

## 비인격적 감독이 직원의 조용한 사직에 미치는 영향: 방어적 침묵과 지위인식의 역할

# The Impact of Abusive Supervision on Employee Quiet Quitting: Examining the Roles of Defensive Silence and Perceived Status

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Grounded in conservation of resource (COR) theory, this study explores employees' avoidance-oriented responses to abusive supervision, a relatively under-researched area. Specifically, it investigates how task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision differentially impact employees' quiet quitting, mediated by defensive silence and driven by resource conservation or acquisition motivations. The study also examines the moderating role of employees' perceived status in these mediation processes. Time-lagged data from a variety of Chinese industries were analyzed using structural equation modeling and the PROCESS SPSS macro. The results indicate that task-related abusive supervision promotes quiet quitting through increased defensive silence, while interpersonal-related abusive supervision deters quiet quitting by reducing defensive silence. This indirect effect is stronger when employees perceive their status as low. The study contributes to understanding abusive supervision by offering novel insights into the relationship between abusive supervision and quiet quitting, providing directions for future research.

Keyword: Abusive supervision, Defensive silence, Quiet quitting, Perceived status

## I . Introduction

Due to its deteriorating nature and impact on various individual and organizational work-

related outcomes, abusive supervision has drawn substantial scholarly attention. Abusive supervision is generally defined as "employees' perception of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile

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verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Research on abusive supervision indicates that targets of supervisory hostility experience diminished job satisfaction and organizational commitment, increased emotional exhaustion and stress (Tepper, 2007), leading to organizationally harmful behavior such as deviations, absenteeism, and turnover (Abi Aad et al., 2021; Agarwal, 2019). From a conceptual standpoint, it is particularly insightful to examine these diverse attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral reactions through an approach-avoidance perspective (Carver and Scheier, 1998; Kiewitz et al., 2016). A review of existing literature indicates that most empirical studies have predominantly focused on examining the targeted employees’ *approach-oriented* responses to abusive supervision (Kiewitz et al., 2016), such as aggression and retaliation toward the offender (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). These studies indicate that employees often respond to abusive supervision by engaging in harmful approach behaviors toward their supervisors or others, driven by a desire to express negative emotions such as anger and resentment and to restore a sense of justice or regain control in the workplace.

Yet, in practical organizational settings, employees who experience abusive supervision do not necessarily retaliate to their antagonistic supervisors directly, particularly in societies with high power distance, collectivism,

and interpersonal orientations (Wang et al., 2020). The inherent power imbalance between supervisors and subordinates arises from their differing hierarchical positions, with supervisors controlling more resources, which makes employees hesitant to take aggressive and direct actions against their abusive supervisors due to fears of losing valuable resources, such as promotions or career opportunities, or the possibility of facing further retaliation (Lam and Xu, 2019). Instead, based on the conservation of resource perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), the fear triggered by abusive supervision activates employees’ self-protection mechanisms, leading them to take avoidance and self-defense strategies to preserve their resources and inhibit additional resource depletion/drain. Indeed, the findings of Whitman and colleagues (2014) suggest that feedback avoidance is a prevalent coping mechanism among employees subjected to abusive supervision. Additionally, scholarly investigations by Peltokorpi (2019) and Wang et al. (2020) have corroborated this trend, highlighting interaction avoidance and maintaining silence as further strategies adopted by employees confronted with abusive supervisory behaviors. This suggests that *avoidance-oriented* responses to abusive supervision are not uncommon.

However, in comparison to *approach-oriented* responses, *avoidance-related* responses have not been explicitly considered and empirically studied well within the abusive supervision

research stream (Kiewitz et al., 2016). A common form of avoidance behavior in this context is silence, which is defined as “withholding relevant ideas, information, or opinions as a means of self-protection driven by fear” (Dyne et al., 2003). This study focuses on defensive silence, as it primarily driven by self-protective motives and aligns more closely with both our research framework and the theoretical foundation of COR theory, compared to other types of silence. From the perspective of employees subjected to verbal abuse, defensive silence is considered an effective coping strategy that reduces the risk of further abuse or negative performance evaluations.

To delve deeper into employees’ distal *avoidance-oriented responses* triggered by defensive silence, the current study focuses on a growing yet under-researched organizational phenomenon called *Quiet Quitting* (QQ). QQ refers to “the limited commitment of employees to carry out the assigned duties and to relinquish from any other task not specified in their job description” (Formica and Sfodera, 2022, p. 900). Recent studies suggest that QQ is associated with decreased work productivity, reduced job engagement, and lower work motivation and job satisfaction, ultimately leading to an adverse impact on overall work performance (Hamouche et al., 2023). Therefore, identifying and examining its potential antecedents is imperative to mitigate the potential costs of QQ. According to existing literature, the

role of undesirable leader behaviors is one of the important reasons for employees to actively engage in QQ (Arar et al., 2023). Following this notion, we investigate how defensive silence mediates the effect of abusive supervision on employee QQ.

Moreover, the current scope of abusive supervision mainly centers on personal attacks, including behaviors like mockery, rudeness, and privacy infringement (Stein et al., 2020). According to Tepper (2007), however, it is valuable to differentiate the characteristics of abusive supervision to accurately predict the respective work-related outcomes. In a similar vein, Rodwell and colleagues (2014) pointed out abusive supervision could include both “personal attacks” and “task attacks.” With this respect, Park and colleagues (2014) empirically classified abusive supervision as task- and interpersonal-related behaviors. Specifically, task-related abusive supervision is specifically linked to task-level stressors, where a leader berates and disregards an employee due to poor performance on a task. In contrast, interpersonal-related abusive supervision involves criticism and neglect of employees’ values, origins, and appearance, which are typically perceived as interpersonal stressors (Park et al., 2014). Empirical studies based on this have found that the two types of abusive supervision have different impacts on employees’ performance and job engagement (Park et al., 2014; Baek and Shin,

2018). These findings implying that employees' *avoidance-oriented* responses may also vary based on the types of abusive supervision, a phenomenon that can be explained by Conservation of Resources (COR) theory.

According to COR theory, individuals evaluate potential gains and losses based on their current resource status, which influences their behavioral responses, driven by motives either to conserve resources or acquire new ones (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). In the context of task-related abusive supervision, employees are more inclined to prioritize resource conservation. This tendency arises because task-related abuse typically entails lower levels of stress and resource depletion (Park et al., 2014), leaving employees with sufficient resources to protect, such as opportunities for promotions or career advancement. In such cases, avoidance-oriented responses are perceived as effective strategies, as their benefits—such as minimizing further abuse—outweigh the associated risks. Conversely, interpersonal abusive supervision is often accompanied by higher stress and significant resource depletion (Park et al., 2014), which can push employees' resources to the brink of exhaustion. Under these circumstances, avoidance-oriented responses are less effective in preventing further resource loss or compensating for the existing scarcity, rendering their potential benefits negligible. In response to such scenarios, employees are less likely to adopt

avoidance behaviors and are instead driven by a motivation to acquire new resources, such as seeking social support or external assistance, to cope with the stress. Therefore, building on the examination of employees' avoidance-oriented responses to abusive supervision, it is both logical and significant to further distinguish the potential differences among various types of abusive supervision.

Further, in order to fully understand the suggested connections between abusive supervision, defensive silence, and QQ, we shall explore the boundary conditions that may either amplify or alleviate these connections. Previous research has argued that the perceived status of employees in their team/organization acts as a crucial psychological means. Varying levels of perceived status then could influence and change employees' reactions toward the same team/organizational procedures and/or treatments received from the significant player of the team/organization, such as leaders (Diekmann et al., 2007). In the COR framework, employees who perceive themselves as having higher status are more likely to possess various resources, including challenging tasks, learning and promotion opportunities, greater job satisfaction and efficacy, social recognition, and interpersonal influence (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). Additionally, they are motivated to maintain their current status, prevent any potential decline, and protect the benefits they have acquired (Chen et

al., 2012). Therefore, when confronted with external stimuli, such as abusive supervision, they may become more sensitive and perceive heightened threats. Consequently, they are more inclined to adopt stronger avoidance and protective behaviors to preserve their status and safeguard their vested interests. Thus, drawing upon the COR theory, we propose that, in the presence of abusive supervision, employees with different status perceptions will engage in varying degrees of defensive silence, which, in turn, will impact their QQ.

In sum, this study intends to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding abusive supervision and related organizational behavior in several ways. First, in contrast to the prevailing focus on employees' *approach-oriented* responses to abusive supervision, we investigate the association between abusive supervision and employees' *avoidance-oriented* response: defensive silence. This perspective offers new theoretical insights into employees' behavioral reactions in adverse leadership environments. Second, we introduce QQ as a distal outcome of avoidance-oriented responses, highlighting the long-term harm caused by abusive supervision and addressing a gap in the literature on the emerging organizational phenomenon of QQ. Additionally, we specifically classified task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision and explored their differential impact to underscore the value of distinguishing the types of abusive supervision.

Lastly, this study delves into the role of individual differences in the process through which abusive supervision shapes employees' avoidance-oriented responses, with a particular focus on the moderating effect of employees' perceived status, thereby extending the theoretical boundaries of existing research.

## II. Hypotheses Development

### 2.1 Two Types of Abusive Supervision and Employee Defensive Silence

From traditional leadership to contemporary leadership stream of research, leadership scholars tend to classify and scrutinize leadership approach/style/behavior into task- and interpersonal-related attributes (Yammarino et al., 2020). This general categorization can also be applied to undesirable leadership approach/style/behavior, such as abusive supervision. Indeed, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) explicitly differentiate two distinct attributes of abusive supervision: one reflects the leader's active form of abusive behavior related to interpersonal-oriented abuse (e.g., "my leader ridicules me"), and the other depicts more passive acts of abusive behavior related to task-oriented abuse (e.g., "my leader does not give me credit for jobs requiring a lot of effort"). Additionally, given the incon-

sistent findings in research on abusive supervision, Tepper (2007) also emphasized the importance of distinguishing its components and accounting for perceptual differences to enhance the accuracy of predicting its consequences. Therefore, examining abusive supervision as a single-dimensional construct presents inherent limitations. Building on this perspective, Park and colleagues (2014) empirically classified task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision, and verified their different effects on employees' work-related outcomes. Specifically, task-related abusive supervision occurs when leaders reprimand or neglect employees due to poor task performance, which is typically perceived as a task-related stressor and can lead to task conflicts. In contrast, relationship-related abusive supervision involves leaders criticizing or disregarding employees' background, values, appearance, or other personal attributes, which is perceived as an interpersonal stressor and often results in interpersonal conflicts with the leader. Although research on these two types of abusive supervision is still in its early stages, existing studies suggest that task-related abusive supervision may enhance employees' job engagement and performance, whereas interpersonal-related abusive supervision tends to decrease both (Park et al., 2014; Baek and Shin, 2018). This finding supports the validity of distinguishing between these two types of abusive supervision.

Drawing from the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we suggest that employees respond to various forms of abusive supervision by strategically using defensive silence. The COR theory states that when individuals encounter stressors and external threats, such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), they behave with either *resource-conservation motivation*, which drives them to protect limited resources, or *resource-acquisition motivation*, which compels them to invest in acquiring additional support or averting potential losses (Hobfoll, 2002). Zhou and colleagues (2019) argued that the degree of workplace stressors, particularly hindrance stressors, is the primary determinant of a fundamental shift in resource motivation. At moderate stress levels, employees are driven by the motivation of resource conservation, aiming to prevent the depletion of valuable future assets. Yet, at excessively high stress levels, such as when current resources are insufficient to endure further losses, and when the need to acquire additional resources to halt ongoing resource losses outweighs the fear of losing resources, they prioritize acquiring ancillary resources. Another study found that while the initial response to emotional exhaustion, characterized by resource loss, aligns with the motivation to conserve resources, once emotional exhaustion reaches a critical level and emotional reserves are fully depleted, the response shifts to being driven by the motivation to acquire resources

(Qin et al., 2014). Thus, considering the varying stress levels and resource loss that employees may experience, as well as their judgment of the potential benefits and costs associated with their current resource status under different forms of abusive supervision, we assert that employees' resource-related motivations may differ when encountering distinct styles of abusive supervision, leading them to adopt defensive silence strategies in distinct ways.

Specifically, task-related abusive supervision, associated with task-level stressors, involves a leader berating or ignoring an employee due to poor task performance, reflecting a disagreement between their views, ideas, and opinions on the task (Park et al., 2014). In such situation, employees perceive a loss in their current resource status, leading to frustration, helplessness, and lower self-efficacy (Simons and Peterson, 2000). Despite these challenges, employees perceive this moderately stressful situation as recoverable (Park et al., 2014; Baek and Shin, 2018) and seek to preserve resources such as performance evaluations and continued employment (De Clercq et al., 2021; Tepper, 2007). Therefore, in this occurrence, employees are more prone to adopt *avoidance-oriented* coping strategies, such as engaging defensive silence, to cautiously protect limited resources based on their resource-conservation motivation (Hobfoll, 1989). Exhibiting defensive silence could

offer the employees potential benefits, such as mitigating further resource losses and preventing additional mistakes and abuse. However, attempts to change the status quo are risky due to the potential for leader punishment and negative peer perceptions, and they require significant time and effort. Therefore, based on this assessment of potential benefits and costs, individuals experiencing task-related abusive supervision are inclined to protect their remaining resources and are unlikely to take costly risky behaviors (Qin et al., 2014). In light of this, we put out the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1. Task-related abusive supervision is positively related with employees' defensive silence.*

In a similar vein yet differently, interpersonal-related abusive supervision that involves criticism and disregard for employees' values, origins, and appearance could be perceived as interpersonal stressors of employees (Park et al., 2014). This high-level stressor can cause more enduring damage to the employees than task-related stressors (Tong and Spitzmueller, 2024). Interpersonal-related abusive supervision can lead employees to suffer severe resource losses as the leaders' abuse becomes more personal, eliciting feelings of disrespect, devaluation, unfairness, and anger of the targeted employees (Mitchell and Ambrose,



2007). In this situation, personal resources are nearing depletion, and the remaining resources cannot withstand further loss, making it difficult to change the condition, which may persist or worsen. According to the COR theory, individuals with relatively low current resource status or facing resource depletion may prioritize potential gains over losses, thus being more motivated to acquire ancillary resources or avert potential losses (Lim et al., 2020). Relatedly, the study of Arain and colleagues (2020), it has shown that while employees who engaged in *avoidance-oriented* strategies were able to temporarily prevent their resource loss, employees who proactively conducted help-seeking behaviors acquired new and ancillary resources, thereby avoiding the 'loss spiral.' Based on this notion and findings, we contend that employees would be less likely to respond to interpersonal-related abusive supervision with *avoidance-oriented* behaviors, including defensive silence. This is because they expect severe and persistent resource loss, while the potential benefits of avoidance responses, such as preventing further resource depletion or compensating for current losses, are minimal. Based on this, we put out the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2. Interpersonal-related abusive supervision is negatively related with employees' defensive silence.*

## 2.2 Defensive Silence and QQ

The concept of QQ is characterized by employees who lack commitment and active engagement in their work, avoid expending excessive time, effort, or enthusiasm beyond the essential requirements, and show less eagerness to participate in extra activities (Zenger and Folkman, 2022). The term "QQ" has become popular both in business contexts and within academia, yet it appears to be in its early stages within the literature on applied psychology and organizational behavior. Some studies employed expanded theoretical frameworks and approaches such as social exchange theory, psychological contract, conservation of resources theory, and theory of generations (Hamouche et al., 2023; Tayfun et al., 2023) to understand the phenomenon of QQ. Several related empirical studies of QQ tried to grasp the nature of this concept through the similar concepts like work withdrawal, employee disengagement, continuous commitment, and turnover intention (Anand et al., 2024; Aydin and Azizoğlu, 2022; Formica and Sfodera, 2022; Mahand and Caldwell, 2023). Although QQ shares similarities with these existing variables, it represents a broader concept that integrates both behavioral and emotional dimensions, with employees autonomously setting boundaries for their work and intentionally limiting additional commitments (Kim et al., 2023). While these efforts provide a the-



oretical basis for the study of QQ, the relevant empirical research is still relatively limited.

Among the many feasible determinants that make employees to engage in QQ, Detert (2022) identifies “organizational silence” as a significant predictor of QQ, attributing it to fears of career setbacks, social exclusion, psychological distress, and physical harm. Such fear-based silence can make employees disengaged and leave them acquiescent, which would motivate employees to engage in QQ (Detert, 2022). Relevant studies also indicated that employee silence undermines employee motivation and morale, which could increase employees’ QQ-related behaviors such as absenteeism, arriving late, or leaving early (Öztürk et al., 2023). Additionally, according to defensive silence research, employee reticence has been associated with numerous adverse consequences, including diminished intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction, as well as heightened job burnout (Shaukat and Khurshid, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). These unfavorable psychological factors derived from employee silence have been suggested as potential causes of QQ (Arar et al., 2023). Based on the summarized research and presented arguments, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 3. Employees’ defensive silence is positively related with employees’ QQ.*

## 2.3 Mediating Role of Defensive Silence

As notable workplace stressors, both task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision pose a significant threat, draining employees’ physical and emotional energy and depleting their psychological resources. In response, employees who experience task-related abuse are driven to preserve their valuable and scarce resources by adopting an *avoidance-oriented* response, such as defensive silence, to distance themselves from the abusive leader and the relevant work environment. Over time, the psychological and actual isolation from their leader and work could lead to a sense of disengagement, desensitization, low motivation, and decreased job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2020). This would make employees prioritize their well-being and alleviate stress or burnout by adhering to the bare minimum of output required by their jobs and refraining from exerting extra effort, ultimately resulting in them engaging more QQ (Anand et al., 2024). Conversely, when employees experience interpersonal-related abusive supervision, their tendency to engage in defensive silence decreases, as they would engage in more direct and aggressive coping behaviors. This shift stems from resource depletion and the pressing need to recover and rectify the current situation by acquiring additional resources or averting potential losses. Therefore, we posit that interpersonal-related abusive supervision

reduces the extent of employees' defensive silence and is less likely to result in a significant increase in QQ. As a result, we present the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4. Employees' defensive silence mediates the positive relationship between task-related abusive supervision and QQ.*

*Hypothesis 5. Employees' defensive silence mediates the negative relationship between interpersonal-related abusive supervision and QQ.*

#### 2.4 Moderating Role of Employees' Perceived Status

To gain a deeper comprehension of the suggested abusive supervision-defensive silence-QQ relationships, we shall explore the boundary conditions and factors that may either amplify or alleviate these connections. Using COR theory as a foundation, we contend that followers with high status perception are more sensitive to the signal conveyed by supervisory abuse and may engage in heightened avoidance and protective behavior.

Workplace status, which is defined by respect, visibility, and prestige, describes a person's relative position within a team or organization (Diekmann et al., 2007). Employees with higher perceived status relatively have more resources, such as challenging tasks, learning

and promotion opportunities, higher job satisfaction and efficacy, social recognition, and interpersonal influence (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). Simultaneously, they strive to maintain their current status and forestall any undesirable shifts in status and preserve acquired benefits (Chen et al., 2012). Therefore, when confronted with external stimuli, they encounter a greater threat of potential resource loss, thereby fostering a propensity to activate motivation for resource-conservation, aiming to sustain their current status and safeguard vested interests. Relatedly, previous study showed that individuals with varying perceptions of status may exhibit distinct responses toward external stimuli such as supervisor incivility (Potipiroon and Ford, 2019).

Abusive supervision refers to a destructive behavior marked by public criticism, derogatory remarks, loud tantrums, and/or thoughtless actions in the workplace. Employees who experience task-related abusive supervision may interpret it as a signal of their weaknesses, such as poor performance and insufficient skill, which can lead them to believe they may lose opportunities for salary increases, promotions, or even their current position within the organization (Liang, 2023). In a similar yet different way, interpersonal-related abusive supervision could cause them to experience greater damage to their self-esteem and a lose face in front of colleagues, causing them to feel that

their reputation or self-image has been damaged (Potipiroon and Ford, 2019). Accordingly, both task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision can increase employees' concerns about their status and image, making employees feel potential risks and threats, particularly among employees with high perceived status. In the context of abusive supervision, employees with high perceived status are particularly sensitive to threats to their face or self-image, which may lead them to perceive and evaluate abusive behaviors from supervisors as significantly undermining their self-worth (Liang, 2023). Guided by the principle of primacy of resource loss in COR theory, such employees are more inclined to engage in avoidance and self-protective behaviors to minimize the risk of further conflict or negative evaluations, thereby safeguarding their status and preserving their vested interests. Compared to their counterparts, employees who perceive low status in their team/organization would feel less deprived in terms of resource perspective when they encountered abusive supervision. Their relatively limited resources in the workplace often lead to an attitude of having "nothing to lose." Consequently, they may be less sensitive to abusive task-related and interpersonal supervision and less likely to perceive it as a threat to their status or self-image.

Indeed, related previous study showed that individuals with varying perceptions of status

may exhibit distinct responses toward external stimuli (Blader and Chen, 2011). Potipiroon and Ford (2019) found that, when compared with lower-status employees, those with high-status exhibit heightened sensitivity to instances of supervisor incivility and respond more forcefully by threatening to resign, engaging in organizational deviance, and performing poorly on tasks. Further, Marr and Thau's (2014) work demonstrated through field and laboratory investigations that individuals with higher status experience more self-threatening situations after losing their status compared to those with lower status. This is especially notable due to the intensified desire of these high-status individuals for status-affirming resources, leading them to more effort to prevent this loss (Pettit et al., 2010).

Therefore, we hypothesize that employees with greater perceived status are more likely to exhibit cautious behavior and tend towards *avoidance-oriented* strategies in response to abusive supervision, aiming to safeguard their current resources. Hence, the following hypothesis is put forth:

*Hypothesis 6. Employees' perceived status strengthens the positive indirect relationship between task-related abusive supervision and QQ mediated by employees' defensive silence.*

*Hypothesis 7. Employees' perceived status*

*weakens the negative indirect relationship between interpersonal-related abusive supervision and QQ mediated by employees' defensive silence.*

### III. Method

#### 3.1 Sample and Procedure

We gathered time-lagged data from a number of Chinese organizations, including government institutions, privately held businesses, state-owned enterprises, and foreign-invested corporations. In addition to providing demographic data, employees at Time 1 evaluated two types of abusive supervision, their perceived status, and the extent of their participation in defensive silence. One month later, at Time 2, employees assessed their engagement levels on QQ. After eliminating missing responses and excluding the careless responding cases, the final sample consisted of 258 employees (response rate = 80.62%).

The participants included 142 men (55%) and 116 women (45%). In terms of age distribution, 111 participants (43%) were younger than 30, 116 individuals (45%) were between 30 and 39, 27 participants (10.5%) were between 40 and 49, and 4 participants (1.6%) were older than 50. Regarding the highest educational level attained, 173 (67.1%) of the

employees held a bachelor's degree, 45 (17.4%) had a postgraduate degree, 35 (13.6%) had an associate's degree, and 5 (1.9%) had a high school diploma or below. Concerning organizational tenure, the majority of employees (46.1%) had a tenure of 1 to 5 years, 80 (31%) had been with the organization for 6 to 10 years, 30 (11.6%) had over 10 years of tenure, and 29 (11.2%) had less than 1 year of tenure.

#### 3.2 Measures

A Likert scale with 1 denoting "strong disagreement" and 5 denoting "strong agreement" was used to assess every item, with the exception of the demographic information.

##### 3.2.1 Abusive supervision.

Tepper's (2000) scale served as the basis for measuring abusive supervision, which is further subdivided into task and interpersonal-related abusive supervision (Park et al., 2014). A sample item from the six-item task-related abusive supervision scale is: "My leader doesn't give me credit for jobs requiring a lot of effort." This scale had a Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.91. Similarly, a sample item from the ten-item interpersonal-related abusive supervision scale is: "My leader ridicules me." This scale had a Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.95.

### 3.2.2 Defensive silence.

We utilized a five-item measure created by Dyne and colleagues (2003) to evaluate the employees' defensive silence. An example item reads "I do not speak up and suggest ideas for change, based on fear." The scale's Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was 0.90.

### 3.2.3 Quiet quitting

A seven-item scale created by Anand and associates (2024) was used to measure QQ. "I often avoid working more hours, if there is no additional pay," is an example item. Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for the scale was 0.91.

### 3.2.4 Perceived status

Djurdjevic and colleagues (2017) developed a five-item scale to gauge the extent of em-

ployees' perceived status. An example item reads "I have a great deal of prestige in my organization." The Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was 0.92.

### 3.2.5 Control variables

In order to possibly account for the impact of demographic factors on employees' responses to abusive supervision and its consequences, we considered characteristics such as gender, age, education, and organizational tenure as control variables.

## IV. Results

### 4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Convergent and discriminant validity of the

〈Table 1〉 Confirmatory factor analysis results

Models	X <sup>2</sup>	df	X <sup>2</sup> /df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Hypothesized five-factor model	882.83	485	1.82	0.94	0.93	0.06	0.06
Four-factor model (TAS+IAS; DS; PS; QQ)	1225.03	489	2.51	0.89	0.88	0.08	0.08
Three-factor model (TAS+IAS; DS+PS; QQ)	2025.96	492	4.12	0.77	0.75	0.11	0.12
Two-factor model (TAS+IAS+DS+PS; QQ)	2834.28	494	5.74	0.64	0.62	0.14	0.16
One-factor model (TAS+IAS+DS+PS+QQ)	3600.22	495	7.27	0.53	0.49	0.16	0.18

**Note(s):** TAS = task-related abusive supervision, IAS = interpersonal-related abusive supervision, DS = defensive silence, PS = perceived status, QQ = quiet quitting.

components were evaluated by a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). Five-factor model (i.e., task-related abusive supervision, interpersonal-related abusive supervision, defensive silence, QQ, perceived status) provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 882.83$ ,  $df = 485$ , CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.06) and all the assessed items demonstrated significant loading onto the anticipated latent construct with standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.50 to 0.90. Given high correlation between task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision, we also estimated a four-factor model (i.e., task- and interpersonal-related abusive supervision, defensive silence, QQ, perceived status), which exhibited a comparatively poorer fit with the data ( $\chi^2 = 1225.03$ ,  $df = 489$ , CFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.08,

SRMR = 0.08). Finally, we estimated a one-factor model following Harman's single-factor test, which showed a considerably worse fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 3600.22$ ,  $df = 495$ , CFI = 0.53, TLI = 0.49, RMSEA = 0.16, SRMR = 0.18). The results addressed concerns regarding common source variance by confirming the discriminant validity of the measures employed in this study.

## 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 displays the variables' means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities. Additionally, to investigate the multicollinearity of the independent variables, we also computed variance inflation factors (VIFs). The VIFs for task- (2.48) and interpersonal-related abusive supervision (2.47) were both

〈Table 2〉 Means, standard deviations, correlations and alphas of variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	0.55	0.50									
2. Age	1.71	0.72	0.23**								
3. Education	3.00	0.62	0.05	-0.06							
4. Tenure	2.43	0.84	0.32**	0.72**	0.15*						
5. TAS	2.20	0.95	0.06	-0.12	-0.16**	-0.08	(0.91)				
6. IAS	1.92	0.92	0.09	0.04	-0.18**	0.06	0.76**	(0.95)			
7. DS	2.49	1.06	-0.02	-0.23**	-0.19**	-0.25**	0.43**	0.23**	(0.90)		
8. PS	3.33	0.97	0.16**	0.29**	0.16**	0.41**	-0.08	0.14*	-0.29**	(0.92)	
9. QQ	2.71	1.02	-0.13*	-0.16*	-0.32**	-0.23**	0.51**	0.39**	0.45**	-0.29**	(0.91)

**Note(s):**  $N = 258$ . TAS = task-related abusive supervision, IAS = interpersonal-related abusive supervision, DS = defensive silence, PS = perceived status, QQ = quiet quitting; Values in the parentheses along the diagonal are Cronbach's alphas; Gender: 0 = Female, 1 = Male; Education: 1 = high school diploma or below, 2 = associate's degree, 3 = bachelor's degree, 4 = postgraduate degree.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

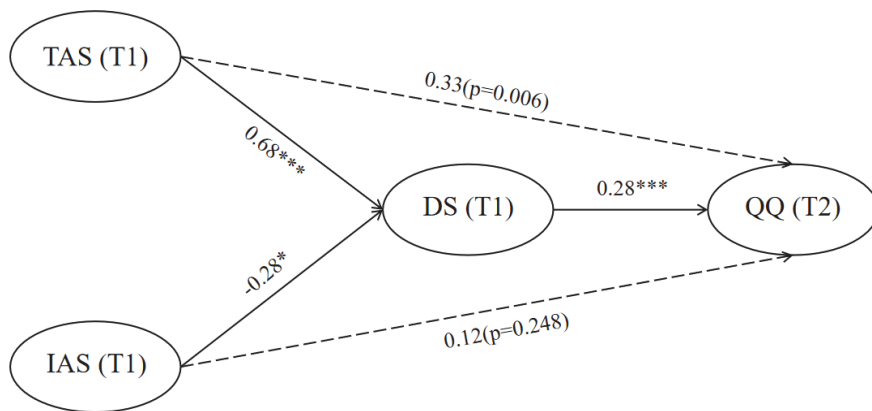
well below 10, indicating that there was no serious multicollinearity issue (Hair et al., 2010).

#### 4.3 Hypothesis Tests

The AMOS 24 software and structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis were used to test the hypothesized model. The results imply that the hypothesized model provides a good fit to the observed data ( $\chi^2 = 827.43$ ,  $df = 456$ ,  $CFI = 0.94$ ,  $TLI = 0.93$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $SRMR = 0.07$ ). Figure 1 and Table 2 provides a summary of the results from SEM analyses. Specifically, there was a significant and positive correlation ( $\beta = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between task-related abusive supervision and defensive silence among employees, supporting

hypothesis 1. Employee defensive silence was significantly and negatively correlated with interpersonal-related abusive supervision ( $\beta = -0.28$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting hypothesis 2. The relationship between employees' defensive silence and QQ was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), thereby validating hypothesis 3. Although we did not hypothesize, for an exploratory purpose, we examined the direct influence of both abusive supervision on QQ. Our result showed that a significant and positive association between task-related abusive supervision and QQ ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), whereas relationship-related abusive supervision exhibited no significant impact on QQ ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p = 0.248$ ).

We examined the mediating function of defensive silence in the association between



**Note(s):**  $N = 258$ ,  $\chi^2 = 827.43$ ,  $df = 456$ ,  $CFI = 0.94$ ,  $TLI = 0.93$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $SRMR = 0.07$ ; TAS = task-related abusive supervision, IAS = interpersonal-related abusive supervision, DS = defensive silence, QQ = quiet quitting; Bold line = hypothesized path, Dotted line = path is not hypothesized.  
\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

〈Figure 1〉 Standardized parameter estimates for the hypothesized model



〈Table 3〉 Results of the path coefficients of the structural equation modeling

Direct effects	$\beta$	S.E.	CR	$p$	Results
TAS → DS	0.68	0.13	5.72	***	H1 Supported
IAS → DS	-0.28	0.12	-2.52	*	H2 Supported
DS → QQ	0.28	0.07	3.89	***	H3 Supported
Indirect effects	$\beta$	S.E.	95% CI	$p$	Results
TAS → DS → QQ	0.19	0.06	[0.08, 0.32]	***	H4 Supported
IAS → DS → QQ	-0.08	0.04	[-0.17, -0.01]	*	H5 Supported

**Note(s):**  $N = 258$ . CR = Construct Reliability, TAS = task-related abusive supervision, IAS = interpersonal-related abusive supervision, DS = defensive silence, QQ = quiet quitting, Bootstrap samples = 10,000.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

abusive supervision and QQ using the bootstrap approach. As detailed in Table 3, our results showed that task-related abusive supervision was positively correlated with QQ through defensive silence, with the value of 0.19 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals excluded zero (0.08, 0.32). This result indicated that hypothesis 4 was supported. Interpersonal-related abusive supervision was negatively related to QQ through defensive silence, with the value of -0.08 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals consistently excluded zero (-0.17, -0.01). Hypothesis 5 was thus validated.

Finally, SPSS PROCESS macro was utilized to test the suggested moderated mediation model. Table 4 illustrates that the indirect correlation between task-related abusive supervision and QQ through defensive silence was not moderated by employees' perceived status (index of moderated mediation = 0.02, 95% CI includes zero [-0.02, 0.06]). Thus,

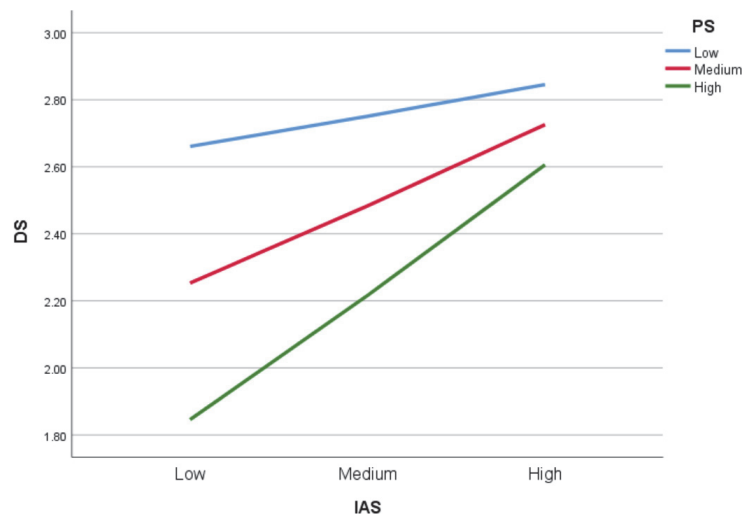
hypothesis 6 was not supported. Conversely, the indirect relationship between interpersonal-related abusive supervision and QQ via defensive silence was moderated by the level of employees' perceived status (index of moderated mediation = 0.04, 95% CI excludes zero [0.01, 0.09]), supporting hypothesis 7. To assess the conditional effect more thoroughly, we computed the indirect effects based on three representative levels of perceived status: the mean, one standard deviation above the mean, and one standard deviation below the mean. The results indicated that the indirect effect is significantly negative when perceived status is low (indirect effect = -0.08, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.01]), meaning that when the employees with low perceived status encountered interpersonal-related abusive supervision, the negative mediation effect between interpersonal-related abusive supervision and QQ becomes more prevalent. Although the positive indirect effect is not significant for

〈Table 4〉 Results of moderated mediation analysis

Conditional indirect effects		Estimates	S.E.	95% CI	Results
TAS → DS → QQ	Index of moderated mediation	0.02	0.02	[-0.02, 0.06]	H6 Not Supported
	Low perceived status (-1 SD)	0.11	0.04	[0.04, 0.19]	
	Average perceived status (M)	0.13	0.04	[0.06, 0.21]	
	High perceived status (+1 SD)	0.14	0.05	[0.06, 0.25]	
IAS → DS → QQ	Index of moderated mediation	0.04	0.02	[0.01, 0.09]	H7 Supported
	Low perceived status (-1 SD)	-0.08	0.04	[-0.15, -0.01]	
	Average perceived status (M)	-0.04	0.03	[-0.09, 0.01]	
	High perceived status (+1 SD)	0.01	0.03	[-0.05, 0.07]	

**Note(s):**  $N = 258$ ; TAS = task-related abusive supervision, IAS = interpersonal-related abusive supervision, DS = defensive silence, QQ = quiet quitting; 95% CI = 95% confidence intervals with lower and upper limits; Bootstrap samples = 10,000.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



**Note(s):** IAS = interpersonal-related abusive supervision, DS = defensive silence, PS = perceived status

〈Figure 2〉 Moderating effect of employees' perceived status

the employees with high level of perceived status (indirect effect = 0.01, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.07]), the positive value of index of moderated mediation indirectly supports our hypothesis that employees with higher per-

ceived status tend to exhibit *avoidance-oriented* coping strategy when they even encounter interpersonal-related abusive supervision. The moderating effect is clearly demonstrated in Figure 2.

## V. Discussion

Based on the two-wave data gathered from employees in different Chinese organizations, our results demonstrate that task-related abusive supervision is positively related to employees' QQ by increasing defensive silence. Conversely, interpersonal-related abusive supervision has a negative indirect effect on employees' QQ through a decrease in defensive silence. Further, this negative mediating effect was moderated by the extents of employees' perceived status. We believe our findings make meaningful contributions to leadership and the relevant organizational behavior literature.

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

First, the current study substantively theorized and empirically examined the impact of abusive supervision on the employees' avoidance-oriented coping behaviors, defensive silence, thereby adding another layer of empirical findings related to the negative consequences of abusive supervision. Different from previous research that mainly examined *approach-oriented* responses, we focused on *avoidance-oriented* coping mechanisms and reveals how abusive supervision triggers defensive silence in employees. This study not only offers a new perspective for understanding employees' behavioral responses in negative

leadership environments but also broadens the scope of existing research, providing new directions for studies on negative leadership.

Second, we further investigated the distal effects of employees' avoidance-oriented reactions to abusive supervision, and examined the relationship between abusive supervision, defensive silence, and QQ. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the long-term detrimental impacts of abusive supervision while shedding light on the emerging, yet underexplored, organizational phenomenon of QQ. Our findings suggest that abusive supervision may act as a potential antecedent of QQ, with defensive silence serving as a mediating mechanism in this relationship. Consequently, this study partially addresses the question of when and how employees are motivated to engage in QQ, and calls for further research on this evolving phenomenon.

Furthermore, in response to Tepper's (2007) call, we distinguish between task-related and interpersonal-related abusive supervision, demonstrating that employees adopt different defensive silence strategies depending on the type, which highlights the importance of differentiating the various dimensions of abusive supervision. Specifically, our findings suggest that employees tend to resort to defensive silence as a reaction to task-related abusive supervision, which may ultimately lead to distant indications of QQ. This finding is consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), sug-

gesting that employees who encountered task-related abusive supervision often experience a degree of resource loss, leading them to choose silence and QQ as defensive, resource-conservation strategies. Conversely, our analyses showed when employees experience interpersonal-related abusive supervision, they engage in less defensive silence, resulting in no significant increase in QQ. This aligns with the perspective of the COR's resource-acquisition perspective, suggesting that when resources are nearing depletion, individuals are motivated to acquire resources or alter the sustained loss of resources, thus, less inclined to engage in defensive silence. This could be a noteworthy finding that needs careful consideration and interpretation. Specifically, for this result, we do not interpret this phenomenon as desirable, such as interpersonal-related abusive supervision suppressing the extent of employees' defensive silence. Instead, it could be a worse scenario of abusive supervision, as it indirectly supports prior research linking interpersonal-related abusive supervision to employee dissatisfaction and anger, which prompts *approach-oriented* responses such as aggression and retaliation (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007), particularly among those who perceive lower status with "nothing to lose".

Finally, our results pertaining to the moderating role of employees' perceived status indicate that individuals' responses to abusive supervision may vary depending on their

specific circumstances. According to our findings, when confronted with interpersonal-related abusive supervision, employees with low perceived status are less inclined to engage in defensive silence and QQ. This result indirectly supports the notion that employees with high perceived status might take more avoidance measures, such as defensive silence and QQ, to protect their status-related resources. These insights enhance our comprehension of the impacts of abusive supervision and underscore the significance of taking into account a variety of elements in subsequent studies on this topic.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

First, based on the findings concerning abusive supervision, defensive silence, and QQ relationships, we recommend that leaders not only avoid interpersonal-related abusive supervision but also recognize that task-related abusive supervision is another form of abusive supervision, which can lead to defensive silence and a range of negative outcomes related to QQ. Leaders should ensure the rationality and fairness of work allocation to avoid negative reactions from employees due to perceived task-related abusive supervision and provide more specific and constructive feedback on work-related issues, instead of solely blaming and criticizing. Meanwhile, they should also avoid personal attacks due to their potentially serious consequences. For

HR practitioners, assessing candidates' emotional regulation and interpersonal communication skills during managerial selection and appraisal processes is crucial. Additionally, implementing regular training programs can help enhance leadership competencies and mitigate the risks of abusive supervision. Moreover, organizations should take action to prevent and hinder their managers/leaders from exerting abusive supervision. Specifically, they can implement appropriate rules or punishment systems to mitigate instances of misconduct resulting from abusive supervision.

Second, recognizing the mediating role of employees' defensive silence within the link between abusive supervision and increased QQ, leaders should foster enhanced communication and collaboration within teams to reduce employees' inclination toward defensive silence. This approach would encourage employees to voice their opinions and prevent long-term negative consequences. HR practitioners should implement anonymous feedback channels to facilitate the reporting of abusive supervision, thus minimizing the occurrence of defensive silence. Furthermore, organizations should cultivate and reinforce a culture of inclusivity, respect, and positive leadership to mitigate the prevalence of abusive supervision.

Third, our study showed that differing levels of employees' perceived status could affect the associations among interpersonal-related

abusive supervision, defensive silence, and QQ. Employees with high-status perceptions will feel more threatened by interpersonal-related abusive supervision and therefore be more likely to adopt defensive silence and QQ. From this result, we suggest that leaders ought to understand the various degrees of perceived status that employees hold within their team or organization, and further engaging in individualized management tactics by considering employees' various levels of status perception. On the premise of avoiding abusive supervision, leaders should focus on employees' individual needs and development, offering tailored support and feedback. HR practitioners can reduce high-status employees' sensitivity to and perception of threat from abusive supervision by implementing fair compensation policies, establishing clear career development paths, and providing public recognition, thus preventing defensive silence and negative behaviors. Additionally, organizations should foster a culture of fairness, emphasize the value of each employee, and pay attention to the physical and mental health of employees and their perceived status.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

It's crucial to recognize some limits even with this study's theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, although our time-lagged data set allows us to partly alleviate

the methodological concerns related to the common source rating and reverse causality among the study variables, the field survey design cannot verify the causal effects of the suggested relationships. For future study, it is encouraged to adopt longitudinal or experimental research methodologies to robustly test the causality among the suggested relationships. Additionally, our dataset is only comprised of the employees working in various organizations located in China. Thus, the drawn conclusions from the current study may not be generalizable. Accordingly, future research should collect the data from various cultural/organizational contexts and explore our model to see whether the found results patterns still hold.

Second, this study primarily investigates the mediating role of defensive silence as an avoidance-oriented response to abusive supervision. Future research could further explore other avoidance-oriented mediators, such as emotional regulation, prevention-focused coping strategies or avoidance motives. Moreover, given that organizational silence encompasses various forms, future studies could explore the mediating effects of other types of silence, such as acquiescent silence. This would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the roles and underlying mechanisms of different forms of silence in the context of abusive supervision.

Third, to enhance our understanding regarding employees' possible reactions to dif-

ferentiated abusive supervision, future research could simultaneously investigate both *approach*- and *avoidance-oriented* behaviors as potential outcomes of the different styles of abusive supervision and explore their distinct underlying mechanisms.

Finally, as an emerging and widespread organizational phenomenon, research on QQ remains in its early stages. Although this study examines task-oriented abusive supervision as one of its antecedents, future research should explore additional potential antecedents and outcomes to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, future research should further examine the reliability and validity of the measurement scales used to ensure their accuracy. It is also recommended to explore the multidimensional nature of the scales in greater depth, particularly the behavioral and emotional dimensions, to better capture their complexity.

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