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# Employee Loyalty as a Tool for Emotional Manipulation by Leaders

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## Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between employee loyalty and perceptions of manipulation. Analysis of 452 respondents from Bulgaria indicates that loyalty to leaders is significantly higher than organisational loyalty and is strongly correlated with perceptions of manipulation. Manipulative practices are widely recognized. Interestingly, although individual aspects of leader and organisational loyalty correlate positively, a statistically significant but weak negative correlation emerges between their total aggregated scales, revealing complex underlying dynamics. The results reveal the “dark side” of loyalty, highlighting employees’ vulnerability. The study emphasises the importance of ethical leadership and fair practices in preventing exploitation and promoting employee well-being.

**Keywords:** employee loyalty; emotional manipulation; leadership; organisational loyalty; workplace; ethical leadership

**JEL:** M54, J28, D91

## 1. Introduction

The modern business landscape has undergone significant evolution in recent years, shifting the focus from exclusively increasing profits and productivity to adopting a more holistic perspective (Kostadinova, 2021). In a competitive market, companies are actively looking for loyal employees. This loyalty means a lasting connection with the organisation, regardless of the circumstances. It not only increases commitment, discipline and compliance but also enhances job satisfaction. Loyal employees also contribute to the strengthening of the employer brand (Azhar et al., 2024; Hadj, 2024).

Loyalty promotes trust, cooperation, and prosocial behaviour, and people with a reputation for loyalty are perceived as better friends and employees (Ismail, 2025). Conversely, disloyalty often damages personal and professional reputations. Loyalty can be directed towards both the organisation and individual leaders, with loyalists expected to make sacrifices in the interest of the object of their loyalty. Although these sacrifices are accepted as morally right, in extreme cases, the expectation of loyalty can become a tool for control and exploitation (Stanley et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022).

On the other side, leadership is about motivating a team towards a shared vision. However, sometimes, the drive to get the most out of a team can jeopardise the well-being or mental health of its members. Although not all leadership is extreme, the influence aspect often overlaps with manipulation. Manipulation, unlike ideal leadership, which implies integrity and vision, carries a negative connotation associated with deception and coercion. The line between actual influence and subtle control is a fine one. Leadership inevitably involves influencing, shaping

the thoughts and actions of others. Effective leaders recognise this and use it responsibly, inspiring rather than manipulating (El Haidouri, 2024). Despite the common perception that leadership is moral and well-intentioned, some leaders can be manipulative and unethical in their actions (Rego et al., 2025). Unfortunately, responsible influence is not inherent in every leader and is often replaced by unethical behaviour.

Recent research indicates that manipulation constitutes a major form of unethical leadership behaviour and is strongly linked to Machiavellian personality traits. Leaders high in Machiavellianism are willing to engage in intentionally misleading and exploitative practices, aiming to control others through emotional influence and manipulative interpersonal techniques (Li et al., 2024). Such individuals are typically cynical and suspicious, prone to circumventing established norms, and show little empathy, instead adopting pragmatic and instrumental approaches to achieve their goals. In organisational settings, they are often found in leadership positions from which they prioritise power, disregard rules, and control subordinates. Moreover, manipulative leaders are adaptive, shifting flexibly between cooperation and competition depending on what best serves their interests (Cai et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024).

Despite extensive research on employee loyalty, significant gaps remain in understanding the dynamics between different types of loyalty and their interaction with perceptions of manipulation, particularly when analysed at the individual leader level. While some studies hint at potential negative aspects of loyalty, there is a lack of empirical data to demonstrate the intensity of these relationships, particularly in cases where loyalty may be associated with perceptions of exploitation. This highlights the importance



of studying loyalty as a means of manipulation, as the phenomenon is poorly understood, and adequate strategies to address this type of negative influence are lacking.

This study provides new and critical insights by empirically examining the complex interrelationships among organisational loyalty, loyalty to the manager or leader, and perceptions of manipulation in the workplace. The main novelty of the present study lies in two dimensions. First, the study provides an initial indication of a robust and direct positive correlation between employees' loyalty to their managers and perceptions of manipulation by those managers. This finding sheds new light on the "dark side" of leadership loyalty, challenging idealised perceptions of it and highlighting the potentially exploitative aspects of emotional attachment in the workplace. Second, the study highlights the distinction between organisational loyalty and leader loyalty, finding that average levels of leader loyalty are statistically significantly higher than those of organisational loyalty, and more importantly, highlights a weak but statistically significant negative correlation between these two types of loyalty. This is not fully in line with intuitive expectations of a positive covariation and calls for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between institutional and individual attachment in the workplace.

Although there are many differences between the roles of a leader and a manager in an organisation (Holmes et al., 2021), this study uses the two terms interchangeably to reflect *the role of a superior who has an established, significant emotional connection with their subordinate and, in turn, influences them*. Therefore, in the context of the present study, "leader" and "manager/supervisor" refer specifically to individuals who exercise interpersonal influence and are the object of emotional attachment from their subordinates, going beyond the purely formal aspects of their position. This definition is crucial for understanding the results obtained, particularly in relation to loyalty and perceptions of manipulation. The central thesis is that *loyal employees are often subject to unethical practices by leaders or trusted individuals rather than being respected or rewarded*. This occurs because loyal people are usually assumed to be willing to make personal sacrifices. The pilot study aims to compare the degree of loyalty with employees' perceptions of manipulation by surveying employees from Bulgaria, with different professional profiles and hierarchical positions. To achieve the outlined objectives, the paper is organised into four subsequent sections. First, the Theoretical Background (Section 2) establishes the conceptual framework by reviewing relevant literature. Next, the Methodology (Section 3) describes the research design, data collection procedures, and the sample characteristics. The empirical findings are then presented in Results and Discussion (Section 4), where the correlations between loyalty and manipulation are analysed. The paper concludes with Section 5 (Conclusions), which summarises the key contributions and suggests directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Faced with global challenges such as climate change and the need for sustainable development, the 21st century requires profound socio-economic changes. Although loyalty is perceived as a virtue, it raises a paradox: *is it always to the benefit of the one who shows it?* Loyal employees often become vulnerable to disloyal practices, and when this leads to exploitation, their reputation as loyal workers can perpetuate a vicious circle of suffering (Stanley et al., 2023).

Employee loyalty, long promoted and especially emphasised in the 1990s, remains a key factor for businesses today. Studies show that retaining employees is often more cost-effective than attracting new ones, and even minor improvements in loyalty can significantly reduce costs and increase profits (Hadj, 2024; Regin et al., 2023). It is thus established as a strategic asset for competitiveness and sustainability, which requires leaders to understand its drivers (Ford et al., 2023; Maksim and Śliwicki, 2025).

Globalisation and labour shortages are driving the need for innovative approaches to attracting and retaining talent (Knezović and Jamak, 2023). Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a helpful framework that suggests that loyalty and trust are built through reciprocal exchanges. In an organisational context, employees invest emotional and cognitive loyalty, expecting fairness and support, and their violation is perceived as a breach of the social contract (Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu, 2018). Today, loyalty is manifested through knowledge, commitment, responsibility, and recommendations (Maksim and Śliwicki, 2025), with tenure remaining a key criterion for demonstrating loyalty. For leaders, it is a key asset leading to higher productivity and sustainable development.

The traditional definition of loyalty as a long-term commitment to the company, even in difficult times, is inapplicable to modern organisations that value variability and flexibility. The model of working for a lifetime in a company is rare; employees often change employers and roles. Some researchers even consider the concept of loyalty to be outdated or burdensome to measure (Maksim and Śliwicki, 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). Regin et al. (2023) define loyalty as the strength of the employee-employer relationship, reflecting an agreement with the organisation's principles, priorities, and mission. It includes not only staying with the company and not being interested in other opportunities, but also a psychological state of the relationship. In the past, loyalty was associated with actions such as defending the organisation during difficult times and cooperating with colleagues, rather than simply being an attitude (Ford et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022).

Employee loyalty is often expressed as *organisational commitment*, which represents the level of dedication and emotional attachment to the organisation (Lahlou-Kassi and Eddakir, 2025). It comprises three components: *affective commitment* (an emotional connection), *continuance com-*

*mitment* (based on the costs of leaving), and *normative commitment* (a sense of obligation). Understanding these dimensions helps organisations improve employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. High commitment leads to lower turnover, as emotionally connected employees tend to stay due to positive feelings and a sense of belonging. Conversely, low commitment can mean staying under duress, which leads to dissatisfaction (Rego et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). Today, companies are striving to cultivate emotional engagement to increase productivity and foster a more engaged workforce. Prioritising engagement enhances goal achievement and fosters a competitive advantage. Despite these advantages, the concept of loyalty itself requires a more nuanced examination, especially when analysing the object of this loyalty and its potential connection to negative phenomena such as workplace manipulation.

A clear distinction needs to be made between *organisational loyalty* and *leader loyalty* based on the object to which it is directed. While the former is an attachment to the company, the latter is focused on a specific direct supervisor. A study by Zhang et al. (2022) reveals that leader loyalty is extreme among “insiders” in the context of differential leadership, indicating a more intense and personal connection compared to an abstract connection to the organisation. These authors found that leader loyalty is usually higher than organisational loyalty, which is explained by SET: “inside” employees show absolute loyalty to their leaders, driven by a desire for good relationships and gratitude for the treatment received. This direct reciprocity forms a stronger bond than that with the impersonal organisational structure. However, excessive emphasis on leader loyalty can create divisions and harm overall organisational effectiveness.

Within SET, the distinction between organisational loyalty and leader loyalty stems from the different objects of exchange and the nature of the relationship. Organisational loyalty, associated with employer-employee relationships and measured by perceived organisational support, is shaped by the feeling that the organisation values the employee’s contributions and well-being, with the exchange being more institutional in nature (Ariani and Feriyanto, 2024; Fan et al., 2021). In contrast, leader loyalty is closely related to leader-member exchange (LMX). These relationships are more personal, based on trust, respect, and mutual obligations, often going beyond formal job duties to “cross-functional” relationships. SET suggests that the more personal and emotional the exchange in LMX, the more profound and immediate the reciprocity. Because LMX involves direct, individual interactions, leader loyalty may be more closely related to everyday experiences and immediate feelings of gratitude. Organisational loyalty, while important, is more abstract and influenced by broader policies and culture, leading to different types of commitment (Ariani and Feriyanto, 2024).

To better understand this personal relationship, it is essential to distinguish between the roles of *the manager* and *the leader*, which is not always possible. The manager is primarily associated with the formal authority derived from the position held in the hierarchy, which allows him to allocate tasks, control processes and be responsible for achieving specific goals. The leader, on the other hand, is more closely associated with informal influence based on the ability to inspire, motivate, and unite people around specific values or a vision (Agazu and Debela, 2024; Holmes et al., 2021; Yusof, 2021). Despite these differences, the two roles often overlap. A manager can also be perceived by his subordinates as a leader when he manages to build trust, create an emotional connection and guide the team beyond the framework of his formal duties. Thus, formal authority is complemented by interpersonal influence, which enhances the effectiveness of working relationships and the sustainability of organisational culture (Jibreal, 2021; Yusof, 2021).

However, there are also situations in which leadership is not tied to a management position. A leader can also be a person without formal authority, but with strong influence on the group (Jibreal, 2021; Yusof, 2021). In such a case, the moral basis of his behaviour is crucial. Leadership influence can be used manipulatively and to the detriment of others, but it can also be used with good faith and care for the team. It is this ethical dimension that makes the difference between leadership that builds trust and cohesion and leadership that undermines the moral and organisational climate. Due to the characteristics outlined, the terms “leader” and “manager” are used interchangeably in this study. This is done to emphasise the role of a person who not only occupies a formal management position but also exercises interpersonal influence, maintaining a significant emotional connection with their subordinates. This definition is crucial for interpreting the results, particularly in relation to employee loyalty and perceptions of potential manipulation.

Employee loyalty is also a concept in organisational behaviour, manifested in attitudes and behaviour, and is based on the *stimulus-organism-response* model (Maksim and Śliwicki, 2025). The *stimulus-response* relationship is also often viewed through the lens of emotional intelligence (EI). Although people usually associate “*reaction*” with negative outbursts, other forms of response, such as blind obedience, are equally undesirable. Therefore, loyalty, when provoked by inappropriate individuals, can lead to unhealthy and blind obedience. It is precisely low EI that prevents adequate response to manipulative techniques (Kostadinova, 2021).

Leaders with high EI are valued for their empathy, communication, and ability to manage complex interpersonal relationships. While EI fosters trust and a positive environment, it can also be used as a weapon for manipulation, control, and exploitation (Laker, 2024). At its

core, EI is the ability to understand, manage, and influence emotions—our own and those of others, including empathy, self-awareness, and relationship building (Kostadinova, 2021). Used ethically, EI helps leaders connect with their teams, foster collaboration, and create a psychologically safe environment. However, these same skills become dangerous if used for manipulation rather than development. Leaders who are skilled at reading emotions and social dynamics can exploit these abilities to power, suppress dissent, and manipulate outcomes to their advantage. Seemingly caring and supportive, they disarm teams, making it challenging to recognise toxic behaviour. Used unethically, EI becomes a tool of control, stifling the work environment (Laker, 2024).

Emotionally intelligent leaders use empathy and social awareness to motivate their teams (El Haidouri, 2024). But when influence is based on distortion of facts or emotional pressure, it becomes manipulation—the “dark side” of emotional intelligence (Hadj, 2024; Hyde and Grieve, 2018; Tran et al., 2023). The key difference lies in the intention: if the goal is to benefit the group, the influence is positive; if it is for personal gain or control, it is manipulative. Authentic leadership is founded on integrity and honest communication, whereas manipulation yields short-term benefits without fostering trust (El Haidouri, 2024).

In the context of leadership research, the pursuit of organisational effectiveness is crucial for generating valuable outcomes, and the work environment can cause stress through its demands and pressures (Dirik and Eryilmaz, 2018; Tomková and Čigarská, 2022). In such an organisational environment, manipulation is a common practice, as people often try to achieve their goals through various means, including exploiting others. Manipulation aims to arouse specific needs or interests in the manipulated person in order to make them act in favour of the manipulator. It is a universal method of influence that is difficult to avoid, as it interferes with human nature and behaviour. However, it carries negative connotations, as it always involves harming the other and benefiting the manipulator. It is a complex process that combines different techniques (Hyde and Grieve, 2018; Tomková and Čigarská, 2022).

One of the less obvious but particularly effective techniques of manipulation in organisational settings involves the instrumentalisation of *team spirit*, where appeals to unity and cohesion can be reframed as tools for control and exploitation. Although *team spirit* is typically viewed as a positive organisational value—promoting cohesion, trust, and collective identity—recent research demonstrates that it can also be manipulated by leaders as part of destructive or exploitative leadership practices (Bieńkowska and Tworek, 2025). According to Cai et al. (2024), high-Machiavellian leaders exploit employees’ implicit expectations of loyalty and team membership to suppress dissent, using group loyalty as leverage for manipulative behaviour. Khalid and Aftab (2024) further show that under exploita-

tive leadership, employees who believe in team-oriented norms may experience injustice and respond by withholding knowledge, indicating a breach between the rhetoric of team cohesion and the reality of unfair treatment. Additionally, Bieńkowska and Tworek (2025) document how leaders maintain “team-oriented” and authenticity rhetoric to mask harmful behaviours and organisational decline. These findings suggest a basis for treating *team spirit* not only as a positive construct but also, under certain conditions, as a manipulative tactic.

A fundamental problem with manipulation is the lack of conscious consent from the manipulated, and the manipulator’s awareness varies. Severe forms of workplace manipulation, bordering on bullying, can seriously damage mental health (Tomková and Čigarská, 2022). In organizational settings, manipulation involves influencing the choices of others through morally problematic means, typically manifesting through deceptive practices, psychological pressure, and the calculated exploitation of emotional vulnerabilities (Hyde and Grieve, 2018; Li et al., 2024). All of these raise questions about the value of freedom of choice. The tendency to manipulate for personal gain in the workplace is usually attributed to people with high Machiavellianism, who use various tactics to achieve goals (status, money), often disregarding morality and hurting others. In this way, Machiavellian leaders undermine trust and reciprocity (Ma et al., 2023), creating a toxic environment where loyalty becomes a means of instilling fear and distrust. Research shows that when loyalty is excessively emphasised, it can become a tool for exploitation, as appeals to loyalty are often used manipulatively to justify unfair demands or personal sacrifice (Li et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2023).

Although highly manipulative employees may conceal their true nature and be polite, their amoral manipulation quickly disrupts the balance of social interaction in the workplace, leading to poor performance (Tomková and Čigarská, 2022). This makes manipulation in a professional context difficult to detect. However, understanding its characteristic signs is essential to avoiding dangerous situations. These may include, but are not limited to (Durand, 2023; Li et al., 2024): (1) *Excessive control* that manipulators seek to exercise over their colleagues or associates. They may closely monitor activities, impose arbitrary rules, or dictate decisions without consultation; (2) Spreading false or concealing important information—*disinformation*, as well as distorting reality; (3) *Imputation of a sense of responsibility* for problems or mistakes that are not within the employee’s control, thus exploiting their feelings of guilt; (4) Additionally, some manipulators *present themselves as victims* to elicit sympathy, exaggerating their difficulties and thereby gaining the support of others; (5) Seek to *isolate their victims* by keeping them away from friends, loved ones, or family members, which inevitably makes them more vulnerable to influence; (6) Skillfully *exploit the emotions of*

others, whether it be fear, anger, guilt, or compassion, to get them to act in accordance with their desires; (7) Do not hesitate to use *veiled threats*, such as job loss, revealing secrets, or slander, to force others to submit to their will; (8) Tendency to *ignore or belittle* the needs, rights, and feelings of others, focusing only on their own goals.

At the same time, according to SET, workplace relationships are viewed as an exchange of resources. When employees invest their loyalty (*emotional, temporal, cognitive*) in the organisation or leader, they expect reciprocity—fair treatment, recognition, and support. When these expectations are not met or pressure and manipulation are used instead, the employee may perceive this as a violation of the social contract (Ariani and Feriyanto, 2024; Fan et al., 2021). Despite the widespread perception of employee loyalty as a purely positive element contributing to organisational success, the academic literature has so far provided insufficient in-depth empirical studies that systematically analyse and convincingly demonstrate a direct relationship between high levels of loyalty and increased perceptions of manipulation in the workplace. Existing knowledge gaps leave unanswered critical questions about how exactly highly loyal employees become vulnerable to exploitation and how manipulative tactics applied by management or confidants are perceived and experienced in the context of deep-rooted loyalty. There is also a lack of research that can clearly distinguish and contrast the role of organisational loyalty and loyalty to the immediate supervisor in this manipulative context.

Based on this, the present study relies on the central thesis that loyal employees may be subject to manipulative practices rather than being highly respected or rewarded for their dedication. This concept of the “dark side” of loyalty suggests that strong emotional attachment and a sense of duty can be exploited by management. It is expected that even at the organisational level, the presence of strong attachment could create conditions for subtle forms of pressure that loyal employees perceive as manipulative. Employees who are highly loyal to the organisation may be willing to go the extra mile or accept complex tasks in the name of the “common good”. When the organisation abuses this willingness, imposing unwanted changes or demanding unfair sacrifices under the guise of “team spirit” or “corporate values”, the loyal employee may experience this as manipulation, since the expected reciprocity (a favourable work environment and fairness) is absent. Their invested loyalty makes them less likely to resist, but not to ignore, the manipulation. This allows the formulation of *Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a moderate positive relationship between employee loyalty to the organisation and the feeling of being manipulated.*

Furthermore, in view of the growing recognition of the crucial role of leadership in modern organisations, it is necessary to examine in more detail how loyalty to individual managers is intertwined with perceptions of manipulation.

Given the close daily communication and the direct influence of leaders on the work process and employee well-being, it is expected that the emotional bonds formed may be particularly susceptible to exploitation. The relationship with the leader is often more personal and emotional. Employees may feel a strong sense of indebtedness or gratitude to the leader for support, development, or trust they have received. This can lead to “emotional indebtedness” or “cognitive dissonance” (the employee knows something is not quite fair, but justifies the leader due to loyalty), which makes them particularly vulnerable. The leader may use this personal relationship to impose decisions that are not in the employee’s best interest, but are presented as “mutual support” or “personal favour”. The loyal employee feels compelled to comply, but at the same time, they realise that they have been manipulated. Therefore, we formulate *Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a strong positive relationship between the employees’ loyalty to leadership figures in the organisation and the feeling of being manipulated.* This hypothesis is justified by the assumption that strong personal attachment and trust in a particular leader may create greater vulnerability to unethical practices, such as using “team spirit” or instilling guilt for imposing undesirable tasks.

Finally, given the distinction between organisational and leader loyalty, it is essential to examine their interrelationship. Although one might intuitively expect a positive correlation between these two aspects of loyalty, existing theoretical models allow for various forms of independence or complex interactions. An empirical examination of this relationship is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of loyalty dynamics in organisational contexts. Therefore, *Hypothesis 3 (H3) postulates that: There is a statistically significant relationship between loyalty to the organisation and loyalty to leadership figures in the organisation.* This hypothesis aims to clarify the extent to which loyalty to individual leaders influences or is related to overall organisational loyalty, opening the way for a more in-depth analysis of these phenomena.

### 3. Methodology

This pilot study was designed to explore the relationship between employee loyalty and their perception of manipulation by senior and established leaders. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the questionnaire was presented to participants under the general title “*Healthy Work Environment*” to avoid leading respondents toward specific answers or situations that might be perceived as biased. This approach was adopted to promote more objective and unbiased data collection. The study’s sample comprises Bulgarian individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, including employees from supermarkets, government administrations, and manufacturing companies. The diverse professional backgrounds were not analysed as part of this exploratory research, as the primary aim was to refine and

test the questions related to loyalty and the feeling of manipulation. Future research will build upon these findings by exploring dependencies and conducting more in-depth analyses to examine the demographic and social characteristics of the sample population.

### 3.1 Data Collection

The primary data collection tool is an anonymous questionnaire structured into four main sections: (1) *Demographic characteristics*: Includes inquiries about the gender, age and education of the respondents; (2) *Organisational characteristics*: Collects information on the size of the company in which the employee works (micro, small, medium, corporate business), as well as the length of their employment in the specific organisation; (3) *Loyalty to the organisation and perception of manipulation by the organisation*; (4) *Loyalty to the leader/supervisor and feeling of manipulation by the leader/supervisor*.

The key variables in this study—*Loyalty to the organisation*, *Feeling manipulated by the organisation*, *Loyalty to the leader*, *Feeling manipulated by the leader*—were measured using newly developed self-report scales. Individual questions (statements) were formulated based on the relevant theoretical background to reflect the key aspects of the studied constructs. For each scale, responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). All indices were formed by averaging the responses to the relevant statements. The internal consistency of all multi-item scales used in the present study was assessed using *Cronbach's Alpha* ( $\alpha$ ). All scales demonstrated high  $\alpha$  values ( $>0.90$ ), indicating strong internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instruments.

- *Loyalty to the organisation* was measured using 8 statements (Q1.1–Q1.8—*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.959$ );

- *Feeling manipulated by the organisation* was measured using 9 statements (Q2.1–Q2.9—*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.992$ );

- *Loyalty to the leader* was measured using 8 statements (Q3.1–Q3.8—*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.974$ );

- *Feeling manipulated by the leader* was measured using 8 statements (Q4.1–Q4.8—*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = 0.987$ ).

The extremely high Cronbach's alpha value ( $\alpha = 0.992$ ) for the “perceived organisational manipulation” scale is an indication of semantic overlap or redundancy among the items. The high correlation between the questions suggests they measure a very narrow aspect of the construct with minimal variation, which may be due to their close semantic proximity.

Data collection was carried out between *May 1 and May 31, 2025*, among Bulgarian employee, using two primary methods: (1) *Distribution of Google Forms through various digital channels* for quick and convenient completion, ensuring anonymity and accessibility; (2) *Direct entry of answers into a standard table during in-person conver-*

*sations* to clarify any ambiguities and gain a deeper understanding of the context. All applicable ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Prior to their participation, all respondents were informed about the study's purpose “*Healthy Work Environment*”), the voluntary nature of their participation, and the use of their data for research purposes only without identifying individuals or companies. It was explicitly emphasised that the collected data were completely anonymous and confidential. Participants were also given the clear right to withdraw at any time during the process without consequence.

### 3.2 Data Analysis (Preliminary Analyses/Scale Validation)

The software packages SPSS (Version 30.0; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA; Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and Microsoft Excel (Microsoft 365; Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA) were used to analyse the collected data. SPSS was applied to perform statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), correlation analysis to identify relationships between variables, and other appropriate statistical tests. Excel was used to organise and preview the raw data and to calculate basic summary statistics.

To establish the factor structure and assess the construct validity of the multi-item scales, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted for each scale separately. Prior to performing the EFA, the necessary assumptions for data suitability were checked (Table 1). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sample adequacy measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to assess the adequacy of the sample and the interrelationships between the items. All scales showed suitable values for factor analysis (KMO between 0.555 and 0.849; Bartlett's test  $p < 0.001$ ), although the KMO for *Loyalty to the organisation* was at the lower end of the acceptable range.

The conducted EFA is consistent with the unidimensional structure of all four scales, with one dominant factor being extracted for each of them. This factor explained a significant portion of the total variance in the respective statements, ranging from 77.78% to 92.43%, and all statements demonstrated high factor weights on their primary factor. Despite the overall positive results, some nuances were identified for the scales *Loyalty to the organisation* and *Loyalty to the leader*; a higher percentage of residuals was observed in the reproduced correlations (60.0% and 50.0% above 0.05, respectively), which may suggest some discrepancies between the model and the observed correlations. In contrast, the scales *Perceived organisational manipulation* and *Perceived leader manipulation* demonstrated excellent model fit indicators, with a small number of residuals, providing support for their strong factor structure.

**Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's test for the studied scales (source: Own development).**

KMO and Bartlett's test		Loyalty to the organisation	Feeling manipulated by the organisation	Loyalty to the leader	Feeling manipulated by the leader
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.		0.555	0.706	0.739	0.849
Bartlett's test of sphericity.	Approx. Chi-Square	6,424.462	1,3021.437	10,204.602	11,449.153
	df	28	36	28	28
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

KMO, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The survey was conducted among 452 respondents, with no missing values, indicating the completeness of the data. Of those who participated in the survey, 170 (38%) were men and 282 (62%) were women. Those born between 1964 and 1980 were 190 (42%), between 1981 and 1996 were 213 (47%), and between 1997 and 2012 were 49 (11%). Accordingly, 87 (19%) had secondary education, and 365 (81%) had higher education.

Regarding the companies where the respondents are employed, 147 (32%) people work in micro companies (with staff <10), 84 (19%) people work in small companies (with staff from 11 to 50), 129 (29%) people work in medium-sized companies (with staff from 51 to 250), 92 (20%) people work in large companies (with staff >250). 49 (11%) of the respondents have less than 1 year of experience in the respective company, 274 (61%) have between 1 and 5 years, and 41 (9%) have between 6 and 10 years. 88 (19%) of the respondents in the survey have more than 10 years of experience.

The distribution by ownership structure reveals that the majority of respondents work in the private sector with domestic capital – 319 (71%), followed by foreign-owned private companies with 55 (12%). 49 (11%) people represent the non-governmental sector, while the public sector accounts for 16 (4%), and mixed-ownership entities include 13 (3%).

The data in Table 2 show that employees have the highest loyalty to colleagues and the team (Q1.6: mean 3.92; median and mode 4), while the lowest is in the obligation to stay in the organisation (Q1.7: mean 2.35; median 2; mode 1), which may indicate a risk of turnover. Other indicators of loyalty are moderate, including the propensity to stay (2.94), willingness to make additional efforts (3.36), and uncertainty about staying (Q1.8: 3.05). Almost all asymmetry coefficients are negative, indicating that most employees rate loyalty highly, except for Q1.7 (0.247), where the majority do not feel strongly obligated to stay. Standard deviations range between 1.000 and 1.400; The obligation to stay has a higher deviation (1.275), and loyalty to colleagues has a lower one (1.018), indicating greater agreement on this issue.

The data in Table 3 indicate a moderate perception of manipulation by the organisation, with mean values be-

tween 2.90 and 3.07. The highest mean value (3.07; Q2.4) suggests that employees perceive calls for proactivity as disguised requests for additional work, while other statements (Q2.1, Q2.9, Q2.2, Q2.3) indicate the exploitation of commitment, personal sacrifice, and the use of guilt and loyalty. The lowest mean value (2.77; Q2.5) indicates that the tactic of “citing past merit” is less perceived. Positive asymmetry coefficients suggest that the perception of manipulation is moderate, while negative ones (e.g., “voluntary contribution” –0.142; “one big family” –0.410) indicate a broader agreement on manipulation through these tactics. The standard deviations (0.900–1.300) reflect a significant diversity in opinions.

Table 4 shows high loyalty to the leader, with the highest mean values for Q3.1 (3.92)—willingness to make personal sacrifices, Q3.2 (3.73)—feelings of gratitude and indebtedness, and Q3.4 (3.64)—preference for working with the current manager. Most of the asymmetry coefficients are negative, indicating that the majority of employees give high ratings to the various loyalty aspects, except for Q3.3 (0.003), where the distribution is symmetric. The standard deviations are low, especially for Q3.1 (0.529), reflecting strong agreement among employees. More generally, the range of 0.800–1.100 indicates that loyalty to the leader is more consistent than the perception of manipulation.

Table 5 shows that the strongest perceptions of manipulation by the manager are Q4.1 (3.46)—using “team spirit” to impose unwanted obligations—and Q4.7 (3.37)—pressure for personal sacrifices in the name of loyalty. Q4.4 (3.27) indicates frequent guilt-inducing behaviour in case of disagreement. The standard deviations are high (1.300–1.600), reflecting significant dispersion in perceptions. Most skewness coefficients are negative (e.g., Q4.1 –0.682; Q4.7 –0.620), indicating that manipulative practices by managers are widespread and are commonly perceived as such.

Analysis of Table 6 shows that the relationships between organisational loyalty statements (Q1.1–Q1.8) and perceptions of organisational manipulation (Q2.1–Q2.9) are primarily negative. This means that higher levels of loyalty are generally associated with lower perceptions of manipulation, with Spearman coefficients ranging from –0.040 to –0.252, indicating weak to moderate relationships. Most of these correlations are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Still, some statements, such as Q1.4, Q1.6, and Q1.8, show

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics: *loyalty to the organisation* (source: Own development).**

Questions Group 1/Statistics N = 452; Missing = 0	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Skewness
1.1 I feel a strong attachment to this company.	1	4	2.74	3.00	4	1.095	-0.318
1.2 I am proud to say that I work for this company.	1	4	3.03	4.00	4	1.087	-0.484
1.3 I intend to work for this company for the next few years.	1	5	2.94	4.00	4	1.438	-0.260
1.4 I feel personally committed to achieving the goals of my team/department.	1	5	3.46	4.00	4	1.248	-1.173
1.5 I am willing to go the extra mile to help the company succeed.	1	5	3.36	4.00	4	1.395	-0.610
1.6 I believe that loyalty to my colleagues and team is important to me.	1	5	3.92	4.00	4	1.018	-1.976
1.7 I feel obligated to stay with this organisation.	1	4	2.35	2.00	1	1.275	0.247
1.8 If I had a choice, I would prefer to stay with this organisation, even if I were offered a similar position elsewhere.	1	5	3.05	3.00	3	1.166	-0.416

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics: *feeling manipulated by the organisation* (source: Own development).**

Questions Group 2/Statistics N = 452; Missing = 0	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Skewness
2.1 I feel that the organisation takes advantage of my commitment and sense of responsibility by assigning me excessive work or unrealistic expectations.	2	5	2.97	3.00	2	1.006	0.670
2.2 The organisation often creates feelings of guilt or inadequacy to make me accept situations or decisions that I disagree with.	2	4	2.96	3.00	2	0.902	0.079
2.3 I feel that the organisation uses my loyalty and desire to do well to achieve its own goals that are not always in my best interest.	2	5	2.96	3.00	2	1.009	0.678
2.4 The organisation often appeals to “voluntary contribution” or “proactivity” in a way that is actually a hidden requirement for additional work without compensation.	2	4	3.07	3.00	4	0.951	-0.142
2.5 The organisation often highlights my past contributions and loyalty to motivate me to take on additional commitments that are not entirely within my discretion.	1	5	2.77	2.00	2	1.323	0.178
2.6 I believe that the organisation is purposefully relying on the loyalty of its employees to avoid introducing better conditions or practices.	1	5	2.86	3.00	4	1.311	-0.029
2.7 I sometimes feel pressured by the organisation’s management to accept tasks or conditions “out of loyalty”, even when it is to the detriment of my personal time or well-being.	1	4	2.86	3.00	4	1.231	-0.410
2.8 The organisation often uses messages about “one big family” or “company loyalty” in a way that makes me feel obligated to do more than necessary.	1	5	2.92	3.00	5	1.249	-0.317
2.9 I feel that the organisation expects me to sacrifice my personal time and well-being “for the sake of the common cause”, without adequate recognition or compensation.	1	5	2.96	3.00	4	1.356	-0.193

**Table 4. Descriptive statistics: *loyalty to the leader* (source: Own development).**

Questions Group 3/Statistics N = 452; Missing = 0	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Skewness
3.1 I would support my immediate supervisor, even if it means compromising my personal time or comfort.	3	5	3.92	4.00	4	0.529	-0.088
3.2 I feel indebted to my immediate supervisor for the care and support he/she has given me.	2	5	3.73	4.00	4	0.880	-1.094
3.3 I feel a strong connection with my immediate supervisor, similar to that with a family member or close friend.	2	5	3.24	4.00	4	1.071	0.003
3.4 I would prefer to work with my current supervisor, even if a similar opportunity opens up with another supervisor.	1	5	3.64	4.00	4	0.997	-1.495
3.5 I feel personally committed to the success of my supervisor and his/her projects.	1	5	3.55	4.00	4	1.094	-1.170
3.6 I am willing to make additional efforts to achieve the goals set by my immediate supervisor.	1	4	3.44	4.00	4	0.897	-1.749
3.7 I feel strong affection and respect for my immediate supervisor.	1	5	3.63	4.00	4	0.998	-1.458
3.8 I trust my immediate supervisor and his/her decisions.	1	5	3.54	4.00	4	1.006	-1.180

**Table 5. Descriptive statistics: *feeling manipulated by the leader* (source: Own development).**

Questions Group 4/Statistics N = 452; Missing = 0	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Skewness
4.1 My manager often uses appeals to “team spirit” or “common goals” in a way that makes me feel obligated to do something I don’t want to or that is not my job.	1	5	3.46	4.00	4	1.312	-0.682
4.2 I feel that my commitment and loyalty are sometimes exploited by my manager.	1	5	3.07	4.00	4	1.454	-0.549
4.3 I feel that my manager uses my loyalty as a way to convince me to accept unfair conditions or workload.	1	5	3.07	3.00	1	1.523	-0.317
4.4 My manager makes me feel guilty if I question his/her decision or request, which makes me wonder if I am not “loyal enough”.	1	5	3.27	4.00	1	1.629	-0.452
4.5 My relationship with my manager creates a sense of obligation that goes beyond my professional commitments and is based on personal attachment or loyalty.	1	5	3.17	3.00	4	1.410	-0.337
4.6 I feel that my manager uses my loyalty to achieve goals that are not in the best interest of the team or company but rather his/her personal.	1	5	3.18	3.00	5	1.544	-0.161
4.7 I sometimes feel pressured by my manager to accept tasks or conditions “out of loyalty”, even when it is at the expense of my personal time or well-being.	1	5	3.37	4.00	4	1.640	-0.620
4.8 I feel like my manager “demands” loyalty rather than “earns” it.	1	5	3.17	3.00	5	1.554	-0.161

non-statistically substantial relationships with specific indicators of manipulation, suggesting that not all aspects of organisational loyalty are equally related to perceptions of manipulative practices.

In summary, the correlation analysis reveals a predominant and statistically significant inverse relationship between individual aspects of organisational loyalty and

perceptions of organisational manipulation. Although the personal relationships are mostly weak to moderate, their consistent negative nature and statistical significance (with the exception of a few specific statements) support the idea of an inverse relationship between these two sets of variables in the study sample.

**Table 6. Spearman's correlation between organisational loyalty & perception of manipulation (source: Own development).**

	Spearman's rho	Q2.1	Q2.2	Q2.3	Q2.4	Q2.5	Q2.6	Q2.7	Q2.8	Q2.9
Q1.1	Correlation Coefficient	0.147**	-0.103*	-0.151**	-0.087	-0.142**	-0.139**	-0.088	-0.105*	-0.145**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002	0.029	0.001	0.064	0.002	0.003	0.062	0.025	0.002
Q1.2	Correlation Coefficient	-0.185**	-0.129**	-0.189**	-0.112*	-0.181**	-0.178**	-0.112*	-0.136**	-0.186**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.006	0.000	0.017	0.000	0.000	0.017	0.004	0.000
Q1.3	Correlation Coefficient	-0.247**	-0.173**	-0.252**	-0.149**	-0.242**	-0.239**	-0.149**	-0.181**	-0.246**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000
Q1.4	Correlation Coefficient	0.049	0.034	0.050	0.027	0.053	0.051	0.021	0.030	0.049
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.295	0.473	0.286	0.564	0.265	0.277	0.660	0.525	0.297
Q1.5	Correlation Coefficient	-0.195**	-0.137**	-0.194**	-0.121*	-0.187**	-0.187**	-0.122**	-0.146**	-0.193**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.010	0.000	0.000	0.010	0.002	0.000
Q1.6	Correlation Coefficient	-0.058	-0.040	-0.055	-0.036	-0.053	-0.053	-0.039	-0.045	-0.055
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.221	0.392	0.240	0.439	0.263	0.265	0.412	0.339	0.241
Q1.7	Correlation Coefficient	-0.221**	-0.154**	-0.222**	-0.134**	-0.214**	-0.213**	-0.135**	-0.161**	-0.219**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.004	0.000	0.000	0.004	0.001	0.000
Q1.8	Correlation Coefficient	-0.056	-0.040	-0.059	-0.033	-0.052	-0.051	-0.036	-0.041	-0.054
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.237	0.395	0.211	0.483	0.271	0.277	0.444	0.383	0.249
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							N = 452; Missing = 0			
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).										

Table 7 shows strongly positive correlations between statements of loyalty to the leader (Q3.1–Q3.8) and perceptions of manipulation (Q4.1–Q4.8), with coefficients ranging from 0.681 to 0.955. All correlations are highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the higher the loyalty to the leader, the greater the perceived manipulation by the manager. This highlights the robust and significant positive relationship between loyalty to the leader and perceptions of manipulation. However, the result requires conceptual interpretation and verification of the coding of the variables.

Table 8 shows statistically significant correlations between the various indices of loyalty to the immediate supervisor and loyalty to the organisation. Q3.3 (“strong emotional connection with the supervisor”) demonstrates robust correlations with almost all aspects of loyalty to the organisation, suggesting a direct relationship between this emotional connection and both long-term stay in the company and commitment to team goals. Preference to work with the current manager (Q3.4) shows a robust correlation (0.991) with personal commitment to the organisation’s team and departmental goals, suggesting near-identity between the two.

Trust in the immediate manager and their decisions (Q3.8) correlates strongly with the intention to stay with the company long-term ( $r = 0.933$ ) and with personal commitment to team goals ( $r = 0.880$ ), highlighting the close relationship between trust in the leader and overall organisational commitment. Even loyalty to the leader, related to personal sacrifices, shows significant positive correlations with organisational loyalty, for example, 0.855 with the choice to stay in the current organisation, even in the face of better external offers.

Paired Samples T-tests (Table 9) indicate several key insights. First, the mean values show that loyalty to the leader ( $M = 3.58$ ) is significantly higher than loyalty to the organisation ( $M = 3.11$ ). This difference is statistically significant ( $t(451) = -6.923$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a small to moderate effect size (Cohen’s  $d = -0.326$ ), which is consistent with the conclusion of a more substantial personal commitment of employees to their managers. Second, the analysis of the relationships between loyalty and manipulation suggests different dynamics. In the case of loyalty to the leader and the perception of manipulation by him, there is a powerful and statistically significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.880$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result implies that the greater the

**Table 7. Spearman’s correlation between loyalty to the leader & the feeling of manipulation (source: Own development).**

	Spearman’s rho	Q4.1	Q4.2	Q4.3	Q4.4	Q4.5	Q4.6	Q4.7	Q4.8
Q3.1	Correlation Coefficient	0.790*	0.764*	0.710*	0.681*	0.768*	0.735*	0.694*	0.729*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.2	Correlation Coefficient	0.792*	0.767*	0.713*	0.684*	0.772*	0.739*	0.697*	0.733*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.3	Correlation Coefficient	0.840*	0.947*	0.931*	0.909*	0.921*	0.914*	0.853*	0.915*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.4	Correlation Coefficient	0.890*	0.885*	0.829*	0.806*	0.849*	0.804*	0.822*	0.806*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.5	Correlation Coefficient	0.890*	0.882*	0.826*	0.804*	0.854*	0.811*	0.820*	0.812*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.6	Correlation Coefficient	0.821*	0.901*	0.834*	0.860*	0.838*	0.853*	0.809*	0.852*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.7	Correlation Coefficient	0.902*	0.900*	0.844*	0.822*	0.858*	0.810*	0.838*	0.812*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.8	Correlation Coefficient	0.877*	0.955*	0.878*	0.879*	0.881*	0.871*	0.840*	0.871*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					N = 452; Missing = 0				

**Table 8. Spearman’s correlation between loyalty to the leader & loyalty to the organisation (source: Own development).**

	Spearman’s rho	Q1.1	Q1.2	Q1.3	Q1.4	Q1.5	Q1.6	Q1.7	Q1.8
Q3.1	Correlation Coefficient	0.752*	0.653*	0.767*	0.914*	0.797*	0.713*	0.634*	0.855*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.2	Correlation Coefficient	0.752*	0.655*	0.769*	0.915*	0.798*	0.711*	0.637*	0.853*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.3	Correlation Coefficient	0.895*	0.936*	0.978*	0.818*	0.903*	0.657*	0.923*	0.801*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.4	Correlation Coefficient	0.803*	0.767*	0.887*	0.991*	0.871*	0.717*	0.745*	0.814*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.5	Correlation Coefficient	0.812*	0.764*	0.884*	0.997*	0.876*	0.715*	0.743*	0.832*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.6	Correlation Coefficient	0.869*	0.922*	0.872*	0.783*	0.887*	0.598*	0.865*	0.711*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.7	Correlation Coefficient	0.810*	0.780*	0.900*	0.976*	0.880*	0.716*	0.759*	0.811*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Q3.8	Correlation Coefficient	0.882*	0.892*	0.933*	0.880*	0.924*	0.719*	0.879*	0.806*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					N = 452; Missing = 0				

loyalty to the leader, the more employees perceive themselves to be manipulated by him. That highlights the potential for vulnerability within a strong emotional bond with the immediate supervisor as a leader.

Despite this strong correlation, the T-test shows that loyalty to the leader is statistically significantly higher than the feeling of being manipulated by the leader ( $M = 0.36477$ ,  $t(451) = 9.526$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $Cohen's d = 0.448$ ). Third, the relationship between loyalty to the organisation and the feeling of being manipulated by it is more nuanced. A weak but statistically

significant negative correlation was found ( $r = -0.125$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). This result contrasts with earlier correlation analyses of individual statements. However, the T-test shows that loyalty to the organisation is statistically significantly higher than the feeling of manipulation by the organisation ( $M = 0.17945$ ,  $t(451) = 2.328$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ), although with a minimal effect size ( $Cohen's d = 0.110$ ). This suggests that despite the presence of manipulative practices, overall loyalty to the organisation remains the dominant perception.

In addition to the theoretical background that highlights the potential role of “team spirit” (Q4.1) and “guilt

**Table 9. T-test comparing key variables<sup>1</sup> (source: Own development).**

		Paired Samples Statistics							
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Pair 1	Loyalty_Org_Overall (LOO)	3.1062	452	1.07722	0.05067				
	Manipulation_Org_Overall (MOO)	2.9267	452	1.10641	0.05204				
Pair 2	Loyalty_Leader_Overall (LLO)	3.5849	452	0.87237	0.04103				
	Manipulation_Leader_Overall (MLO)	3.2201	452	1.46889	0.06909				
Pair 3	Loyalty_Org_Overall (LOO)	3.1062	452	1.07722	0.05067				
	Loyalty_Leader_Overall (LLO)	3.5849	452	0.87237	0.04103				
		Paired Samples Correlations							
		N	Correlation	Sig.					
Pair 1	LOO - MOO	452	-0.126	0.007					
Pair 2	LLO - MLO	452	0.880	0.000					
Pair 3	LOO - LLO	452	-0.128	0.007					
		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Confidence Interval		t	df	Sig.**
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	LOO - MOO	0.17945	1.63876	0.07708	0.02797	0.33093	2.328	451	0.020
Pair 2	LLO - MLO	0.36477	0.81406	0.03829	0.28952	0.44002	9.526	451	0.000
Pair 3	LOO - LLO	-0.47871	1.47007	0.06915	-0.61459	-0.34282	-6.923	451	0.000
*95% Confidence Interval of the Difference									
**Sig. (2-tailed)									
		Paired Samples Effect Sizes							
		Standardiser	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval					
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	LOO - MOO	Cohen's d	1.63876	0.110	0.017	0.202			
		Hedges' correction	1.64013	0.109	0.017	0.202			
Pair 2	LLO - MLO	Cohen's d	0.81406	0.448	0.351	0.545			
		Hedges' correction	0.81474	0.448	0.351	0.544			
Pair 3	LOO - LLO	Cohen's d	1.47007	-0.326	-0.420	-0.231			
		Hedges' correction	1.47129	-0.325	-0.420	-0.231			

<sup>a</sup> The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.

Cohen's d uses the sample standard deviation of the mean difference.

Hedges' correction uses the sample standard deviation of the mean difference, plus a correction factor.

<sup>1</sup>Key variables: #1 - Loyalty to the organisation (LOO) and the feeling of manipulation by the organisation (MOO); #2 - Loyalty to the manager/leader (LLO) and the feeling of manipulation by the manager/leader (MLO); and #3 - Loyalty to the organisation (LOO) and loyalty to the manager/leader (LLO).

induction” (Q4.4) as common manipulation tactics, a parallel multiple mediation analysis was conducted (Table 10). The purpose of this analysis was to examine whether these specific tactics act as mediators in the relationship between loyalty to the leader and perceived manipulation. The selection of “team spirit” and “guilt induction” as mediators is theoretically justified, as they represent specific behavioural strategies that leaders can use to influence followers, especially in the context of existing loyalty. These tactics may serve as mechanisms through which higher loyalty to the leader potentially leads to increased perceptions of manipulation. The analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) of IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27), and utilising 10,000 bootstrap samples to generate bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) confidence intervals. Loyalty to the leader (LLO) was defined as the independent variable (X), perceived manipulation (MLO) as the dependent variable (Y), and “team spirit” (Q4.1) and “guilt induction” (Q4.4) were included as parallel mediators (M1 and M2).

The results of the mediation analysis show that LLO significantly predicts both “team spirit” (Q4.1) ( $b = 1.3722$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and “guilt induction” (Q4.4) ( $b = 1.5724$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In the model predicting perceived MLO, both “team spirit” ( $b = 0.1510$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and “guilt induction” ( $b = 0.6988$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) are statistically significant predictors, controlling for loyalty to the leader. The total indirect effect of loyalty to the leader on perceived manipulation, mediated through both mediators, is significant (Effect = 1.3060, 95% BCa CI [1.2336, 1.3876]), as the confidence interval does not include zero. Specifically, the indirect effect through “team spirit” (Q4.1) is statistically significant (Effect = 0.2071, 95% BCa CI [0.1620, 0.2533]), as is the indirect effect through “guilt induction” (Q4.4) (Effect = 1.0989, 95% BCa CI [1.0405, 1.1639]).

It is important to note that the direct impact of leader loyalty on perceived manipulation remains statistically significant (Effect = 0.1762,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating the presence of partial multiple mediation. This means that while leader loyalty continues to have a direct effect on perceived manipulation, a significant portion of this effect is also mediated indirectly through the mechanisms of “team spirit” and “guilt induction”. These findings provide empirical support for the role of the indicated tactics as essential mediators in the relationship under consideration.

The analysis reveals that while employees value loyalty to colleagues and the team, their attachment, pride and sense of obligation to the organisation are significantly lower. This highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing long-term organisational commitment. Employees also report manipulative practices—such as demanding “voluntary” uncompensated work, excessive expectations, guilt-inducing and exploiting loyalty—as more often coming from line managers, but also from the organisation itself.

The results show very high employee loyalty to their immediate supervisors, as expressed through trust, emotional attachment, and a willingness to make sacrifices. The data indicate that managers often exploit this loyalty through “team spirit”, pressure for additional tasks and guilt. Although there are significant individual differences in experiences, almost all respondents demonstrate a willingness to support their leader. T-tests confirm a statistically significantly higher loyalty to supervisors than to the organisation, which emphasises the central role of the leadership figure for employee engagement.

At first glance, the data in Table 6 support *Hypothesis 1*, but instead of being moderate, the observed correlations between organisational loyalty and perceptions of manipulation are strong to very strong. This indicates that more loyal employees are more likely to feel manipulated by the organisation. However, the results of the summary scales reveal a weak but statistically significant negative relationship, which does not confirm the initial hypothesis and suggests a more complex dynamic. Similar to research on organisational commitment (Lahlou-Kassi and Eddakir, 2025; Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2024), the results highlight that loyalty is a multidimensional construct whose relationship with manipulation requires further investigation. The *t*-test shows that the average loyalty to the organisation is significantly higher than the perception of manipulation. This suggests that it is precisely the most engaged employees who may be most vulnerable to exploitation disguised as *team spirit* or the *common good*. Such practices have serious consequences for well-being—for example, one third of employees in Australia and the USA attribute their stress to problems at work, with a significant proportion attributing it to managers and colleagues (Hyde and Grieve, 2018). In this context, the imbalance between organisational expectations and employee counter-expectations undermines the principle of fair exchange (Ford et al., 2023).

The results in Table 7 are consistent with *Hypothesis 2*, showing a strong positive relationship between loyalty to the leader and perception of manipulation. Correlations often exceed 0.800 and reach 0.900, which clearly indicates that the more loyal and committed an employee is to their manager, the more they feel exposed to manipulative or exploitative practices. The findings suggest that loyalty to leaders may make employees more susceptible to unethical behaviour. In support of *Hypothesis 2*, a robust positive correlation was found between allegiance to the leader and perception of manipulation. However, the T-test revealed that the mean loyalty remained significantly higher than the perception of manipulation, suggesting that employees can recognise manipulative practices but still maintain a high level of loyalty. The results show that the more loyal, committed, and trusting an employee is to their leader, the stronger their attachment to them. The literature on destructive and toxic leadership supports these observations, showing that such leaders abuse their power through ma-

**Table 10. Results from the parallel multiple mediation model (PROCESS Model 4)<sup>2</sup> (source: Own development).**

OUTCOME VARIABLE: Q4.1							
Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	0.9124	0.8325	0.2890	2236.3694	1.0000	450.000	0.0000
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	-1.4589	0.1070	-13.6287	0.0000	-1.6693	-1.2485	
LLO	1.3722	0.0290	47.2903	0.0000	1.3151	1.4292	
OUTCOME VARIABLE: Q4.4							
Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	0.8423	0.7094	0.7723	1098.7768	1.0000	450.000	0.0000
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	-2.3714	0.1750	-13.5504	0.0000	-2.7153	-2.0275	
LLO	1.5724	0.0474	33.1478	0.0000	1.4792	1.6656	
OUTCOME VARIABLE: MLO							
Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	0.9940	0.9879	0.0262	12,243.1780	3.0000	448.000	0.0000
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	-0.2159	0.0390	-5.5398	0.0000	-0.2925	-0.1393	
LLO	0.1762	0.0214	8.2140	0.0000	0.1340	0.2183	
Q4.1	0.1510	0.0223	6.7562	0.0000	0.1071	0.1949	
Q4.4	0.6988	0.0137	51.1306	0.0000	0.6720	0.7257	
DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y							
Direct effect of X on Y							
	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
	0.1762	0.0214	8.2140	0.0000	0.1340	0.2183	
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:							
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
TOTAL	1.3060	0.0390	1.2336	1.3876			
Q4.1	0.2071	0.0223	0.1620	0.2533			
Q4.4	1.0989	0.0315	1.0405	1.1639			
Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:							95
Number of bootstrap samples for bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals:							10,000

<sup>2</sup>Key variables: X (Independent variable)—Loyalty to the manager/leader (LLO); Y (Dependent variable)—Feeling of manipulation by the manager/leader (MLO); M1 (Mediator 1): Q4.1 (Team Spirit); M2 (Mediator 2): Q4.4 (Guilt Induction). MSE, Mean Squared Error; LLCI, Lower Level Confidence Interval; ULCI, Upper Level Confidence Interval; df, Degrees of freedom.

nipulation, humiliation, and belittling to achieve personal goals (Cai et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025). This highlights that manipulative behaviour is deeply rooted in certain forms of leadership and influences the relationship between employee loyalty and perceptions of manipulation.

Regarding *Hypothesis 3*, the data in Table 8 show strong positive correlations between the individual aspects of loyalty to the leader and to the organisation. At the same time, the analysis of aggregated scales reveals a weak but statistically significant negative correlation, which contra-

dicts the initial hypothesis and previous observations. This suggests that the generalisation of the data may mask the nuances of the relationship and that the dynamics between institutional and leader loyalty are more complex than expected from the individual correlations. A more in-depth analysis of the reasons behind this negative correlation at the aggregate level is necessary. Although the literature often suggests a positive relationship between organisational loyalty and leader loyalty, the observed negative correlation can be explained by more nuanced theoretical frameworks.

Research on differential leadership indicates that perceptions of organisation and “leadership” may be intertwined or mutually influence each other across different groups of employees. High leader loyalty may be functional at the individual level, but it leads to divisions and reduced organisational loyalty, which explains the negative correlation at the aggregate level (Zhang et al., 2022).

In light of the results, practical recommendations can be formulated for managers to foster a positive culture and mitigate adverse effects. To increase loyalty to the organisation, it is essential to build transparent and fair management processes. High loyalty can paradoxically increase the perception of manipulation, especially when expectations are unclear or fairness is compromised, so organisations should regularly collect feedback and identify potential issues through surveys and discussions. Such practices foster trust and support loyalty without compromising vulnerability (Lahlou-Kassi and Eddakir, 2025; Shangze, 2024).

In addition, increasing employee engagement requires active involvement in decision-making processes and recognition of their contributions. Managers can encourage this through project participation, freedom of initiative, and regular recognition of achievements, which increase motivation and satisfaction without the risk of feeling manipulated (Jo and Shin, 2025; Poorani and Pradap, 2024).

Managing the relationship between employees and leaders is also crucial for striking a balance between loyalty and commitment. Because high loyalty to specific leaders is often associated with a stronger sense of manipulation, organisations need to build a culture in which trust is directed towards the institution rather than individuals. Practices such as mentor rotation, group initiatives, and training in ethical leadership practices can limit the risk of exploitation and foster sustainable commitment (Cai et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

#### 4.1 Limitations of the Study

This pilot study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results, but they also serve as key guidelines for future research. First, the study design is cross-sectional and relies entirely on self-report data collected at a single point in time from a single source. This may introduce biases resulting from common method bias. While this approach is suitable for research purposes and identifying correlations, it does not enable the establishment of causal relationships. Therefore, future studies could employ a longitudinal design to track changes in employees’ perceptions over time, which would enable more rigorous inferences about the direction of causality.

Second, the study is limited in both geographical and temporal scope, as it only includes employees from Bulgaria at a specific point in time (May 2025). This limits the direct generalisability of the results to other cultural and organisational contexts. Differences in national culture, or-

ganisational culture, and management styles can significantly influence the relationship between loyalty and perception of manipulation. Therefore, future studies could expand their scope to include employees from different countries and organisations, which would contribute to a more objective understanding of the phenomena under consideration.

Third, although the present study provided an initial assessment of the factor structure through EFA, it did not include more sophisticated statistical methods. The extremely high Cronbach’s alpha value ( $\alpha = 0.992$ ) for the “perceived manipulation” scale is an indication of semantic overlap or redundancy of the items, which may also lead to a lack of full discriminant validity between closely related constructs. Therefore, the use of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) in future studies is of key importance for the validation of the scales. Additionally, methods such as structural equation modelling (SEM) would allow for the testing of more complex causal models, which would deepen our understanding of the direction and strength of the relationships between variables.

Fourth, the scope of the statistical analysis was limited to direct relationships among the core constructs, without controlling for the potential moderating role of organisational characteristics. Specifically, although data on ownership structure were collected to profile the respondents, they were not utilised in the inferential analysis to maintain focus on the general psychological dynamics and model parsimony. Consequently, the study does not account for potential differences in how loyalty and manipulation interact within public versus private sector entities. Future research should address this by conducting comparative studies to determine if the ownership form acts as a boundary condition for the observed effects.

Finally, the operationalisation of some constructs is limited in scope. The interchangeable use of the terms “leader” and “manager” emphasises a specific type of relationship characterised by a strong emotional bond, which limits the applicability of the results to more formal or transactional management roles. Additionally, the definition of “perceived manipulation” remains open to individual interpretation, reflecting a general negative feeling rather than a specific meaning. Future research could examine these constructs more broadly and validate their operational definitions. Despite these limitations, the present study provides a necessary foundation that can be built upon in future studies, offering valuable guidance for deepening our understanding of the complex interactions between loyalty, leadership tactics, and perceptions of manipulation in organisational contexts.

#### 4.2 Future Research Directions

Based on the findings and limitations, future research can be developed in several key directions. To deepen our understanding of the complex relationships found in

the present study—in particular, the strong correlation between leader loyalty and perceptions of manipulation (the “dark side” of loyalty) and the negative relationship between organisational and leader loyalty—we need to investigate the underlying mechanisms. This includes examining leader intentions when using tactics such as “team spirit” and “guilt induction”, as well as identifying contextual and individual moderators. Developing more differentiated measures of manipulation is also essential.

Furthermore, to establish causal relationships, future research should employ more rigorous designs, such as longitudinal studies and experimental or quasi-experimental designs that allow for the control of unobserved confounding factors. Additionally, to enhance generalisability, studies with larger and more diverse samples, encompassing various sectors and cultural contexts, including cross-cultural comparisons, are necessary. In this context, specific comparative analyses based on ownership structure (e.g., public vs. private sector) would be particularly valuable to determine whether institutional differences moderate the link between loyalty and perceived manipulation.

To reduce self-report bias, future research should utilise multiple data sources (e.g., peer ratings, supervisor ratings, or objective organisational data) and employ consistent data collection methods. Finally, as a next step after the current EFA, future research should necessarily include CFA. This will enable rigorous testing of the hypothesised factor structures of the scales and a more in-depth study of discriminant validity between closely related constructs, providing a stronger basis for future theoretical developments.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study examines the dynamics of employee loyalty in depth, distinguishing between organisational loyalty and leader loyalty, and discusses their relationship to perceptions of workplace manipulation. The results reveal several key insights.

A key finding is that average levels of leader loyalty are statistically significantly higher than those for the organisation, which is consistent with the crucial role of individual leadership in employee engagement. Furthermore, the study highlights the “dark side” of loyalty, especially for leaders: a strong positive correlation was found between leader loyalty and perceptions of leader manipulation. That suggests that more loyal employees may perceive themselves as more manipulated, challenging the idealised image of loyalty and drawing attention to the potential for exploitation of emotional attachment. Despite this strong correlation, average leader loyalty remains higher than average perceptions of manipulation.

Regarding organisational loyalty and perceived manipulation, the results reveal a more nuanced picture: a weak but statistically significant negative correlation was observed, which contradicts the initial hypothesis. More-

over, the relationship between organisational loyalty and leader loyalty is statistically significant, but weak and negative. This requires a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics, suggesting that high loyalty to one may not correlate positively with the other.

These findings have important implications for corporate practice. The quality of leadership at the middle and lower levels is of fundamental importance. Harmful or exploitative practices at the leadership level can not only undermine loyalty to the specific leader but also indirectly affect the overall perception of the organisation. To prevent loyalty abuse and ensure sustainable employee well-being, organisations need to reassess their values, focusing on building an environment of trust, fairness, and psychological safety, rather than simply demanding loyalty.

The study contributes to existing theories of loyalty by distinguishing and analysing the intensity and interrelationships between different types of loyalty. It also provides empirical support for the concept of a “dark side” of loyalty, suggesting a need for a more nuanced approach. Future research could focus on qualitative methods to understand the reasons for the observed negative correlation between the two types of loyalty, as well as on strategies to prevent manipulation and promote ethical leadership.

## Availability of Data and Materials

All data reported in this paper will be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Author Contributions

All work was conceived and completed by AT.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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