

**Two-faced employers? Employee psychological withdrawal reactions to employer signals
during times of uncertainty**

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Abstract

Purpose: Times of high uncertainty can result in challenges for organizations and employees alike. Drawing on signaling theory, this paper investigates how an employer's handling of an uncertain situation, namely a pandemic, affects psychological withdrawal and perceptions of organizational hypocrisy.

Design/methodology/approach: To empirically test the hypotheses, we conducted two field surveys, resulting in 934 observations across two samples, and an experiment with a sample of 393 participants.

Findings: While support for a direct negative effect of how well an employer handled a pandemic on psychological withdrawal was mixed, perceived organizational support consistently moderated this relationship such that an employer that handled a pandemic well reduced employees' psychological withdrawal if perceived organizational support was high. This highlights the importance of proactive and consistent organizational support to prevent backlash.

Originality/value: This paper contributes to the literature on perceived organizational support and signaling theory by demonstrating that organizational support and the consistency in signals organizations communicate are a crucial contingency during times of uncertainty.

Keywords: organizational support, hypocrisy, employee withdrawal, signaling theory

In times of unprecedented challenge, clear communication of support for employees is crucial for organizations (Allen *et al.*, 2007). This study examines how employees perceive their employer's signals in contexts characterized by complexity and overwhelming or incomplete information (Sydow *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, we explore the uncertain context of a pandemic and examine how perceptions of an employer's pandemic response relate to psychological withdrawal (i.e., neglect of work responsibilities; Lehman and Simpson, 1992). We expect that withdrawal depends not only on how organizations demonstrate care for their employees in a focal uncertain situation (i.e., perceptions of how the employer handled a pandemic) but also on how they perceive their employers demonstrate care for their well-being in a normal circumstance (i.e., perceived organizational support), which contribute to perceptions of their organization as either consistently supportive or hypocritical. These dynamics are particularly vital in contexts where external conditions are unpredictable.

We draw on signaling theory, which explains how information flows from more informed senders to less informed receivers who interpret these signals (Spence, 1973). The signaling environment in which an exchange takes place shapes employee interpretations, particularly in crisis contexts, like the COVID-19 pandemic, where attention towards employer signals is heightened. In a highly volatile context, when organizations handle a situation poorly, they send a strong signal that their employees' well-being is not a priority (Connelly *et al.*, 2011), while effective situation management conveys an equally strong signal of support. Prior research largely focuses on organizational signals to external stakeholders (e.g., Ramaswami *et al.*, 2010) and few studies have examined how organizations send signals internally and the outcomes of internal signals sent in high-stress contexts. We posit that uncertain contexts represent a key opportunity for organizations to demonstrate the signal consistency and reinforce support for

employees.

This research proposes that organizational support signals in uncertain contexts may fall short if core values are not established, causing employees to question their sincerity. We treat perceived organizational support (i.e., the extent to which employees believe their organization cares about their well-being; Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) as a moderator that enhances the impact of effective crisis management in reducing counterproductive attitudes. Even if an employer handles a crisis well, employees may withdraw if they find limited support at a holistic level, viewing the organization as hypocritical (i.e., perceiving that their employer is not consistent in their support for employee well-being). We contribute to the discourse on organizational hypocrisy (Wagner *et al.*, 2009) by exploring how misalignment between organizational signals influences perceptions of organizational actions. While organizations recognize that their actions send internal signals (e.g., Flynn and Leslie, 2023), organizations may overlook how multiple internal signals are interpreted, especially in uncertain contexts. The present study thus emphasizes the importance of maintaining consistency in internal support signals in uncertain situations.

We contribute to the literatures on organizational hypocrisy (Wagner *et al.*, 2009) and signaling theory (Spence, 1973) by exploring how an organization's pandemic response (i.e., context-specific support), in tandem with the general perceived level of organizational support, affects withdrawal responses. A pandemic represents a critical context where organizations can either send consistent or inconsistent signals, with significant consequences. Recent research links pandemic-related policy changes (e.g., remote work; Collins *et al.*, 2020) to psychological distress and anxiety (Trougakos *et al.*, 2020). We extend this by emphasizing the need for consistent signals from employers in uncertain contexts characterized by variability and

incomplete information (Sydow *et al.*, 2013). This study highlights the importance of consistency between multiple support signals, especially in uncertain circumstances, to reduce employees' cognitive load and perceptions of hypocrisy.

Theory and Hypotheses

Signaling During Times of Uncertainty

Management researchers have applied signaling theory to various organizational contexts (e.g., Ramaswami *et al.*, 2010) but most studies have focused on external stakeholders rather than the signals organizations send internally. We extend signaling theory by examining how internal signals affect employee outcomes, particularly in uncertain settings. Within organizations, employers act as the more informed senders that elect how they will send signals, while employees are the less informed receivers who will interpret organizational signals (Spence, 2002). Signals such as job conditions and perceived employee-organizational relationship quality can contribute to employees' assessments of the organization (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the extent to which these signals are salient and whether they are interpreted as beneficial or detrimental is important for determining employee outcomes.

We examine these signals during the COVID-19 pandemic, a highly uncertain context that fundamentally changed how employees work (Collins *et al.*, 2020), increased childcare responsibilities (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020), and impaired critical work progress (Trougakos *et al.*, 2020). During a period of such uncertainty, how organizations communicate and respond to employees is vital (Allen *et al.*, 2007) because employees are attuned to signals addressing their needs (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). How an organization handles its responsibilities signals its internal values (Turban and Greening, 1997) and employees who perceive high quality communication are more receptive to change in the face of uncertainty (Allen *et al.*, 2007). Thus, how employees

appraise crisis management signals alongside signals of organizational support impacts employee and organizational outcomes.

Employer's Handling of a Pandemic and Psychological Withdrawal

We suggest that how an organization handles a pandemic, in essence how employees perceive organizations have demonstrated care for their well-being during a pandemic, serves as a key signal of organizational values. While employees regularly interpret signals regarding organizational policies and behaviors (Flynn and Leslie, 2023; Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017), we theorize that these signals become especially salient in unpredictable contexts with limited information. During a pandemic, when uncertainty about the future of work and concerns over one's well-being are high, employees will rely more on organizational signals for clarity on how to feel and behave at work (Connelly *et al.*, 2011).

We expect employees' interpretation of their organization's pandemic response to be especially influential on psychological withdrawal - thoughts or behaviors that indicate neglect of work responsibilities (Lehman and Simpson, 1992). Psychological withdrawal is particularly relevant given the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on mental health, distress (Giusti *et al.*, 2020), and impaired critical work progress due to employees' suppressing emotions at work (Trougakos *et al.*, 2020). Suppressing pandemic-related anxiety is cognitively taxing and impedes employees' ability to regulate attention and perform tasks effectively (Beal *et al.*, 2005), leading employees to detach and neglect work responsibilities (Lehman and Simpson, 1992). Unlike physical withdrawal (e.g., tardiness; Lehman and Simpson, 1992) which may be influenced by pandemic-related work structure changes (e.g., remote work, social distancing; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020), psychological withdrawal is more difficult to observe but more likely during a pandemic due to the blurring of work-home boundaries (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). Therefore,

we expect that the heightened salience of organizational signals regarding how well an employer handles a pandemic will strongly impact psychological withdrawal due to employees' reliance on organizational signals and their influence on the psychological processing of uncertain contexts.

Hypothesis 1: Employee perceptions of how well the employer handled a pandemic will be negatively related to employee psychological withdrawal.

Perceived Organizational Support and Signal (In)consistency

While an organization's pandemic response is a salient signal, employees interpret this signal alongside other organizational cues, assessing the signals for consistency when coping with uncertainty. Consistent signals are more clearly recalled and clarify expectations between employers and employees (Baron and Kreps, 1999), yet research has largely overlooked how employees aggregate multiple signals in meaningful ways (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). While organizations may aim to communicate an overarching signal of support, acute context-specific signals (e.g., during a pandemic) must align with overarching support signals. Since employees are continuously processing the signals employers send (e.g., Flynn and Leslie, 2023), maintaining consistency across signals is vital.

In times of organizational change, employees make sense of the environment by interpreting organizational signals (Cullen *et al.*, 2014). When they perceive organizational actions as supportive, employees increase their attachment to the organization (Casper and Harris, 2008) and cope better with change-related uncertainty (Cullen *et al.*, 2014). We expect that, in stressful contexts, employees will rely on existing perceptions of organizational support – the “extent to which an organization values [employees'] contributions and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986, p. 501) - because support signals are particularly relevant when they face work-related challenges. Therefore, employees perceiving positive support

signals will appraise an uncertain circumstance in a more positive light while those perceiving negative or limited support signals will be more likely to detach psychologically.

Both an organization's pandemic response and perceived organizational support can reduce psychological withdrawal, but if these two signals are inconsistent, employees may interpret them ambivalently. Inconsistent communication hinders change management (Cullen *et al.*, 2014) and consistent policies help employees understand expectations (Baron and Kreps, 1999). Furthermore, perceptions of fair treatment and psychological contract violations are also important antecedents to perceptions of organizational support (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, to ensure that employees receive unilaterally positive signals, the context-specific signal of pandemic response and general support signals must align to reduce psychological withdrawal.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived organizational support will moderate the negative relationship between employee perceptions of how well the employer handled a pandemic and employee psychological withdrawal such that the relationship will be stronger when perceived organizational support is higher rather than lower.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Organizational Hypocrisy

We propose that an organization's pandemic response affects withdrawal both directly and indirectly through employees' implicit expectations (Rousseau, 1989). Employees have implicit expectations of their employer in return for their contributions and if this implicit agreement is violated (e.g., inadequate pandemic support), employees may question the employer's motives (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994) and perceive the organizational as hypocritical. Perceived organizational hypocrisy - "the belief that a firm claims to be something that it is not" (Wagner *et al.*, 2009, p. 79) - is a psychological mechanism through which

employees interpret inconsistent information such that there is some perceived distance between the organization's assertions and their efforts. Research links perceived hypocrisy directly to negative employee outcomes such as emotional exhaustion (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2015) particularly when the organization fails to uphold psychological contracts. Therefore, we extend our model to incorporate perceived organizational hypocrisy as a mediator.

In the case of the pandemic, employees may perceive hypocrisy if the organization's behavior violates these assumed agreements. Since psychological contracts emerge when employees contribute to the organization and expect a future return (Rousseau, 1989), we posit that employees will anticipate employer guidance and support during uncertain contexts. When organizations fail to provide this support, the perceived hypocrisy that follows may "generate discomfort that [employees] attempt to reduce by psychologically distancing themselves from ... an organization that presumably endorses such hypocritical behavior" (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2015, p. 931). Since the ambiguity of a pandemic heightens psychological distress (Trougakos *et al.*, 2020), the cognitive load of suppressing these heightened negative states should also increase. Thus, we expect that in response to hypocrisy perceptions, employees will engage in more withdrawal to reduce feelings of distress that are elicited by their organizations.

Hypothesis 3: The negative relationship between employee perceptions of how well the employer handled a pandemic and employee psychological withdrawal will be partially mediated by employee perceptions of organizational hypocrisy.

Signal (In)consistency and Perceived Organizational Hypocrisy

Psychological withdrawal depends on both perceptions of organizational support and perceptions of context-specific signals in tandem. Similarly, we expect that perceptions of hypocrisy will also depend on a combination of these signals. Inconsistent signals can trigger

perceptions of unreliability and hypocrisy, eliciting negative responses (Wagner *et al.*, 2009). Since senders and receivers often have competing interests, whether the signal itself is consistent with the quality of the signaler is essential to the receiver's interpretation (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Since signal reliability depends upon the receiver's perceptions of honesty from the signaler (Connelly *et al.*, 2011), when an employee perceives signals to be unreliable, they may be distrustful of the sender (i.e., the employer) reinforcing hypocrisy perceptions.

Again, we suggest that a pandemic represents a critical context where employees rely on consistent organizational signals to determine their behavior. If an organization's pandemic response aligns with its usual care for employees, perceptions of inconsistency and hypocrisy are reduced. Especially with heightened vigilance surrounding pandemic policies, any inconsistencies in organizational signals will be more salient (Wagner *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, while managing a pandemic well may reduce perceived hypocrisy, this effect weakens when overarching support is inconsistent.

Hypothesis 4: Perceived organizational support will moderate the negative relationship between employee perceptions of how well the employer handled a pandemic and employee perceptions of organizational hypocrisy such that the relationship will be stronger when perceived organizational support is higher rather than lower.

Finally, we propose a full moderated mediation model summarizing all proposed effects (see Figure 1).

Hypothesis 5: Perceived organizational support will moderate both the direct and indirect effects of employee perceptions of how well the organization handled a pandemic on employee psychological withdrawal through employee perceptions of organizational hypocrisy such that the effects are stronger when perceived organizational support is

higher than when perceived organizational support is lower.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Overview of Studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three studies with employed U.S. participants over 18 to ensure consistent national COVID-19 pandemic experiences. In Study 1 ($N = 379$), we collected field survey data from Survey Monkey Audience to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. In Study 2 ($N = 555$), we collected data from Prolific to test an extended model including perceived hypocrisy as a mediator. Since both were self-report studies conducted at one time point, we conducted an experiment in CloudResearch for Study 3 ($N = 393$) to test the robustness of our findings, manipulating employer's handling of a pandemic and perceived organizational support through an experimental vignette. Studies 1 and 2 were conducted several months after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020; Bergquist *et al.*, 2020) and Study 3 was conducted in 2021. Given the need for real-time reactions, we used crowdsourced data and followed best practices (Peer *et al.*, 2022; Pozzar *et al.*, 2020), utilizing platforms with the lowest participant usage frequency and where the platform was not their primary source of income (e.g., Prolific), while also removing participants who failed directive attention checks

Study 1

Participants in Study 1 ($N = 379$) were 51% female, 28% underrepresented groups, an average of 45 years old and had an average organizational tenure of 13 years. They worked across various industries (e.g., 15% services, 11% manufacturing, 10% healthcare; 72% for profit) and occupations (e.g., nurse, business analyst, engineer).

Measures

Participants rated their employer's handling of a pandemic on a single item (1 = *very badly* to 7 = *very well*): "How well do you think your employer has handled the COVID-19 pandemic?" We utilized a one-item measure in efforts to efficiently capture employees' responses to their employers during the months following the height of the pandemic. For perceived organizational support, participants rated their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) with statements about their employing organization using an eight-item scale ($\alpha = .90$) from Rhoades and colleagues (2001). Psychological withdrawal was measured using an eight-item scale ($\alpha = .91$) by Lehman and Simpson (1992). Participants reported how often during the past month they had engaged in each of the psychological withdrawal behaviors (1 = *never* to 7 = *very often*). Measure items and anchors are detailed in [Appendix A](#).

We controlled for sex, race, age, and organizational tenure. Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female, and race was coded 0 = White and 1 = underrepresented group. Age and organizational tenure were measured continuously. We conducted a CFA to assess the discriminant validity of the measures used in each study. Results are available in supplemental materials.

Results

Table I presents descriptives for Study 1. To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we conducted a moderated hierarchical regression (Table II), centering continuous predictors to reduce multicollinearity (Cohen *et al.* 2003). We plotted the interaction at ± 1 standard deviation from the mean for the independent and moderator variables and tested the simple slopes (Aiken and West, 1991). Additionally, we used the interActive data visualization tool (McCabe *et al.*, 2018) to provide more informative plots of the interaction effects in our model (see [Appendix C](#)). This is a user-friendly online tool¹ introduced by McCabe *et al.* (2018), which allows us to examine

¹ The online tool can be accessed at <https://connorjmccabe.shinyapps.io/interactive/> (McCabe *et al.*, 2018). To use the tool, a dataset must be uploaded containing the variables of interest. After the independent, dependent,

simple slopes at multiple levels of the moderator and the Johnson-Neyman regions indicating the range in which simple slopes are statistically significant (McCabe *et al.*, 2018).

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, employer handling of a pandemic was not related to psychological withdrawal ($b = .10$, $t(377) = 1.29$, $p = .197$). However, supporting Hypothesis 2, perceived organizational support moderated this relationship ($b = -.16$, $t(377) = -3.81$, $p < .01$; see Figure 2). Following recommendations from Bliese and Wang (2020) estimating observed power using t and z values, we estimate that observed power for Hypothesis 2 met the 0.8 threshold required to detect significant effects. Simple slopes analysis showed a negative relationship in cases of higher perceived organizational support ($b = -.25$, $t(377) = -2.13$, $p = .033$) but positive in cases of lower perceived organizational support ($b = .21$, $t(377) = 2.27$, $p = .024$). [Appendix C](#) presents plots from the interActive data visualization tool (McCabe *et al.*, 2018), which show results consistent with our prediction.

INSERT TABLE I, TABLE II, FIGURE 2 HERE

Study 2

Participants in Study 2 ($N = 555$) were 42% female, 21% underrepresented groups, an average of 34 years old, and had six years of organizational tenure. The participants represented various industries (14% professional, scientific, or technical services, 14% education, 12% healthcare; 76% for profit) and occupations (e.g., warehouse worker, software developer, marketing director).

Measures

moderator, and control variables are specified, by clicking on "Run Analysis" button, the results can be obtained. The tool will generate interaction plots and Johnson-Neyman plots. There is also the option to edit the variable names displayed on the plots and download the final version. The original syntax for creating this tool is available in McCabe *et al.* (2018).

We used the same controls and measures for handling of a pandemic, perceived organizational support ($\alpha = .92$), and psychological withdrawal ($\alpha = .81$). As a robustness check, we added a three-item measure ($\alpha = .94$) for satisfaction with the employer's pandemic response (adapted from Watkins and colleagues, 2015; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). We measured perceived organizational hypocrisy using six items ($\alpha = .93$) from Wagner and colleagues (2009). Participants reported how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about their organization (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*).

Results

Table III presents descriptives for Study 2. Employer handling of a pandemic was not significantly related to psychological withdrawal ($b = -.02$, $t(553) = -.32$, $p = .752$; Table IV). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, perceived organizational support negatively moderated this relationship ($b = -.08$, $t(553) = -2.68$, $p < .01$). Estimated observed power for Hypothesis 2 ranged from .70 to .80 (Bliese & Wang, 2020), warranting cautious interpretation. As shown in Figure 3, this relationship was negative in cases of higher perceived organizational support ($b = -.17$, $t(553) = -2.05$, $p = .041$) but not significant in cases of lower perceived organizational support ($b = .04$, $t(553) = .62$, $p = .535$). [Appendix D](#) presents interactive tool plots (McCabe *et al.*, 2018) consistent with this pattern.

INSERT TABLE III, TABLE IV, FIGURE 3 HERE

For Hypothesis 3, we used model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017). The indirect effect of how well the employer handled a pandemic on psychological withdrawal through perceived organizational hypocrisy was significant and negative (indirect effect = $-.27$, $SE = .04$, $CI = [-.36, -.20]$). The direct effect of how well the employer handled a pandemic on psychological withdrawal after including the indirect effect was not significant (direct effect =

.07, $SE = .06$, $CI = [-.36, .19]$), supporting a full mediation model rather than the partial mediation proposed in Hypothesis 3.

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, perceived organizational support negatively moderated the relationship between employer's handling of a pandemic and perceived organizational hypocrisy ($b = -.06$, $t(553) = -2.42$, $p = .016$; Table IV). As Figure 4 shows, this relationship was negative in cases of both higher ($b = -.35$, $t(553) = -5.17$, $p < .01$) and lower perceived organizational support ($b = -.20$, $t(553) = -3.67$, $p < .01$) with a steeper slope in cases of higher perceived organizational support. [Appendix E](#) presents plots from the interActive tool (McCabe *et al.*, 2018).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

We used Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 8 to test the full model. A significant moderated mediation index (effect = $-.02$, $SE = .01$, $CI = [-.03, -.01]$) supported our hypothesis. The indirect effect of perceptions of how well the employer handled a pandemic on psychological withdrawal through perceived organizational hypocrisy was stronger in cases of higher (indirect effect = $-.10$, $SE = .02$, $CI = [-.15, -.06]$) than in cases of lower perceived organizational support (indirect effect = $-.06$, $SE = .02$, $CI = [-.09, -.03]$), supporting Hypothesis 5. Results using the three-item supplemental measure of satisfaction with employer's pandemic response supported these findings (see [Appendix F](#)).

Study 3

In Study 3, we conducted a 2×2 between-participant experiment manipulating employer's handling of a pandemic (poorer vs. better) and perceived organizational support (lower vs. higher). Participants ($N = 393$) were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios about a retail organization. They were 45% female, 26% from underrepresented groups, averaged 42 years old with nine years of organizational tenure, and represented diverse industries (e.g., 14%

finance, 14% healthcare, 12% education; 77% for profit) and occupations (e.g., foreman, public relations, IT).

We based the experimental manipulation scenario on an article about the experiences of essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (O'Donnell, 2020). The scenario describes a major retail store and the recommended COVID-19 guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control (see [Appendix G](#)). To measure perceived hypocrisy ($\alpha = .97$) and psychological withdrawal ($\alpha = .93$), we used the same measures as in our previous two studies, modifying instructions to refer to the scenario.

Results

Table V presents descriptives for Study 3. In contrast to Studies 1 and 2, employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation was significantly and negatively related to psychological withdrawal ($b = -1.33$, $t(391) = -9.88$, $p < .01$; see Table VI), supporting Hypothesis 1. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the perceived organizational support manipulation moderated this relationship ($b = -.57$, $t(391) = -2.14$, $p = .033$) such that it was more strongly negative in the higher ($b = -1.61$, $t(391) = -8.58$, $p < .01$) rather than lower perceived organizational support condition ($b = -1.04$, $t(391) = -5.42$, $p < .01$; Figure 5).

INSERT TABLE V, TABLE VI, FIGURE 5 HERE

Supporting Hypothesis 3, perceived organizational hypocrisy partially mediated the relationship between the employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation and psychological withdrawal (indirect effect = $-.34$, $SE = .11$, $CI = [-.57, -.14]$). The direct effect was also significant when taking into consideration the indirect effect (direct effect = $-.95$, $SE = .17$, $CI = [-1.28, -.62]$). Consistent with Hypothesis 4, perceived organizational support manipulation moderated the relationship between employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation and

perceived organizational hypocrisy ($b = -4.54, t(391) = -17.33, p < .01$; Table VI). This relationship was strongly negative and significant in the higher ($b = -4.53, t(391) = -24.68, p < .01$) but not in the lower perceived organizational support condition ($b = .02, t(391) = .09, p = .93$; see Figure 6)

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

We tested the full model using model 8 of Hayes' PROCESS macro, but results did not support Hypothesis 5 (effect $-.52, SE = .28, CI = [-1.08, .02]$). While we found consistent support for the moderating role of organizational support perceptions and the mediating role of organizational hypocrisy perceptions, between Studies 2 and 3 we found only partial support for the full model.

Discussion

Across all three studies, perceived organizational support consistently moderated employees' reactions to employers' pandemic response. Without pre-established positive support perceptions, context-specific support in uncertain situations may prove ineffective or even risk being perceived as hypocritical. Findings demonstrated that employees interpret an organization's pandemic response within the broader context of the organization's general signal of support. In all studies, a well-handled pandemic reduced psychological withdrawal when perceived organizational support was high. Furthermore, psychological withdrawal was consistently lower in organizations with higher as compared to lower organizational support, reinforcing the notion that an existing positive perception of organizational support enhances the influence of a context-specific crisis response on reducing withdrawal (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017).

Results for lower perceived organizational support were more mixed. The relationship between how the employer handled a pandemic and psychological withdrawal was positive in

Study 1, non-significant in Study 2, and negative in Study 3. These disparate findings may be due to sample and study context differences. The pattern of the slopes for organizations with lower perceived organizational support were more consistent in Studies 1 and 2, thus, we expect that the experimental context may have heightened participant reactions compared to a real-world context. Similarly, perceived organizational support consistently moderated the relationship between how the employer handled a pandemic and perceptions of hypocrisy. In Studies 2 and 3, a well-handled pandemic reduced hypocrisy perceptions in higher perceived organizational support cases, but these effects were weaker (Study 2) or non-significant (Study 3) in lower support cases. Again, the experimental context may have amplified the effect of a well-handled pandemic by eliminating possible signal contamination.

Findings also demonstrated that how employers handled a pandemic affected psychological withdrawal through organizational hypocrisy perceptions. Study 2 showed full mediation in a field survey context where the effects of a well-handled pandemic reduced withdrawal reactions due to beliefs that the organization is consistent in maintaining psychological contracts (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017). Experimentally, we found support for partial mediation, indicating that in a hypothetical vignette situation, both the direct negative impact of how an employer handled a pandemic and its effect through perceptions of hypocrisy influence withdrawal. Thus, organizations should demonstrate strong employee support during times of uncertainty as it shapes both the direct reactions to a crisis response and indirect outcomes via hypocrisy perceptions.

Surprisingly, we saw mixed results for the direct effect of an employer's handling of the pandemic on psychological withdrawal. Field studies (Studies 1 and 2) revealed no relationship between the employer's handling of a pandemic and psychological withdrawal responses, while

the experiment (Study 3) found a strong negative relationship. This discrepancy may exist because in a field survey context, as compared to a more controlled experimental context, employees are considering multiple conflicting signals that limit the effect of one specific signal on psychological withdrawal behaviors. We hypothesized that the signal of how the employer handled a pandemic would be especially salient given the uncertain context of a pandemic; however, it is possible that signal contamination from outside of the organization may interfere with the salience of how the employer has handled a pandemic. Heightened distress during the pandemic (Trougakos *et al.*, 2020) may have also exhibited a stronger force on employee responses than the sole signal of employer's pandemic response. Study 3's experimental manipulation likely increased signal salience, explaining a stronger withdrawal response. Timing of the data collections may also play a role, as the experiment (2021) was conducted when pandemic uncertainty may have already declined, while the field surveys (2020) were conducted during the peak of pandemic uncertainty.

Finally, results from the full moderated mediation model yielded mixed findings: supported in Study 2 but not in Study 3. Given the strength of the moderating effect of perceived organizational support, we again expect that these differences are due to the increased salience of the two signals (i.e., employer's handling of a pandemic and organizational support) in the experimental context. It is possible that the full moderated mediation model was not supported in Study 3 because the aggregated effect of the two signals most strongly affected perceptions of hypocrisy when presented in an experimentally manipulated context.

Theoretical Implications

First, we contribute to the ongoing research on effects of a pandemic on employee outcomes (e.g., Trougakos *et al.*, 2020) and more generally, on how the way in which employers

handle uncertain contexts influences employees' responses. This study highlights the need for consistent signals and clear communication from employers especially during times of uncertainty. How an employer handles an uncertain event not only directly influences perceptions of the employer (e.g., as one that upholds unspoken psychological contracts), but also influences indirectly through perceptions of organizational hypocrisy. By examining how signals are interpreted aggregately in uncertain circumstances we contribute to the understanding of how employers should behave to protect employees' psychological well-being in times of uncertainty.

Our findings also contribute to theories of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) and organizational hypocrisy (Wagner *et al.*, 2009) by demonstrating that perceived organizational support is a crucial contingency in shaping perceptions of hypocrisy during uncertain circumstances. Based on how the organization treats its employees generally, employees form an attribution regarding the organization's intent (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) and assess the likelihood that the organization will also be supportive in difficult times (Cullen *et al.*, 2014). Our results indicate that if employees generally perceive that they are valued by the organization, then perceptions of specific actions taken during critical contexts are more positive. Taken together, we expand the nomological network of organizational hypocrisy (Wagner *et al.*, 2009) to include support perceptions at both general and specific crisis levels.

Finally, the present study contributes to signaling theory (Spence, 1973) in two major ways. On the one hand, the findings demonstrate the relevance of signal (in)consistency (Connelly *et al.*, 2011) in aggregated interpretations of signal reliability. We show that psychological withdrawal was reduced only when organizations sent consistent positive signals. More importantly, this paper shows that the underlying mechanism involves employees'

organizational hypocrisy perceptions, indicating that organizations with inconsistent support signals are likely seen as hypocritical, thus engendering employees' counterproductive behaviors such as psychological withdrawal. On the other hand, we extend signaling theory by exploring two unique environments: internal organizational signaling and signaling in the high uncertainty context of a pandemic. Signaling theory has typically examined organizational signals in a specific signaling environment: to external stakeholders (e.g., Ramaswami *et al.*, 2010). Our findings complement prior research by illuminating that in a signaling exchange that takes place internally, employees may aggregate multiple signals to form an impression of employer care. In addition, in a signaling environment with high levels of uncertainty, maintaining consistent signals is particularly essential to employee outcomes because of the salience of signals during uncertain times.

Practical Implications

To prevent psychological withdrawal during uncertainty, organizations should send consistent positive signals regarding how they support employees. This should be proactive, with long-term goals of genuinely supporting employees' well-being. Fair treatment, including fair procedures, distribution of outcomes, and respectful interpersonal treatment (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001), along with supervisor support and favorable working conditions (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017), foster perceptions of organizational support and reduce perceived hypocrisy. As employees are especially sensitive to signals during uncertain times, organizations making sincere efforts to provide consistent support will reap the benefits of a more engaged workforce.

To improve perceptions of crisis management, organizations should prioritize employee well-being over profit. Carnevale and Hatak (2020), for example, highlight addressing pandemic-induced challenges employees face like altered work conditions and vulnerabilities of certain

populations. Forms of support can include job autonomy, flexible work arrangements, and virtual socialization opportunities. Furthermore, consistent communication is key to providing support, understanding employees' concerns, and considering idiosyncratic needs in addition to organization-wide policies.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Studies 1 and 2 relied on cross-sectional and self-reported data, making them susceptible to common method bias. We mitigate this concern by replicating findings in Study 3 using an experimental design with manipulated independent and moderator variables. Post-hoc tests (i.e., common latent factor approach, CFA marker technique, Harman's one-factor test, and hypothesis testing controlling for job satisfaction) further addressed potential common method variance. Moreover, research suggests that common method bias is unlikely to produce spurious moderating effects and may weaken interaction effects, reinforcing the validity of any observed interactions (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012; Siemsen *et al.*, 2010). Still, our methodology has limitations and we recommend cautious interpretation. Some post-hoc tests, like the common latent factor approach, may lack power, especially with multiple sources of method variance (Castille and Williams, 2022, 2024; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). While these tests detect common method variance, they may not accurately estimate substantive parameters of interest (Castille and Williams, 2024). Future research should use longitudinal designs collecting data at different time points and/or from different sources (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024) and critically evaluate post-hoc approaches (e.g., Howard *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, since Studies 1 and 2 examine outcomes after an uncertain event, future studies should collect data before, during, and after such events to assess evolving perceptions of support.

Second, we utilized a single-item measure of employer's pandemic response in Study 1,

which prevents reliability assessment and limits estimation of interaction term reliability (Edwards, 2009). Since single-item indicators assume perfect reliability, our regression analyses may underestimate effect size due to measurement error from common method variance. This limitation should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. However, recent research suggests single-item measures have strong content validity and demonstrate few usability concerns, while multi-item measures risk contamination from redundancy (Matthews et al., 2022). Despite this, we recognize that a single-item measure has its limitations. Thus, we introduced a three-item measure of satisfaction with pandemic response as a robustness check and conducted an experiment manipulating pandemic response. Future research should use multi-item measures or refine single-item measures to directly capture the focal effect (e.g., including the pandemic context directly in the item rather than describing a general time period; Oltmanns et al., 2020).

We used crowdsourced datasets to capture real-time pandemic responses, but this limits our ability to track changing reactions to the same signals over time. Despite using directive attention checks (Pozzar *et al.*, 2020) and platforms demonstrating higher participant comprehension and attention (Peer *et al.*, 2022), data quality remains a concern due to the unknown reliability of crowdsourced participants (e.g., Harms and DeSimone, 2015). To add context, we collected data on participants' organizational size and industry as more details on work environments could enhance understanding. Future research should use longitudinal designs with multiple employees per organization to examine how signals are perceived within the same organization and in a variety of different organizations. Studies should also move beyond convenience sampling to incorporate objective measures and experimental designs that further establish causality.

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Table I*Study 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*^a

Variables	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sex ^b	-	-	-							
2. Race ^c	-	-	-	-.09						
3. Age	44.91	14.35	-	.03	-.20**					
4. Organizational tenure	12.83	15.43	-	-.13*	-.03	.17**				
5. Employer's handling of a pandemic	3.82	1.14	-	-.01	-.06	.14**	.05			
6. Perceived organizational support	4.67	1.41	.90	-.02	-.06	.08	.01	.64**		
7. Employee psychological withdrawal	2.88	1.46	.91	-.17*	.14**	-.32**	.26**	-.08	-.16**	
8. Employer's handling of a pandemic \times Perceived organizational support	1.02	1.78	-	.02	-.04	.04	-.04	-.47**	-.32**	-.15**

^a $N = 379$ ^b Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female.^c Race was coded 0 = White, 1 = underrepresented group* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table II

Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Employee Psychological Withdrawal (Study 1)^a

Variables	Employee psychological withdrawal		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Controls			
Sex ^b	-.33*	-.34*	-.34*
Race ^c	.24	.22	.19
Age	-.04**	-.04**	-.03**
Organizational tenure	.03**	.03**	.03**
Independent variables			
Employer's handling of a pandemic		.10	-.02
Perceived organizational support		-.19**	-.19**
Interaction			
Employer's handling of a pandemic × Perceived organizational support			-.16**
<hr/>			
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.22**	.23	.26
<i>Δ Adjusted R²</i>		.02**	.03**

^a $N = 379$

^b Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female.

^c Race was coded 0 = White, 1 = underrepresented group

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.

Table III*Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*^a

Variables	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sex ^b	-	-	-									
2. Race ^c	-	-	-	.07								
3. Age	34.43	9.19	-	-.06	-.22**							
4. Organizational tenure	6.31	7.64	-	-.13**	-.11**	.44**						
5. Employer's handling of a pandemic	3.88	.96	-	-.08	.03	-.03	.01					
6. Satisfaction with employer' pandemic response	5.21	1.62	.94	-.11**	.02	.01	.07	.81**				
7. Perceived organizational support	4.95	1.32	.92	-.10*	.02	-.00	.05	.69**	.81**			
8. Perceived organizational hypocrisy	3.12	1.49	.93	.09*	-.06	.00	-.04	-.65**	-.73**	-.83**		
9. Employee psychological withdrawal	1.91	1.11	.81	-.06	.04	-.19**	-.03	-.18**	-.18**	-.24**	.32**	
10. Employer's handling of a pandemic × Perceived organizational support	.88	1.67	-	.07	-.05	.01	-.03	-.50**	-.53**	-.48**	.38**	.02

^a $N = 555$ ^b Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female.^c Race was coded 0 = White, 1 = underrepresented group.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table IV

Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Employee Psychological Withdrawal and Perceived Organizational Hypocrisy (Study 2)^a

Variables	Employee psychological withdrawal			Perceived organizational hypocrisy		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Controls						
Sex ^b	-.20*	-.25**	-.24*	.23	.00	.00
Race ^c	-.01	.02	.01	-.27	-.15	-.16
Age	-.02**	-.03**	-.03**	.00	.00	.00
Organizational tenure	.01	.01	.01	-.01	.00	.00
Independent variables						
Employer's handling of a pandemic		-.02	-.06		-.24**	-.27**
Perceived organizational support		-.19**	-.21**		-.81**	-.83**
Interaction						
Employer's handling of a pandemic × Perceived organizational support			-.08**			-.06*
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.04**	.10	.11	.01	.701	.704
<i>Δ Adjusted R²</i>		.06**	.01**		.70**	.003*

^a $N = 555$

^b Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female.

^c Race was coded 0 = White, 1 = underrepresented group.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.

Table V*Study 3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*^a

Variables	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex ^b	-	-	-								
2. Race ^c	-	-	-	-.09							
3. Age	41.80	10.73	-	.16**	-.23**						
4. Organizational tenure	9.15	8.21	-	.06	-.11*	.41**					
5. Employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation	.04	.50	-	-.03	-.03	-.01	-.01				
6. Perceived organizational support manipulation	.01	.50	-	-.12*	-.01	.06	.05	-.05			
7. Perceived organizational hypocrisy	4.16	2.07	.97	.06	.02	-.04	-.01	-.55**	-.08		
8. Employee psychological withdrawal	3.36	1.53	.93	.01	.02	-.06	.03	-.42**	-.24**	.38**	
9. Employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation \times Perceived organizational support manipulation	-.01	.25	-	-.01	-.02	.03	.05	.02	.08	-.56**	-.12*

^a $N = 393$ ^b Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female.^c Race was coded 0 = White, 1 = underrepresented group.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table VI

Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Employee Psychological Withdrawal and Perceived Organizational Hypocrisy (Study 3, Experiment) ^a

Variables	Employee psychological withdrawal			Perceived organizational hypocrisy		
	Step 1	Step 1	Step 1	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Controls						
Sex ^b	.06	.12	.11	.28	.27	.23
Race ^c	.00	-.04	-.05	.02	-.07	-.09
Age	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.01
Organizational tenure	.01	.02	.02	.00	.00	.01
Independent variables						
Employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation ^d		-1.33**	-1.32**		-2.30**	-2.25**
Perceived organizational support manipulation ^e		-.83**	-.81**		-.48**	-.30*
Interaction						
Employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation × Perceived organizational support manipulation			-.57*			-4.54**
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	.00	.25	.26	.00	.31	.61
<i>Δ Adjusted R²</i>		.25**	.01*		.31**	.30**

^a $N = 393$

^b Sex was coded 0 = male, 1 = female

^c Race was coded 0 = White, 1 = underrepresented group

^d Employer's handling of a pandemic manipulation was contrast-coded (see Cohen et al., 2003) with -.5 for poor, +.5 for better

^e Organizational support manipulation was contrast-coded (see Cohen et al., 2003) with -.5 for low, +.5 for high

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.

Figure 1

Proposed Theoretical Model

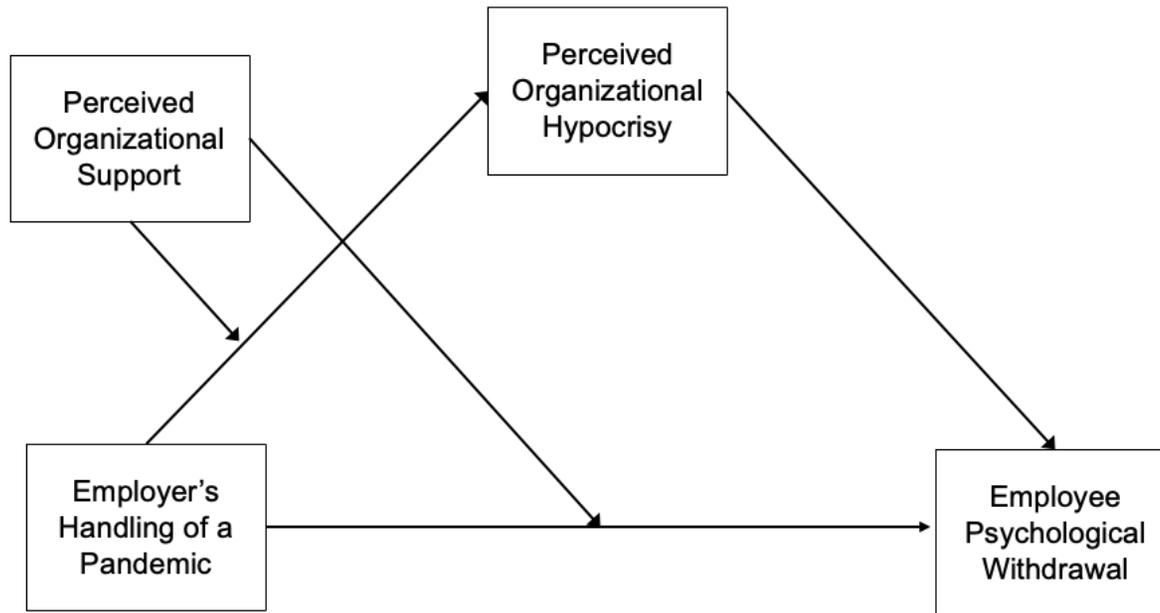


Figure 2

The Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Support on the Relationship Between the Employer's Handling of a Pandemic and Employee Psychological Withdrawal (Study 1)

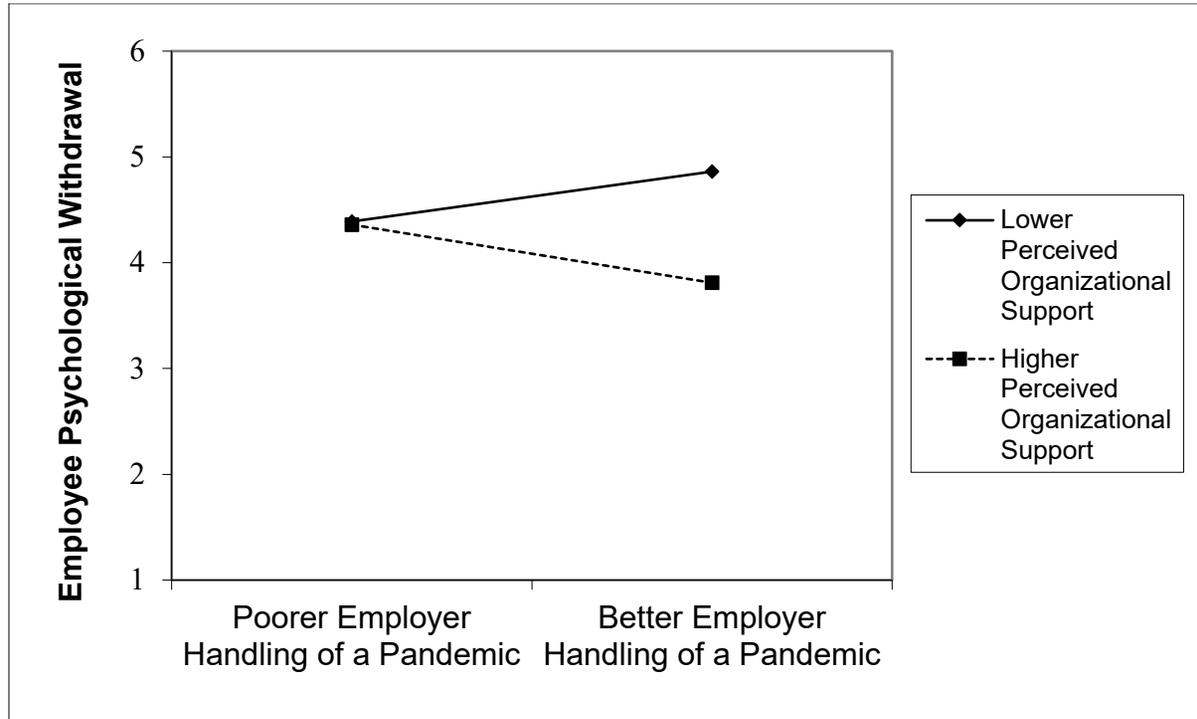


Figure 3

The Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Support on the Relationship Between the Employer's Handling of a Pandemic and Employee Psychological Withdrawal (Study 2)

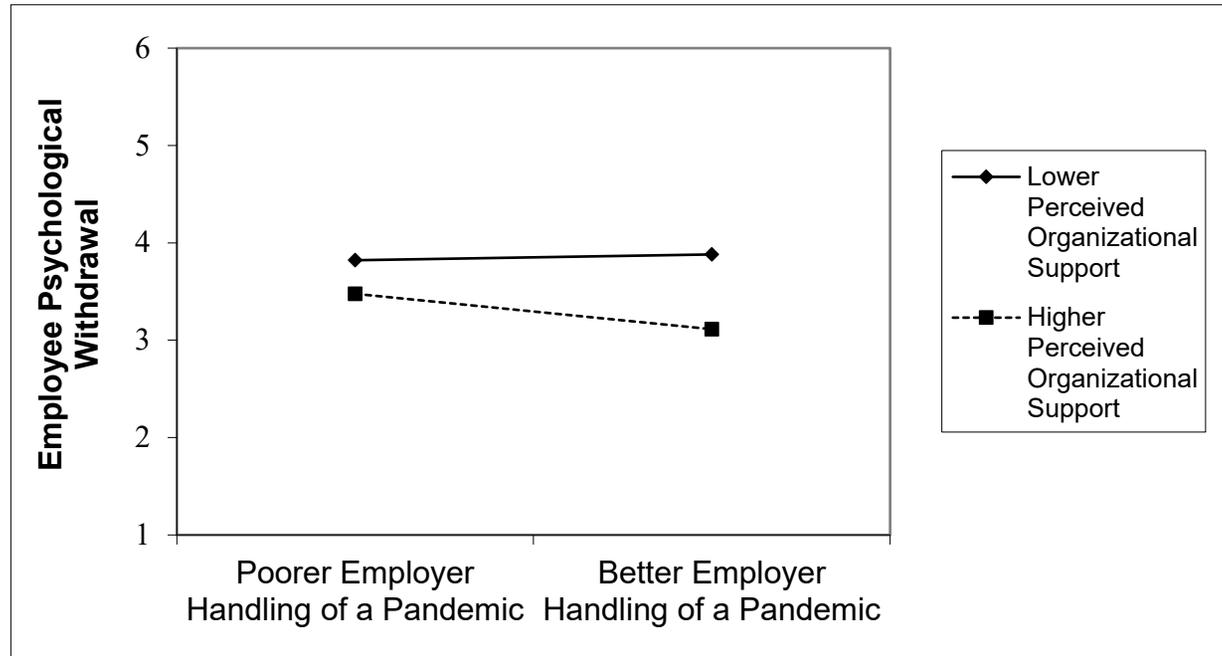


Figure 4

The Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Support on the Relationship Between the Employer's Handling of a Pandemic and Perceived Organizational Hypocrisy (Study 2)

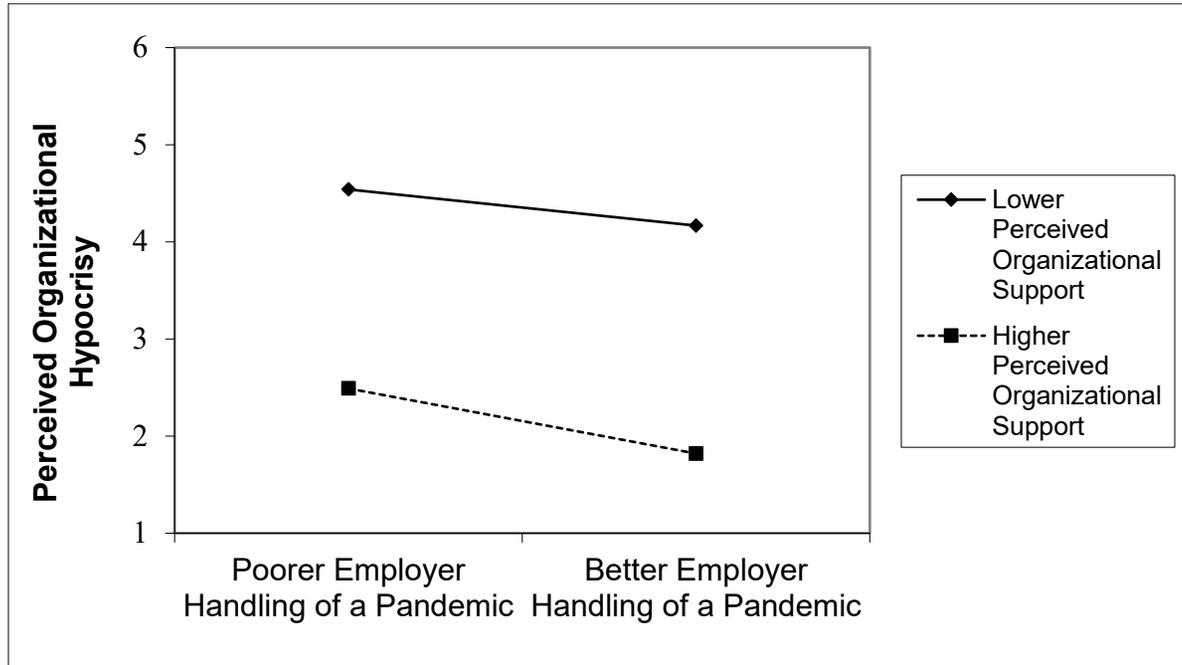


Figure 5

The Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Support Manipulation on the Relationship Between Employer's Handling of a Pandemic Manipulation and Employee Psychological Withdrawal (Study 3, Experiment)

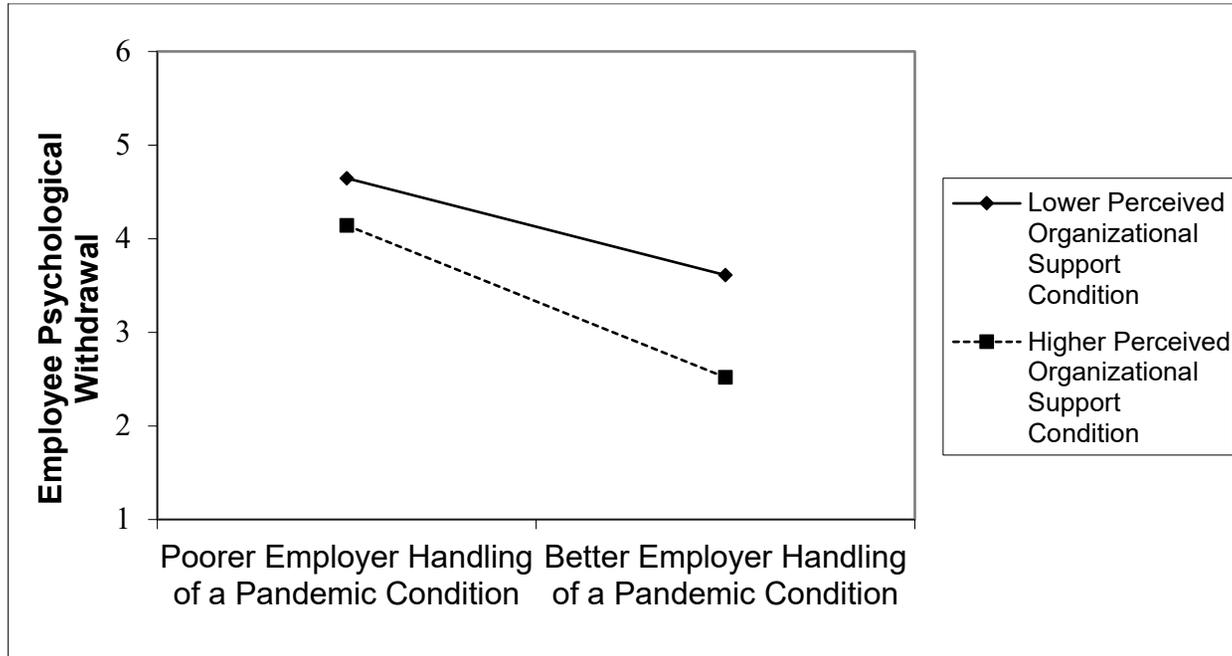


Figure 6

The Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Support Manipulation on the Relationship Between Employer's Handling of a Pandemic Manipulation and Perceived Organizational Hypocrisy (Study 3, Experiment)

