisms do not necessarily act directly; performance pressure is generated by the high goals and demands set by corporate management, which represent high demands and high risks, while high demands and risks motivate corporate employees to do whatever they can for their own development [2, 5]. Gurran *et al.* identified professional identity as an intrinsic motivating factor for individual career development, *i.e.*, the higher the

individual's professional identity, the more beneficial it is for his or her career development [6]. When faced with demanding and risky performance pressures from corporate managers, sales staff are more likely to engage in pro-organizational behaviors due to their lack of full confidence in dealing with performance pressures, leading them to do their utmost to contribute their value to their companies and improve organizational effectiveness through

various behaviors [4, 7]. Accordingly, this research concluded that performance pressure indirectly affects sales staff's UPB by influencing their professional identity, and based on this, hypothesis 4 was proposed: Sales staff's professional identity mediates the relationship between performance pressure and UPB.

Combining the above analysis, this study proposes a research model, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Construction of research model.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Research Sample and Data Collection

The research started with a small-scale pre-study among schools, companies, family and friends. 117 questionnaires were collected through questionnaire distribution, and after analysis, the questionnaires were processed accordingly to ensure good reliability and validity. In this research, a total of 266 questionnaires were collected by distributing questionnaires in sales groups of enterprises, 219 of which were valid, with a valid return rate of 82.3%. The respondents were all college students who participated in internships and those who worked in sales in small and medium-sized enterprises. Among the final valid sample, 46.6% were male and 53.4% were female; 27.9% were under 19-28 years old and 10.5% were 49 years old and above; 42.9% were under high school, 47.5% were high school/junior high school, and 9.6% were bachelor and above; 21% were under 100,000 and 0.9% were over 400,000 in annual income.

#### 3.2. Variable Measurements

##### 3.2.1. Measurement of Performance Pressure

This research uses the stress diagnostic scale developed by Ivancevich and Matteson as the main body [9], and then refers to the modifications made to the scale by Qian Tang [17], and on top of that, makes changes and deletions to obtain the performance stress measurement questionnaire in this paper, taking into account the topic of their own research. In this research, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this scale is 0.885.

##### 3.2.2. Measurement of Professional Identity

In this research, we have drawn on the General

Occupational Identity Scale developed by Tyler and McCallum in 1998, and we have also referred to some of the occupational identity scales for a specific occupation (nursing students), and we have studied the differences between the occupational identity scales for a specific occupation and the general scale, and finally developed the occupational identity part of the questionnaire in this paper. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale was 0.903.

##### 3.2.3. Measurement of UPB

The Umphress scale, which has now gained widespread use, was used in this study [18]. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.808.

##### 3.2.4. Control Variable

Individuals' variables such as gender, age, education, and annual income were measured as control variables in the form of fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice through the first part of the questionnaire with basic information.

### 4. Empirical Analysis

#### 4.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The descriptive statistical analysis in this study focused on summarizing the four indicators of kurtosis, skewness, standard deviation, and mean of each variable to gain a preliminary understanding of the basic profile of each variable and its degree of dispersion. As shown in Table 1, the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis of performance pressure, professional identity and UPB are all less than 3 and 10. According to Kline's standard, the data can be considered to be subject to normal distribution, so the data in this study can support subsequent analysis. The mean value of performance pressure is 2.2986, and that of UPB is 2.2317.

It can be seen that the performance pressure and UPB of the research population belong to the medium low level, while the mean value of professional identity is 3.8113, belonging to the medium high level. It can be preliminarily believed

that performance pressure and UPB are positively correlated. And these two are negatively correlated with professional identity, so the hypothesis of this study is preliminarily confirmed to be correct.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistical results of key variables.*

Variable	N	Mean value	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Performance pressure	219	2.2986	0.80260	1.602	2.154
UPB	219	2.2317	0.76454	1.406	1.810
Professional identity	219	3.8113	0.67284	-1.952	3.153

**4.2. Variation Analysis**

This research conducted a difference analysis on control variables such as age, gender, annual income and education background, aiming to explore whether these control variables would have a significant impact on dependent variables, and find out the control variables with a significant

impact, so as to eliminate problems such as inaccurate data analysis results caused by control variables. This study conducted a difference analysis on gender as a control variable, and the results showed that gender had no significant influence on performance pressure, UPB and professional identity (all  $P > 0.05$ ). See Table 2 for details.

*Table 2. Analysis of the difference between groups.*

		Levene's Test For Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.
Performance pressure	Equal variances assumed	0.484	0.487	0.617	217	0.538
UPB	Equal variances assumed	3.033	0.083	-1.039	217	0.300
Professional identity	Equal variances assumed	0.19	0.891	-0.609	217	0.543

In this research, single-factor ANOVA test was used to analyze age, educational background and annual income. The results showed that age and annual income had no significant effects on performance pressure, UPB and professional identity ( $P > 0.05$ ). Educational background significantly

affects the dependent variable of performance pressure ( $P < 0.05$ ), so it is necessary to include educational background as a control variable in the model in subsequent analysis. See Table 3 for details.

*Table 3. Analysis of the difference between groups.*

Variable	Age		Annual revenue		Education	
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Performance pressure	0.894	0.445	1.923	0.108	3.931	0.004
UPB	0.710	0.547	0.858	0.490	0.964	0.428
Professional identity	0.274	0.844	1.902	0.111	0.844	0.499

**4.3. Correlation Analysis**

SPSS26.0 software was used in this research to conduct Pearson correlation analysis on the three variables of performance pressure, professional identity and UPB. The results showed that the Pearson coefficient between performance pressure and UPB was 0.577, between 0 and 1 ( $P < 0.01$ ). It shows that there is a significant positive correlation between performance pressure and UPB. Similarly, the Pearson coefficient values of performance pressure and professional identity, as well as professional identity and UPB were respectively -0.746 and -0.700 ( $P < 0.01$ ), indicating that performance pressure and professional identity, as well as professional identity and UPB were significantly negatively correlated.

**4.4. Regression Analysis**

Correlation analysis can only identify performance pressure, professional identity, and UPB that there is a connection between two of the three, and cannot judge the influence between variables. Therefore, SPSS26.0 software was used for further analysis with multiple linear regression analysis.

**4.4.1. Regression Test of Performance Pressure on UPB of Sales Staff**

Build the model 1, at the same time degree to the control variables and performance pressure among the independent variables into the model to test the main effect of UPB. Table 4 shows that after excluding the influence of educational background, the independent variable of performance

pressure has a significant influence on UPB ( $P < 0.05$ , Durbin-Watson value is 1.954, close to 2). Performance pressure has a significant predictive effect on UPB of sales staff.

**Table 4.** Regression test result of performance pressure on UPB.

Variable	Model 1		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Performance pressure	0.599	10.489	0.000
High school or junior college	-0.006	-0.103	0.918
Bachelor	-0.084	-1.424	-1.400
Masters	0.017	0.302	0.740
PhD and above	-0.116	-2.093	0.039
R <sup>2</sup>	0.352		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.337		
Durbin-Watson	1.954		

**4.4.2. The Regression Test of Performance Pressure on Professional Identity**

Model 2 was built, and the control variable of educational background and the independent variable of performance pressure were included in the model to test its main effect on professional identity. Table 5 shows that after excluding the influence of the control variable of education background, the independent variable of performance pressure has a significant influence on professional identity ( $P < 0.05$ , Durbin-Watson value is 1.934, close to 2), and the independent variable of performance pressure has a very significant effect on the prediction of professional identity. The independent variable performance pressure and the control variable education could explain 55.7% of the fluctuation of the dependent variable professional identity.

**Table 5.** Regression test result of performance pressure on professional identity.

Variable	Model 2		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Performance pressure	-0.770	-16.490	0.000
High school or junior college	0.004	0.092	0.926
Bachelor	0.101	2.091	0.038
Masters	-0.008	-0.183	0.834
PhD and above	0.050	1.097	0.281
R <sup>2</sup>	0.568		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.557		
Durbin-Watson	1.934		

**4.4.3. Regression Test of Professional Identity on UPB**

Model 3 is constructed, and the control variable of educational background and the independent variable of professional identity are included in the model to test the main effect of the control variable on UPB. Table 6 shows that after excluding the influence of the control variable of education background, the independent variable of professional identity has a significant influence on the UPB of sales staff ( $P < 0.05$ , Durbin-Watson value of 2.113, greater

than 2), and the independent variable of professional identity has a very significant effect on the prediction of UPB. The independent variable professional identity and the control variable education can explain 48.5% of the fluctuation of the dependent variable UPB.

**Table 6.** Regression test result of professional identity on UPB.

Variable	Model 3		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Professional identity	-0.698	-14.242	0.000
High school or junior college	-0.005	-0.093	0.926
Bachelor	0.000	0.001	0.999
Masters	0.014	0.287	0.775
PhD and above	-0.079	-1.617	0.107
R <sup>2</sup>	0.497		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.485		
Durbin-Watson	2.113		

**4.5. Mediating Effect Analysis**

This study mainly tested the mediating effect of professional identity according to a set of testing procedures for mediating effect proposed by Wen et al. [19]. The mediating effect test program proposes three equations:

$$Y=cX+e_1 \tag{1}$$

$$M=aX+e_2 \tag{2}$$

$$Y=c'X+bM+e_3 \tag{3}$$

In this study, performance pressure of sales staff was first included into the model as an independent variable, education background as a control variable, and UPB of sales staff as a dependent variable. Linear regression test was conducted. If the test result of coefficient c was significant, the next step was carried out. On the basis of the significance of coefficient c, test whether performance pressure (X) has a significant influence on professional identity (M) (coefficient a), and whether professional identity (M) has a significant influence on UPB (Y) (coefficient b). If both coefficient a and coefficient b are significant, proceed to the next step. On the basis that coefficient a, coefficient b and coefficient c are all significant, the direct influence of performance pressure (X) on UPB (Y) is tested again (coefficient c'). On the basis of considering the influence of educational background,  $F=55.408$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , performance pressure (X) had a significant predictive effect on UPB (Y) of sales staff;  $c=0.595$ ,  $t=10.491$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , performance pressure (X) positively affected UPB (Y), and the coefficient c was significant. After considering the effect of control variables,  $F=137.307$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , performance pressure (X) has a significant predictive effect on professional identity (M);  $a=-0.760$ ,  $t=-16.414$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , performance pressure (X) negatively affects professional identity (M), and coefficient a is significant. After considering the influence of control variables, regression coefficient b ( $t=-8.828$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) was significant, while regression coefficient c' ( $t=1.848$ ,  $P > 0.05$ )

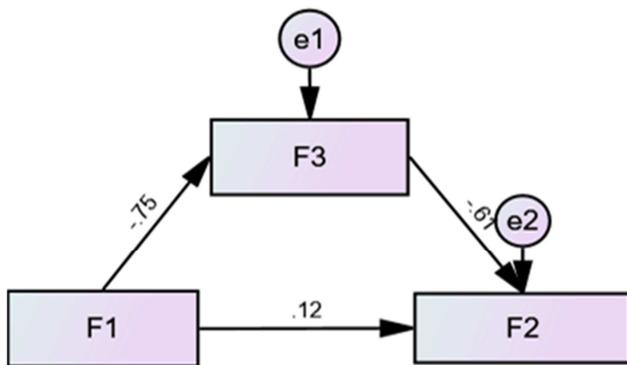
was not. See Table 7 for details.

Table 7. Regression analysis of mediating effect.

Variable	Equation 1		Equation 2		Equation 3	
	Y=UPB		M=professional identity		Y=UPB	
Dependent variable	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Education	-0.083	-1.458	0.064	1.388	-0.044	-0.884
Performance pressure	0.595	10.491***	-0.760	-16.414***	0.137	1.848
Professional identity	(c)		(a)		(c')	
					-0.603	-8.828***
					(b)	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.339		0.560		0.499	
F	55.408***		137.307***		71.364***	

Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001, 2-tailed

The Bootstrap method was also used in this study to verify the significance of the mediating effect again. The results showed that the mediating effect between professional identity, performance pressure and UPB of sales staff was in the 95% confidence interval [0.2708, 0.6096], excluding 0, and the mediating effect size (a\*b) was 0.4361, accounting for 76.954% of the total effect. Therefore, the professional identity of sales staff plays a complete mediating role between the performance pressure and the UPB of sales staff, and the mediating effect has been verified, as shown in Figure 2.



Note: F3: professional identity, F2: UPB, F1: performance pressure

Figure 2. Mediating effect.

## 5. Research Conclusion and Enlightenment

### 5.1. Research Conclusion

This study analyzed the data obtained by means of variation analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, mediating effect analysis and other methods, and found that among the control variables, educational background has a significant impact on employees' performance pressure. Therefore, in the follow-up analysis, this paper included educational background as a control variable into the research model, after eliminating the interference of educational background, the following two conclusions are reached: 1) Performance pressure positively affects the UPB

of sales staff and has a significant predictive effect on them. That is to say, the higher the performance pressure is, the more likely it is that sales staff will have UPB. Moreover, judging the level of performance pressure can help us to predict the possibility that sales staff will have UPB. 2) Performance pressure can indirectly affect the UPB of sales staff by influencing their professional identity, and professional identity plays a completely mediating role between the two. We can effectively reduce and control the occurrence of UPB of sales staff by improving their professional identity.

### 5.2. Research Enlightenment

This study mainly discusses how performance pressure indirectly affects employees' UPB by influencing employees' professional identity. Based on the research results, suggestions are proposed from two levels of employees and leaders, hoping to help enterprises control and reduce employees' UPB.

First of all, according to the theory of emotional cognitive evaluation, the generation of stress is the result of individuals comparing the demands of the environment with their own ability. Therefore, employees should pay attention to the improvement of their own ability, and the improvement of their ability will effectively reduce the pressure perception of employees. Besides employees should actively to maintain good relationship with colleagues, leadership, how to communicate with others, will be pressure and annoyed mood through dialogue way to comfort, and communication to seek the help of others, thereby reducing stress. At the same time, employees should have a clear understanding of themselves and do what they can. They should not set too high tasks and goals for themselves and add unnecessary pressure to themselves. Take the initiative to find the value of your work in order to enhance your professional identity. Finally, good relaxation can effectively relieve the pressure of employees, and employees can make personalized changes according to their interests and personal characteristics.

What's more, moderate performance pressure can increase output, but the pressure has a critical value. Once the "critical value" is exceeded, the pressure will be unfavorable to the work of employees, making employees produce

pro-organizational and unethical behaviors in order to meet the goals of the organization [16]. Enterprise leaders not only need to pay attention to whether employees can bring good performance to the enterprise, but also need to pay attention to the physiological health state of employees. Enterprise leaders should lay emphasis on the building of corporate culture, infect employees with corporate culture, let employees have a sense of identity for their work, and improve the sense of belonging to the enterprise to reduce the occurrence of UPB. With the understanding and support of leaders, employees can effectively relieve their performance pressure. Therefore, leaders of enterprises should regularly take the initiative to communicate with subordinates, understand their physical and mental health status and difficulties in work, and help subordinates to solve their difficulties. In addition, when formulating employee indicators and tasks, enterprise leaders should consider comprehensively, evaluate employee performance scientifically, and set performance goals based on this. Leaders can also help employees learn to self-discharge and relax through training. For example, the enterprise can invite some psychological experts or university psychology teachers to give lessons in the enterprise, so that employees can have a good psychological construction, so that employees can self-regulate in the face of bad physical and mental state.

### 5.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

Although this study objectively verified our hypothesis, there were also limitations: due to the impact of the epidemic, offline research could not be conducted during the survey, which might lead to slight deviations in questionnaire results. In addition, a large part of the research subjects come from small cities with low educational background, no high pursuit of life, and a relatively comfortable life. As a result, the average value of performance pressure in this study is at a medium low level. In the future, we can consider to supplement and improve the data of people with high education and high pressure, so as to make the data more complete and representative. The influence of performance pressure on sales staff's UPB is real-time, while the results collected in this study are from a certain point in time, which cannot reflect the influence of performance pressure on sales staff's UPB in real time. Hence, the causal relationship deduced may not be very rigorous. Long-term real-time follow-up can be considered in the future, so that the data obtained will be more real and effective and the conclusions drawn will be more rigorous.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Author Contributions

ZZ designed the study; ZJ, JX, and ZZ performed the experiments; JX, RZ and ZJ analysed the data; ZJ and RZ wrote the paper.

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