

An Integrative Model of the Association Between Leadership Styles and Employee's Self-Handicapping Behavior

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Self-handicapping is a strategy that provides individuals with justifications for the externalization of failure. Although rarely investigated, external factors are assumed to be influential in the emergence of self-handicapping. Utilizing trait activation theory, this study aims to understand the association of leadership styles with employees' self-handicapping and how this process is mediated by fear of failure and moderated by socially prescribed perfectionism. Data were collected from 210 individuals aged 20–67. The results indicated that self-handicapping behavior was negatively associated with transformational and positively associated with abusive supervision with the significant mediator role of fear of failure. Socially prescribed perfectionism has also appeared to be a significant moderator only in the relationship between transformational leadership and fear of failure.

Keywords: self-handicapping, trait activation theory, transformational leadership, abusive supervision, fear of failure

Self-handicapping is a phenomenon where an individual engages in success sabotaging behaviors—such as inadequate preparation (Pyszczyński & Greenberg, 1983), alcohol consumption before a critical task (Berglas & Jones, 1978), reduced effort (Thompson & Richardson, 2001)—with the underlying motive to create excuses for potential failure and shield self-esteem

This article was published Online First March 2, 2023.

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(Berglas & Jones, 1978). It helps individuals preserve their self-concept by creating self-made excuses, which would allow making external or situational attributions in the case of failure. Consistent with the description of this phenomenon, previous research has asserted various personality characteristics influential in the emergence and maintenance of self-handicapping. Among many, conscientiousness, neuroticism (Ross et al., 2002), low and shaky self-esteem (Higgins, 1990; Lupien et al., 2010; Tice & Baumeister, 1990), low self-control (Uysal & Knee, 2012), and maladaptive perfectionism (Arazzini Stewart & De George-Walker, 2014; Frost et al., 1990) have been consistently shown to be notable characteristics associated with self-handicapping (see Török & Szabó, 2018, for a comprehensive review). However, merely focusing on the internal factors to predict self-handicapping can fall short of explaining the emergence of those behaviors in the work context. Although rarely investigated, dynamics of the social environment are influential in the occurrence of self-handicapping (Self, 1990; Török & Szabó, 2018), with the evaluative context being among the most crucial ones (Higgins, 1990). Considering the performance-based and evaluative nature of the modern work environment, the connection of self-esteem to career success, and the effect of social interactions with colleagues and leaders on employees' behaviors, self-handicapping is also expected to be prevalent in the organizational context.

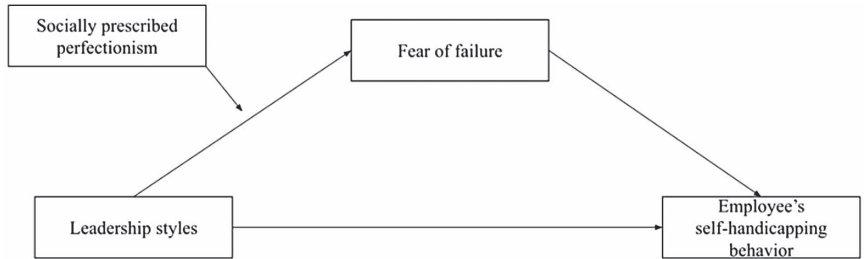
Drawing on trait activation theory, behaviors displayed by the leader can trigger certain behaviors of employees by activating relevant traits (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Although the self-handicapping literature tends to approach this phenomenon as a dispositional characteristic, from an interactionist point of view, we assert that this trait can be activated (or deactivated) when trait-related situational cues, sent by leaders, are proximal. We also suggest that, when traits are activated, they are displayed through behaviors. As such, in the present study, we particularly focus on the relationship between one of the most impactful factors in organizational settings; leadership styles in terms of how they activate individuals' self-handicapping traits, which are translated into behavior.

Since leaders vary in the way they pursue work-related goals (Bass, 1998) and lead their teams, they can trigger affective reactions and activate relevant traits in their subordinates. Hence, their idiosyncratic way of leading can determine employees' actions (Tett et al., 2021; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) both through emotions and trait activation. While some leaders exert abusive supervision to ensure that their subordinates meet their high expectations (Tepper, 2007), others execute an encouraging, inspiring, empowering management style, thinking that this is the best way to reach their organizational and personal goals (Bass, 1998). Those exertions inevitably send certain cues and trigger work-related emotions, yet the literature is inchoate in terms of how leaders' approaches to their subordinates elicit such emotions. Considering that emotions are essential determinants of behavior in general (Lazarus, 1991) and fearing

failure is an emotion pertinent to the performance domain, it is expected to influence employees' performance-related behaviors. Moreover, employees' perceptions regarding the external expectations for flawlessness can alter the effect of leaders in creating those emotions. Thus, we aim to investigate the association between abusive and transformational leadership and employees' self-handicapping behavior by focusing on the mediator role of fear of failure and the moderating role of socially prescribed perfectionism which comprises the beliefs that others expect one to be flawless (Stoeber et al., 2013; see Figure 1).

The findings of this research aim to contribute to the literature and practice in several ways. First, considering the antecedents and dynamics of self-handicapping such as evaluative context (Higgins et al., 1990), shaky self-concept (Berglas, 1985), and a threat to identity (Berglas, 1985), this phenomenon is expected to be highly prevalent in the organizational context with several critical work-related outcomes yet under-researched. As such, the present study will extend the literature by revealing other crucial antecedents of this self-sabotaging behavior in an important performance domain. By utilizing the outputs of this research, practitioners can also intervene in the necessary actors to enhance employee experience to further increase their performance without sacrificing their well-being. Secondly, given that interpersonal expectations generally characterize the work environment, surprisingly, the literature on the role of maladaptive perfectionism in the organizational context is inchoate. Although several empirical studies have been published to understand the role of this subtype of perfectionism in the work context (e.g., Childs & Stoeber, 2012; Stoeber et al., 2013), this limitedness prevents us from making confident inferences about its role in employee performance. Hence, the results of this study will specifically shed light on the interactive role of socially prescribed perfectionism within a work environment in eliciting counterproductive work behavior. From a practitioners' perspective, understanding employees' tendencies and its products when coupled with a leader-member relationship should inform human

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of the Present Study



resources practitioners in their recruitment and rotation processes. Likewise, leaders can greatly benefit from this research by understanding how signals they send can elicit or prevent harmful work behavior and adjust their leadership styles. Moreover, to our knowledge, the research to date generally focused on the relationship between leadership styles and leaders' own fear of failure, and there is no empirical research investigating the role of leaders in evoking fear of failure in subordinates. Besides being extremely surprising, the *unfortunately* leader-focused literature may justify this inchoateness. Therefore, this research aims to shed light on future research on employees' relationships with their leaders. Relatedly, this research intends to reveal an antecedent of a performance-related emotion of the employees in the organizational context by explicitly addressing the role of supervisors. Hence, the findings may provide important insights to practitioners in understanding the relationship between specific types of leaders and subordinates' behavior and create room for adjusting their leader selection practices, increasing leaders' awareness, and leading them to review their people management styles to prevent counterproductive work behaviors.

Trait Activation Theory and Leadership Styles

Trait activation theory posits that certain personality traits are activated and translate into work behaviors when trait-related situational cues are available (Tett & Burnett, 2003). According to this theory, personality characteristics reside within individuals as "latent potential" until any cue triggers and activates that disposition, followed by the demonstration of behaviors (Greenbaum et al., 2017; Tett & Burnett, 2003). When trait-relevant situational cues trigger individuals' dispositional characteristics, increasing the probability of the behavioral expression of that certain trait (Tett et al., 2021). Although the trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) originally associates personality with job performance, we believe that it is also applicable to traits (i.e., self-handicapping) that inherently indicate performance.

There has been an ongoing debate in the literature on whether self-handicapping is a trait, or it is a situation-specific set of behaviors (see Török & Szabó, 2018, for a review). We approach this debate from an interactionist perspective and suggest that in the work environment, self-handicapping is a trait that is not readily available all the time, but rather can be activated through trait-relevant situational cues in the environment. The cues naturally exist in the dyadic relationship between leaders and subordinates are substantial factors in determining employees' emotions and behaviors (Liden et al., 1997). In the organizational context, leaders can act as a triggering factor with their idiosyncratic way of managing employees and reaching goals, thereof can hinder or

reveal their subordinates' disposition by sending trait-relevant signals. Thus, the specific style they display while interacting with the employees may be a critical activator of the subordinate's disposition (Tett et al., 2021) which turn into self-handicapping behaviors. Although researchers have coined several leadership styles such as authoritarian (Lewin et al., 1939), transactional (Bass, 1981), and paternalistic (Aycan, 2006), leader behaviors are mainly categorized as either positive or negative. Hence, the focus of the present study is on abusive and transformational leadership styles, which are recognized as types of positive and negative leadership styles, respectively (Otto et al., 2018).

Transformational leaders are mostly perceived as role models by their subordinates, inspiring them through their visions, challenging them with hard but reachable goals, encouraging them to question existing assumptions, and acting as mentors to facilitate growth and satisfaction of the needs of their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Therefore, it is associated with more desirable employee outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior (Nohe & Hertel, 2017; Whittington et al., 2004), increased performance, and innovation (Boerner et al., 2007). Although the research is scarce regarding the effect of transformational leaders on employees' success sabotaging behaviors, the reason for the proposed relationship is threefold. According to Self (1990), situations requiring an immediate mastery of the task and not allowing individuals to progress to mastery can be perceived as appropriate conditions for self-handicapping as such situations create uncertainty regarding whether expectations can be met. Török and Szabó (2018) have also suggested that uncertainty is among the most prevalent contextual eliciting factor of self-handicapping. However, transformational leaders provide employees with the opportunity to grow, helping them successively reaching their highest level of performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Moreover, they provide a psychologically safe environment for their employees where failure is not judged (Carmeli et al., 2013) and is perceived as a source of development. As such, this approach might hinder success sabotaging traits by sending certainty and safety cues, precluding employees to exert self-handicapping behaviors. Thus, subordinates of these leaders receive cues that might maximize their chances to compartmentalize their self-worth with success in their task and focus on their progress, preventing the activation of this trait, resulting in less self-handicapping behavior.

The next reason for suggesting transformational leadership is associated with less self-handicapping is pertinent to individuals' less need for maintaining a sense of control over the situation due to the empowering aspects of transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Snyder, 1990). People who present self-handicapping behavior are motivated to believe that if they had not engaged in self-handicapping, they would be effective in the task—a line of thought that helps them to preserve their feeling of self-efficacy and control (Rhodewalt, 1990). Considering that *empowerment* and *giving*

autonomy are among the most significant aspects of transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006), this autonomy sends certain cues that enhance the sense of control over a situation and help employees to protect their feeling of self-efficacy, yielding successful management (i.e., without handicapping) of the task at hand by precluding the need for the expression of self-handicapping. This is also congruous with previous research where high autonomy is associated with a lower level of self-handicapping (Knee & Zuckerman, 1998).

The last argument is related to the *individualized consideration* component of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), which entails providing contingent feedback; helping employees establish a cause-and-effect relationship between their efforts and outcomes. Since noncontingent success feedback is among the main antecedents of self-handicapping behavior (Berglas & Jones, 1978), tailor-made feedback processes are expected to lower the expression of self-handicapping trait, exerted by employees. This occurs through individualized consideration for each employee and might provide employees with a clear connection between their actions and outcomes, removing uncertainty. Receiving meaningful feedback regarding their performance and realizing that their leaders individually consider their needs and aspirations are perceived as cues of safety and expectancy by the employees. This sense of safety can remove the attempts to ensure certainty which can be attained by engaging in self-handicapping behaviors. As such, we assert that the abovementioned characteristics of transformational leaders might act as *constraints* to dispositional self-handicappers, making that trait less vocalized in terms of the behavior, thereof weakening the trait-behavior relationship, and precluding the behavioral expression.

H1: Transformational leadership will be negatively associated with self-handicapping in such a way that a higher level of transformational leadership perceived by the employees will be associated with lower levels of self-handicapping.

In contrast to transformational leadership, abusive supervision refers to the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors (excluding physical contact) of the supervisor as perceived by the employee (Tepper, 2000). Research maintains that abusive supervision costs almost \$23.8 billion to organizations in the United States due to decreased productivity, health care expenses, absenteeism, and turnover costs (Tepper et al., 2006). This leadership style is mainly characterized by the humiliation and disrespect of employees (Tepper, 2000), leading to dysfunctional behaviors on the part of the employee (Tepper et al., 2001; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Even though the explicit intention of this treatment can be the attainment of goals rather than

simply abusing the employee, the employee may find it challenging to cope with the negative emotions emerging from such treatment and thus experiences an increase in the frequency of counterproductive work behavior (Sulea et al., 2013; Tepper, 2000).

Abusive supervisors damage their subordinates' sense of self by humiliating them and undermining their efforts and performance (Thau & Mitchell, 2010; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). Theoretically, this might indicate that, while working under an abusive supervisor, employees might feel the urge to protect their self-concept (Higgins, 1990), which can take some maladaptive forms such as heavy drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), counterproductive work behaviors (Sulea et al., 2013), and procrastination (He et al., 2021)—all of which potentially sabotage their success, hence, resembles self-handicapping—with the purpose of restoring the damaged sense of self (Thau & Mitchell, 2010).

Based on the trait activation theory, we approach abusive supervision as a specific social situation (Greenbaum et al., 2017) and suggest that interacting with an abusive leader involves certain cues directly relevant for underlying reasons for the expression of self-handicapping. Since variation in workers' expressions of certain personality traits depend on the cues provided by either task, other people or organizational context, there is good reason to believe that abusive supervisors have the potential to act as a social *demand*, which is one of the most prevalent trait activators (Tett & Burnett, 2003). In support of this assumption, abusive supervision has been identified as a trait activator of Machiavellianism by sending messages regarding unethical behaviors (Greenbaum et al., 2017). In the case of self-handicapping, abusive leaders act in a way that protecting the self-image becomes extremely necessary and creates situational relevance for the activation of self-handicapping as disposition. Second, abusive leaders send cues regarding the inflated possibility as well as the aversive results of failure, thus triggering employees to protect their self-esteem in advance by putting self-imposed obstacles. Third, abusive supervisors have a powerful social dominance which employees generally cannot control (Greenbaum et al., 2017). Considering that the need for control is the mechanism lying behind self-handicapping, this apparent lack of control over the situation triggers self-handicappers to exert control by behaving in a success sabotaging way. As such, we expect abusive supervisors will be "trait activators" by sending trait-relevant cues, increasing the possibility of presenting self-handicapping behaviors.

H2: Abusive supervision will be positively associated with employees' self-handicapping in such a way that a higher level of abusive supervision perceived by the employees will be associated with higher levels of self-handicapping.

Fear of Failure

Fear of failure is considered a disposition that directs individuals to avoid the circumstances bearing a high probability of failure due to the likelihood of shame and humiliation following anticipated failure (McClelland et al., 1953). It is a crucial antecedent of self-handicapping behavior as failure in a task presents a threat to individuals' self-concept (Snyder, 1990), and individuals engage in self-handicapping to protect their self-image if they are high in failure avoidance tendency (Martin & Marsh, 2003). The role of fear of failure as an achievement motive in predicting self-handicapping in various achievement contexts is also revealed by several other empirical studies (Chen, Chen, et al., 2009; Chen, Wu, et al., 2009; Elliot & Church, 2003).

Although several scientists have conceptualized fear of failure as a dispositional factor (e.g., Atkinson, 1957), Conroy (2001a, 2001b) suggested that it can result from interpersonal interactions as well. Notably, the organizational context includes critical interpersonal stimuli that have a strong potential to elicit various unpleasant performance-related emotions (Gabriel, 1998) that conceptually resemble fear of failure. Since interactions within the dyadic relationship between the leader and the subordinate produce emotional reactions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), leaders' behavioral patterns during work-related tasks can signal the potential reactions in the case of failure, creating fear in subordinates too. However, to our knowledge, the research on fear of failure has chiefly focused on the motivational antecedents of this emotion (Atkinson, 1957), neglecting the impact of external stimuli, especially in the self-handicapping process.

Although the role of fear of failure in eliciting work-related adverse behavior is sparse, researchers have revealed the role of this affect in eliciting maladaptive self-protective strategies (De Castella et al., 2013). Considering the generally competitive nature of the modern work environment, the role of leaders in evoking emotions in subordinates (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002), and the connection of self-worth with success in the organizational context (Judge, 2009), fear of failure can be expected to mediate the relationship between leadership styles and employees self-handicapping behavior.

H3: Transformational leadership will be negatively associated with employees' self-handicapping through decreasing fear of failure.

H4: Abusive supervision will be positively associated with employees' self-handicapping through increasing fear of failure.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

Although in the early literature on fear of failure has been conceptualized as a stable personality trait (Atkinson, 1957), recent empirical research revealed that the interplay between situational factors and dispositional characteristics play a critical role in explaining the occurrence and intensity of this fear (e.g., Conroy et al., 2006, 2007). Research in the achievement domain suggested that the perceived competence and the feedback received from the coach might be considered important in explaining the change in this fear, specifically *upsetting important others* dimension, yet requires empirical support (Conroy et al., 2005). This indicates the necessity of further explicating this interactive relationship between situational and dispositional factors in the occurrence of this fear.

Socially prescribed perfectionism is the belief that others expect one to be flawless and harshly assess one's performance, equating their value with how they perform (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). High socially prescribed perfectionists anticipate adverse reactions from others (in the form of harsh criticism and rejection) following failure or imperfection (Childs & Stoeber, 2012), due to the belief that such failure may damage their value in the eyes of others (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). Thus, escaping possible disapproval and criticism from the environment and satisfying others' expectations is extremely important for these individuals (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Since the work environment generally includes social interaction and requires performance, socially prescribed perfectionism is considered a crucial individual difference factor in the organizational context (Childs & Stoeber, 2012). Considering that socially prescribed perfectionism involves the perceived obligation to reach others' expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), it is highly expected that this perception is presumably influential in explaining the effect of others' behaviors on employees' work-related affects. The reason for this proposed relationship is that leadership styles are generally conceptualized as employees' perceptions about their leaders (Tepper, 2007); hence, the effect of this perception on work-related emotions is not immune to the perceived expectations from employees regarding their performance. Suppose the employee is working with a leader who does not focus on mistakes, promotes personal growth, and shows individualized consideration. In that case, this might counteract the negative effect of socially prescribed perfectionism in eliciting work-related maladaptive emotions. In the same line of thought, if the leader exhibits behaviors signaling adverse outcomes when their high expectations are not met, employees' anticipation regarding the possible outcomes might be

exacerbated by the perceived expectations to be flawless. As such, there is a good reason to expect that the association between the leaders' characteristics in managing their employees and employees' fear due to the anticipated reaction regarding their performance will depend on the level of socially prescribed perfectionism. Furthermore, the level of socially prescribed perfectionism may also be influential in the association between leader characteristics and fear of failure.

H5: The relationship between abusive supervision and fear of failure will be moderated by socially prescribed perfectionism in such a way that the positive association between abusive supervision and fear of failure will be stronger for individuals who are high in socially prescribed perfectionism.

H6: The relationship between transformational leadership and fear of failure will be moderated by socially prescribed perfectionism. The negative association between transformational leadership and fear of failure will be stronger for individuals who are high in socially prescribed perfectionism.

H7: Socially prescribed perfectionism will moderate the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and self-handicapping through fear of failure. Specifically, the mediating role of fear of failure will be more pronounced when employees have higher socially prescribed perfectionism.

H8: Socially prescribed perfectionism will moderate the indirect relationship between transformational leadership and self-handicapping through fear of failure. Specifically, the mediating role of fear of failure will be more pronounced when employees have higher socially prescribed perfectionism.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in January 2020 through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing service, from 210 U.S.-based employees who have been working under an immediate supervisor for at least the past 6 months. The data collection process was carried out with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey. Participants were provided with a \$0.2 reward for completing the approximately 7 min survey. Forty percentage of the

participants were female, and 81% of respondents were at least university graduates. Participants' age ranged from 20 to 67 with a mean age of 35.1 ($SD = 10.46$).

Measures

Transformational Leadership

Ten items from the Transformational Leadership Scale (Ismail et al., 2010) were used to assess transformational leadership with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A sample item was "My immediate supervisor encourages me to think more creatively." Cronbach's α for this scale was .95, and the authors also reported an acceptable level of construct validity.

Abusive Supervision

Fifteen items from the Abusive Supervision Scale (Tepper, 2000) were used with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). A sample item was "My immediate supervisor tells me I'm incompetent." The original scale had .90 reliability and adequate construct validity.

Self-Handicapping

The Self-handicapping Scale developed by Jones and Rhodewalt (1982) was used for the study. To adapt it to the work setting, we have changed two items' contexts (from "exam" to "presentation or meeting"). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item was "When I do something wrong, my first impulse is to blame circumstances." The scale has good reliability ($\alpha = .79$) and supports the convergent and discriminant validity with the correlations with other related measures.

Fear of Failure

Performance Appraisal Inventory (Conroy, 2001b), composed of 25 items, has been used to assess fear of failure with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *do not believe at all* to 5 = *believe all the time*). A sample item was "When I am not succeeding, I am less valuable than when I succeed." Cronbach's α of the original scale ranged from .72 to .86 for the subdimensions.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

A 15-item Socially Prescribed Perfectionism subscale of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) was used. A sample item was "Success means that I must work even harder to please others." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Hewitt and Flett (1991) reported good reliability ($\alpha = .81$), and later studies provided support for the concurrent validity (Hewitt et al., 1991).

Data Analysis

We used IBM SPSS statistical tool to calculate descriptive statistics and correlations among variables. We conducted our analysis using Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro statistical software to test our hypotheses. We begin with mediation analysis (Model 4), and then tested our full moderated mediation model (Model 7). Statistical significance was evaluated with the 5,000 boot-strapped samples to create bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs, 95%).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Normality assumptions were checked, and the necessary transformations were conducted. Means, standard deviations, correlations, skewness, and kurtosis for all variables are presented in Table 1. Fear of failure and self-handicapping behavior were significantly associated with both leadership styles, and the association between socially prescribed perfectionism and fear of failure was significant.

Testing the Mediation Model

Two simple mediation analyses, examining the mediator role of fear of failure in the relationship of abusive and transformational leadership with self-handicapping, were conducted using PROCESS (Hayes, 2018, Model 4) to test H1, H2, H3, and H4. As presented in Tables 2 and 3, both abusive and transformational leadership are significantly associated with fear of failure, $\beta = .46$, $t(206) = 12.32$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.50$, $t(206) = -2.82$, $p < .001$, respectively, and fear of failure is also significantly associated with self-handicapping behavior, $\beta = .35$, $t(205) = 7.98$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .45$, $t(205) = -13.81$, $p < .001$, for abusive and transformational leadership models,

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, Alpha Coefficients, and Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Gender	—	—	—							.41	-1.85
2. Age	35.10	10.45	.16*	—						.98	.13
3. Abusive supervision	2.39	1.32	-.12	-.51**	(.98)					.32	-1.56
4. Transformational L.	1.60	.31	.10	.12	-.11	(.92)				.58	.11
5. Fear of failure	3.10	.87	-.50	-.37**	.67**	-.22**	(.96)			-.23	-.71
6. Socially prescribed perfectionism	3.03	.56	-.04	-.39**	.49**	-.08	.53**	(.78)		-.69	.77
7. Self-handicapping	3.39	.63	-.06	-.43**	.69**	-.42**	.75**	.50**	(.90)	.06	-.41

Note. *N* = 210. Internal reliability coefficients for the measures are given in parentheses. For gender, 1 = male, 2 = female. Transformational L. = Transformational Leadership.
* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .001.

Table 2
Mediation Effect of Fear of Failure on the Association Between Transformational Leadership and Self-Handicapping

Predictors	Outcome variable: FoF				Outcome variable: self-handicapping			
	β	t	SE	%95 CI	β	t	SE	%95 CI
Constant	4.88	14.27	.34	4.20–5.54	3.12	13.72	.23	2.68–3.58
Gender	.04	.35	.11	–.19–.27	.03	.57	.05	–.08–.14
Age	–.03	–5.40**	.00	–.04–.02	–.01	–3.76**	.00	–.02–.00
TL	–.50	–2.83*	.18	–.85–.15	–.52	–6.04**	.09	–.68–.35
FoF	—	—	—	—	.45	13.81**	.03	.39–.52

Note. $N = 210$. Beta values are unstandardized coefficients as it is suggested by Hayes (2018). TL = transformational leadership; FoF = fear of failure; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

respectively. Abusive and transformational leadership styles are also directly and significantly associated with self-handicapping behavior, Direct effect, $\beta = .16$, $t(205) = 5.17$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.52$, $t(205) = -6.04$, $p < .001$, respectively. The indirect effect of abusive supervision on self-handicapping behavior through fear of failure was .16 with .03 SE and 95% CI [.10, .22] (Table 3), and the indirect effect of transformational leadership on self-handicapping behavior through fear of failure was -.23 with .09 SE and 95% CI [–.42, –.05]. This implies a significant mediator role for fear of failure in the relationship between both transformational and abusive leadership and self-handicapping behavior.

The total effect of both abusive and transformational leadership on self-handicapping were also significant, Total effect, $\beta = .32$, $t(206) = 11.97$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.74$, $t(206) = -6.40$, $p < .001$, respectively.

Table 3
Mediation Effect of Fear of Failure on the Association Between Abusive Supervision and Self-Handicapping

Predictors	Outcome variable: FoF				Outcome variable: self-handicapping			
	β	t	SE	%95 CI	β	t	SE	%95 CI
Constant	2.00	3.28	.32	.42–1.69	2.11	11.70	.18	1.75–2.46
Gender	.05	.59	.09	–.12–.23	.02	.33	.06	–.09–.12
Age	–.00	–.47	.00	–.01–.00	–.00	–1.82	.00	–.01–.00
AS	.46	12.32**	.04	.39–.53	.16	5.17**	.03	.10–.22
FoF	—	—	—	—	.35	7.98	.04	.26–.43

Note. $N = 210$. Beta values are unstandardized coefficients as it is suggested by Hayes (2017). AS = abusive supervision; FoF = fear of failure; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Testing the Full Model

To analyze the entire model, two multiple moderated mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS (Model 7), where the first model involved abusive supervision as an independent variable and the second model involved transformational leadership. The model involved the moderator role of socially prescribed perfectionism on the relationship between leadership styles and fear of failure.

Contrary to H5, the relationship between abusive supervision and fear of failure was not moderated by socially prescribed perfectionism, $\beta = .33$, $t(205) = 1.38$, $p = .17$. The relationship between abusive supervision and fear of failure was not strengthened when socially prescribed perfectionism was added to the model as a moderator (Table 4). Similarly, socially prescribed perfectionism did not moderate the indirect model suggested by the moderated mediation index (.12, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [-.03, .32]), rejecting H7.

The results for transformational leadership, however, reveal that the transformational leadership style can be a protective factor for perfectionist employees in the prevention of fear of failure and consequently self-handicapping behavior. Confirming H6, socially prescribed perfectionism had a significant moderator role in the relationship between transformational leadership and fear of failure, $\beta = -.50$, $t(205) = -2.31$, $p < .05$. More specifically, employees with higher socially prescribed perfectionism experience less fear of failure when they work with transformational leaders, see Figure 2, 1 SD above the mean, $t(204) = -3.72$, $b = -.71$, $p < .00$; 1 SD below the mean, $t(204) = -1.03$, $b = -.19$, $p = .30$. Confirming H8, socially prescribed perfectionism moderated the indirect effect of transformational leadership on self-handicapping through fear of failure as suggested by the

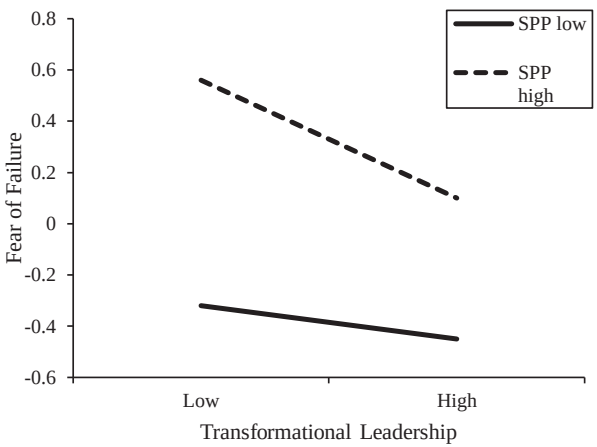
Table 4
Moderation Effect of Socially Prescribed Perfectionism on the Association Between Abusive Supervision and Self-Handicapping

Predictors	Outcome variable: FoF				Outcome variable: self-handicapping			
	β	t	SE	%95 CI	β	t	SE	%95 CI
Constant	2.96	15.11	.19	2.58–3.36	2.43	13.14**	.18	2.07–2.80
Gender	.03	.39	.09	-.13–.20	.02	.32**	.06	-.09–.13
Age	.00	.29	.00	-.00–.01	-.00	-1.91	.00	-.01–.00
AS	1.10	8.37**	.13	-.38–.67	.43	4.55**	.09	.24–.61
SPP	.49	4.55**	.11	.28–.70	—	—	—	—
AS $\times$ SPP	.33	1.38	.24	-.14–.79	—	—	—	—
FoF	—	—	—	—	.37	8.49**	.04	.28–.45

Note. $N = 210$. Beta values are unstandardized coefficients as it is suggested by Hayes (2017). AS = abusive supervision; FoF = fear of failure; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; SPP = socially prescribed perfectionism.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Figure 2
Interaction Effect of Transformational Leadership and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism on Fear of Failure



moderated mediation index ($-.23, SE = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.52, -.07]$). That is, fear of failure mediated the association of transformational leadership with self-handicapping only for individuals with high and moderate levels of perfectionism (Table 5). In other words, transformational leadership is associated with a lower frequency of self-handicapping behavior through lower levels of fear of failure only in individuals who have high (1 *SD* above the mean, effect = $-.32, SE = .10, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.58, -.17]$) and moderate (mean, effect = $-.23, SE = .08, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.41, -.09]$) levels of socially prescribed perfectionism. A similar pattern was not observed for low socially prescribed perfectionism individuals (1 *SD* below the mean, effect = $-.09, SE = .09, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.27, .08]$).

Table 5
Moderation Effect of Socially Prescribed Perfectionism on the Association between Transformational Leadership and Self-Handicapping

Predictors	Outcome variable: FoF				Outcome variable: self-handicapping			
	β	<i>t</i>	<i>SE</i>	%95 CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>SE</i>	%95 CI
Constant	-.34	-.28**	1.19	-2.69–2.0	2.30	13.19**	.17	1.96–2.65
Gender	.03	.25	.10	-.17–.22	.03	.57	.05	-.07–.14
Age	-.01	-2.64*	.00	-.02–.00	-.01	-3.75**	.00	-.02–.00
TL	1.06	1.58*	.68	-.27–2.40	-.52	-6.04**	.09	-.68–.35
SPP	1.52	4.16**	.37	.80–2.24	—	—	—	—
TL $\times$ SPP	-.50	-2.32*	.22	-.93–.07	—	—	—	—
FoF	—	—	—	—	.46	13.81**	.03	.39–.52

Note. *N* = 210. Beta values are unstandardized coefficients as it is suggested by Hayes (2017). TL = transformational leadership, FoF = fear of failure; *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; SPP = socially prescribed perfectionism.

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .001.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between leadership styles and subordinates' self-handicapping behaviors with the mediator role of fear of failure and the moderator role of socially prescribed perfectionism through the lens of trait activation theory. As hypothesized, the findings indicate that abusive supervision is positively, and transformational leadership is negatively and significantly associated with the self-handicapping behavior of the employee partly through fear of failure. This research also responds to the call made by [Török and Szabó \(2018\)](#) in which situational factors eliciting and reducing self-handicapping require more scientific attention.

The mediator role of fear of failure in the association between abusive supervision and self-handicapping can be explained by the threatening atmosphere that is created by abusive leaders. This atmosphere, which is characterized by embarrassment and humiliation, might be associated with the emergence of the idea that failure may have catastrophic consequences, thus motivating employees to engage in self-handicapping to protect their self-concept. This is in line with the previous findings regarding the robust association between abusive supervisors and employees' tendency to engage in self-destructive or counterproductive work behaviors to deal with difficult emotions elicited by their abusive managers ([Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006](#); [Sulea et al., 2013](#)).

The moderator role of socially prescribed perfectionism in the relationship between leadership styles and fear of failure was only significant for transformational leadership. When employees with a higher perception that they are expected to perform flawlessly, work with transformational leaders, their fear of failure decreases significantly as compared to employees with lower socially prescribed perfectionism. In this case, the role of transformational leaders becomes more pronounced that they become a soothing factor for their perfectionist subordinates. The underlying reason for this might be transformational leaders' less focus on failure as one of their defining characteristics, a factor that alleviates the perceived perfectionist expectations, thus fear of failure.

The results also revealed the mediator role of fear of failure in the association between transformational leadership and self-handicapping, which appears to be significant only for individuals with high or moderate levels of socially prescribed perfectionism. This can be the consequence of the psychologically safe and encouraging work environment that is generated and maintained by transformational leaders, which may buffer the negative impact of socially prescribed perfectionism since the transformational leader gives the message that they are not specifically focused on mistakes ([Carmeli et al., 2013](#)) and thus making employees feel less threatened. This attitude might alleviate the perfectionists' worries about being criticized in the case of failure and thus be

associated with lower levels of self-handicapping. Considering that individuals based their relational values on their success, individualized consideration of transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006) might be especially helpful in socially prescribed perfectionists. Moreover, this result supports our argument that not all employees experience those feelings (i.e., fear) and behavioral outcomes (i.e., self-handicapping); hence, individual differences need to be incorporated into this line of research. It would be also enlightening to investigate whether leadership style influences who will be selected for employment in terms of fear of failure and socially prescribed perfectionism.¹

However, our approach to the input (leaders' behaviors) - output (subordinates' emotions and behaviors) process of this relationship considers it as a one-way mechanism instead of a reciprocal relationship, ignoring the dynamic nature of the leader-subordinate relationship. The dyadic relationship between the leader and subordinate is an ongoing process that simultaneously affects the leader and the subordinate in an alternating manner (Day & Misencio, 2016). Considering the research suggested that certain personality traits are associated with the perception of abusive supervision (Brees et al., 2014), future researchers might consider investigating this relationship from a more interactionist approach.

Among many other personality characteristics, self-handicapping is closely related to self-esteem and self-control both of which are critical in the organizational environment. Considering individuals who have shaky self-esteem and low self-control are more prone to self-handicapping, for the purpose of shielding self-esteem and maintaining a sense of control, investigating these two characteristics in the work context might reveal important dynamics that would potentially help organizations and employees.

Despite having considerable strengths, this study also has some limitations. While the sample size and the use of cross-sectional data prevented us from claiming causality, self-administered retrospective questionnaires cautioned us to certain biases. To avoid those limitations, future researchers may consider adopting longitudinal studies and experience sampling methodology to measure self-handicapping behaviors as they occur. Furthermore, it is essential to investigate emotion regulation strategies and the role of other coping mechanisms in which employees use to deal with the psychological demand that their leaders created. Considering the differentiating effects of "behavioral" (e.g., withdrawal of effort) and "self-reported" (e.g., reporting high levels of stress) self-handicapping, future researchers can incorporate these two distinct forms of self-handicapping to understand its role and prevalence in the organizational context. Finally, the high correlations between fear of failure and self-handicapping indicates the possibility of collinearity. Since mean centering is

¹ We thank reviewer 1 for this suggestion.

recently has been a subject of discussion for its capacity for dealing with multicollinearity (McClelland et al., 2017), we further proceed with our original scores. Thus, the results should be interpreted with caution.

In conclusion, the results of this research might significantly benefit human resources professionals by helping them to see the protective/deteriorating effect of leadership styles and manage organizational policies and interventions accordingly. Leaders and consultants who work with executives can also greatly benefit from this research by comprehending how the way leaders manage their employees has the potential to trigger and activate maladaptive traits, presumably impeding their team to reach performance goals. Hence, open rooms to modify their way of leading to elicit desired employee behaviors.

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