

# A Study on the Relationship Between Personality Traits and Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors of Sales Staff: The Mediation of Performance Pressure

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## To cite this article:

Zheng Jiahuan, Zeng Zhi, Jiang Xiaohan. A Study on the Relationship Between Personality Traits and Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors of Sales Staff: The Mediation of Performance Pressure. *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 11, No. 2, 2023, pp. 62-69.

doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20231102.14

Received: March 16, 2023; Accepted: April 23, 2023; Published: April 27, 2023

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**Abstract:** *Objective:* To explore the causes of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) of sales staff and the influence mechanism of personality traits on UPB. *Methods:* The questionnaire method was used to obtain the sample data. The personality traits scale, performance pressure scale and UPB scale were adapted and questionnaires were designed based on the previous mature scales. The questionnaires were distributed to the sales staff by random sampling and a total of 600 valid questionnaires were obtained in the end. And the data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis and mediated effects analysis using SPSS 26.0. *Results:* The mean value of personality traits of the sales staff was 3.683 with a standard deviation of 0.503; the mean value of performance pressure was 3.367 with a standard deviation of 0.475; and the mean value of UPB was 3.658 with a standard deviation of 0.523. Personality traits of sales staff had significant positive effects on performance pressure and UPB ( $P < 0.05$ ). Performance pressure had a significant positive effect on UPB ( $P < 0.05$ ). Performance pressure partially mediated the relationship between personality traits and UPB. *Conclusions:* The adoption of UPB by sales staff is not only directly influenced by personality traits, but also indirectly influenced by performance pressure. Therefore, organizations should guide employees to form positive personality traits, and give them more support and care to alleviate the negative emotions caused by performance pressure, so as to avoid the occurrence of bad behavior.

**Keywords:** Sales Staff, Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior, Personality Traits, Performance Pressure

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## 1. Introduction

Due to their boundary-crossing roles, sales staff rarely have daily communication with managers and other members within the organization, and in addition, sales staff need to interact with customers in an increasingly complex environment full of uncertainty and interpersonal conflict [3, 27]. Their unique job characteristics provide many opportunities for unethical behavior, making sales staff at higher risk of engaging in unethical behavior than other employees in the organization. Unethical behaviors of sales staff, such as cheating customers and lying about product performance, will not only cause customer dissatisfaction, but also have a negative impact on the reputation of the enterprise

[8]. However, not all of these unethical behaviors are self-interested and may also be pro-organizational. Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) refers to the unethical behavior that violates laws, regulations or industry norms for the benefit of the organization [9]. Its special nature of "pro-organization" makes it different from other unethical behavior, with a strong distinction. This behavior may be tolerated and supported in the organization. In the case of being ignored, even if it has a positive effect on maintaining the interests of the organization and its members in the short term, it will still damage the interests of the organization in the long term. Therefore, UPB has attracted extensive attention from experts in management, sociology and other fields.

Reciprocal determinism points out that individual behavior is

affected by both individual subjective factors and external environmental factors. Previous studies believe that personal factors are one of the main reasons for unethical behaviors, and many traits such as attitude, personality and emotion can affect individuals' behavioral tendency [26]. Among them, personality traits, as one of the most important aspects of human life, can affect all human behaviors in personal and social life [23]. In organizations, personality traits have an impact on work attitudes, work behaviors, and work performance. Employees with different personalities tend to feel different performance pressures and thus exhibit different behaviors [28]. However, current researches on the personal factors affecting UPB mainly focus on gender, education level, values and other aspects, and rarely involve personality traits [6]. Therefore, based on existing theories and research status, this study takes sales staff as the research object, and explores the impact of personality traits on UPB and the mediating effect of performance pressure through empirical analysis. It is helpful to provide theoretical basis for the proposal of relevant policies to realize the rational allocation of human resources and restrain the occurrence of UPB, and provide reference for the promotion of positive and sustainable development of enterprises.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

### 2.1. Personality Traits and Performance Pressure

Personality traits are the psychological structures which can trigger and dominate people's behavior and make repetitive responses when faced with stimuli in the current period, among the many factors that make up personality [16]. In recent years, the Big Five personality model has been widely recognized, with the most influential being the five-factor model proposed by Costa and McCrae, who classified personality traits into five dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, openness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness [5]. Personality traits can identify whether one is in a pressurizing situation by the level of perceived threat, for example, when high levels of some traits make individuals appear sensitive and anxious, they are more likely to identify external events as threatening, which triggers high levels of pressure [4]. Thus, for the same situation or event, the level of perceived pressure can vary across personality traits. Currently, performance pressure is considered as job pressure due to performance appraisals, performance requirements, etc. and for employees, performance pressure is the tension and imbalance that occurs when individuals perceive a mismatch between their abilities and job requirements [11]. Therefore, when employees are under the same performance appraisal, different personality traits can produce different performance pressure outcomes. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Personality traits have a significant positive effect on performance pressure.

### 2.2. Personality Traits and UPB

Behavior is driven by the interaction between individual

personality characteristics and environmental factors [19]. Personality psychologists have proposed that personality traits permeate individual behaviors and play a role in behavioral decision-making [1]. For sales staff, different individual traits will make different choices on things, and thus make behaviors that have different effects on the company. Employees with different personality traits may take the initiative to explore development opportunities and seek change because they are not satisfied with the status quo, or may take the initiative to implement unethical behaviors that benefit the organization in order to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the company [7]. And some studies have shown that employees with high levels of certain traits (e.g., high neuroticism) are more likely to exhibit unethical behaviors [10]. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Personality traits have a significant positive effect on UPB.

### 2.3. Performance Pressure and UPB

As the market competition is fierce increasingly, organizations tend to set high levels of performance goals in order to maintain its survival and development. When employees cannot fulfill the high performance requirements with their own abilities, it will become the pressure of employees. Previous studies have found that performance pressure in organizations can have a double-edged sword effect, which can have positive and negative effects on employees at the same time. On the positive side, performance pressure is regarded by employees as an opportunity for career development and self-growth, which can mobilize employees' work vitality and increase their work involvement, thus promoting the improvement of performance [14, 15, 18]. The rewards given by the organization to the employees who complete the performance goals can make the employees profit and improve their happiness [22]. In order to safeguard their own interests, employees will have a strong pro-organization motivation and even commit a series of unethical behaviors in order to contribute to the organization. On the negative side, performance pressure is seen as a threat, which will increase employee anxiety and job insecurity. When employees believe that performance pressure poses a threat to their current work, or even lose their jobs, they will engage in UPB to avoid the harm caused by performance deficiency [13]. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Performance pressure has a significant positive effect on UPB.

### 2.4. The Mediation of Performance Pressure

This study argues that although personality traits can have an impact on UPB, this mechanism of action is not necessarily direct, but may also be indirect, mediated by performance pressure. Many personality traits can significantly influence perceptions of pressure and coping styles, and through further research, Liu et al. found that different personality traits affect people's perceptions of pressure, prompting them to develop different emotions and thus adopt different behaviors to cope

with stressful events [17]. Employees with many personality traits such as high neuroticism and low extroversion are more sensitive to high performance requests and are prone to develop anxiety, resulting in a high level of perceived performance pressure, at this time, employees may ignore moral factors and take unethical behaviors to improve performance, so as to realize their own contribution to the organization and avoid threats to their position in the organization [20, 24]. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: The effect of personality traits on UPB

among sales staff is mediated by performance pressure.

In summary, this study examines the current situation related to sales staff as respondents from the perspective of personality traits, performance pressure and UPB, i.e., to verify the relationship between sales staff personality traits, performance pressure and UPB.

Based on the dimensions of the variables distilled in the existing studies and the interrelationships among the main variables, a theoretical model of the study was constructed based on the proposed hypotheses (as shown in Figure 1).

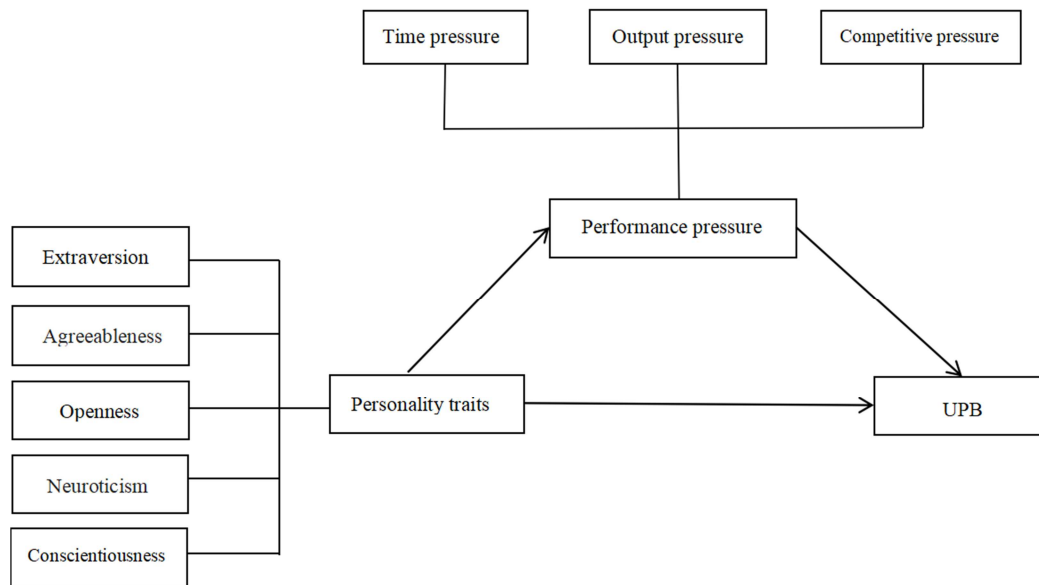


Figure 1. The theoretical model of this research.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Research Objects

The questionnaire was distributed to sales staff on the online platform using random sampling. We finally obtained 600 valid questionnaires with an effective rate of 97.9%, and the questionnaire completers all gave their informed consent to the study and participated voluntarily. The distribution of demographic characteristics of the survey respondents was as follows. Male participants accounted for 66.7%, which was higher than female. For the age group, the distribution was mainly between 25-35 years old, accounting for 55.0%. For positions, the vast majority were general employees, accounting for 85.0%. Regarding marital status, most of the participants were married, accounting for 50.0%. The education level of the participants was mainly below bachelor's degree, accounting for 63.3%. Pertaining to working years, most had less than 5 years of experience, accounting for 48.3%.

#### 3.2. Research Tools

##### 3.2.1. Self-Administered General Sociodemographic Scale

The questionnaire contained a scale pertaining to participants' general sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, marital status, educational background,

position and working years.

##### 3.2.2. Personality Traits Scale

A five-item personality trait scale was designed for this study, containing five dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, openness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness. Its items were responded in our questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly approve). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the scale was 0.903 (Table 1).

##### 3.2.3. Performance Pressure Scale

Based on the diagnostic stress scale developed by Ivanceviche and Matteson, this study designed the performance pressure scale [12]. The scale included three dimensions of time pressure, output pressure and competitive pressure, with a total of 5 items. Its items were responded in our questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly approve). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the scale was 0.863.

##### 3.2.4. UPB Scale

The classic scale developed by Umphress, which is generally accepted in the industry, was used in this study, and five of the questions were selected [25]. Its items were responded in our questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly approve). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the scale was 0.896.

### 3.3. Procedures and Analysis

Firstly, SPSS 26.0 was used to analyze the correlation between the variables, and the correlation degree between the variables was expressed by Pearson correlation coefficient.

Secondly, the linear relationship between the variables was verified by regression analysis. Finally, the stepwise regression method was used to test whether the mediating effect was valid.

**Table 1.** Results of reliability and validity analysis of the scale.

Variables	Cronbach's $\alpha$	KMO	Bartlett's test	Accumulated variance contribution rate (%)
personality trait	0.903	0.771	166.155***	62.705
Performance pressure	0.863	0.772	284.635***	63.093
UPB	0.896	0.765	116.289***	59.369

Note: \*\*\* means  $P < 0.001$ .

## 4. Research Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The results of descriptive statistical analysis (Table 2) showed that the mean value of personality traits was 3.683, the standard deviation was 0.503, and the mean standard error was 0.021. The mean value of performance pressure is 3.367, the standard deviation is 0.475, and the mean value of standard error is 0.019. The mean value, standard deviation and mean standard error of UPB were 3.658, 0.523 and 0.021. The sample mean of each variable is high, the degree of dispersion is low, and the degree of sample confidence is high.

### 4.2. Correlation Analysis

SPSS 26.0 was used to conduct correlation analysis on the data collected from the questionnaire. The results showed that (Table 3), each dimension of personality traits was significantly positively correlated with each dimension of performance pressure. There was a significant positive correlation between the dimensions of personality traits and UPB. There is a significant positive correlation between performance pressure and UPB. Therefore, the hypothesis and model proposed in this study are reasonable.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistical analysis results of each variable.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean standard error
Personality traits	3.683	0.503	0.021
Performance pressure	3.367	0.475	0.019
UPB	3.658	0.523	0.021

**Table 3.** Correlation analysis results of each variable.

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness	Time pressure	Output pressure	Competitive pressure	UPB
Extraversion	1								
Agreeableness	0.528**	1							
Conscientiousness	0.616**	0.681**	1						
Neuroticism	0.574**	0.681**	0.681**	1					
Openness	0.089*	0.410**	0.207**	0.277**	1				
Time pressure	0.376**	0.494**	0.521**	0.557**	0.330**	1			
Output pressure	0.237**	0.488**	0.364**	0.550**	0.464**	0.454**	1		
Competitive pressure	0.227**	0.387**	0.240**	0.370**	0.352**	0.179**	0.510**	1	
UPB	0.508**	0.652**	0.677**	0.711**	0.377**	0.559**	0.532**	0.364**	1

Note: \* indicates  $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $P < 0.01$ .

### 4.3. Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is used to test the relationship between personality traits, performance pressure and UPB, and the results are shown in Table 4. In terms of the relationship between personality traits and performance pressure, the linear relationship model formula of each dimension of personality pressure and performance pressure can be expressed as:  $\text{Performance pressure} = 2.480 + 0.235 * \text{extraversion}$ ;  $\text{Performance pressure} = 1.631 + 0.448 * \text{agreeableness}$ ;  $\text{Performance stress} = 2.099 + 0.334 * \text{Conscientiousness}$ ;  $\text{Performance pressure} = 1.726 + 0.433 * \text{neuroticism}$ ;  $\text{Performance pressure} = 2.214 + 0.362 * \text{Openness}$ . The  $R^2$  of models are respectively 0.113, 0.337, 0.215, 0.400 and 0.254. All models passed the F test, which means that all dimensions of personality traits have significant positive effects on performance pressure, among which, neurotic personality has the greatest impact on performance pressure, and extroverted personality has the least impact. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

In terms of the relationship between personality traits and UPB, the linear relationship between each dimension of

personality pressure and UPB can be expressed as follows:  $UPB = 2.181 + 0.391 * extraversion$ ;  $UPB = 1.509 + 0.555 * agreeableness$ ;  $UPB = 1.621 + 0.537 * conscientiousness$ ;  $UPB = 1.626 + 0.536 * neuroticism$ ;  $UPB = 2.709 + 0.298 * Openness$ . The  $R^2$  of models are 0.258, 0.426, 0.458, 0.506 and 0.142, respectively. All models passed the F test, which means that all dimensions of personality traits have significant positive effects on UPB, among which neurotic personality has the greatest impact on UPB, and open personality has the least impact. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is supported.

In terms of the relationship between performance pressure

and UPB, the linear relationship model formula of each dimension of performance pressure and UPB can be expressed as:  $UPB = 2.186 + 0.402 * time pressure$ ;  $UPB = 1.809 + 0.565 * output pressure$ ;  $UPB = 2.826 + 0.247 * competitive pressure$ . The  $R^2$  of models are 0.312, 0.283 and 0.133, respectively. All models passed the F test, which means that each dimension of performance pressure has a significant positive effect on UPB, in which time pressure has the greatest impact on UPB, while competitive pressure has the least impact. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is supported.

**Table 4.** Results of regression analysis.

Variable			Regression coefficient			Fitting index		
Dependent variable	Independent variable		Unstandardized coefficient	Standardization coefficient	t	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F
Performance pressure	Extraversion	(Constant)	2.480	-	24.009***	0.113	0.112	76.174***
		Extraversion	0.235	0.336	8.728***			
	Agreeableness	(Constant)	1.631	-	16.167***	0.337	0.336	303.766***
		Agreeableness	0.448	0.580	17.429***			
	Conscientiousness	(Constant)	2.099	-	20.883***	0.215	0.214	163.793***
		Conscientiousness	0.334	0.464	12.798***			
	Neuroticism	(Constant)	1.726	-	20.674***	0.400	0.399	398.957***
		Neuroticism	0.433	0.633	19.974***			
	Openness	(Constant)	2.214	-	26.831***	0.254	0.253	203.550***
		Openness	0.362	0.504	14.267***			
UPB	Extraversion	(Constant)	2.181	-	20.969***	0.258	0.257	208.188***
		Extraversion	0.391	0.508	14.429***			
	Agreeableness	(Constant)	1.509	-	14.597***	0.426	0.425	442.941***
		Agreeableness	0.555	0.652	21.046***			
	Conscientiousness	(Constant)	1.621	-	17.620***	0.458	0.457	504.79***
		Conscientiousness	0.537	0.667	22.468***			
	Neuroticism	(Constant)	1.626	-	19.489***	0.506	0.505	612.967***
		Neuroticism	0.536	0.711	24.758***			
	Openness	(Constant)	2.709	-	27.295***	0.142	0.141	98.933***
		Openness	0.298	0.377	9.947***			
UPB	Time pressure	(Constant)	2.186	-	24.000***	0.312	0.311	271.133***
		Time pressure	0.402	0.559	16.466***			
	Output pressure	(Constant)	1.809	-	14.881***	0.283	0.282	236.398***
		Output pressure	0.565	0.532	15.375***			
	Competitive pressure	(Constant)	2.826	-	31.653***	0.133	0.131	91.353***
		Competitive pressure	0.247	0.364	9.558***			

Note: \*\*\* means  $P < 0.001$ .

#### 4.4. Mediating Effect Test

SPSS26.0 software is used to combine the mean and centralize the data, and stepwise regression method is used to further test whether the mediating effect of performance pressure is significant. The results are shown in Table 5. Firstly, the influence of personality traits on UPB was significant, and the regression coefficient  $\beta$  was 0.769. After adding performance pressure as the mediator, personality traits and performance pressure are included into the equation as independent variables.

The results show that personality traits could significantly predict UPB. After adding performance pressure variable, the  $\beta$  value of personality traits decreased to 0.638, but the results were still significant. This suggests that performance pressure plays a partial mediating role between personality traits and UPB. Personality traits not only have a direct predictive effect on UPB, but also have an indirect effect on UPB through performance pressure. Therefore, hypothesis 4 is supported.

To sum up, the final research model of this paper is shown in Figure 2.

**Table 5.** Test results of mediating effect.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	$\beta$	Standard error	t	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F
UPB	Personality traits	0.769	0.027	29.415***	0.591	0.591	865.224***
UPB	Personality traits	0.638	0.035	18.811***	0.614	0.612	473.936***
	Performance pressure	0.199	0.037	5.862***			

Note: \*\*\* means  $P < 0.001$ .

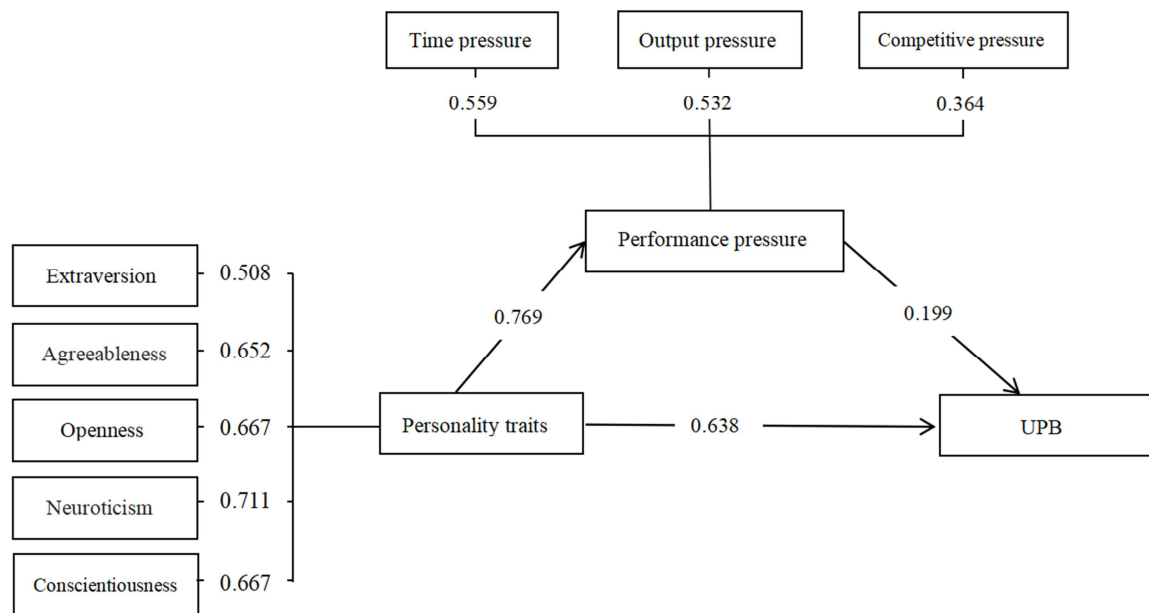


Figure 2. The final theoretical model of this research.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Sales Staff's Personality Traits, Performance Pressure and UPB Status

The overall mean value of personality traits is at a higher level, indicating that enterprise sales staff show more obvious individual traits, which has a greater impact on the growth of the enterprise. Employees with obvious personality traits tend to work seriously, have a strong sense of responsibility, and are more willing to actively seek opportunities. The overall mean value of performance pressure is high, which indicates that sales staff are under greater performance pressure. The barrier to entry for sales staff is low, and many employees lack the ability to match the job requirements. However, in the current competitive market environment, enterprises often set higher performance targets to seek survival and development. In order to maintain their status in the organization, some employees will excessively pursue the current performance goals and ignore the improvement of their own abilities, which will eventually become a vicious circle. The overall mean value of UPB is also high, indicating that sales staff are more likely to take unethical behaviors in violation of laws, regulations or industry norms for the benefit of the organization, but this will inevitably damage the long-term interests of the organization and affect the reputation of the organization. Therefore, organization leaders and managers should attach great importance to employees' UPB.

### 5.2. Main Effect Analysis

The empirical study shows that personality traits have a positive effect on sales staff's UPB. First of all, extroverted employees prefer to express themselves. In order to gain recognition from the organization and team, they may take unethical behaviors to ensure the efficient completion of

organizational tasks. Secondly, agreeableness employees have an optimistic attitude, so they have a high level of career satisfaction, and are motivated to become members of the organization, taking improper behaviors to maintain the organization [2]. Moreover, conscientious employees are generally strict with themselves and can excellently complete the tasks of the organization, but some studies believe that this is due to their desire for rewards [21]. When such desire exceeds their own moral bottom line, it will lead to unethical behaviors. Neurotic employees, on the other hand, are more sensitive to the work environment and lack job insecurity, prompting them to resort to unethical practices in order to avoid job threats. Finally, open employees like innovation. When they are bored with daily work, they will have the idea of "taking risks" to change the original working methods and contents, and thus produce UPB.

### 5.3. Mediating Effect Analysis

This study verifies that the personality traits of sales staff indirectly affect the UPB through the mediating effect of performance pressure, which indicates that the adoption of UPB by sales staff is not only directly influenced by personality traits, but also indirectly influenced by performance pressure. Firstly, the five dimensions of personality traits positively affect performance pressure. Under the same performance requirements, when employees have more obvious personality traits, they can perceive more threats in all aspects, thus generating performance pressure. Secondly, performance pressure positively affects UPB. When sales staff feel time pressure, they will take unethical actions to ensure that the performance requirements of the organization are met within the specified time. In the face of output pressure, sales staff will cheat customers and other improper behaviors to meet the high standards of the organization to protect the interests of the organization. In addition, when sales staff feel competitive pressure, in order to

avoid the threat to their status in the organization, they will trigger unethical behavior to protect their own interests. Therefore, the distinct personality traits of salespeople will cause them to form different levels of performance pressure, at which time, they are more likely to produce negative emotions and behaviors, and thus trigger UPB.

## 6. Conclusion

This study takes the relationship between sales staff's personality traits, performance pressure and UPB as the main line, and specifically analyzes the direct effects of five dimensions of personality traits on UPB and how to produce indirect effects through the intermediary of performance pressure. According to the research results, the higher the level of personality traits of sales staff, the more performance pressure, and the more likely to cause UPB; The higher the perceived level of performance pressure, the more likely the sales staff to carry out the UPB; Performance pressure plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between personality traits and UPB.

This study introduced performance pressure as a transmission factor to improve the model of the influence of personality traits on UPB, and conducted research around the antecedents of UPB and the mechanism of its interactions, which is an enrichment and extension of UPB-related research and provides a theoretical basis for future research on personality traits, performance pressure and UPB. In addition, by exploring the mechanism of UPB, this study uncovers new ideas to reduce this behavior of employees and helps organizations to effectively identify and prevent the occurrence of UPB of employees. It also sounds a warning bell for organization managers, emphasizing the need to focus on strengthening the correct guidance for employees in daily management, which has important practical significance for the future benign development of organizations.

Although this study objectively verified our hypothesis, there are still limitations: first, offline research could not be conducted during the survey due to the COVID-19, and we could not determine whether the participants were honest and detailed in reporting unethical behavior, which may lead to slight bias in the questionnaire results. A combination of online and offline approaches could be considered in the future. Second, the sample in this study was mainly sales staff and represented a limited source. More sample sources could be considered in future research. Third, this study was confined to cross-sectional analysis, which inevitably missed the long-term impact of the factors and could not reflect the relationship between personality traits and UPB of sales staff in real time, thus leading to biased results. Future research could consider a longitudinal design for long-term tracking to make the results more convincing.

## Conflict of Interest

All the authors do not have any possible conflicts of interest.

## Author Contributions

ZZ designed the study; ZJ, JX, and ZZ performed the experiments; JX, ZZ, and ZJ analysed the data; ZJ and ZZ wrote the paper.

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