

## THE DARK SIDE OF GUANXI HRM PRACTICES: EXAMINING MORAL DISENGAGEMENT, UNETHICAL PRO-SUPERVISOR BEHAVIOR, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CYNICISM UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF POWER DISTANCE ORIENTATION

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### Abstract

Relational favoritism in human resource management remains pervasive in high power distance economies, yet its simultaneous behavioral, cognitive-moral, and attitudinal consequences are poorly understood. Drawing on social information processing theory, this study examines how guanxi HRM practices personnel decisions based on personal relationships rather than merit shape employee pro-supervisor behavior, moral disengagement, and organizational cynicism, and tests power distance orientation as a cultural boundary condition of each relationship. Survey data were collected from 400 full-time employees of commercial banks in Punjab, Pakistan, and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling in SmartPLS 4. Results show that guanxi HRM practices positively predict all three outcomes, revealing a bifurcation of loyalty whereby employees behaviorally invest in the supervisor who controls relational rewards while morally and attitudinally withdrawing from the organization that tolerates them. Power distance orientation moderates these relationships asymmetrically: it strengthens the effect of guanxi HRM on pro-supervisor behavior while buffering its effects on moral disengagement and organizational cynicism. Multi-group analysis indicates the cynicism response is more pronounced among female employees. The findings extend social information processing theory by specifying cultural value orientation as the interpretive filter through which identical HRM cues yield divergent responses, transport the guanxi HRM framework beyond China to the referral-driven South Asian workplace, and alert managers and regulators to the hidden costs of relational personnel systems that purchase supervisory loyalty at the price of moral and attitudinal erosion.



## Introduction

Organizations worldwide invest heavily in merit-based human resource systems, yet informal relational practices continue to shape who gets hired, trained, evaluated, and rewarded. In many economies, personal connections rather than performance determine the allocation of organizational resources, a pattern documented across family firms, public institutions, and private enterprises (Khatri & Tsang, 2003; Schilpzand et al., 2025). When relational favoritism penetrates human resource management (HRM), it corrodes the psychological contract between employees and employers, distorts perceptions of fairness, and generates measurable losses in trust, engagement, and performance (Chen et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2021). The stakes extend beyond individual grievances: relationship-based HRM decisions weaken institutional legitimacy, encourage employees to invest in impression management rather than productive work, and normalize the belief that success depends on whom one knows. Understanding how employees respond behaviorally, cognitively, and attitudinally to relationally contaminated HRM systems is therefore a central concern for organizational scholarship and practice.

The literature on guanxi HRM practices, which refers to HRM decisions based on personal relationships between employees and supervisors, instead of merit (Chen et al., 2004; Yang & Yang,

2020), is most developed. While the construct is rooted in the Chinese workplace, relationship-based HRM works in a similar manner in collectivist, high power distance societies, such as South Asian economies, where connection-based staffing and promotion are well entrenched (Khatri & Tsang, 2003; Nadeem & Kayani, 2019). The dynamics are worth studying in the context of Pakistan's organizational environment where many organizational decisions are made through the process of referral.

Previous studies have proven that guanxi HRM practices are a workplace stressor with mostly negative outcomes, such as decreased trust in management (Chen et al., 2004), emotional exhaustion and poor job performance (Yang et al., 2021), less creative performance (Yang & Yang, 2020), and lower well-being (Liu & Jia, 2021). A parallel stream suggests that these practices have ethical implications: those who have been exposed to the relational favoritism practice exhibit unethical pro-supervisor behavior acts that are aimed at benefiting the supervisor and are considered unethical by others (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019) as a result of the cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement (Moore et al., 2012; Yao et al., 2026). Favoritism also fosters organizational cynicism, a sense of lack of integrity in the organization (Dean et al., 1998; Chiaburu et al., 2013).



This study is stimulated by three gaps. First, there is an empirical paradox in the literature, as guanxi HRM practices give rise to compliance-oriented responses, such as employees redirecting loyalty towards the supervisor who controls the relational rewards (Yao et al., 2026), and withdrawal-oriented responses, such as employees' moral disengagement and cynicism towards the organization (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Liu & Jia, 2021). Previous research has studied each of these consequences separately and no models have yet been proposed to explain how the same behavior can lead to pro-supervisor investment and to moral and attitudinal erosion. To resolve this contradiction, a design must be developed that simultaneously models behavioral (pro-supervisor behavior), cognitive-moral (moral disengagement) and attitudinal (organizational cynicism) outcomes. Second, a theoretical gap is related to boundary conditions: while it is agreed that guanxi HRM responses are contingent on employees' perceptions of hierarchy and authority (Yang et al., 2018), some have tested for the presence of relational moderators (e.g., supervisor-subordinate guanxi: Yao et al., 2026), but the literature has not yet integrated cultural value orientations (e.g., power distance orientation, the individual-level acceptance of unequal power distribution: Kirkman et al., 2009) into the nomological network of guanxi HRM. Third, a contextual and

population gap exists: evidence is still largely Chinese and the generalizability of the results to the other institutionally different but equally prevalent South Asian workforces is not guaranteed.

The practical issue is consequential: in high power distance economies, organisations have HRM systems that involve a mix of relational favoritism and formal merit rhetoric, but managers can't necessarily predict whether this will engender loyalty or moral decay and cynicism, which in turn increases turnover, misconduct and performance costs (Schilpzand et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2021). Until it is understood which employees react with pro-supervisor investment and which with moral disengagement and cynicism and under which cultural conditions which reaction is strengthened, interventions aimed at professionalizing HRM are untargeted. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore the relationships of guanxi HRM practices and pro-supervisor behavior, guanxi HRM practices and moral disengagement, guanxi HRM practices and organizational cynicism among employees in the Pakistani organizations, and to examine the moderating role of power distance orientation in each of those three relationships to determine the cultural boundary condition that influences employees' reactions to relationally based HRM.

The study is based on the social information processing theory (Salancik



& Pfeffer, 1978) which says that employees form attitudes and behaviors based on the cues they receive in their social environment. The guanxi HRM practices convey strong information signals about what the organization will reward, and the power distance orientation will influence the employees' understanding and behavior toward the information signals. Theoretically, it contributes to the social information processing theory by placing power distance orientation as an interpretive lens in three outcome areas. Contextually, it brings guanxi HRM framework from China to the referral-based workplace in Pakistan. In practice, it helps HR staff identify the point at which relational favoritism becomes loyalty and toxicity.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Foundation:

#### Social Information Processing Theory

According to the social information processing (SIP) theory, people don't necessarily form attitudes and behaviors in isolation, but rather they build them adaptively from information in the social context in which they are embedded (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). The theory is based on three basic assumptions. First, the social context provides cues which indicate which behaviors are expected, rewarded and sanctioned. Second, employees' interpretations of organizational reality are powerfully influenced by salient

and proximal cues, especially those that come from authority figures who control valued resources. Thirdly, people rationalize their attitudes and behaviors that follow in order to be congruent with the informational environment they internalize. Guanxi HRM practices are a very powerful cue system in this context: when it is obvious that recruitment, appraisal and reward decisions are based on personal relationships and not on merit (Chen et al., 2004), this sends a clear signal to employees that relationships, not performance, are what are valued to achieve organizational success. Therefore, SIP theory suggests that employees who come into contact with guanxi HRM will re-evaluate their own behavior regarding supervisor-led investment decisions, adapt their moral judgments to a system that is relationally regulated, and redefine their beliefs.

Although previous studies have applied SIP theory to relational HRM settings, two limitations in these studies are addressed in this study. Scholars have used SIP logic to account for the spread of unethical behavioral norms through guanxi HRM practices, as employees see relational favoritism as a cue that such unethical practices are tolerated by the organization (Yao et al., 2026), and how supervisors' guanxi HRM perceptions spread down to influence subordinates' engagement (Yang et al., 2018). These applications, however,



make the implicit assumption that cue interpretation is similar across employees, which is not supported by meta-analytic findings of significant heterogeneity in employee reactions to contextual antecedents of misconduct (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). In addition, previous theoretical applications focus on the single-outcome designs and fail to illuminate the ability of SIP theory to account for divergent responses of compliance, moral accommodation, and attitudinal withdrawal from the same cue system. This study contributes to SIP theory in two ways. First, it models three outcome domains simultaneously. Second, it adds power distance orientation (Kirkman et al., 2009) as an interpretation lens through which the same social information can be interpreted differently, specifying the individual-level mechanism through which identical social information can lead to different responses.

## Relationship Among Variables and Hypothesis Development

There is growing evidence in the ethics literature that relationally governed HRM systems shift employee's loyalty from the organization to the supervisor. Guanxi HRM practices focus discretion on employees' careers on the supervisors, which means employees understand that their career promotion will rely less on the organization's performance systems and more on developing goodwill among supervisors (Chen et al., 2004; Yang et

al., 2021). This informational environment suggests that it is rational for employees to adopt the behavior strategy of supervisor-directed investment, and this is consistent with the results of the empirical study: When the supervisor's guanxi HRM practices were exposed, employees' actions of unethical pro-supervisor behaviors that would benefit the supervisor but harm the employee were increased, confirming the prediction of SIP theory (Yao et al., 2026), which is consistent with the results of previous studies showing that employees engage in pro-leader transgressions when the leader controls salient outcomes (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). The causal mechanism is a combination of instrumental exchange (employees are expected to receive some rewards for their loyalty) and signaling (favoritism suggests that this is what the organization implicitly rewards, Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

However, the empirical evidence is not always positive, and a critical examination shows that there are significant inconsistencies. However, there is also a large body of literature reporting withdrawal in response to guanxi HRM, such as lower engagement (Liu & Jia, 2021), lower creative performance (Yang & Yang, 2020), and emotional exhaustion (Yang et al., 2021), which are difficult to reconcile with a loyalty inducing account without boundary conditions.



Methodologically, prior research has primarily been conducted on cross-sectional Chinese samples where relational moderators like *guanxi* (supervisor-subordinate relationships) are found, but not in other relational HRM contexts like South Asia where referral networks exist instead of *guanxi* per se (Khatri & Tsang, 2003). This study addresses the possibility that the *guanxi* HRM-pro-supervisor behavior relationship may not be universal, as indicated by the contradictory nature of the investment and withdrawal responses to *guanxi*, by incorporating power distance orientation. In line with the evidence and the SIP theory's prediction that employees adapt their behaviour to cues given by the authorities who control the resources, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H1.** *Guanxi* HRM practices are positively related to pro-supervisor behavior.

Moral disengagement the set of cognitive maneuvers through which individuals deactivate moral self-regulation, including moral justification, displacement of responsibility, and diffusion of blame (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012) is theorized here as a direct cognitive consequence of relationally contaminated HRM. SIP theory clarifies the mechanism: *guanxi* HRM practices supply employees with ready-made rationalizations by demonstrating that the organization itself subordinates merit and fairness to

relational expedience (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Yao et al., 2026). When the formal system visibly rewards connections over contribution, employees can displace responsibility for their own ethical compromises onto the system ("everyone advances through connections"), diffuse blame across the collective, and morally justify self-protective conduct as adaptation rather than transgression. Meta-analytic evidence corroborates this contextual pathway, identifying perceptions of organizational politics and unjust treatment both conceptually proximal to *guanxi* HRM as robust contextual antecedents of moral disengagement at work (Ogunfowora et al., 2022).

A critical reading of this literature nonetheless exposes an unresolved conceptual tension regarding moral disengagement's position in the nomological network. The dominant tradition models moral disengagement exclusively as a mediating mechanism transmitting contextual effects to misconduct (Moore et al., 2012; Yao et al., 2026), which presupposes rather than tests the antecedent relationship between *guanxi* HRM and moral disengagement as a substantive outcome in its own right. This modeling convention obscures a theoretically important question: whether relational HRM systems erode employees' moral self-regulatory architecture independently of any specific downstream behavior. Moreover, effect



sizes for contextual antecedents of moral disengagement vary considerably across studies and settings (Ogunfowora et al., 2022), implying unmodeled moderators, and virtually all guanxi-specific evidence derives from Chinese organizations, constraining contextual generalizability. By modeling moral disengagement as a focal outcome in a Pakistani setting, this study tests whether the corrosive cognitive effect of relational HRM holds where cultural expectations about hierarchy differ in institutional origin, if not intensity. In line with SIP theory and the cumulative contextual evidence, the following hypothesis is advanced:

**H2.** Guanxi HRM practices are positively related to moral disengagement.

Organizational cynicism is a negative attitude that involves the belief that the organization is lacking integrity, negative affect and negative behavioral tendencies (Dean et al., 1998), that is the attitudinal end of the informational cascade set in motion by guanxi HRM. HRM practices are one of the most diagnostic cues that employees have in regard to the nature of an organization since they show what the organization actually rewards, rather than what it rhetorically espouses (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), from an SIP perspective. If personnel decisions are in fact systematically based on personal relationships, then employees can infer that the organization's claims of merit

and fairness are hypocritical, and this inferred hypocrisy (the discrepancy between what is said and what is done) is exactly the psychological underpinning of cynicism (Dean et al., 1998). Meta-analytic evidence has shown that fairness violations are among the most powerful predictors of organizational cynicism (Chiaburu et al., 2013) and studies of similar constructs have found that favoritism and nepotism increase employee cynicism and work withdrawal in the hospitality and service industries (Abubakar et al., 2017).

The favoritism–cynicism literature, however, is constrained by construct heterogeneity and contextual narrowness, which lessen the confidence in the inferences that can be made about guanxi HRM in particular. Relational favoritism has been operationalized as nepotism (Abubakar et al., 2017), cronyism (Khatri & Tsang, 2003) and generalized favoritism (Schilpzand et al., 2025), which are different in the source of favoritism (family versus supervisor) and in the degree of formality, and most designs are cross-sectional single-source surveys and thus susceptible to common method inflation. In addition, the cynicism outcome is in contrast to the pro-supervisor outcome proposed in H1: an employee who is cynical with the organization but behaviorally committed to the supervisor represents a divided loyalty which single-outcome



studies would not capture. This seemingly paradoxical situation is in principle surmountable: cynicism is directed toward the organization, pro-supervisorism is directed toward the individual who determines the rewards in the relationship, and the simultaneous targeting of both outcomes is a direct test of this "loyalty-bifurcation" account. In line with fairness theorizing and the growing body of empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is advanced. Organizational cynicism is a negative attitude that involves the belief that the organization is lacking integrity, negative affect and negative behavioral tendencies (Dean et al., 1998), that is the attitudinal end of the informational cascade set in motion by guanxi HRM. HRM practices are one of the most diagnostic cues that employees have in regard to the nature of an organization since they show what the organization actually rewards, rather than what it rhetorically espouses (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), from an SIP perspective. If personnel decisions are in fact systematically based on personal relationships, then employees can infer that the organization's claims of merit and fairness are hypocritical, and this inferred hypocrisy (the discrepancy between what is said and what is done) is exactly the psychological underpinning of cynicism (Dean et al., 1998). Meta-analytic evidence has shown that fairness violations are among the most powerful predictors of

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**H3.** Guanxi HRM practices are positively related to organizational cynicism.

Power distance orientation (PDO), defined as the degree to which unequal power distribution is accepted as legitimate and appropriate (Hofstede, 2001; Kirkman et al., 2009), is placed as the interpretive filter which conditions behavioural responses to guanxi HRM. According to SIP theory, identical cues only acquire meaning through interpretation (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and PDO provides the interpretive schema for cues related to hierarchical resource allocation. High-PDO employees believe that supervisors are entitled to wide discretion, that they need not explain themselves to their supervisors, and that it is a moral duty to be loyal to one's supervisor (Kirkman et al., 2009; Lian et al., 2012). Guanxi HRM practices are interpreted as a normal exercise of hierarchical authority rather than procedural corruption for such employees, which further enhances the instrumentality and legitimacy of investing in the supervisor and thus makes the translation of guanxi HRM cues to pro-supervisor behavior stronger.

In contrast, low-PDO employees have egalitarian expectations, which make it hard for them to accept the legitimacy of the supervisor-centered resource allocation process and so reduce their loyalty and willingness to reciprocate favoritism with loyalty even if instrumental incentives are available. Empirical evidence backs up this conditioning logic: PDO is found to systematically affect employee responses to authority-based treatment, such that employees with high PDO are less likely to respond negatively to abusive supervision (Lian et al., 2012) and employees with low PDO are more likely to respond positively to leadership across cultural contexts (Kirkman et al., 2009). However, previous guanxi HRM studies have only examined relational moderators (e.g., the strength of guanxi between supervisor and subordinate, Yao et al., 2026), and cultural value orientations have been excluded from the model, although they are theoretically important in the context of hierarchy-based practices. Testing PDO in Pakistan a society with high but variably high power distance offers a theoretical extension and a conservative test as there has to be within-sample variance in PDO for the moderation to be seen. Accordingly:

**H4.** Power distance orientation moderates the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and pro-supervisor behavior.



While PDO increases the behavioral loyalty response, there is evidence that it buffers the cognitive-moral erosion response. Moral disengagement is thought to come into play when an individual is facing a situation or behavior that is in conflict with their internalized moral code (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012); the more the situation or behavior is perceived as violating moral standards, the more self-regulatory work must be done to accommodate it. Guanxi HRM is a blatant breach of the principles of egalitarianism and meritocracy, and thus causes acute moral dissonance that requires disengagement mechanisms, such as self-serving adaptations, blaming a corrupt system, and diffusing blame to resolve. For high-PDO employees, on the other hand, the extent of the supervisor's discretion in granting rewards is within the scope of legitimate authority, and thus guanxi HRM is not likely to lead to high levels of moral dissonance and disengagement. SIP theory supports this logic: It is not just the presence of the cue that leads to cognitive adjustment, but rather the meaning of the informational cue (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

Evidence that high-PDO employees are less likely to react to authoritarian and abusive treatment via justice-based processes (Lian et al., 2012) and meta-analytic results showing that the magnitude of contextual antecedents of moral disengagement is highly variable

across studies (Ogunfowora et al., 2022) provide indirect support for this buffering prediction. An important caveat should be noted: a competing theoretical explanation suggests that high-PDO employees' deferral can actually increase the extent of displacement of responsibility onto authority figures, which may be referred to as amplification rather than buffering. But this is an account which assumes that guanxi HRM is morally problematic from the outset, which is precisely what high PDO undermines through the legitimization of hierarchical discretion. The present design is an empirical contribution to adjudicate between these competing accounts. Consistent with the dissonance-based logic, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H5.** Power distance orientation moderates the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and moral disengagement.

The cynicism pathway is also dependent upon employee perceptions of the legitimacy of the relational resource allocation. Organizational cynicism is based on the assumption that the organization is acting in a way that is not consistent with values of integrity and fairness (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Dean et al., 1998); this assumption requires a standard of fairness to judge actions. PDO sets the standard. Guanxi HRM is a direct violation of the expectations of low-PDO employees

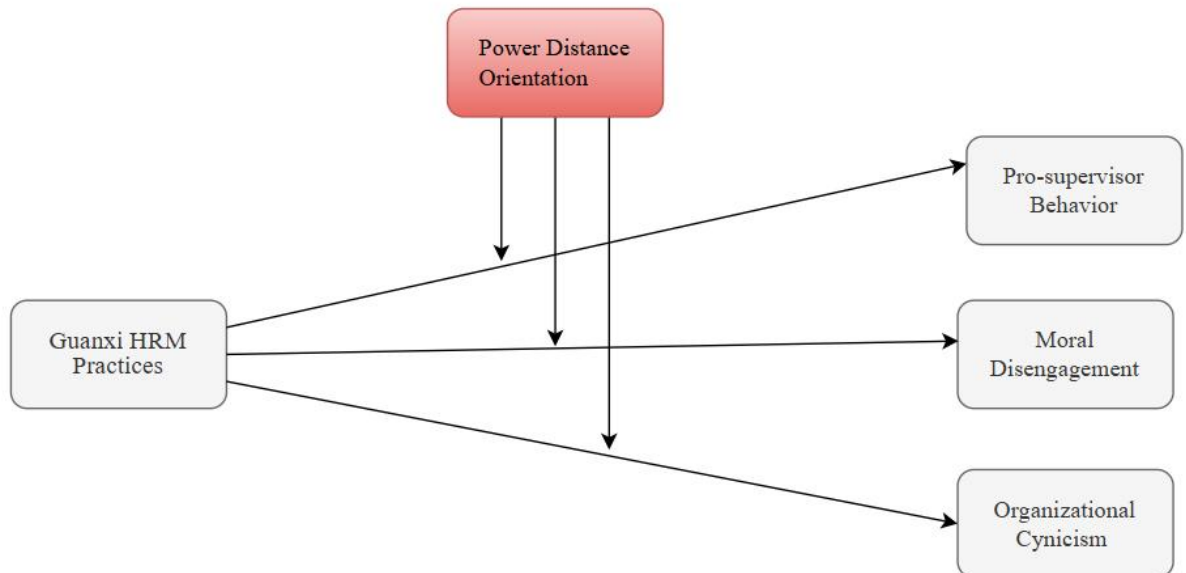


that power is exercised in an accountable manner and personnel decisions are made in a procedurally fair way, which directly leads to the feeling of hypocrisy, thereby stimulating cynical beliefs, negative affect and disparagement. High-PDO employees who already expect the use of concentrated and discretionary authority do not have as large of an expectation-reality gap when faced with the same practices, resulting in weaker cynical attributions. This expectancy-violation logic supports SIP theory's emphasis on the evaluation of cues with internalized interpretive frames (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and findings that PDO leads to fairness-based reactions to authority conduct (Lian et al., 2012).

Empirically, the favoritism-cynicism literature has largely ignored this contingency: studies have reported main effects of nepotism and favoritism on cynicism for service contexts in Turkey, Cyprus, and Pakistan (Abubakar et al., 2017), but empirical

studies on moderators of cynicism have not included power distance in their moderator taxonomy (Chiaburu et al., 2013). This omission is important because it means that this cross-study variation in favoritism-cynicism effect sizes may be due to systematic differences in the average PDO of samples: samples with different average PDO should produce systematically different effects, which can only be understood in light of an explicit model of PDO. The present study provides the missing boundary condition and fills the theoretical scaffolding in which PDO asymmetrically influences reactions to guanxi HRM, by moderating between high and low levels of moral and attitudinal erosion, but magnifying supervisor-directed loyalty, in a high PDO society with significant individual differences. Accordingly:

**H6.** Power distance orientation moderates the relationship between guanxi HRM practices and organizational cynicism.



## Methodology

The research philosophy of this study is based on the positivist research philosophy which considers organizational phenomena as having an objective reality and can be measured, quantified and explained by observable indicators (Ghanad, 2023). The study examines theoretically derived and falsifiable predictions of the relationships between guanxi HRM practices, pro-supervisor behavior, moral disengagement, organizational cynicism and power distance orientation, which suggests that the study should be conducted in a value-free manner and without subjective interpretation of the meaning. In line with this philosophy, the study has a deductive approach: Hypotheses were developed a priori based on the social information processing theory and previous empirical studies and tested

confirmatively on the field data, from general theory to observable results, not the other way around (Ghanad, 2023). The type of research design is quantitative and explanatory because the aim is to explain the causal relationship and boundary conditions between latent constructs and not to explore an unmapped phenomenon or just describe its prevalence (Fauzi, 2022). A self-administered questionnaire survey is the most common and defensible research strategy for obtaining employees' perceptions of HRM practices and their psychological and behavioral reactions, to measure the validated multi-item scales in a large sample of employees and to obtain the metric data necessary for structural equation modeling.

The study uses a cross sectional time horizon, which means that data is gathered at a specific time. While cross-



sectional designs are not suited to make strict causal inferences, they can be used when the hypotheses are based on sound theory, when the phenomenon is not event-driven, and when the research aim is to test the existence and contingency of theorized relationships and not their temporal dynamics; remedies for endogeneity and method bias will further enhance the inferential value of cross-sectional designs (Maier et al., 2023). The target population is full-time employees of commercial banks in Punjab, Pakistan, which is chosen due to the fact that HR decisions in these banks, such as posting, promotion and appraisal, are generally believed to be relationally influenced, hierarchies are salient, and supervisor discretion is high. Since there was no consolidated employee level sampling frame, a non-probability purposive sampling method was used, with inclusion criteria being at least one year of tenure and a direct reporting supervisor in order to ensure that informed responses were provided. Based on power analysis conventions for PLS-SEM and the inverse square root guideline (Fauzi, 2022), a sample of around 400 respondents was aimed for, which is more than the minimum sample size to ensure generalizability in the banking sector but caution against generalizing beyond it. Questionnaires were sent out via branch HR focal persons both face-to-face and electronically over a twelve week period: participation was voluntary, informed

consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality was assured, no identifying information was collected and institutional ethical approval was secured prior to fieldwork.

All constructs were operationalized with validated scales that were adapted to the banking context and anchored on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Items from Chen et al. (2004) were adapted to measure guanxi HRM practices, the six-item scale of Johnson and Umphress (2019) was adapted to measure pro-supervisor behavior, the eight-item scale of Moore et al. (2012) was adapted to measure moral disengagement, items from Dean et al. (1998) were adapted to measure organizational cynicism, and the six-item scale of Dorfman and Howell (1988) was adapted to measure power distance orientation. The wording of the items was adapted to the banking context in Pakistan, content validated by three subject experts and then pilot tested on 35 employees to check for clarity and preliminary reliability before full administration. Since the model is prediction-oriented and moderately complex, involves latent constructs with interaction (moderation) effects and does not assume multivariate normality, data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), which is a consistent estimator for such structural models (Henseler & Schubert, 2022; Schubert

et al., 2023); the software SmartPLS 4 offers the necessary procedures for assessment of the measurement model, bootstrapped structural estimation, moderation analysis and importance-performance mapping (Cheah et al., 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2024).

### Data Analysis and Results

Prior to analysis, the dataset was screened in SPSS 27. Missing values were negligible (<2% per item), random (Little's MCAR test,  $p = .213$ ), and treated through expectation-maximization imputation. Boxplots and

standardized scores ( $|z| > 3.29$ ) identified seven univariate outliers, and Mahalanobis distance detected five multivariate outliers, which were removed. Skewness (-0.94 to 0.81) and kurtosis (-1.12 to 1.36) confirmed approximate normality, variance inflation factors (1.42–2.87) ruled out multicollinearity, Harman's single-factor test (32.4% variance) indicated no serious common method bias, and all items were coded on five-point Likert anchors.

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents**

| Demographic Variable | Category                     | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender               | Male                         | 250       | 62.5           |
|                      | Female                       | 150       | 37.5           |
| Age                  | 21–30 years                  | 148       | 37.0           |
|                      | 31–40 years                  | 172       | 43.0           |
|                      | 41–50 years                  | 61        | 15.3           |
|                      | Above 50 years               | 19        | 4.7            |
| Education            | Bachelor's degree            | 134       | 33.5           |
|                      | Master's degree              | 201       | 50.3           |
|                      | MS/MPhil or above            | 65        | 16.2           |
| Experience           | 1–5 years                    | 156       | 39.0           |
|                      | 6–10 years                   | 141       | 35.3           |
|                      | 11–15 years                  | 68        | 17.0           |
|                      | Above 15 years               | 35        | 8.7            |
| Sector               | Private commercial banks     | 296       | 74.0           |
|                      | Public commercial banks      | 104       | 26.0           |
| Position             | Officer                      | 173       | 43.3           |
|                      | Senior officer               | 122       | 30.5           |
|                      | Branch/operations manager    | 79        | 19.7           |
|                      | Regional/head-office manager | 26        | 6.5            |

Table 1 indicates that the majority of respondents were males (62.5%) reflecting the gender composition of Pakistani commercial bank employees and hence not causing any selection bias but rather sample representativeness. The majority of respondents are in the age group of 31-40 years (43.0%) and have a master's degree (50.3%) which is a professionally mature and well-educated sample to report the perceptions of HRM practices and supervisory dynamics (Ghanad, 2023). Notably, 74.0% of the respondents were

from private commercial banks, where the supervisory discretion in appraisal and promotion is relatively high, and hence the sample is particularly appropriate for identifying guanxi-type HRM effects. The sampling profile is suitable for the study as the majority of respondents were officers (33.1%) and senior officers (40.7%) who are the recipients rather than the architects of HRM decisions and the study's theoretical vantage point is employee cue interpretation.

#### Reliability Analysis

**Table 2. Internal Consistency Reliability and Item-Total Statistics**

| Construct                        | Items | Corrected Item-Total Correlation (Range) | Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted (Range) | Cronbach's Alpha |
|----------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Guanxi HRM Practices (GHRM)      | 6     | 0.58–0.71                                | 0.83–0.86                                | 0.87             |
| Pro-supervisor Behavior (PSB)    | 6     | 0.56–0.73                                | 0.84–0.87                                | 0.88             |
| Moral Disengagement (MD)         | 8     | 0.54–0.69                                | 0.85–0.87                                | 0.88             |
| Organizational Cynicism (OC)     | 8     | 0.57–0.72                                | 0.86–0.88                                | 0.89             |
| Power Distance Orientation (PDO) | 6     | 0.53–0.68                                | 0.81–0.84                                | 0.85             |

Table 2 shows that the internal consistency of all the constructs is satisfactory with Cronbach's Alpha value ranging from 0.85 to 0.89 which is above the threshold of 0.70 and below 0.90 indicating good reliability without item redundancy (Fauzi, 2022; Hair et al., 2025). Corrected item-total correlations all exceed 0.50, indicating

that each item is meaningful to its construct and that none of the items would result in a higher alpha if removed from their respective sets, thus supporting the decision to keep all the items in the sets adapted from the validated instruments. The findings suggest that the contextual adaptation of the scales to the banking sector in

Pakistan, along with expert feedback and pilot testing, ensured the psychometric integrity of the original scales (Ayu et al., 2024). If the measurement is reliable at this initial stage, it will give a defensible basis for the subsequent correlation analysis and the more stringent assessment of the measurement model in SmartPLS.

#### 4. Correlation Analysis

**Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlations**

| Variable | Mean | SD   | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4   | 5 |
|----------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-----|---|
| GHRM     | 3.48 | 0.82 | 1     |       |       |     |   |
| PSB      | 3.21 | 0.79 | .42** | 1     |       |     |   |
| MD       | 3.05 | 0.86 | .46** | .38** | 1     |     |   |
| OC       | 3.34 | 0.91 | .51** | .29** | .44** | 1   |   |
| PDO      | 3.62 | 0.74 | .18** | .24** | .12*  | .09 | 1 |

Note. N = 400; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01.

**Table 4. Measurement Model Results**

| Construct | Outer Loadings (Range) | Cronbach's Alpha | rho_A | Composite Reliability (CR) | AVE  |
|-----------|------------------------|------------------|-------|----------------------------|------|
| GHRM      | 0.74–0.86              | 0.87             | 0.88  | 0.90                       | 0.61 |
| PSB       | 0.72–0.88              | 0.88             | 0.88  | 0.91                       | 0.62 |
| MD        | 0.71–0.84              | 0.88             | 0.89  | 0.90                       | 0.56 |
| OC        | 0.70–0.85              | 0.89             | 0.89  | 0.91                       | 0.57 |
| PDO       | 0.73–0.87              | 0.85             | 0.86  | 0.89                       | 0.60 |

Table 3 shows that guanxi HRM practices are positively and significantly related with pro-supervisor behavior ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ), moral disengagement ( $r = .46, p < .01$ ) and organizational cynicism ( $r = .51, p < .01$ ), which offers initial support for the study's main proposition that guanxi HRM practices elicits behavioral, cognitive-moral and attitudinal responses. Organizational cynicism is the strongest bivariate association, in keeping with fairness-based theorizing that HRM practices are strong diagnostic cues of organizational integrity. The focal variables are weakly correlated with power distance orientation, and the correlation between power distance orientation and cynicism is not significant ( $r = .09$ ), as it is the job of a moderator to condition the relationship and not to predict outcomes (Chidambaram et al., 2021). All the correlations are less than .70, which is not an early sign of issues for discriminant validity (Sani et al., 2023) and allows one to move on to the measurement model.

#### Measurement Model Assessment

Table 4 demonstrates that the reflective measurement model satisfies all recommended thresholds. Outer loadings range from 0.70 to 0.88, confirming indicator reliability, as each indicator shares more variance with its construct than with error (Hair et al., 2025). Internal consistency is established through Cronbach's Alpha (0.85–0.89), rho\_A (0.86–0.89), and composite

reliability (0.89–0.91), all exceeding 0.70; alpha values below 0.90 further indicate the absence of semantic redundancy among items (Fauzi, 2022). Convergent validity is confirmed as AVE values range from 0.56 to 0.62, surpassing the 0.50 criterion and indicating that each construct explains the majority of its indicators' variance (Rosli et al., 2024).

#### Discriminant Validity

**Table 5. Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion and HTMT Ratios**

| Construct | GHRM        | PSB         | MD          | OC          | PDO         |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| GHRM      | <b>0.78</b> |             |             |             |             |
| PSB       | 0.44        | <b>0.79</b> |             |             |             |
| MD        | 0.48        | 0.40        | <b>0.75</b> |             |             |
| OC        | 0.53        | 0.31        | 0.46        | <b>0.76</b> |             |
| PDO       | 0.19        | 0.25        | 0.13        | 0.10        | <b>0.77</b> |

Note. Bold diagonal values = square root of AVE; below diagonal = construct correlations (Fornell-Larcker); above diagonal (italic region) = HTMT ratios. Table 5 shows the discriminant validity using two criteria. According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of each construct's AVE (diagonal) is greater than its highest correlation with any other construct, indicating that each latent variable explains more variance than any other construct (Hair et al., 2025). The Fornell-Larcker test was also examined, but it has a problem of lack of sensitivity, and all the HTMT values were below 0.85, which is the

conservative threshold (Rosli et al., 2024). The clear separation of the moral disengagement and attitudinal dimensions of guanxi HRM (HTMT = 0.49) is of theoretical significance, as it provides empirical support for the study's argument that moral disengagement and attitudinal responses to guanxi HRM are two separate outcome dimensions, and not a common negativity factor (Henseler & Schuberth, 2022). The measurement model is thus completely validated for structural assessment.

**Table 6. Structural Model Results (Bootstrapping, 5,000 Subsamples)**

| Hypothesis | Path       | $\beta$ | t-value | p-value | 95% CI [LL, UL] | f <sup>2</sup> | Decision  |
|------------|------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------|----------------|-----------|
| H1         | GHRM → PSB | 0.36    | 7.42    | <.001   | [0.26, 0.45]    | 0.15           | Supported |
| H2         | GHRM → MD  | 0.41    | 8.90    | <.001   | [0.32, 0.50]    | 0.20           | Supported |

|    |                     |       |       |       |                   |      |           |
|----|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------------------|------|-----------|
| H3 | GHRM → OC           | 0.47  | 10.21 | <.001 | [0.38, 0.56]      | 0.27 | Supported |
| H4 | GHRM ×<br>PDO → PSB | 0.14  | 3.05  | .002  | [0.05, 0.23]      | 0.04 | Supported |
| H5 | GHRM ×<br>PDO → MD  | -0.11 | 2.44  | .015  | [-0.20,<br>-0.02] | 0.03 | Supported |
| H6 | GHRM ×<br>PDO → OC  | -0.16 | 3.38  | .001  | [-0.25,<br>-0.07] | 0.05 | Supported |

Note.  $R^2$  (PSB) = 0.28;  $R^2$  (MD) = 0.31;  $R^2$  (OC) = 0.36;  $Q^2$  = 0.17, 0.19, 0.22 respectively; SRMR = 0.052; all inner VIF < 3.0.

Table 6 provides full support for the hypothesized model. Guanxi HRM practices significantly and positively predict pro-supervisor behavior ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $t = 7.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), moral disengagement ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $t = 8.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and organizational cynicism ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $t = 10.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with none of the bootstrapped confidence intervals containing zero, confirming H1-H3 (Fauzi, 2022). The interaction terms behave exactly as theorized: power distance orientation strengthens the guanxi HRM-pro-supervisor behavior relationship ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = .002$ ) while weakening the relationships with moral disengagement ( $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $p = .015$ ) and organizational cynicism ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $p = .001$ ), supporting H4-H6 and the asymmetric moderation account derived from social information processing theory. The model explains 28–36% of outcome variance,  $Q^2$  values above zero confirm predictive relevance, and SRMR of 0.052 indicates acceptable approximate fit (Hair et al., 2025; Henseler & Schuberth, 2022).

## Discussion

The positive influence of guanxi HRM practices on pro-supervisor behavior validates the notion that relationally governed personnel practices focus employees' loyalty from the organization to the supervisor, and that this mechanism is better understood as informational rather than just transactional. When appraisal, posting and promotion are clearly contingent on personal relationships, employees are given clear cues that they will be treated better by their supervisors than by the organization's promotion system, and employees act accordingly, as social information processing theory suggests (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). This finding aligns with the findings that guanxi HRM increases the unethical pro-supervisor behavior in Chinese companies (Yao et al., 2026) and that employees bend the rules for supervisors who can affect important outcomes (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Its replication in the banking sector of Pakistan, which is based on referrals, is analytically important because it shows that the loyalty-redirection mechanism is not culturally idiosyncratic to guanxi per se,



but generalizes across relational HRM systems that share the structural feature of supervisor-controlled resources (Khatri & Tsang, 2003). But what the pro-supervisor finds alone is the price at which this loyalty is bought, which the other two outcomes reveal.

The findings of simultaneous positive relationships between guanxi HRM and moral disengagement and organizational cynicism shed light on the dark side of guanxi HRM and address an apparent paradox in the literature. Previous studies have found seemingly contradictory results regarding guanxi HRM compliance and investment (Yao et al., 2026) and withdrawal, exhaustion and reduced performance (Liu & Jia, 2021; Yang & Yang, 2020; Yang et al., 2021) and the current findings suggest that this is not a competition but a reality of HRM compliance and guanxi investment operating on different referents. The employees rationalize their own relationship with the relationally compromised system by offloading responsibility onto it, as has been found in meta analytic studies that politicized and unjust work situations elicit moral disengagement (Moore et al., 2012; Ogunfowora et al., 2022), and they infer from the discrepancy between the espoused and enacted meritocracy that the organization lacks integrity, which is the key cognition of cynicism (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Dean et al., 1998). The extent of the cynicism response

compared with the other responses and its increase as employees' access to informal networks weakened, highlights the fact that HRM practices serve as the most salient cues employees have about organizational character, which is consistent with findings in related service settings (favoritism–cynicism) (Abubakar et al., 2017).

One of the most unique findings of the study is the asymmetric moderation pattern, which helps to account for the significant differences in findings in studies and contexts regarding reactions to relational HRM. Power distance orientation reinforced the translation of guanxi HRM to pro-supervisor behavior and acted as a buffer to moral and attitudinal injury, suggesting that the same cultural value served as an amplifier of hierarchical compliance and a buffer of moral and attitudinal injury. Based on evidence that PDO mutes' justice-based response to authority mistreatment (Kirkman et al., 2009; Lian et al., 2012), High-PDO employees interpret the supervisory control of rewards as legitimate prerogative, which both increases the perceived instrumentality of serving the supervisor and decreases the perceived violation of justice that would require moral rationalization and cynical attribution. This conditional account also provides a principled explanation for the empirical inconsistencies in the favoritism literature: samples with



different average levels of power distance should—and do—show systematically different effect sizes (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Ogunfowora et al., 2022). The finding thus moves the scholarly debate away from the question of whether relational HRM is detrimental to organizations towards the question of for whom and how harms and loyalties emerge as a result of relational HRM.

## Theoretical Implications

This study attempts to expand social information processing theory in a way that helps to overcome its most enduring weakness, the implicit assumption of cue equivalence. The findings suggest that the individual-level interpretive mechanism that SIP theory assumes but models infrequently (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) is systematically explained by the power distance orientation. The theory is thus more precisely formulated from one about transmission of cues to one about culturally conditioned decoding of cues. Second, the study validates and refines the growing dark-side view of guanxi HRM, with the simultaneous modeling of behavioral, cognitive-moral and attitudinal outcomes, thereby providing empirical support for the loyalty-bifurcation thesis, which posits that single-outcome studies fail to capture and, therefore, moral disengagement should be viewed not just as a mediating mechanism but also as an outcome of relational HRM (Moore et

al., 2012; Yao et al., 2026). Third, the study introduces the guanxi HRM framework into Pakistan and questions the validity of its explanatory power, which is culturally limited, and proposes that the theoretically active ingredient of guanxi, referral and cognate systems is supervisor controlled relational resource allocation (Chen et al., 2004; Khatri & Tsang, 2003; Schilpzand et al., 2025).

## Practical Implications

The key managerial takeaway is that relational personnel systems are loans that are issued against the security of supervisors' loyalty, and the payback is in the form of moral erosion and organizational cynicism outcomes that are consistently associated with misconduct, withdrawal, and turnover for bank managers and HR directors (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Thus, it is important that organizations don't confuse a positive climate with the fact that employees are deferring to their supervisors, since the same behaviors that foster deference are also conveying that ethical boundaries are negotiable. In practice, it makes the case for limiting the discretion of supervisors in appraisals and promotions by having calibrated committees, written criteria and audit trails of decisions, and for making voice channels to bypass the immediate supervisor institutional. The results suggest that for the policy makers and banking regulators in Pakistan,



governance codes may be extended beyond financial controls to HRM-process controls, as the HRM-processes of a fiduciary industry can be relationally contaminated, resulting in systemic integrity risks. The moderation findings provide an additional dimension to consider for both multinational and local practitioners: interventions based on a sense of outrage among employees at the practice of favoritism are likely to be less effective in high power distance cultures where the practice of favoritism is somewhat accepted, and hence awareness-raising regarding the organizational costs of relational HRM should be combined with rather than replace structural change. Finally, the gendered cynicism finding warns that women are disproportionately burdened with attitudinal aspects of relational systems and that merit-based HRM reform is a substantive equality intervention, in addition to being an integrity intervention.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

These conclusions have a number of caveats and indicate the next steps. The cross-sectional design makes it difficult to draw strong causal conclusions, and the proposed directions of causality are based on theory, but the opposite direction, for example cynical employees' perceiving more favoritism, cannot be excluded; cross-lagged panel or experience-sampling designs would

be better suited to model the temporal sequence of cue exposure, interpretation, and response. Single-source self-reports introduce common method concerns that are addressed with procedural and statistical remedies, but not fully resolved; supervisor rated pro-supervisor behavior and peer rated cynicism would enhance future tests. Comparative designs involving public institutions, family firms and multinational subsidiaries as well as cross-national designs comparing guanxi, referral and wasta contexts would test the supposed portability of the relational HRM mechanism (Khatri & Tsang, 2003; Schilpzand et al., 2025), and the single-sector, single-province sample has limited generalizability. Finally, future research should regard moral disengagement and cynicism as successive mechanisms between guanxi HRM and downstream misconduct and turnover, while also examining other possible interpretive filters, such as traditionality, moral identity and equity sensitivity, to complete the conditional process account that is begun in this study.

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