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Do Ethical Climate and Trust Restrain Misidentification and Bullying in Organization?

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A B S T R A C T

Main Purpose – This study aims to examine the role of ethical climate and trust in restraining negative workplace behaviors, particularly organizational misidentification and workplace bullying, which remain relatively underexplored in ethical climate research.
Method – This study employed a quantitative approach using survey data collected from 176 employees across various industries in Taiwan. The data were analyzed using reliability testing, confirmatory factor analysis, correlation analysis, hierarchical regression, and path analysis to examine the relationships and mediation effects among the variables.
Main Findings – The results show tha ethical climate has a significant positive effect on trust and a significant negative effect on misidentification and workplace bullying. Employees perceiving a stronger ethical climate exhibit higher trust and lower negative workplace behaviors. Furthermore, the findings provide preliminary support for the mediating role of trust in the relationship between ethical climate and negative workplace behaviors.
Theory and Practical Implications – This study advances the literature by combining ethical climate and trust in a single framework to explain underexplored negative workplace behaviors, such as organizational misidentification and bullying. Organizations can leverage ethical climate to foster trust among employees, thereby reducing negative workplace behaviors and promoting a healthier work environment.
Novelty – This study integrates ethical climate and trust within a single mediation framework to explain the reduction of negative workplace behaviors.

Keywords: bullying, ethical climate, misidentification, organizational behavior, trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Negative workplace behavior has garnered increasing scholarly attention due to its far-reaching consequences for employees and organizational effectiveness, encompassing phenomena such as workplace bullying, deviance, and organizational misidentification, which not only undermine productivity but also erode interpersonal relationships and long-term organizational sustainability (Parboteeah, Weiss, & Hoegl, 2024). Although prior studies have emphasized the promotion of positive organizational behaviors, the persistence of dysfunctional behaviors suggests that fostering positive conditions alone may not suffice to eliminate undesirable outcomes. Recent research highlights the significance of organizational context in shaping employee behavior, with ethical climate emerging as a central construct that guides moral reasoning and behavioral decision-making (Gleason, 2018; Matten & Moon, 2020; Parboteeah, Weiß, & Hoegl, 2024). Empirical evidence indicates that organizations characterized by strong ethical climates tend to foster positive behaviors while reducing misconduct and deviance, yet workplace bullying and organizational disidentification remain persistent challenges, particularly in environments marked by low trust, interpersonal mistreatment, and weak ethical guidance (Hsieh & Wang, 2016; Fein et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2025).

Prior studies report a negative association between ethical climate and workplace deviance, yet emerging evidence suggests that the relationship is more nuanced, involving psychological mechanisms such as trust in supervisors (Decoster et al., 2021; Verma et al., 2025). Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, employees who perceive a strong ethical climate are more likely to develop trust in their supervisors, which subsequently mitigates negative workplace behaviors (Morrison, 2022; Haq et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the mediating role of trust remains insufficiently explored, particularly concerning organizational misidentification and workplace bullying, two critical yet underexamined forms of negative behavior (Hashish et al., 2024; Malola et al., 2025; Vilas-Boas, 2019). Moreover, while ethical climate is recognized as influencing employee behavior, most research focuses on general workplace deviance, with limited attention to specific behaviors shaped by trust-related mechanisms within Asian organizational contexts (Decoster et al., 2021; Haq et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2025).

Addressing these gaps, this study proposes a conceptual framework integrating ethical climate, trust in supervisors, and negative workplace behaviors, specifically organizational misidentification and workplace bullying. Ethical climate, as employees' shared perception of appropriate ethical conduct, provides a normative structure influencing decision-making processes and behavioral outcomes. Empirical studies demonstrate that strong ethical climates establish clear behavioral standards that discourage misconduct, reduce interpersonal mistreatment, and attenuate bullying (Hsieh & Wang, 2016; Abbas et al., 2024; Fein et al., 2023; Vilas-Boas, 2019). Trust in supervisors represents a critical psychological

mechanism within this framework, reflecting employees' willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of leadership intentions (Goncalves et al., 2024; Grošelj et al., 2020). Perceptions of ethical organizational environments enhance trust in leaders, which in turn encourages positive reciprocation and reduces harmful behaviors (Haq et al., 2022; Decoster et al., 2021).

The theoretical grounding of this study draws on Social Exchange Theory and Social Identity Theory, offering a comprehensive lens to understand how organizational context and psychological mechanisms jointly shape employee behavior. Organizational misidentification arises when employees perceive a misalignment between personal and organizational values, leading to oppositional attitudes and distancing behaviors, which ethical climates can mitigate by reinforcing alignment and shared norms (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Chen & Li, 2013; Teresi et al., 2019; Pagliaro et al., 2018). Workplace bullying, characterized by repeated mistreatment often underpinned by power imbalances, is similarly influenced by organizational ethical conditions, with fairness and mutual respect reducing the likelihood of such behaviors (Vilas-Boas, 2019; Fein et al., 2023; Haq et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2023). Accordingly, trust functions as a mediating mechanism linking ethical climate to these negative behaviors, shaping employee responses to organizational treatment and reinforcing positive behavioral reciprocation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Chen & Li, 2013; Haq et al., 2022; Decoster et al., 2021; Verma et al., 2025).

Building on these theoretical and empirical insights, this study aims to examine the role of ethical climate in reducing negative workplace behaviors by incorporating trust in supervisors as a mediating variable. The specific objectives are to analyze the effect of ethical climate on trust, examine its direct effects on organizational misidentification and workplace bullying, and test the mediating role of trust in these relationships. By integrating direct and mediated pathways, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how ethical climate shapes employee behavior, contributing to both theory and practical implications for fostering healthier, more productive work environments.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research design, collecting survey data from 176 employees across multiple industries in Taiwan. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was carefully reviewed and refined to ensure clarity and minimize potential common method bias (Munir et al., 2024). The sample comprised employees from diverse organizational backgrounds, with 55% holding staff-level positions. Participants reported an average tenure of 11.09 years (SD = 8.71) and varying lengths of working relationships with their supervisors. The sample included 56% male and 44% female respondents, with 65% under the age of 40 and holding at least a college-level education. Participation was voluntary, and respondents' anonymity was maintained, with no personally identifiable information collected.

A structured survey instrument measured all study variables. Ethical climate, the independent variable, was captured using eight items adapted from Podsakoff et al. (2023), reflecting compliance- and care-oriented dimensions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.931). Trust in supervisors, the mediating variable, was measured using items adapted from Liu et al. (2020) and Podsakoff et al. (2023) demonstrating strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.932). Organizational misidentification, a dependent variable, was measured using five items reflecting psychological distancing from the organization. Workplace bullying, another dependent variable, was measured with seven items adapted from the Negative Acts Questionnaire and related studies on interpersonal mistreatment. To ensure conceptual equivalence, the questionnaire was translated into Chinese using a back-translation procedure.

Data analysis followed a sequential approach. Internal consistency was first assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Construct validity was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), assessing convergent and discriminant validity following Cheung et al. (2023). Correlation analysis provided preliminary evidence of relationships among variables. Hierarchical regression analysis tested both direct and mediating effects, with trust serving as the mediator following the procedure of Saleem (2019). Path analysis was applied to examine the overall structural relationships within the research model, with model fit assessed using GFI, CFI, NNFI, and RMR indices.

The analyses confirmed the reliability and validity of all variables, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.9. Convergent validity was supported, with AVE values above 0.5 and component reliability (CR) above 0.6. Discriminant validity was verified by comparing squared correlations with AVE values, confirming the independence of constructs. Hierarchical regression and path analyses further confirmed that trust mediates the relationship between ethical climate and both organizational misidentification and workplace bullying. These results demonstrate that the measurement and analytical approach is rigorous and suitable for testing the relationships among the study variables, providing a robust foundation for the research findings.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The reliability analysis confirmed that all constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.909 to 0.964, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold and indicating that the measurement instruments were reliable. Participants reported moderate to high levels of ethical climate (mean = 3.76, SD = 0.75) and trust in supervisors (mean = 3.63, SD = 0.88), while perceptions of organizational misidentification and workplace bullying were relatively low (means = 2.07 and 1.93, SDs = 0.89 and 0.95, respectively). All variables were significantly correlated with one another at the 0.01 level, with ethical climate positively associated with trust and negatively associated with

both organizational misidentification and workplace bullying. These results support the initial reliability and correlation structure of the measurement model and confirm the appropriateness of the instruments for subsequent analyses.

Construct validity was further examined through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The evaluation of model fit relied on multiple indices, including the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), non-normed fit index (NNFI), and root mean residual (RMR). The results, summarized in Table 1, the CFA results indicate that most measurement indicators demonstrate acceptable construct validity, although several fit indices for the ethical climate construct fall slightly below commonly recommended thresholds, particularly GFI and NNFI. Nevertheless, the construct was retained because the factor loadings, AVE, and composite reliability values remained within acceptable ranges, supporting the overall adequacy of the measurement model for exploratory behavioral research. These findings suggest that the measurement model adequately represents the observed data.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Of Research Variables

No	Variables	χ^2	df	GFI	NNFI	CFI	RMR	Variance Accumulation	Factor Loading	AVE	CR
1	Ethical climate	265.37	20	0.73	0.87	0.91	0.088	74.72%	All > 0.64	0.75	0.96
2	Trust	29.22	5	0.94	0.95	0.97	0.031	83.87%	All > 0.77	0.84	0.96
3	Identity	3.27	5	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.013	82.41%	All > 0.76	0.82	0.96
4	Work bullying	99.96	14	0.86	0.94	0.96	0.026	86.63%	All > 0.79	0.87	0.98

Source: Authors' Calculation Based on Survey Data

Convergent validity was evaluated through the magnitude of factor loadings, AVE, and composite reliability. All factor loadings exceeded 0.50, indicating sufficient item reliability. In addition, AVE values ranged from 0.75 to 0.87, surpassing the minimum criterion of 0.50, while CR values ranged from 0.96 to 0.98, well above the acceptable level. Together, these results confirm that the constructs exhibit satisfactory convergent validity. Discriminant validity was further assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion by comparing the square root of AVE values with inter-construct correlations. The results indicate that the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs, supporting adequate discriminant validity.

In addition, criterion-related validity was examined by analyzing the relationships between the independent variable, the mediating variable, and the dependent variables. Ethical climate and trust are significantly associated with both misidentification and workplace bullying at the 0.01 significance level, providing further support for the validity of the proposed model. In addition to construct-level CFA assessment, the overall measurement model was evaluated to examine the simultaneous relationships among all constructs. The overall model demonstrated an acceptable level of fit, supporting the distinctiveness and adequacy of the proposed latent variables.

Correlation analysis indicated that ethical climate was positively associated with trust ($r = 0.497$, $p < 0.01$), while exhibiting negative associations with organizational misidentification ($r = –0.409$, $p < 0.01$) and workplace bullying ($r = –0.384$, $p < 0.01$). These results provide preliminary evidence of the expected relationships among the variables. Hierarchical regression analyses further examined these relationships with the results reported in Table 2. Including trust in the regression models led to a substantial increase in explained variance, accounting for an additional 8.4% of variance in organizational misidentification ($p < 0.001$) and 3.3% in workplace bullying ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that trust functions as an important mediating mechanism, linking ethical climate to reduced negative workplace behaviors.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: Misidentification			Dependent Variable: Work bullying		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Position	-.180*	-.118	-.074	-.226*	-.173	-.141
Gender	.168*	.144*	.120	.214	.192*	.175
Education	-.104	-.177*	-.163*	.050	-.013	-.002
Ethical climate		-.434***	-.271**		-.377***	-.257*
Trust			-.321***			-.237*
ΔR^2	.070*	.179***	.073***	.092*	.135***	.039*
R^2	.070*	.249***	.299***	.092*	.228***	.243*
Significant F change	3.817	36.217	16.160	5.185	26.622	8.116

Coefficients are Beta

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Source: Authors' Calculation Based on Survey Data

The regression coefficients for ethical climate decreased in magnitude after including trust, indicating a potential mediating effect. This pattern is consistent with established mediation criteria, suggesting that trust serves as an intermediary mechanism linking ethical climate to both organizational misidentification and workplace bullying. Although the analysis relied primarily on hierarchical regression and path analysis without bootstrapped indirect effect estimation, the findings provide preliminary support for the mediating role of trust, as evidenced by the reduction of the direct effect coefficients after its inclusion.

Path analysis further tested the overall structural model. The standardized regression weights for all variables were significant at $p < 0.01$. The model demonstrated an acceptable level of fit, with $\chi^2 = 15.856$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$; GFI = 0.958; NFI = 0.915; CFI = 0.923; and RMR = 0.064. These results indicate that the proposed structural model adequately represents the relationships among ethical climate, trust, organizational misidentification, and workplace bullying, providing robust support for the measurement and structural framework.

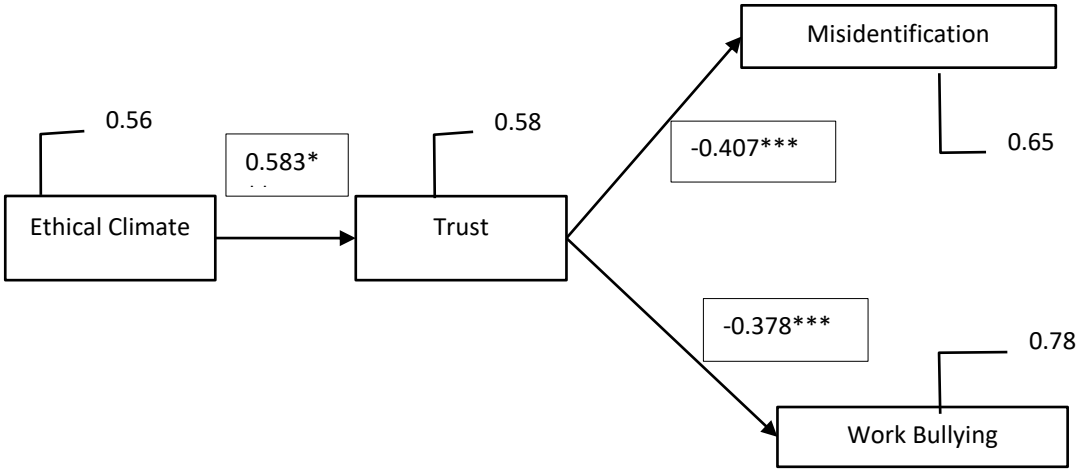


Figure 1. Research Model Test

The findings of this study provide important insights into the mechanisms through which ethical climate shapes negative workplace behaviors. The results indicate that a stronger ethical climate is associated with lower levels of organizational misidentification and workplace bullying, highlighting the role of ethical context as a regulatory force in organizations. This evidence aligns with prior studies suggesting that ethical climate establishes shared norms and expectations that discourage deviant behavior and promote appropriate conduct (Aloustani et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2024; Fein et al., 2023). The findings also imply that workplace bullying should not be viewed solely as an individual behavioral problem, but rather as an organizationally embedded phenomenon shaped by ethical norms and relational dynamics.

Beyond confirming these relationships, the present study offers further explanation of the underlying processes. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, ethical climate can be interpreted as an organizational signal reflecting fairness, integrity, and support (Arrieta et al., 2019). Such perceptions influence how employees evaluate their relationship with both the organization and its leaders. When ethical standards are consistently upheld, employees are more likely to reciprocate through constructive behaviors, thereby reducing the likelihood of engaging in harmful actions such as misidentification and workplace bullying. This interpretation is consistent with prior findings emphasizing the role of organizational context in shaping employee reciprocity and behavioral outcomes (Decoster et al., 2021).

The results also underscore the importance of trust in supervisors as a critical behavioral mechanism. Trust is found to be negatively associated with both misidentification and workplace bullying, indicating that employees who perceive their leaders as trustworthy are less likely to engage in negative workplace behaviors. This finding supports earlier research demonstrating that trust functions as a key relational mechanism that mitigates workplace mistreatment and deviance (Haq et al., 2022; Decoster et al., 2021). In line with existing literature, trust reduces uncertainty in interpersonal relationships and fosters cooperative and

prosocial behavior (Bavel et al., 2020). These findings suggest that ethical organizational environments may not directly suppress harmful behaviors unless employees also perceive relational security and trust in leadership. This highlights the possibility that ethical policies alone are insufficient when interpersonal trust within the organization remains weak.

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the mediating role of trust in the relationship between ethical climate and negative workplace behaviors. The findings suggest that ethical climate influences misidentification and workplace bullying both directly and indirectly through trust. This result provides empirical support for arguments that the effects of organizational context are often transmitted through psychological mechanisms rather than operating in isolation (Verma et al., 2025). The contribution also extends prior work on leadership effectiveness that highlights the importance of mediating mechanisms such as follower self-concept (Dwivedi et al., 2020). In this regard, ethical climate creates the conditions under which trust can develop, and it is this trust that ultimately shapes employee behavioral responses.

The relationship between ethical climate and organizational misidentification can also be interpreted through Social Identity Theory. A strong ethical climate reinforces alignment between individual and organizational values, thereby strengthening employees' identification with the organization (Teresi et al., 2019; Pagliaro et al., 2018). Conversely, when ethical standards are perceived as weak or inconsistent, employees may experience value incongruence, leading to psychological distancing and the emergence of misidentification (Demasi & Voegtlin, 2022). These findings suggest that ethical climate not only influences behavior but also shapes how employees define their relationship with the organization.

With respect to workplace bullying, the findings highlight the importance of ethical norms in regulating interpersonal interactions. Organizational environments characterized by strong ethical standards tend to discourage harmful behaviors and promote respectful engagement, thereby reducing the likelihood of bullying (Mostafa, Farley, & Zaharie, 2020; Haq et al., 2022). This supports the view that workplace bullying is not merely an individual-level phenomenon but is strongly influenced by organizational conditions and ethical context.

Overall, this study contributes to the broader discussion on the relationship between positive organizational constructs and negative behavioral outcomes. While ethical climate represents a positive organizational attribute, its impact on reducing negative behaviors is not automatic. Instead, the relationship is mediated by psychological mechanisms, particularly trust, which plays a central role in translating ethical context into behavioral outcomes. This finding extends previous research by offering a more nuanced understanding of how positive and negative organizational dynamics interact.

Finally, the use of a Taiwanese sample provides additional insight into the role of cultural context. Although the Taiwanese context may provide useful insight into the role of collectivist cultural values in workplace relationships, the present study did not conduct a

direct cross-cultural comparison. Therefore, interpretations related to cultural influence should be viewed cautiously and may serve as directions for future comparative research. In collectivist cultures, where interpersonal relationships and shared values are emphasized, ethical climate and trust may exert a stronger influence on employee behavior (Fang & Yu, 2023; Wang et al., 2025). This suggests that cultural factors may shape the effectiveness of ethical climate in reducing negative behaviors, providing a valuable direction for future research.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that ethical climate plays a significant role in reducing negative workplace behaviors, with trust in supervisors functioning as a critical mediating mechanism. The findings indicate that employees who perceive a stronger ethical climate report lower levels of organizational misidentification, reflecting greater alignment between personal and organizational values, and lower levels of workplace bullying, highlighting the importance of ethical norms in guiding interpersonal interactions. These results extend existing literature by showing that positive organizational conditions alone are insufficient to suppress harmful behaviors, and that relational mechanisms such as trust are necessary to translate ethical context into constructive employee behavior. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizations should not rely solely on formal ethical policies but also prioritize the development of trust-based relationships between leaders and employees, which can help create healthier work environments, enhance organizational cohesion, and reduce interpersonal conflicts. Policy makers and organizational leaders may consider implementing clear anti-bullying regulations, promoting ethical leadership, and fostering trust-based supervisory practices to strengthen ethical climates within firms and institutions. Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported survey data, and focus on employees in Taiwan, which may constrain the generalizability of the results; future research should employ longitudinal or multi-source designs, expand cross-cultural samples, and apply advanced mediation techniques such as bootstrapping or structural equation modeling to further validate the relationships identified in this study.

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