

Institutional Dynamics and Moral Disengagement among Employees of Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract : *This study examines how employee behaviour and moral disengagement in tertiary institutions are impacted by institutional dynamics, particularly feedback culture, workplace politics, and institutional trust. Based on institutional theory and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Disengagement, the study views moral disengagement as a sociocognitive process influenced by power dynamics and organisational structures. Data were gathered from 273 academic and non-academic staff members of Nigerian higher education institutions using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. SPSS and SmartPLS were used for analysis. Strong relationships were found to exist between institutional factors such as workplace politics and institutional trust had a negative correlation ($r = -0.625$), but trust had a positive correlation ($r = 0.649$) with feedback culture and a positive correlation ($r = 0.557$) with institutional commitment. These findings suggest that the establishment of moral and dedicated institutional environments depends heavily on trust and transparent feedback mechanisms. However, it was discovered that there was a complicated and indirect relationship between moral disengagement and institutional variables. This suggests that disengagement serves as a mediating cognitive mechanism that connects institutional conditions to behaviours like employee withdrawal and knowledge hiding. Significantly, a moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.326$) between moral disengagement and feedback culture draws attention to a paradoxical effect indicating that employees may unintentionally engage in defensive moral justifications as a result of politicised or poorly run feedback systems. The study suggests that workplace politics, weak feedback culture, and poor institutional trust all contribute to the institutional reinforcement of moral disengagement in tertiary institutions. In order to promote moral accountability and long-term employee engagement, it suggests improving feedback systems, depoliticising management procedures, and fortifying transparent governance. The mediating and moderating effects of institutional ownership and other contextual factors in influencing moral cognition and ethical behaviour are to be investigated in future studies using PLS-SEM and longitudinal methodologies.*

Keywords: institutional dynamics, moral disengagement, workplace politics, institutional trust, feedback culture, tertiary institutions

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral disengagement has emerged as a critical construct in contemporary organisational and educational contexts for understanding unethical behaviour, knowledge hiding, and employee disengagement. The concept of moral disengagement was initially proposed by [1] as a component of Social Cognitive Theory. It describes how people alter their moral principles in order to justify immoral or counterproductive behaviour without feeling bad about it. In higher education settings, where institutional culture, leadership conduct, and organisational pressures impact employees' ethical reasoning and behaviour, this mechanism has gained renewed relevance [2], [3].

According to research, disengagement in academic institutions not only lowers productivity but also jeopardises an organization's ethical framework by encouraging behaviours like academic dishonesty, workplace misconduct, and knowledge hiding [4], [5]. By distributing blame,

downplaying consequences, or redefining immoral behaviour as necessary or harmless, people use moral disengagement to defend their actions [6], [7]. Furthermore, these tendencies are exacerbated by psychological and institutional factors, such as egotistic environments, abusive supervision, and weak ethical leadership, which help normalise unethical behaviour within organisational frameworks [8], [9].

The problem assumes a more significant institutional dimension in higher education. Academic misconduct and favouritism in promotions are examples of ethical transgressions that indicate not only personal moral failings but also the influence of societal and institutional frameworks that encourage moral disengagement. Organisational trust, workplace politics, and feedback culture are examples of institutional dynamics that impact the moral climate in which employees interpret and act upon ethical dilemmas [10], [11]. Employees are more likely to defend unethical behaviour as a coping mechanism or survival strategy in organisations with low trust, political environments, and inadequate feedback systems.

From a sociological perspective, moral disengagement is a behaviour that is supported by institutional norms and social structures in addition to being a psychological phenomenon that occurs on an individual basis. Politically charged managerial cultures, poor communication channels, and unequal authority structures can all promote moral disengagement and erode ethical accountability [12]. Analysing how relational dynamics and institutional frameworks affect ethical orientations is crucial to understanding moral disengagement in higher education institutions.

This study looks at how much workplace politics, feedback culture, and institutional trust affect moral disengagement among tertiary institution employees. The paper extends moral disengagement theory from the individual to the organisational and institutional levels by combining sociological and psychological perspectives, improving our understanding of ethics, culture, and behaviour in higher education settings.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is based on both Bandura's Institutional Theory [1] and Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Disengagement, which offer complementary perspectives for comprehending unethical behaviour in educational and organisational systems. These frameworks work together to explain how institutional structures and individual cognition interact to create and maintain moral disengagement among tertiary institution staff.

2.1 Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Disengagement

According to Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1999) [1], people control their behaviour by internalising moral principles that serve as self-punishments that guide ethical behaviour. However, moral disengagement which serves as a collective term for cognitive justifications which allows these temporarily mechanisms to be momentarily suspended. People justify unethical behaviour while preserving a positive moral self-image by using strategies like moral justification, euphemistic labelling, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanisation, and attribution of blame [4], [13].

According to recent studies that have expanded Bandura's framework into organisational and educational context, unethical outcomes like bullying, workplace deviance, and knowledge hiding are mediated by moral disengagement. For example, Fatima et al. (2025) [8] found that egoistic institutional climates are facilitators of unethical behaviours and moral disengagement in higher education, while Kumar et al. (2025) [2] found that moral disengagement explains how performance motivation causes academic staff to hide knowledge. Similarly, Ochasi (2024) [14] emphasised the impact of ethical climate on moral disengagement in medical residency programs, and Miller et al. (2019) [4] illustrated how Bandura's eight mechanisms can be applied to academic bullying.

These studies support Bandura's claim that moral disengagement is a socially embedded phenomenon rather than just a psychological phenomenon. The degree of disengagement is determined by institutional and cultural factors that affect how people understand and defend moral decisions, such as peer norms, feedback culture, and leadership ethics [9], [15].

2.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory places behaviour within larger organisational and societal frameworks, whereas Social Cognitive Theory places more emphasis on individual cognition. Institutions establish "scripts," or formal and informal norms, that specify acceptable behaviour and shape workers' moral reasoning. Moral disengagement may arise as an adaptive reaction to systemic pressures when patronage, favouritism, or bureaucratic inefficiencies are institutionalised [12].

This institutional interpretation is supported by empirical research. According to Fatima et al. (2025) [8], cronyism and egoistic environments stifle moral responsibility in higher education. While Shinde (2025) [11] noted the systemic role of "people, process, purpose, and power" in influencing employee disengagement, Bhana and Suknunan (2021) [10] noted that unfair structures and exclusionary leadership encourage disengagement across job grades. Furthermore, Ebrahimi and Matt (2024) [16] illustrated how technological biases and institutional task complexity lead to moral blindness and ethical lapses.

According to this viewpoint, moral disengagement is a structural result of institutional environments that normalise unethical behaviour as well as a failure of personal morality. The interaction of workplace politics, feedback culture, and organisational trust in tertiary institutions can either reinforce or lessen these tendencies.

This study conceptualises moral disengagement as a structurally conditioned phenomenon and a learnt cognitive process by combining Social Cognitive Theory and Institutional Theory. Although Bandura's model describes how people deactivate moral self-regulation, Institutional Theory explains why this disengagement continues because it is accepted or even required for survival due to institutional logics, power dynamics, and organisational norms. Thus, this integrated framework offers a strong theoretical foundation for investigating the ways in which institutional dynamics impact moral disengagement among tertiary institution staff.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED CONSTRUCTS

The major constructs underlying the study are knowledge hiding, employee disengagement, workplace deviance, and the institutional dynamics of trust, politics, feedback culture, and institutional ownership. They are all examined as determinants of moral disengagement in tertiary institutions.

3.1 Hiding and Moral Disengagement

Knowledge hiding, which is the intentional withholding of information from coworkers, has been closely linked to moral disengagement mechanisms that enable people to defend such actions [2], [3]. Since employees frequently justify withholding information as a means of self-defence or competitive advantage, moral disengagement mediates the relationship between performance motivation and knowledge hiding in academic settings [2]. In a similar vein, Fatima et al. (2025) [8] discovered that cronyism and egoistic organisational climates encourage moral disengagement and unethical knowledge behaviours in higher education. On the other hand, moral detachment and knowledge hiding tendencies are lessened by moral leadership and views of organisational justice [9], [17]. Therefore, in institutional contexts, knowledge hiding is both a behavioural manifestation and a result of moral disengagement.

3.2 Employee Engagement and Disengagement

According to Bhana and Suknunan (2021) [10] and Shinde (2025) [11], employee engagement is the psychological and emotional involvement of people in their work, while disengagement is a reflection of withdrawal, cynicism, and a diminished moral commitment. Employees who work in environments with abusive supervision, social undermining, or perceived injustice are more likely disengaged both ethically and emotionally [12], [7]. Aligning with the evidence that moral reasoning and leadership ethics influence employees' sense of purpose, Shinde (2025) [11] proposed the 4P Model comprising of People, Process, Purpose, and Power as systemic factors influencing disengagement. Because institutional norms mediate the ethical connection to work, disengagement in tertiary institutions is therefore not only motivational but also moral and structural.

3.3 Workplace Deviance and Ethical Climate

Moral disengagement is widely acknowledged as a cognitive precondition for unethical behaviour and workplace deviance [5], [7]. People are more likely to act in ways that go against institutional values when ethical climates deteriorate, including cyber misconduct, academic dishonesty, and harassment [18], [19]. According to Humbert and Strid (2024) [12], institutional tolerance or underreporting of such behaviours normalises unethical practices and reinforces moral detachment. Conversely, it has been demonstrated that interventions that "inoculate" people against moral disengagement, like ethics training or reflective leadership programs, improve moral awareness and ethical resilience [20]. The significance of moral education and ethical climate reform in academic systems is highlighted by these findings.

3.4 Institutional Trust

Employees' faith in the organization's impartiality, openness, and dependability is reflected in institutional trust. While low trust encourages cynicism and justifiable wrongdoing, high trust encourages ethical compliance and

teamwork [17]. According to Humbert and Strid (2024) [12], a lack of institutional confidence reinforces moral disengagement by causing misconduct, including gender-based violence, to go unreported. Similarly, Bhana and Suknunan (2021) [10] found that employee disengagement increases when leadership is seen as discriminatory or self-serving. Sociologically speaking, institutional trust serves as a moral stabiliser, reaffirming shared ethical norms and group responsibility.

3.5 Workplace Politics

Informal power struggles, favouritism, and manipulation that influence decision-making and resource access are all included in workplace politics. According to Fatima et al. (2025) [8], cronyism is a political dynamic that permits knowledge hiding and moral disengagement in higher education. In a similar vein, Mostafa et al. (2021) [9] showed how social undermining among coworkers can counteract the benefits of moral leadership by encouraging disengagement and moral decline. Political environments frequently foster egoistic norms in which workers put their own interests ahead of the integrity of the organisation [7]. Sociologically, these politics are a reflection of bureaucratic hierarchies and unequal power dynamics that normalise moral rationalisation as a means of survival.

3.6 Feedback Culture

The institutional norms pertaining to performance evaluation and communication are referred to as feedback culture. While punitive or opaque systems contribute to moral disengagement and alienation, open, constructive feedback encourages ethical reflection and accountability [5]. Inadequate feedback procedures in academic settings result in defensiveness, silence, and a loss of moral sensitivity [13], [21]. Employees' internalisation or disengagement from institutional ethics is thus influenced by feedback culture, which functions as a communication-based moral regulator.

3.7 Institutional Ownership (Moderating Dynamic)

Employees' sense of identification and belonging to their organisation, or institutional ownership, acts as a moderating influence on moral behaviour. Loyalty, responsibility, and moral engagement are all enhanced by high ownership [10]. On the other hand, when workers feel excluded or alienated, they may justify unethical behaviour as a reaction to institutional injustice [11]. The association between moral disengagement and deviance is moderated by social identity, as shown by [18], indicating that moral detachment is prevented by identification with institutional values.

3.8 Emerging Sociological Perspectives

According to recent research, moral disengagement is socially transmitted, institutionally sustained, and structurally induced. While Althouse (2023) [22] show that ethical quandaries in academia are caused by systemic cultural factors rather than isolated individual failings, Humbert and Strid (2024) [12] emphasise how reporting structures and

institutional confidence shape collective morality. Furthermore, Jones et al. (2024) [20] contend that moral inoculation can increase societal ethical resilience through ethics education and thoughtful discussion. All of these results point to the need for institutional interventions that increase trust, reduce politics, and encourage candid criticism and ownership in order to address moral disengagement in higher education.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to empirically validate the proposed conceptual model linking institutional dynamics (trust, workplace politics, and feedback culture) to moral disengagement and its behavioural outcomes (knowledge hiding and employee disengagement) among staff in tertiary institutions.

The design aligns with the Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Disengagement and Institutional Theory, which jointly posit that unethical behavior results from both individual cognitive processes and structural conditions. This design allows for the measurement of direct, mediating, and moderating effects among constructs.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The population comprises academic and non-academic staff of public and private tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

A target sample size of 273 respondents was determined using Cochran's formula for large populations, ensuring representativeness and statistical power. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality and ethical approval assured.

4.3 Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed around the conceptual framework and divided into seven sections. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

1. Section A: Demographic data (gender, designation, years of service, etc.).
2. Section B: Institutional Trust Scale.
3. Section C: Workplace Politics Scale.
4. Section D: Feedback Culture Scale.
5. Section E: Moral Disengagement Scale.
6. Section F: Behavioral Outcomes:
 - i. Institutional Commitment Scale, which is used as the reverse proxy measure for Employee Disengagement.
 - ii. Knowledge Hiding Scale.
7. Section G: Institutional Ownership (A categorical variable to used as a moderator).

4.4 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review by three scholars specializing in organizational behavior and higher education management. Construct validity and reliability

were assessed using the criteria established for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM):

1. Internal Consistency Reliability: Verified through Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha, with values ≥ 0.70 considered acceptable.
2. Convergent Validity: Assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with values ≥ 0.50 required.
3. Discriminant Validity: Assessed using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT), with HTMT values typically ≤ 0.90 (or ≤ 0.85 for a stricter criterion) indicating sufficient distinction between constructs.

4.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS 28 for descriptive statistics and data cleaning, and SmartPLS 4 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) algorithm. The analysis followed a multi-step process:

1. Descriptive Statistics for demographic profiling and construct distributions (mean and standard deviation).
2. Correlation Analysis (Pearson's r) to test preliminary relationships between constructs.
3. Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This involved two main stages:
 - i. Measurement Model Assessment: Confirmatory assessment of the measurement model's validity and reliability (CR, Cronbach's Alpha, AVE, HTMT) as detailed in Section 4.4.
 - ii. Structural Model Assessment: Assessment of the hypothesized relationships through a bootstrapping procedure to determine the significance of the path coefficients (β and p -values) and their effect sizes. The model's predictive power (R^2 values) and predictive relevance (Q^2 values) will also be reported.

This analytical strategy provides both theoretical validation and practical insight into how institutional environments shape moral cognition and employee behavior in academia.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the participating institutions. Informed consent was secured from all respondents, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Construct Means

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 provides insight into the general perception of the organizational environment and employee psychological states among the $N=273$ staff. All constructs are measured on a 5-point Likert scale, 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree.

Table 1: Construct Means and Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Type	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Standard	Interpretation

			Deviation (SD)	
Institutional Trust (IT)	Independent	3.29	0.71	Slightly above Neutral; Moderate Trust.
Workplace Politics (WP)	Independent	3.1	0.68	Slightly above Neutral; Moderate Perception of Politics.
Feedback Culture (FC)	Independent	3.49	0.83	Moderate Agreement; Positive Feedback Culture.
Moral Disengagement (MD)	Mediator	2.79	0.64	Slightly below Neutral; Low to Moderate MD.
Institutional Commitment (IC)	Outcome (Reverse Disengagement)	4.18	0.65	High Agreement; High Employee Commitment.

5.2 Correlation Analysis (Bivariate Relationships)

The Pearson correlation matrix as shown in Table 2 indicates the direction and strength of linear relationships between the constructs.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Construct Pair	Correlation (r)	Strength & Direction	Implication
IT ↔ WP	-0.625	Strong Negative	High trust is associated with low politics.
IT ↔ FC	0.649	Strong Positive	High trust is associated with a better feedback culture.
IT ↔ IC	0.557	Strong Positive	Trust is a major predictor of employee commitment.
WP ↔ FC	-0.498	Moderate Negative	High politics is associated with a poor feedback culture.

FC ↔ MD	0.326	Moderate Positive	A stronger feedback culture is associated with higher MD.
IT ↔ MD	0.016	Negligible	No direct linear relationship observed.

5.3 Institutional Dynamics in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

The results confirm that the three facets of Institutional Dynamics are highly interconnected. The strong negative correlation between Institutional Trust ($\bar{x}=3.29$) and Workplace Politics ($r=-0.625$) is a foundational finding. It suggests that politics acts as a potent institutional lubricant of distrust. Where employees perceive favoritism and political maneuvering, their faith in the institution's management and fairness erodes.

Similarly, the strong positive correlation between Trust and Feedback Culture ($r=0.649$) highlights the reciprocal nature of these environments. An atmosphere of trust is necessary for employees to "share ideas and criticisms freely" and for supervisors to "deliver feedback respectfully." These findings are consistent with Institutional Theory, which posits that the structural conditions (i.e., the dynamics) of an organization shape collective perception.

5.4 Institutional Dynamics and Behavioral Outcomes

The data strongly support a structural link between a healthy institutional environment and positive employee outcomes. Institutional Trust ($r=0.557$) and Feedback Culture ($r=0.390$) both showed strong-to-moderate positive correlations with Institutional Commitment ($\bar{x}=4.18$). This suggests that fostering trust and implementing a clear, positive feedback mechanism are effective strategies for mitigating employee disengagement and enhancing organizational loyalty.

The finding that staff exhibit High Institutional Commitment ($\bar{x}=4.18$) despite Moderate Politics ($\bar{x}=3.10$) suggests a potential buffering effect by other institutional factors, or that Nigerian academic staff remain highly committed, perhaps due to cultural values or job security perceptions, which warrants deeper SEM analysis.

5.5 Relationship with Moral Disengagement (MD)

The preliminary results on Moral Disengagement ($\bar{x}=2.79$) are the most intriguing and necessitate the planned SEM:

1. **Trust and Politics:** The negligible direct correlations of Institutional Trust (IT) ($r=0.016$) and Work Politics (WP) ($r=-0.078$) with MD challenge a simple direct effect. This suggests that the relationship is likely indirect, as hypothesized, with Moral Disengagement serving as a cognitive mediator rather than a direct outcome of the environment. According to Social Cognitive Theory, the environment first influences cognition (MD), which then influences behavior (disengagement/hiding).

2. **Feedback Culture Anomaly:** The moderate positive correlation between Feedback Culture and Moral Disengagement ($r=0.326$) is a counter-intuitive finding.
3. **Interpretation:** While good feedback culture aims to improve performance, a positive correlation with MD may suggest:
 - i. **Defensive Cognition:** In an unstable political environment, receiving critical feedback may trigger moral justifications (MD) to protect the self-concept, especially if performance appraisals are not fully trusted.
 - ii. **Scale Overlap:** The perceived openness of the feedback culture (a high score) might be misinterpreted by some respondents as the institution being too permissive, potentially easing the justification for breaking rules.

The interdependence of the institutional dynamics and their substantial influence on employee commitment were successfully established by the preliminary analysis. Additionally, it demonstrated that there is a complicated and probably mediated relationship between these dynamics and moral disengagement, supporting the use of SEM to precisely map the theoretical pathways.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that employee behaviour and ethical orientation in tertiary institutions are significantly influenced by institutional dynamics, particularly institutional trust, workplace politics, and feedback culture. The results show that these dynamics are strongly interdependent, that is, open communication and transparency strengthen organisational trust, while a negative correlation between Trust and Workplace Politics ($r = -0.625$) highlights how political scheming erodes trust in institutional leadership. These components work together to create a unified atmosphere that has a significant impact on employee attitudes.

Findings suggest that trust, feedback culture, and institutional commitment are positively correlated, indicating that moral responsibility and employee engagement are strengthened by an open and encouraging institutional environment. On the other hand, the complexity of Moral Disengagement shows that there may be an indirect and context-dependent relationship between it and institutional factors. The weak direct relationships found between moral disengagement, politics, and trust imply that disengagement acts as a cognitive mediator, converting institutional conditions into behavioural outcomes like withdrawal and knowledge hiding.

Curiously, a paradox is introduced by the moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.326$) between Moral Disengagement and Feedback Culture, suggesting that even well-meaning feedback systems may elicit defensive moral justifications in politically charged situations. In order to identify mediating and moderating pathways specifically, the function of

institutional ownership in moderating these effects, this unexpected pattern necessitates additional investigation using SEM.

The findings provide a better understanding of moral disengagement as a phenomenon that is institutionally reinforced rather than just an ethical transgression committed by an individual. Feedback, politics, and trust are institutional structures that interact to either promote or discourage moral behaviour. In order to foster moral accountability and organisational commitment, tertiary institutions must institutionalise transparent governance, depoliticise administrative systems, and fortify feedback and recognition mechanisms. The causal structure of these relationships, in particular the indirect impact of institutional dynamics on moral disengagement and its behavioural outcomes, should be further clarified by future research using PLS-SEM or longitudinal designs. According to this perspective, moral disengagement is best understood as a component of a larger sociological process that has its roots in communication, trust, and power. These three factors that are crucial for maintaining ethical integrity in higher education.

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