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# Abusive Supervision and Career Adaptability: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Coworker Support

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## ABSTRACT

Recent literature on abusive supervision has suggested its negative impact on a number of work outcomes. However, we still have little knowledge about the impact of destructive leadership on employee career outcomes. Drawing on social cognitive theory (SCT), we propose that abusive supervision challenges employee career adaptability by damaging career self-efficacy beliefs in the workplace. Three-wave data collected from 287 employees working in different organizations situated in China has shown that abusive supervision is negatively related to employee career adaptability through career self-efficacy. Moreover, coworker support was found to buffer the association between abusive supervision and career adaptability such that the relationships are weaker at higher levels of coworker support. Implications for researchers and practitioners and research directions for the future are discussed.

## Introduction

Abusive supervision has dominated recent empirical research in the area of destructive leadership (Gonzalez-Morales, Kernan, Becker, & Eisenberger, 2018; Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017; Yu, Duffy, & Tepper, 2018; Zhang, Liu, Xu, Yang, & Bednall, 2019). Research has associated abusive supervision with a number of work outcomes such as workplace deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), low performance (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012), less work engagement (Chang, Wang, Li, & Liu, 2011), and high psychological distress (Tepper, 2007). However, research on the impact of abusive supervision on employee career outcomes is limited in the literature. Importantly, research suggests that the effects of leadership may last even when the leader-follower relationship ends. For example, Barling (2014) argued that the real test of leadership is what is achieved after the current leader-follower relationship has finished. On the other hand, managers sometimes take abusive supervision as instrumental in managing employees (Oh & Farh, 2017; Zhang & Liu, 2018) as some scholars view that abusive supervision may enhance employees' promotion-focused work efforts (Oh & Farh, 2017). In this scenario, it is reasonable to explore the relationship between abusive supervision and employee career outcomes. As such, managers may take abusive supervision with an intention to manage employee performance through increasing their work-related efforts, but perceptions of abusive supervision by the employees may decrease their career adaptability by damaging efficacy beliefs.

Career adaptability is getting essential to employee career success in the context of today's dynamic nature of job and career markets (Baruch, 2006; Savickas et al., 2009; Zacher, 2014). Career

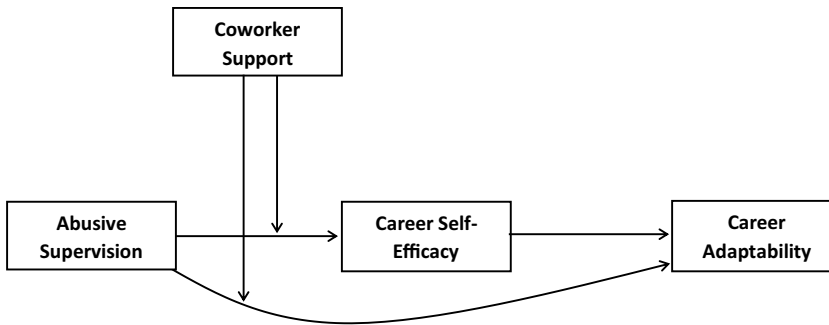


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

adaptability is defined as “the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). Savickas views career adaptability as a psychological resource that helps people to deal with their career management needs including career development, career transitions, and sudden career changes (Savickas, 1997). Extant literature has found a significant association of career adaptability with several career and job outcomes, this includes job engagement (Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012), loyalty (Klehe, Zikic, Vianen, Annelies, & De Pater, 2011), commitment (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), and performance (Zacher, 2015). Although, research (Biemann, Kearney, & Marggraf, 2015; Joo & Lim, 2013; Litano & Major, 2016), reveals that supervisors play a key role in developing subordinates’ careers. We still have no research evidence on how abusive supervision can be detrimental to employee career adaptability. We, therefore, intend to investigate the relationships between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability. As such we assume that abusive supervisors can damage employee career adaptability by negatively influencing their career self-efficacy. To support our assumption we utilize social cognitive theory (SCT) which helps us to explain why we expect a negative association between abusive supervision and subordinates’ career outcomes. SCT suggests that environmental factors serve as either barriers or facilitators of efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986). Drawing on SCT, we argue that abusive supervision as an environmental barrier can affect followers’ career adaptability via damaging their career self-efficacy.

If employee career adaptability could be damaged by abusive supervision, a further research question is how to cope with such an unfavorable environment. Previous research (Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Hirschi, 2009; Leahy-Warren, McCarthy, & Corcoran, 2012), suggests that social support is positively associated with career self-efficacy and career adaptability. Drawing on social support literature, we, therefore, suggest that coworkers support one receives at the workplace may act as a substitute for supervisory support which is absent in the environment of abusive supervision. We assume that coworker support may weaken the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates’ career adaptability. Thus, the second purpose of our research is to investigate the moderating effect of coworker social support on the relationships of abusive supervision and career adaptability.

By investigating abusive supervision (a work-related factor) as an important determinant of employee career adaptability (a career outcome) our research makes major contributions in leadership and career domains. For instance, knowing the effect of abusive supervision (a leadership style) on subordinates’ career adaptability will help us to understand the relationship between destructive leadership and employee career. This will extend the literature on abusive supervision as the research usually examines how leadership behavior affects subordinates during the course of the current leader-follower relationship. An understanding of the impact of abusive supervision on workers’ long-term career outcomes such as career adaptability will also help the organizations to

develop practices that discourage such an environment in organizations. On the other hand, antecedents of career adaptability are rather scarce in the literature. Following Savickas and his colleagues' (Savickas, 2002; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) arguments that career adaptability can be influenced by the factors within-person and environment, we further extend this line of work knowing abusive supervision as an environmental aspect that can undermine this important employee resource in today's workplaces. Finally, we explore the moderating role of coworker support on the association between abusive supervision and subordinates' career adaptability. By doing so, we not only identify a boundary condition to the negative effect of abusive supervision on career adaptability but also provide insights for employees to maintain their career adaptability in an unfavorable environment. Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model.

## Theory and hypotheses development

### *Abusive supervision, self-efficacy, and career adaptability*

Abusive supervision defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178) has been found as an important workplace stressor in the recent research (Peltokorpi, 2019; Pradhan & Jena, 2018; Scheuer, Burton, Barber, Finkelstein, & Parker, 2016). Taking abusive supervision as a workplace stressor (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006) we expect a negative association between abusive supervision and employee career outcomes such as career self-efficacy and career adaptability. Aryee, Sun, Chen, and Debrah (2008) have already pointed out that abusive supervision as an important workplace stressor is a threat to employee career development opportunities. Some other studies have also argued the possible impact of abusive supervision on employee careers (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010). Meta-Analytic research suggesting a strong association between supervisory support and subordinates' career satisfaction (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), provides further support to our idea that the supervisor role is important in influencing employee career outcomes. Another recent meta-analysis on employee career adaptability (Rudolph, Lavigne, Katz, & Zacher, 2017) informs us that studies have found a negative association between job stress and employee career adaptability.

Self-efficacy is defined as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986). Biemann et al. (2015), conceptualized career self-efficacy as, "the extent to which a person is confident that he or she will manage career-related challenges and experience successes such as regular pay raises and promotions". The social cognitive theory argues that self-efficacy is based on four sources that include enactive mastery experience, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physical states (Bandura, 1986). We believe that an environment of abusive supervision can negatively affect all these four sources to undermine employee career self-efficacy. Specifically, employees' participation is decreased in an environment of abusive supervision as abusive supervisors tend to ignore employee achievements (Harvey, Harris, Gillis, & Martinko, 2014), this leads to negative mastery experiences and undermines their career-self efficacy. Research shows that individuals stay away from the managers who mistreat their subordinates (Yagil, Ben-Zur, & Tamir, 2011), such supervisors cannot provide coaching or mentor on career-related matters to their subordinates which prevents subordinates from vicariously learning from their supervisors as role models. Similarly, abusive supervisors are found not to recognize employee achievements and attribute adverse outcomes to their subordinates (Tepper et al., 2009) which may lead to negative social persuasions thereby damaging their career self-efficacy beliefs. Research studies have also pointed out the negative impact of abusive supervision on several negative states of employees, including hostility and emotional exhaustion (Lian et al., 2014; Tepper, 2000) under which they cannot accumulate a positive career self-efficacy. Empirical research on leadership has shown that leaders influence employee beliefs and abilities (Afsar, Badir, Saeed, & Hafeez, 2017), therefore, negatively influencing employee beliefs for their career development abusive

supervisors can harm their subordinates' career self-efficacy which may further lead to low career adaptability.

Career adaptability is a competency skill that enhances individuals' resources and readiness to respond to the changing nature of work (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Tolentino et al., 2014). Career adaptability describes how people manage to stay resilient in times of challenges and transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In their famous study, Savickas and Porfeli (2012) argued that career adaptability is a kind of psychological capital consisting of overall skills and knowledge attained through learning and experience. They are of the view that the factors within-person, the environment, and their interaction may influence individuals' career adaptability. Rudolph, Lavigne, and Zacher (2017) in their recent meta-analysis argued that employee career adaptability is shaped by learning. In an environment of abusive supervision, an individuals' learning is negatively affected (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012) which is likely to affect their career adaptability. Scholars, for instance, Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) believe that supervisor undermining can have a stronger influence on followers than supervisor support. This discussion leads us to assume a negative association between abusive supervision and employee career self-efficacy and career adaptability.

Here, we hypothesized that;

*Hypothesis 1:* Abusive supervision is negatively related to employee career self-efficacy

*Hypothesis 2:* Abusive supervision is negatively related to employee career adaptability

### **Mediating role of career self-efficacy**

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) describes self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances". It implies that self-efficacy is a belief about one's perceived capability which helps them shape their behavior and taking actions in various life settings. Bandura (1986) suggested numerous outcomes of individuals' self-efficacy including academic achievements, social skills, coping with feared events, and career choice. He is of the view that a person's self-efficacy is changed in different situations which consequently results in a change in their behavior. Self-efficacy is the cognitive mean that incorporates information to guide behavior. SCT argues that self-efficacy may enhance individuals' performance, choices, and persistence in positive behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Career self-efficacy is a specific aspect of individuals' self-efficacy which helps us to understand how individuals' beliefs help them shape their careers. Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002) argued that individuals' career self-efficacy is affected by the people and the environment. They suggest that career self-efficacy is a cognitive process that utilizes information to guide the behavior of the individuals (Lent & Brown, 2008; Lent et al., 2002). Some researchers have explored career self-efficacy as a mechanism guiding employee work and career outcomes such as career indecision (Nota, Ferrari, Solberg, & Soresi, 2007), career satisfaction (Jiang, Wang, & Lin, 2016), and career exploration (Gushue, Clarke, Pantzer, & Scanlan, 2006).

Taylor and Betz (1983), argued that people having high self-efficacy can effectively accomplish their tasks that are needed to making their career decisions. Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (2001), are of the view that people who have a low belief that they can produce desired outcomes cannot act effectively. They theorized individuals' self-efficacy as a key variable in the makeup of SCT and believe that efficacy beliefs help people in adaptation. We assume that efficacy beliefs are important in influencing employee career adaptability as it strengthens individuals' commitment, quality of thinking, their level of motivation, and resilience to adversity and failure (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Previous research supports our ideas for instance while studying adolescents, Bandura et al. (2001) argued that students having higher perceived career self-efficacy feel more power in challenging career pursuits. Some other research studies, such as Frese,

Garst, and Fay (2007) have shown a positive association between career decision self-efficacy and individuals' "initiatives for their careers. Zikic and Saks (2009) regarded individuals' self-efficacy as the dynamic mechanism of self-regulation which is the main theoretical base of career adaptability concept as Savickas and Porfeli (2012) conceptualized individual career adaptability as their self-regulation strengths. Biemann et al. (2015) have shown a positive association between employee career self-efficacy and their career success. Though past research reveals that employee career self-efficacy is not a single factor that influences their career adaptability in organizations but it is one important psychological mechanism that negatively links abusive supervision with employee career adaptability. Past research endorses our idea as studies have shown that leadership influences individuals' efficacy beliefs, for instance, Salanova, Lorente, Chambel, and Martínez (2011) argued that through their role modeling and verbal encouragement, managers can enhance the self-efficacy of their employees. SCT argues that there is an impact of environmental factors on individuals' self-efficacy and this impact could be either negative or positive (Bandura, 1986). We theorize that abusive supervision is a negative environmental factor that may damage followers' career efficacy beliefs consequently affecting their career adaptability. Therefore, we hypothesized that career self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability.

*Hypothesis 3: Career self-efficacy is positively related to employee career adaptability.*

*Hypothesis 4: Career self-efficacy partially mediates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability.*

### **Moderating role of coworker support**

Social support is understood as an individual's perception of love, respect, and care from other people (Cobb, 1976). Support from others gives individuals a sense of value and belongingness as part of their social group (Sarafino & Smith, 2014). Antonucci and Jackson (1990) argued that social support can be of different types, including emotional (in the form of sympathy), affirmative (i.e., recognition of ideas and opinions), and tangible (i.e., in the form of money, information, and advice). Researchers believe that social support can protect people from the bad effects of stressors (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In the domain of work, supervisors and coworkers are the major sources of support affecting workers' outcomes (Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Shakespeare-Finch & Obst, 2011). Basford and Offermann (2012) however, found that coworker support independently enhances the motivation of people and their intention to stay in organizations above and beyond supervisor support. Moreover, in an environment of abusive supervision, coworkers are likely to become the more critical source of social support in the workplace. Coworkers should provide either emotional or instrumental support to their fellows for example by providing knowledge that is required to do a specific task (Kim, Kim, & Yun, 2015) or by listening to and becoming friends with them (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

Career researchers have studied several positive outcomes associated with social support, including career decisions (Ebenehi, Rashid, & Bakar, 2016), career information and advice-seeking (Kracke, 2002), career transitions (Burke, Neimeyer, & McDevitt-Murphy, 2010), and career adaptability (Ebenehi et al., 2016; Hirschi, 2009). Studies (Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2009; Wu & Hu, 2009) have suggested the moderating role of coworker support on the negative impact of abusive supervision. For instance, Duffy et al. (2002) argued that coworkers' social support weakens the negative effects of the supervisor's undermining. They studied social support and social undermining from supervisors and coworkers and found that social support from one source has a moderating effect on the social undermining from the other source. This discussion leads us to assume that coworker support may moderate the negative relationship between abusive supervision and employee career self-efficacy. Utilizing the buffering hypothesis of social support, recent research for instance, Yousaf, Rasheed, Hameed, and Luqman (2019) has suggested that social support moderates the

negative impact of stress on employees' negative job outcomes. Taking abusive supervision as an important workplace stressor we expect the similar role of coworkers' support in moderating the relationships of abusive supervision with its outcomes. Our assumptions are consistent with SCT (Bandura, 1986) which suggests that social support serves as a facilitator in helping employees to maintain their self-efficacy and career adaptability in an environment of abusive supervision. Consequently, we develop the following hypothesis;

*Hypothesis 5: Coworker social support moderates the association between abusive supervision and employee career self-efficacy such that the relationship will be weaker at higher levels of coworker support.*

To this point, we have established a theoretical ground for the intervening role of career self-efficacy (Hypothesis 4) and the moderating role of coworker social support (Hypothesis 5). The rationale behind these hypotheses and the theoretical discussion presented above suggest a further integrative moderated mediation model. Specifically, coworker social support may moderate the indirect relationships between abusive supervision and workers' career adaptability through career self-efficacy. Accordingly, we propose the following moderated mediation hypothesis;

*Hypothesis 6: Coworker social support moderates the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability through career self-efficacy such that the relationship will be weaker at higher levels of coworker social support.*

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

We collected the data required for this research study in three phases. At time 1 (T1), during January 2018, we delivered electronic questionnaires to 1340 Executive MBA students enrolled in a Chinese university. All MBA participants were full-time workers in different organizations including sales, banking, insurance, telecommunication, manufacturing, education, real estate, health, and call centers, etc. Respondents were required to rate their perceptions on the scales of abusive supervision and coworker social support. They were also required to provide their demographics information such as gender, age, and tenure in the current organization. We received 610 questionnaires with a response rate of 45.52%. At time 2 (T2), three months later, the same people who participated in the first phase of our survey were required to rate perceptions of their career self-efficacy. This time we received 465 responses. We requested the participants to rate the measures of career adaptability again three months after we received T2 data. This time (T3) we received 344 responses. We used participants' e-mail IDs to match the data collected over three phases. In the first meeting, we assured confidentiality of the information provided by our participants and explained to them that the information provided by them will be used for research purposes only. At the start of the survey, we requested our participants to provide us the e-mail IDs of their current supervisors, who were separately requested through an e-mail to rate the job performance of our respondents. The final sample used in our study containing the supervisor and three-time employee matched responses consists of 287. We distributed a reward of a 10 Yuan cash prize in the form of a WeChat red-packet<sup>1</sup> to each participant each time he/she responded to our survey. The motivation reward for a supervisor was 50Yuan. There is a chance that CMV may occur when data is collected from a single source and at the same point of time, however,

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<sup>1</sup>WeChat red packet is an option to transfer money from one person to another on WeChat, a popular Chinese multi-purpose messaging/social media application with over 1 billion users as of March 2018 (<https://technode.com/2018/03/05/wechat-1-billion-users/>).

researchers, for instance, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003a) recommend that a time separation between measuring independent and dependent variables can minimize the chances of CMV. We decided to keep a time difference of three months between the measurements of constructs following the same time lag period in such kind of organizations' studies conducted to investigate abusive supervision and occupational stressors (Peltokorpi, 2019; Yousaf et al., 2019). Of the 287 participants, 54.4% were male, 43.9% of people were in the group of 30–35 years older, and 34.8% were having an organizational tenure of 2–3 years. To confirm the power of our sample size used in this study, we performed a priori power analysis (Faul & Erdfelder, 1992) and found 108 as the minimum sample size required for our study with a power of 0.9 and alpha of 0.05. Therefore, our sample size of 287 participants was deemed fit for our study. Alternatively, we confirmed that our sample size of 287 is sufficient drawing upon Cohen's Power Analysis table cited in Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016) book. According to this Power Analysis table of Cohen, our model consisted of 3-maximum arrows; and if we choose 1% significance at a minimum of 0.10 r-squared value we will still need a sample size of 176. Thus, we conclude with confidence that the sample size used in the current study is sufficient

## **Measures**

Using the back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980), the English language scales were translated into the Chinese language with the help of two Chinese Ph.D. business administration students who had competency in both languages.

### **Abusive supervision**

To assess workers' perceptions of abusive supervision, we used Tepper (2000) 15-item scale for abusive supervision. Questions are for example, "my supervisor ridicules me", "my supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid" and "my supervisor gives me the silent treatment" and "my supervisor doesn't give me credit for jobs requiring a lot of effort". All questions were designed on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = *never* and 5 = *very often*. Alpha reliability for this scale in our study was found to be 0.89.

### **Career self-efficacy**

Eight-item employee career self-efficacy scale was taken from Biemann et al. (2015). Questions were designed on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Sample items are, "I will be able to achieve most of the career goals that I have set for myself", "when facing difficult assignments in my career, I am certain that I will accomplish them", and "I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different assignments in my career". Alpha reliability for this scale in our study was found to be 0.72.

### **Career adaptability**

We used the Savickas and Porfeli (2012) 24-item career adaptability scale-CAAS to measure the career adaptability of our respondents. Questions were designed on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Participants were required to rate how strongly they have developed resources to deal with their career paths, for example, "preparing for the future" (concern), "taking responsibility for my actions" (control), "observing different ways of doing things" (curiosity), "performing tasks efficiently" (confidence). Alpha reliability for this scale in our study was found to be 0.78.

### **Coworker support**

A five-items scale of Hammer, Saksvik, Nytrø, Torvatn, and Bayazit (2004) was utilized to assess support from coworkers. Sample items are, "I receive help and support from my coworkers", "my coworkers understand if I have a bad day", "my coworkers back me up when I need it". All questions

were designed on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Alpha reliability for this scale in our study was found to be 0.73.

### Control variables

We controlled for the job performance of our respondents rated by their current supervisors as research suggests that employees with poor job performance may perceive more abusive supervision (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Tepper, 2007). For this purpose, we used the 4-item job performance scale from Liden, Wayne, and Stilwell (1993). Sample items are, “what is your personal view of your subordinate in terms of his/her overall effectiveness” (on a five-point Likert scale 1 = *very ineffective* and 5 = *very effective*), “rate the overall performance that you observe for this subordinate” (1 = *unacceptable* to 5 = *outstanding*), “I felt that this subordinate is superior to other subordinates that I have supervised before” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), “overall to what extent do you feel your subordinate has fulfilled his/her roles and responsibilities today” (1 = *not effectively at all* to 5 = *very effectively*). The reliability of the job performance scale in our study was .81. Moreover, we controlled for the effects of respondent’s age, gender, and tenure in the current organization since previous research has shown a relationship for these individual differences between participant’s self-efficacy and career adaptability (Bocciardi, Caputo, Fregonese, Langher, & Sartori, 2017; Jiang, Gu, & Tang, 2017; Wang, Qu, & Xu, 2015; Zacher & Griffin, 2015).

## Results

Scholars such as Campbell and Fiske (1959) and Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003b) have suggested that CMV can become a problem when independent and dependent variables are rated by the same person. We performed Harman’s single-factor analysis and verified that a single factor in our research explains only 21.43% of the total variance which suggests that CMV is not a problem related to our data. Moreover, the time-lagged data collected through our three-wave research design helps to minimize the chances of CMV.

We further performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 21 for establishing construct validity. Researchers such as Hair, Anderson, Babin, and Black (2010) and Markus (2012) recommend that a good model fit should demonstrate the model fit indices such as TLI and CFI are above the minimum value of 0.90 and the value of RMSEA score is below 0.08. Our five factors model reported all acceptable values (TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05, and CMIN/df = 1.4). The loadings for all the items have also been reported in Table 1. We conclude convergent validity of our constructs according to recent recommendations of Cheung and Wang (2017) who argued that there is a convergent validity when the values of AVE are not less than 0.5 (in our case the least value is 0.59) and factor loading of all items are not less than 0.5 (in our case the least value is 0.54). Similarly, Researchers, for instance, Hair et al. (2010) and Gefen and Straub (2005) are of the view that there is a discriminant validity when the square root of AVEs of the constructs are larger than the values of the correlations between constructs. Table 2 reports that in our research the values of the square root of AVEs are greater than the values of correlations between our constructs, which suggests a good discriminant validity.

**Table 1.** Reliability and validity.

Variable	CR	AVE	Cronbach $\alpha$	Loadings
Abusive supervision	0.91	0.62	0.89	(0.57–0.68)
Career Self-efficacy	0.93	0.71	0.72	(0.77–0.91)
Coworker Support	0.73	0.59	0.73	(0.54–0.70)
Career adaptability	0.97	0.68	0.78	(0.73–0.90)
Job Performance	0.86	0.61	0.81	(0.77–0.84)

*N* = 287; AVE = Average variance extracted; CR = Composite reliability

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations.

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.46	0.56	–							
2. Age	2.87	1.07	0.06	–						
3. Tenure	2.48	0.89	0.10	0.09	–					
4. Abusive supervision	3.15	0.74	0.17**	0.04	0.19**	(0.78)				
5. Career Self-efficacy	2.73	0.55	0.05	0.03	–0.13*	–0.43**	(0.84)			
6. Career adaptability	2.13	0.49	0.19**	–0.05	–0.21**	–0.42**	0.35**	(0.83)		
7. Coworker support	3.85	0.59	0.03	–0.03	–0.07	0.43**	0.29**	0.33**	(.77)	
8. Job Performance	3.20	0.37	0.02	0.03	–0.05	–0.02	0.08	0.12*	0.06	(0.90)

*N* = 287; Significant at \* $p < .05$  (two-tailed) and \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed), figures in parentheses are the square root of AVE

### Descriptive statistics

Table 2 reports correlations and descriptive statistics. The correlation results provided basic support to our assumptions. For instance, abusive supervision was negatively correlated with career self-efficacy ( $r = -0.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and career adaptability ( $r = -0.42$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly career self-efficacy was positively correlated with career adaptability ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Hypotheses testing

We utilized SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) to test both the mediation and moderated mediation models. We performed bootstrapping to evaluate the indirect effects in our model (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Bootstrapping is recommended as the preferred method for testing mediation in social science research (Hayes, 2013; Rasheed, Okumus, Weng, Hameed, & Nawaz, 2020).

We ran PROCESS model number 8 wherein we entered gender, age, education, and performance as covariates. We found that abusive supervision was negatively related to career self-efficacy ( $B = -0.27$ ,  $t = -5.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , Table 3), which supports our Hypothesis 1. In addition, abusive supervision was found to be negatively related to employee career adaptability ( $B = -0.15$ ,  $t = -3.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting our Hypothesis 2. We also found support for our Hypothesis 3 as we found that career self-efficacy is positively related to employee career adaptability ( $B = 0.15$ ,  $t = 2.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

We further calculated the mediation of career self-efficacy in the relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability through PROCESS Model 4. The results supported the partial mediation role of employee career self-efficacy on the negative association between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability (estimate of indirect effect =  $-0.09$ , 95% CI [ $-0.15$ ,  $-0.04$ ]). These results supported our Hypotheses 4. Table 3 further reveals that employee career adaptability is significantly related to job tenure in a negative direction. Similarly, job performance has also shown a positive relationship with employee career adaptability. These are also important results that report that job tenure and job performance have significant associations with employee career adaptability.

Hypothesis 5 posits that coworker support (CS) moderates the negative association between abusive supervision (AS) and workers' career self-efficacy. Table 4 demonstrates that the interaction term (AS  $\times$  CS) is significant. In addition, the association is weaker at higher level of moderator (effect =  $-0.20$ , LLCI =  $-0.31$ , ULCI =  $-0.08$ ), than at the low level (effect =  $-0.33$ , LLCI =  $-0.45$ , ULCI =  $-0.22$ ). These results support our hypothesis 5 which states that the relationship between abusive supervision and employee self-efficacy is weaker at the higher levels of coworkers' social support.

Table 4 reports that the impact of abusive supervision on employee career adaptability varies significantly at lower and higher levels of coworker support. At lower levels of coworker support, the magnitude effect is  $-0.21$ , LLCI =  $-0.31$ , ULCI =  $-0.10$ , whereas, at a higher level of support, the magnitude effect is  $-0.07$ , LLCI =  $-0.17$ , ULCI =  $0.03$ . These results give us support to accept our

**Table 3.** Hypothesis testing.

Antecedents	Mediator Career Self-efficacy				Dependent Variable Career adaptability			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
				0.22				0.29
Constant	2.50	0.29	8.61***		1.73	0.38	4.56***	
Gender	-0.03	0.06	-0.54		0.12	0.05	2.28*	
Age	0.00	0.03	0.11		-0.01	0.02	-0.33	
Tenure	-0.04	0.04	-1.16		-0.08	0.03	-2.67*	
Job Performance	0.11	0.08	1.45		0.14	0.07	2.12**	
Abusive supervision	-0.27	0.05	-5.94***		-0.15	0.04	-3.50***	
Career Self-efficacy	-	-	-		0.15	0.05	2.82**	
Coworker support	0.12	0.56	2.17*		0.15	0.05	3.14**	
AS × CS	0.11	0.05	2.16*		0.11	0.05	2.07*	
					<i>Effect</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
<b>Indirect effect AS → CSE → CA</b>					-0.09	0.03	-0.15	-0.04

LLCI = Bias corrected lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = Bias corrected upper limit confidence interval; Significant at: \* = *p* < .05, \*\* = *p* < 01; and \*\*\* = *p* < .001; AS = abusive supervision, CSE = Career self-efficacy, CA = career adaptability, CS = Coworker support

**Table 4.** Moderation results.

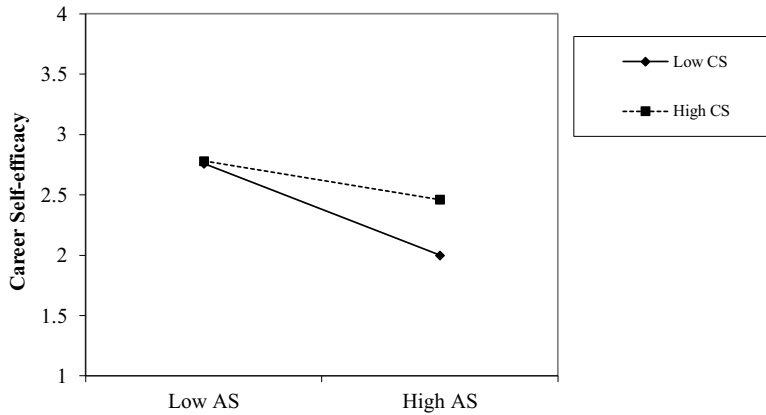
Conditional effects at specific values of moderator (SS) at ±1 SD						
					95% CI	
			<i>Effect</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Career self-efficacy	-1 SD		-0.33	0.06	-0.45	-0.22
	+1 SD		-0.20	0.06	-0.31	-0.08
Career adaptability	-1 SD		-0.21	0.05	-0.31	-0.10
	+1 SD		-0.07	0.05	-0.17	0.03
<b>Conditional indirect effects at specific value of moderator (SS) at ±1 SD</b>						
					95% CI	
			<i>Effect</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Abusive supervision to career self-efficacy to career adaptability	-1 SD		-0.05	0.02	-0.10	-0.01
	+1 SD		-0.03	0.01	-0.06	-0.01

LLCI = Bias corrected lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = Bias corrected upper limit confidence interval; Significant at: \* = *p* < .05, \*\* = *p* < 01; and \*\*\* = *p* < .00

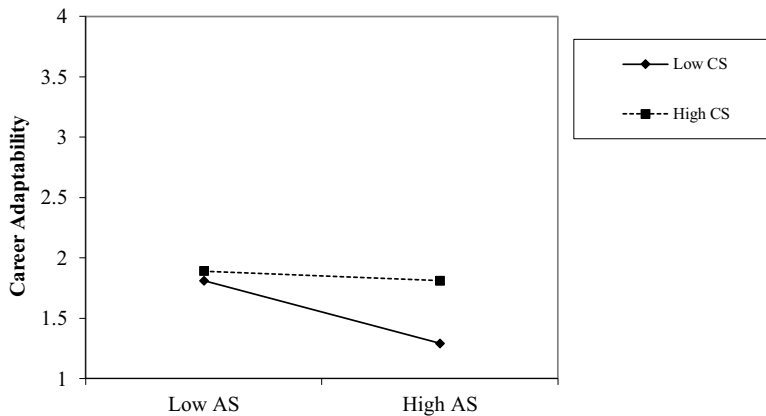
hypothesis 6. This implies that the effect of abusive supervision on employee career adaptability decreases when coworker support is higher.

We further estimated the conditional indirect effect of abusive supervision on employee career adaptability through career self-efficacy at varying levels of coworker social support (1 SD above the mean and 1 SD below the mean) using Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006) method. As shown in Table 4, the results revealed that the conditional indirect effect for abusive supervision via career self-efficacy on career adaptability is weak (magnitude indirect effect = -.03, 95% CI [-0.06, -0.01]) when social support is high (+1 SD), than when coworker support is low (magnitude indirect effect = -.05, 95% CI [-0.10, -0.01]) which supports our Hypothesis 6 for moderated mediation.

We also plotted the moderating role of coworker support on the association between abusive supervision and career self-efficacy and abusive supervision and career adaptability. Figures 2 and 3 show these relationships, these figures depict that when coworker support is high the relationships between abusive supervision and its outcomes in the form of career self-efficacy and career adaptability are weaker than when coworker support is low.



**Figure 2.** Interaction of abusive supervision and coworker support on career self-efficacy. AS = Abusive supervision, CS = Coworker support



**Figure 3.** Interaction of abusive supervision and coworker social support on career adaptability. AS = Abusive supervision, CS = Coworker support

## Discussion

The basic aim of this study was to investigate the association between destructive leadership in the form of abusive supervision and employee career adaptability. Drawing on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), we found that perceived abusive supervision is negatively associated with employee career adaptability. We found that employee career self-efficacy is the underlying mechanism through which abusive supervision is negatively associated with employee career adaptability in organizations. In addition, our results revealed that coworker support serves as a boundary condition on the negative relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability such that the relationship is weaker at higher levels of coworker support. Addressing several limitations in the existing literature, our findings carry significant implications.

This study enriches our understanding of the outcomes of abusive supervision in the career domain. As such, we contribute to the destructive leadership literature by establishing perceptions of abusive supervision as having detrimental long-term effects on employee career adaptability. To the best of our knowledge, career outcomes of abusive leadership have not been studied much in past research. As discussed before, a stream of research has shown a number of negative consequences of abusive supervision in the employee work domain, our study extends the literature on abusive

supervision by investigating its impact in the employee career domain. The results of this study have shown a significant negative association between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability. This should be taken as an important finding which demonstrates that the effect of abusive supervision is not only on the followers' work-related outcomes but it may also extend to their career outcome.

A recent research study has called for more research on the antecedents of career adaptability (Bocciardi et al., 2017). Career adaptability is a central goal of employees in vocational contexts and there is a need to explore how employee career adaptability is formed in order to understand how to build and maintain adaptability resources in the workplace (Bocciardi et al., 2017). We responded to this research call as our study provides a new understanding of how the formation of employee career adaptability can be hindered by the presence of destructive leadership in the form of abusive supervision. The review of past literature on the antecedents of career adaptability shows that there is a single study that links leadership (in the form of supervisory support) with employee adaptability skills (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). The contribution of our study in the literature on career adaptability is also substantial in this context.

Third, the results of our study show that abusive supervision is negatively connected to employee career self-efficacy and career adaptability and supports our hypothesis that career self-efficacy partially mediates the negative relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and employee career adaptability. The social cognitive theory describes self-efficacy as an important belief that shapes employee attitudes and learning in organizations. Our results imply that damage to the efficacy beliefs of an employee undermines the learning required to develop adaptability resources for their career.

Next, in our research, abusive supervision was found to be a barrier to career self-efficacy which, in turn, is negatively associated with career adaptability. These results are in line with past empirical research showing a negative impact for abusive supervision on followers' attitudes and abilities (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), self-efficacy (Duffy et al., 2002), and employee creativity (Han, Harms, & Bai, 2017; Lee, Yun, & Srivastava, 2013; Liu et al., 2012). The findings of this study are critical as employee career adaptability is considered an important skill by which workers make adjustments in order to better fit into today's ever-changing world of work (Bocciardi et al., 2017; Coetzee & Harry, 2014; Savickas, 2013). In short, our reasoning that abusive supervision may damage employee efficacy beliefs which, in turn, negatively influences their career adaptability, helps us to understand the negative impact of leadership on followers' job and career outcomes.

In addition, our research contributes to the social support literature by exploring the moderating impact of coworker support on the association between abusive supervision and subordinates' career self-efficacy. We assumed that coworker support plays a boundary condition role on the association between perceptions of abusive supervision and self-efficacy such that the relationship is weak at the higher levels of coworker support. Our results have supported our assumptions and have shown the significant moderating role of coworker support in our model. Figures 2 and 3 reveal the interaction effects of abusive supervision and coworker support on career self-efficacy and career adaptability. These figures explain that the combination of high abusive supervision and low coworker social support is crucial as employee career self-efficacy and career adaptability are more affected when there is high abusive supervision and low coworker support as compared to when there is high abusive supervision and high coworker support.

Our moderated mediation analysis reveals that the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability through career self-efficacy is weaker for employees having higher levels of coworker support. Consistent with the simple moderation of coworker support on the abusive supervision → employee career self-efficacy link, the moderated mediation analysis indicates that individuals having high coworker support at work are less vulnerable to the negative impact of abusive supervision on their ability to develop adaptability resources for their career. These findings suggest that although, in general, abusive supervision tends to undermine employee self-efficacy and career adaptability, this tendency may be attenuated by individuals having support from their

coworkers. One reason for this phenomenon is that coworkers help employees to survive the negative effects of various stressors at work such as abusive supervision. Bandura et al. (2001) argued that self-efficacy is flexible and can vary in different social settings. Our study supports this argument by highlighting the effect of coworker social support on abusive supervision and subordinates' self-efficacy relationship. These results are consistent with the previous empirical research findings suggesting that individuals having high social support in organizations are less vulnerable to the deleterious effects of stressors (Pow, King, Stephenson, & DeLongis, 2017). However this finding should be seen with its limitations as such there are some boundary conditions to this effect, for instance, for the employees with a too low or poor performance this will be not that much easy to get rid of the effects of abusive supervision even in the presence of coworkers' social support.

### **Practical implications**

This study carries important implications for career managers and organizations. Employee career adaptability has become an imperative in the career development process as it facilitates individuals in adjustment and helps them to carry proactive career behavior in today's dynamically changing career world (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Tolentino et al., 2014). The findings of this study revealed that employee career adaptability can be hampered by abusive supervision at work. These findings should, therefore, motivate organizations to play an intervening role in discouraging such supervisory behavior in the workplace. To discourage abusive supervision in organizations, relevant policies and practices can be implemented, for instance, while selecting managers, organizations can particularly look into the factor of whether the candidate for the supervisory position would carry an abusive style of leadership? We believe that organizations can work on developing sophisticated tools to assess and differentiate managers with high abusive personalities from others.

Moreover, organizations should cultivate a culture that rewards positive leadership styles in the workplace. The presence of such an environment should facilitate employees' ability to develop their adaptability resources thereby enabling them to successfully adjust to changing work conditions (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). Our study also carries implications for career counselors as they consider the important role of supervisors' leadership style when designing interventions that deal with enhancing career adaptability. Our study shows that coworker social support serves as a boundary condition of the relationship between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability. The fact that coworker social support serves to offset the negative effect of abusive supervision on career adaptability suggests the importance of social support in the workplace. This finding has an important implication for individuals for gaining career success and maintaining adaptability resources in adverse environments such as abusive supervision. Employees can develop social networking in workplaces to get support from fellow workers that would compensate for the negative effects of workplace stressors on their career self-efficacy and career adaptability. Organizations can also help employees to create a supportive work environment among coworkers in workplaces. To create such an environment, workers can be encouraged to create social groups for seeking help from others in organizations. They can be provided books and tutorials to know the importance of social skills. Counselors can guide them on how to make friends in the workplace, how to be a team member, how to seek to mentor at the workplace, how to facilitate networking, and creating a culture of social support in organizations. At the selection stage organizations and human resources, personnel can assess whether a candidate is a team member and he would be able to seek and exert more social support in the workplace. Similarly, as our study has shown self-efficacy as an important predictor of career adaptability, therefore, organizations can introduce some interventions in the form of counseling and training sessions to enhance their workers' self-efficacy skills.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

Although we comprehensively conducted this research with the help of three-phase data, we still acknowledge some limitations. For instance, since our sample was entirely composed of Chinese respondents, our findings have limitations to be generalized to other nations and cultures. Future studies should expand our results to other populations and determine whether these findings can be generalized to other cultures, contexts, and countries. For instance, the investigation of this model in a country characterized as individualistic culture may generate different findings. Second, our study explored only a single mediator of the association between abusive supervision and career adaptability. Additional reasons may exist to explain the mechanism underlying this relationship. Future research should, therefore, focus on identifying alternative mediating paths. Third, our model studies employee career adaptability as the ultimate dependent variable, future studies can expand our model to other career outcomes such as employee career growth. Finally, while our focus of interest was on coworker support as the boundary condition surrounding our hypothesized relationships, other potential moderators of this relationship merit future consideration. For example, future research can explore the moderating impact of a subordinate's personality or other individual differences in the relationship between abusive supervision and career adaptability. We also admit the limitation of our interaction effects as shown in [Figures 2 and 3](#). The size of the effect of interest is small though we tested conditional effects which have shown the significance of the effects sizes with no zero between the relevant confidence intervals.

### **Conclusion**

Research on destructive leadership has shown abusive supervision as a leadership style that is detrimental to followers' work outcomes. This study extends the literature on abusive supervision to the employee career domain by establishing an important link between abusive supervision and employee career adaptability. Career adaptability has recently been widely acknowledged in the organization as an important employee resource that helps individuals to manage and develop their careers. Exploring abusive supervision as an important factor that affects employee career adaptability, this research makes novel contributions to both the leadership and career literature. In addition, this study supports the buffering hypothesis of social support and explores the critical role of coworker support in maintaining employee efficacy beliefs and adaptability resources in an environment characterized by abusive supervision.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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