


It's Not the Flattery, It's the Relationship: Rethinking LMX and Workplace Deviance through Ingratiation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the moderating role of ingratiation in the relationship between Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and workplace deviance. While prior research has consistently demonstrated that high-quality LMX reduces deviant workplace behavior through increased trust and mutual support, limited attention has been given to how impression management tactics, such as ingratiation, may influence this relationship. Drawing on a quantitative approach, the study analyzes data from (395) employees across diverse industries in Indonesia. The results indicate that ingratiation significantly moderates the effect of LMX on workplace deviance. Specifically, the negative association between LMX and deviance becomes stronger when ingratiation is high. This finding challenges the conventional assumption that ingratiation is inherently dysfunctional and suggests instead that, in the context of strong leader-subordinate relationships, its potentially negative effects can be socially regulated. The study contributes to the literature by positioning ingratiation not only as a behavioral risk but also as a contextual trigger that activates LMX's adaptive control function. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening high-quality workplace relationships while managing political behavior as part of developing a constructive and ethical organizational culture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Maintaining healthy and productive relationships between leaders and subordinates while simultaneously minimizing workplace deviance remains one of the most pressing challenges in today's organizational landscape. Workplace deviance refers to voluntary behavior that violates organizational norms and threatens the well-being of the organization or its members (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). It encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviors, ranging from minor infractions such as time theft and gossiping to more severe forms such as theft, harassment, or sabotage. Some deviant acts clearly violate legal or formal policies, while others, though not illegal, undermine team productivity and provoke interpersonal conflict (de Bruijn, 2021). As such, identifying factors that either trigger or suppress workplace deviance is critical to fostering ethical and constructive work environments.

One such factor is the quality of the leader-subordinate relationship, commonly conceptualized as Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). LMX captures the extent to which leader-member relationships are based on mutual trust, respect, and reciprocal support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships tend to generate a positive working climate, reinforce team cohesion, and reduce deviant tendencies. Conversely, low-quality LMX marked by alienation, poor communication, and a lack of managerial support can intensify frustration and increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour as a form of resistance or retaliation.

Despite substantial empirical support for the direct link between LMX and workplace deviance, most studies have overlooked moderating mechanisms that might strengthen or weaken this relationship (Wulani et al., 2022). Yet, leader-member dynamics are rarely linear or fixed; they are shaped by various social and psychological factors. For instance, employees' ability to manage upward communication and strategically influence their leaders has been shown to affect relationship quality and conflict resolution (Liu & Liu, 2024). Within this context, ingratiation, an impression management tactic used to elicit favourable treatment from authority figures, emerges as a relevant strategy warranting closer examination. Ingratiation is widely recognized as one of the most effective upward influence tactics in organizational settings (Bolino et al., 2016).

Ingratiation refers to attempts by individuals to strengthen interpersonal rapport with superiors by using flattery, agreement, or other socially pleasing behaviours (Jones, 1964; Bolino et al., 2016). Employees often use ingratiation to gain promotions, favourable evaluations, or symbolic rewards. While such behaviours may facilitate

leader approval and career benefits, prior research has also highlighted their potential downsides. Excessive, inauthentic, or manipulative ingratiation may elicit distrust from leaders and generate an unhealthy political climate (Fitriastuti et al., 2021; Asadullah & Musaddiq, 2016; Kumar & Beyerlein, 1991).

In the context of leader–member interactions, ingratiation exhibits a dual nature. On one hand, when subordinates engage in genuine ingratiation behaviors that align with leader expectations, it may elicit positive responses and reinforce relational bonds (Wu et al., 2013). On the other hand, overuse of ingratiation, especially when perceived as insincere or strategic, can damage trust, provoke peer resentment, and, in turn, is likely to contribute to increased workplace deviance (Klotz et al., 2018; Fitriastuti & Vanderstraeten, 2021). This duality positions ingratiation as a unique yet understudied moderator in the LMX–deviance relationship.

To date, empirical studies examining the moderating role of ingratiation in the relationship between LMX and workplace deviance remain scarce. Most research has concentrated on the direct effects of LMX without fully addressing the complexity of impression management strategies that may shape behavioral outcomes (X. Liu et al., 2020; Z. Liu & Liu, 2024; Wulani et al., 2022). Furthermore, Çiçek (2021) highlights a lack of attention to how LMX dynamics intersect with impression management tactics such as ingratiation. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the moderating role of ingratiation in the link between LMX and workplace deviance.

By exploring this moderating effect, the study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of relational dynamics in organizational settings and offers practical implications for leadership practices. Specifically, it provides insights into how leaders can more effectively manage employee relationships to reduce deviance and promote ethical conduct in the workplace.

As with most empirical studies, this research is not without limitations. Its cross-sectional design constrains causal inferences. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to capture dynamic changes in variables over time. Moreover, the use of perception-based self-report measures raises the risk of common method bias; incorporating data triangulation (e.g., behavioral observations or peer evaluations) would enhance validity. Given the exclusive focus on Indonesian organizations, generalizing findings to other cultural or industrial contexts requires further empirical testing.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX)

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory explains variations in the quality of relationships that develop between leaders and individual subordinates through daily interactions over time (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These relationships tend to evolve into two primary categories: the *in-group*, characterized by warmth, trust, and mutual support; and the *out-group*, defined by more formal, transactional, and limited exchanges. LMX is grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which suggests that relationships built on reciprocity encourage greater organizational commitment, trust, and prosocial contributions from employees (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Among the various factors that influence the development of high-quality LMX, ingratiation has received increasing attention. When subordinates engage in behaviors such as offering praise or aligning their views with those of their supervisor, leaders are more likely to respond positively and form closer relational bonds. However, ingratiation is only one of several antecedents of LMX; others include value congruence, personality compatibility, and leadership style. High-quality LMX has been associated with enhanced job satisfaction, engagement, and citizenship behaviors, while also reducing stress and turnover intention. Conversely, low-quality LMX can lead to perceptions of exclusion or unfair treatment, increasing the likelihood of counterproductive work behaviors.

Ingratiation

Ingratiation refers to a deliberate impression management tactic in which individuals seek social approval, preferential treatment, or symbolic rewards from supervisors by engaging in socially desirable behaviors, such as offering compliments, showing agreement, or demonstrating loyalty (Jones, 1964; Bolino et al., 2016). This strategy is particularly prevalent in hierarchical, competitive, or politically charged organizations, where success is influenced not only by performance but also by how employees manage upward perceptions (Fitriastuti et al., 2021). Ingratiation becomes especially salient in high-pressure and uncertain environments, where employees feel the need to secure their position through interpersonal influence.

As a relational tactic, ingratiation may serve not only to gain symbolic benefits but also to enhance the perceived quality of leader–subordinate relationships. When employed authentically and in the context of mutual respect, ingratiation can foster trust and reinforce social competence. However, when perceived as insincere, excessive, or manipulative, it may backfire, undermining trust and provoking negative reactions from both supervisors and peers (Fitriastuti & Vanderstraeten, 2022).

Beyond reputational risks, recent research highlights that ingratiation can also lead to psychological depletion, a state of emotional and cognitive exhaustion resulting from sustained impression management efforts (Fitriastuti & Vanderstraeten, 2022). Maintaining a favorable image over time requires significant self-regulatory

effort, depleting personal resources such as emotional energy, attention, and self-control (Ni et al., 2023). In such cases, employees may become more vulnerable to deviant behavior due to impaired self-regulation (Klotz et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, these negative consequences are not inevitable. When ingratiation occurs within the context of a high-quality LMX relationship, characterized by mutual trust, respect, and relational stability, the relational security it provides may serve as a buffer against the psychological costs of ingratiation. In this context, ingratiation efforts are more likely to be interpreted as sincere and relationship-maintaining, rather than self-serving, thereby reducing the risk of psychological strain or deviant reactions.

Workplace Deviance

Workplace deviance refers to intentional behavior that violates organizational norms and threatens the well-being of the organization or its members (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Such behaviors range from interpersonal deviance, such as verbal aggression, social sabotage, or ostracism, to organizational deviance, including absenteeism, resource misuse, and deliberate reductions in effort or performance. Deviant behavior often emerges as a response to perceived injustice, psychological strain, or dysfunctional workplace relationships, making it a critical indicator of breakdowns in the organizational social system.

A wide range of individual and relational factors contribute to workplace deviance. One key relational antecedent is the quality of LMX. When leader-subordinate relationships are weak, employees may feel marginalized or treated unfairly, increasing their inclination to act out through deviant behavior. In addition, as noted earlier, deviance may also arise from psychological depletion triggered by sustained ingratiation efforts. When mental and emotional energy is drained, employees may lose the capacity to suppress harmful impulses or adhere to organizational norms, thereby heightening the risk of deviant behavior (Klotz et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2020). Taken together, workplace deviance can be understood as the outcome of complex interactions between relational dynamics and internal psychological strain experienced by individuals in organizational settings.

Leader-Member Exchange and Workplace Deviance

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the quality of dyadic relationships between leaders and subordinates, which are defined by levels of trust, mutual respect, and emotional support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Within this framework, leaders tend to develop differentiated relationships with their subordinates, leading to the formation of two distinct groups: the *in-group* and the *out-group*. In-group members enjoy high-quality exchanges with their leaders, characterized by open communication, greater autonomy, and increased socio-emotional support. In contrast, out-group members experience more formal, transactional relationships, often limited to role-defined tasks and lower levels of trust and involvement (Ahmad et al., 2023).

This relational differentiation aligns with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which argues that individuals are more likely to respond with positive, cooperative behaviors when they perceive their treatment as fair and supportive. Employees who are part of the in-group typically feel valued and empowered, which enhances their intrinsic motivation to contribute and reduces the likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviors. Conversely, those in the out-group may perceive their exclusion as unjust, leading to feelings of frustration, marginalization, and disengagement. These negative experiences may increase the risk of workplace deviance, including behaviors such as withholding effort, misusing resources, or retaliating through sabotage.

Empirical studies have consistently supported the negative relationship between LMX quality and workplace deviance. Wulani et al. (2022) found that employees with high-quality LMX relationships were significantly less likely to engage in deviant behaviors. Similarly, Liu and Liu (2024) showed that strong interpersonal bonds with supervisors helped mitigate counterproductive intentions. Moreover, Liu et al. (2020) identified LMX as a protective factor that inhibits deviance by fostering psychological safety and relational stability. Drawing on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. *Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) is negatively and significantly associated with workplace deviance.*

Ingratiation as a Moderator

While Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) has been widely associated with reduced workplace deviance, this relationship may not be uniform across all organizational contexts. One important factor that can influence the strength of this relationship is ingratiation, a deliberate impression management strategy aimed at eliciting approval from higher-status individuals through flattery, conformity, or other socially pleasing behaviors. Ingratiation is commonly used by employees to gain favorable treatment, build influence, or protect their standing within hierarchical structures.

As an upward influence tactic, ingratiation plays a central role in shaping how subordinates manage their relationships with leaders. Although often effective in eliciting positive reactions, ingratiation is also a double-

edged sword. When perceived as sincere and contextually appropriate, ingratiation may enhance trust and strengthen interpersonal bonds. However, when seen as manipulative, excessive, or self-serving, it can backfire, eroding trust, provoking peer resentment, and increasing the risk of social exclusion or workplace deviance (Fitriastuti & Vanderstraeten, 2022; Yan et al, 2020; Mao et al, 2018; Klotz et al, 2018).

In this sense, ingratiation may serve as a moderator that alters the strength of the relationship between LMX and workplace deviance. For employees who engage in high levels of ingratiation, the quality of their LMX relationship may take on heightened significance. High-quality LMX may buffer the potentially negative effects of ingratiation, such as being perceived as disingenuous, by providing a context of mutual trust and relational goodwill. Conversely, when LMX is low, ingratiation may intensify perceptions of self-serving behavior, further aggravating deviant responses (Azeem et al, 2021).

Therefore, ingratiation does not operate in isolation; its effects on workplace behavior may depend largely on the broader relational context in which it occurs. In high-LMX relationships, ingratiation may be interpreted more positively as an effort to maintain harmony or demonstrate commitment, whereas in low-LMX contexts, it may be viewed with suspicion or cynicism. Therefore, we argue the following:

H2. *Ingratiation moderates the relationship between Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) and workplace deviance such that the negative effect of LMX on deviance is stronger when ingratiation is high.*

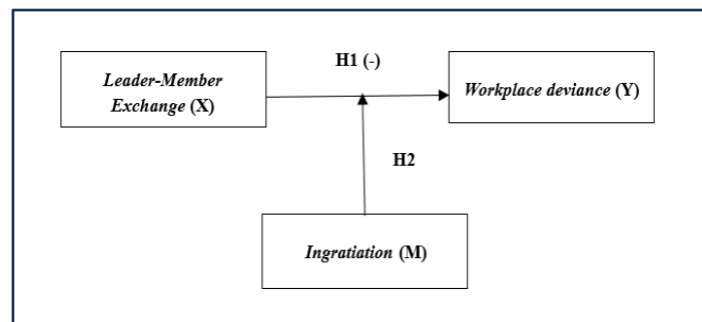


Figure 1. Research Framework: The Moderating Role of Ingratiation in the Relationship Between Leader–Member Exchange and Workplace Deviance

2. METHOD

This study collected data from 395 employees working across various industry sectors in Indonesia, out of a total of 421 distributed questionnaires. The industries are telecommunication, banking, and Education. Supervisors in each organization were first contacted and informed about the research objectives. They assisted in the identification and recruitment of eligible participants and also completed assessments regarding their subordinates' behaviors. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential. Paper-based questionnaires were administered directly on-site at participants' workplaces. Employees completed self-report measures of workplace deviance, while supervisors provided ratings of the quality of their exchange relationship (LMX) and employees' ingratiation behaviors. On average, the questionnaire took 15–20 minutes to complete. Additional demographic data, including age, gender, and tenure were also collected (see Table 1).

2.1 Measures

All constructs were measured using validated scales from established literature. Likert-type response formats were used for each scale, and internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales demonstrating acceptable reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$).

Workplace deviance was assessed through employee self-reports using 11 items adapted from Bennett and Robinson (2000), capturing both *organizational* and *interpersonal* forms of deviance. Respondents indicated how frequently they engaged in deviant acts in the workplace on a 5-point scale (1 = never to 5 = almost always). Sample items include: "Taken an additional or longer break than is acceptable at your workplace" and "Made fun of someone at work." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.89.

Leader–member exchange (LMX) was rated by supervisors using a 7-item scale from Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), measuring the perceived quality of their working relationship with each employee. Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is: "This employee understands my job-related problems and communicates effectively." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.73.

Ingratiation was also assessed through supervisor ratings using a 5-item scale developed by Kumar and Beyerlein (1991). Supervisors rated how often employees engaged in ingratiation behavior toward them on a 7-point scale (1 = never to 7 = daily). A sample item is: “This employee shows support for my ideas even when they might not fully agree.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.82.

To assess the sampling adequacy and suitability of the data for factor analysis, we conducted the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett’s test of sphericity. The KMO value was 0.866, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating a meritorious level of sampling adequacy. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(378) = 3212.215$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlation matrix was appropriate for further analysis.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among all variables. The mean scores and standard deviations for the key study variables were as follows: leader–member exchange (LMX) as rated by supervisors ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.44$), workplace deviance (WD) as self-reported by employees ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.66$), and ingratiation behavior directed toward supervisors ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.88$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

| | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|------------------------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|--------|-------|---|
| Age | 30.22 | 8.30 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Gender | 1.47 | 0.50 | -.09 | 1 | | | | | |
| Job Experience | 1.61 | 0.97 | .68** | .04 | 1 | | | | |
| Supervisor Experience | 1.21 | 0.51 | .38** | .01 | .48** | 1 | | | |
| Leader-Member Exchange | 3.90 | 0.44 | -.02 | .09 | .05 | -.02 | 1 | | |
| Workplace Deviance | 2.01 | 0.66 | -.11* | -.13* | -.06 | -.03 | -.36** | 1 | |
| Ingratiation | 4.38 | 0.88 | -.12* | -.09 | -.03 | -.02 | .20** | .15** | 1 |

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$

Consistent with our expectations, LMX was negatively associated with workplace deviance ($r = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that a higher quality relationship between employee and supervisor is linked to lower deviant behavior at work. Additionally, ingratiation was positively correlated with both LMX ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$) and workplace deviance ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that while ingratiation may enhance supervisory relationships, it may also be associated with an increase in deviant conduct.

In terms of demographic variables, age was negatively correlated with both workplace deviance ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and ingratiation ($r = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that older employees tend to engage less in both behaviors. No significant associations were found between gender and the primary study variables. These findings offer initial evidence regarding the relational and behavioral dynamics in organizational settings and highlight the need to further explore how ingratiation interacts with supervisory relationships and workplace behavior.

2.2 Data Analysis

To examine the moderating effect of ingratiation on the relationship between leader–member exchange (LMX) and workplace deviance, we conducted a regression analysis using PROCESS Macro Model 1 by Hayes (Version 3.5) in SPSS. This analytical approach allowed us to test the interaction effect between the independent variable LMX (X) and Ingratiation (Z) on the dependent variable workplace deviance (Y). The regression equation used is as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \beta_3 (X.Z) + e \quad (1)$$

Prior to the regression analysis, all variables were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity, particularly for the interaction term. Control variables that were significantly correlated with the dependent variable (e.g., age) were included in the initial model. Variables that were non-significant and uncorrelated with workplace deviance were excluded from further analysis, following recommendations by Hayes (2018) and Aiken & West (1991). This procedure enabled us to examine whether the effect of LMX on deviant workplace behaviour varies depending on the level of ingratiation directed toward supervisors. The results are presented in the next section.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The regression analysis was conducted in two steps. In Model 1, which included only the main effects, Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) was found to be negatively associated with workplace deviance (WD) ($\beta = -0.606$, $p < .001$). This suggests that employees with stronger, high-quality relationships with their supervisors are less likely to engage in deviant behavior. Conversely, ingratiation showed a significant positive association with

workplace deviance ($\beta = 0.171, p < .001$), indicating that employees who frequently engage in impression management tactics are more prone to deviant actions.

Model 2 introduced the interaction term between LMX and ingratiation. In this model, the negative effect of LMX on deviance remained significant and slightly strengthened ($\beta = -0.637, p < .001$), while the positive effect of ingratiation also increased slightly ($\beta = 0.184, p < .001$). Notably, the interaction between LMX and ingratiation was significant ($\beta = -0.084, p = .003$), suggesting a moderating effect. Specifically, the relationship between ingratiation and workplace deviance becomes weaker when LMX is high. This finding highlights the buffering role of high-quality leader–member relationships in mitigating the potentially harmful effects of ingratiation.

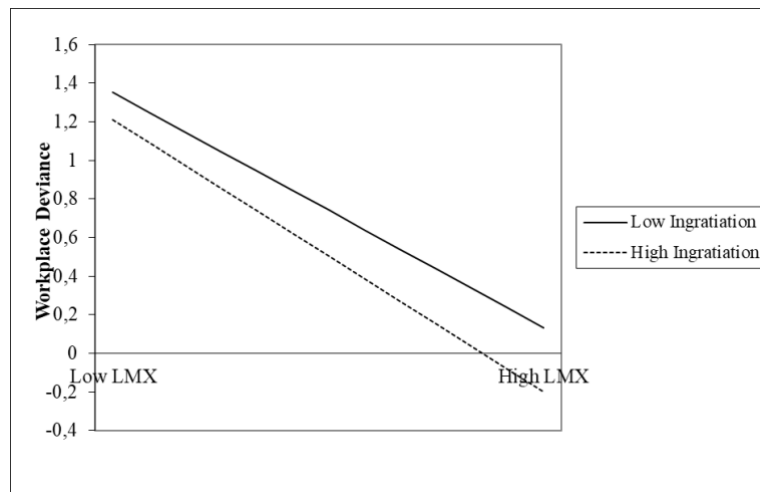


Figure 2. Interaction Effect of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) and Ingratiation on Workplace Deviance

To further examine the interaction effect, simple slopes were computed at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator. The figure above illustrates a significant interaction between leader–member exchange (LMX) and ingratiation in predicting workplace deviance. As shown, at low levels of ingratiation (-1 SD), LMX is negatively associated with workplace deviance, although the slope is relatively shallow. In contrast, at high levels of ingratiation ($+1$ SD), the negative association becomes notably steeper. This pattern suggests that the protective influence of high-quality LMX relationships in reducing workplace deviance is more pronounced when employees engage in greater ingratiation. In sum, this pattern supports the argument that ingratiation functions as a strengthening moderator, amplifying the protective role of high-quality LMX relationships against deviant workplace behavior.

Discussion

Grounded in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory and Impression Management theory, this study offers new insights into how relational quality and strategic self-presentation jointly shape workplace deviance. LMX theory posits that high-quality leader–member relationships, which are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and support, foster positive work attitudes and discourage deviant behavior. Impression Management theory, in contrast, focuses on individuals' efforts to control how they are perceived by others, often through tactics such as ingratiation. While both theories have been extensively applied in organizational research, their intersection remains underexplored. This study bridges that gap by demonstrating how ingratiation moderates the effect of LMX on deviance.

Specifically, the findings reveal that the negative relationship between LMX and workplace deviance becomes stronger when ingratiation is high. This interaction highlights a paradox: although ingratiation is often viewed as a manipulative or self-serving tactic, it can enhance the effectiveness of LMX in suppressing deviant behaviour, provided that the underlying relationship is strong. In other words, ingratiation does not necessarily undermine workplace norms; rather, it can serve as a contextual signal that activates the regulatory function of high-quality leader–member relationships.

From the perspective of LMX theory, the leader–follower relationship acts as a social framework that shapes behavioural boundaries (Ahmad et al., 2023). When followers engage in ingratiation, they place relational pressure on leaders to respond, evaluate, and regulate accordingly. In this setting, the quality of the relationship

becomes critical. High-LMX relationships are more likely to absorb the ambiguity of ingratiation and redirect it into alignment with group norms. Impression Management theory supports this interpretation by recognizing that impression tactics are not inherently good or bad; they are judged through the lens of context, intent, and audience interpretation. A trusting leader–member relationship provides the interpretive lens through which ingratiation is either sanctioned or redirected.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) can be seen as a brake that helps reduce deviant behavior, while ingratiation acts like a gas pedal that can increase it. However, when ingratiation becomes stronger, the protective role of LMX also becomes more active. This shows that strong leader–employee relationships can adjust and respond effectively, even in the presence of ingratiation. These results question the common view that ingratiation is always harmful. Instead, they suggest that ingratiation can highlight the value of high-quality relationships in shaping behavior at work.

From a practical perspective, ingratiation should not be automatically seen as a sign of detrimental behavior. It can help leaders better understand and guide employee actions within a strong relationship. For this reason, organizations should focus on building strong leader–employee relationships and recognizing the social signals behind how people interact. Managing deviant behavior is not only about making and enforcing rules. It is also about creating a work environment where those rules are understood and followed through strong, trust-based relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine how ingratiation moderates the relationship between Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) and workplace deviance. The findings confirm that LMX not only has a direct negative effect on deviant behavior but also plays a critical moderating role in reducing the potential negative impact of ingratiation. Ingratiation, commonly viewed as a strategic impression management tactic used by employees to gain favour, was shown to be positively associated with workplace deviance when used excessively or insincerely. However, when ingratiation occurs within strong, trust-based leader–member relationships, its harmful effects can be reduced. The results offer a theoretical contribution by showing that ingratiation is not only a behavioral risk but also a relational amplifier that increases the importance of LMX. This finding is particularly relevant in politically charged or hierarchical work environments, where ingratiation is more likely to emerge. In such settings, high-quality LMX plays a crucial role in limiting the potential for ingratiation to escalate into workplace deviance.

Based on these findings, several practical actions are recommended for organizational leaders and human resource practitioners. First, it is crucial to strengthen the quality of leader–subordinate relationships through open communication, mutual trust, and transparency. One area that deserves particular attention is how leaders seek feedback from subordinates. However, feedback processes should be used cautiously. Although they are often intended to promote openness and improvement, they can sometimes invite strategic self-presentation. Our related study found that supervisors' feedback-seeking behavior may trigger upward ingratiation from subordinates, potentially as a way to appear favorable rather than to provide honest input (Mertens et al., 2024). This highlights the need to design feedback interactions that support authenticity over image management.

Second, managers should develop greater sensitivity to signs of excessive ingratiation, which may indicate underlying motives such as manipulation or reputational self-protection. Third, leadership development programs should be designed to enhance emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and the ability to build integrity-driven relationships. These competencies help ensure that leaders can interpret ingratiatory behavior appropriately and respond in ways that support ethical conduct. Ultimately, this study suggests that deviance prevention is not only a matter of individual discipline or formal rules but also a relational process shaped by how leaders manage influence, trust, and behavioral ambiguity in daily workplace interactions.

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