

Developing Strategies to Reduce Turnover Intention Driven by Unethical Leadership in Digital Creative Agencies

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ABSTRACT: Digital creative agencies have developed as brands collaborators to supervise content management, online targeted advertising, and consumer engagement strategies integrated into the various digital ecosystems in Indonesia. The workers of this industry dominantly by generation specifically Gen Z. This industry has potential to growth, however there is a lack of organizational structure, excessive workload, and inconsistent policies that have encouraged unethical leadership. Many creative workers experience unfair treatment, lack of empathy, manipulative tendencies, irresponsible behaviours, and egocentric, all of these creates burnout and stress and directly affect desire to leave from the company within the industry. The purpose of this study is to identify the relationship among unethical leadership, psychological distress, and turnover intention to understand the depths of employee's well-being and retention. A quantitative explanatory approach, data were collected from 191 respondents who worked in Indonesia's digital creative agencies through online questionnaire. The variables measured included nine indicators of unethical leadership, four indicators of psychological distress, and three indicators of turnover intention. Using PLS-SEM, the data were analysed to assess relationship between the constructs. These findings demonstrate that psychological distress is linked unethical leadership to turnover intention in fast-paced work culture. Managerial strategies consist of prioritize ethical leadership development, strengthening accountability systems, and workload restructuring to continuous well-being initiatives. Future research is encouraged to incorporate qualitative exploration to better understand of behaviours and expand model of mediating variables such as organizational justice or psychological safety. This study contributes to provides practical insights for improving workforce sustainability in Indonesia's digital creative agencies.

KEYWORDS: Digital Creative Agencies, Gen Z, Psychological Distress, Turnover Intention, Unethical Leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, digitalization has become new opportunity as more companies adopt technology-oriented marketing strategies. Statista (2025) shows there are currently 143 million social media users in the country which makes the internet as primary place for brands to establish visibility to engage more with customer. This phenomenon increases the need for digital creative agencies as strategic partners in producing content, managing digital campaigns, and reinforcing brand identity. There is an increase in the need for digital creative agencies services, which aligns with the projection for digital advertising in the country where is expected to reach \$4.47 billion in 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2025). According to We Are Social (2025) report consumers mainly utilize digital platforms for product information which enhance the need for digital creative agencies to optimize and improve their service for brand visibility and communication strategies. Nonetheless, the organization, management, and workflow in most agencies in Indonesia are still of poor quality. IMD (2025) reported that among the countries in the Asia Pacific, Indonesia at a low rank of digital management capabilities. (Asian Development Bank, 2024) observes a disparity in the output of creative workers and their expected remuneration. This demonstrates that the growth of the industry does not correlate with improvement in governance and working condition. Masri (2023) describes some of the unethical leadership practices in some of the digital creative agencies that include authoritarian styles, heavy workload, irregular, and poor communication. Moreover, Ilham (2025) discussed the increases in stress, emotional burnout, and decreased work motivation caused by unethical leadership styles. These conditions lead to poor performance and increase the intention of employee to leave. SINDIKASI (2022) states that 40.5% of creative employee work more than working hours legally permits on Manpower Law 2003, additionally 51.2% said their workload exceeds expectations of their contractual obligations, meaning that there are expectations of work that run over implicit agreements. This is made worse by the fact that 82.1% of employees are not compensated for their extra hours of work. These working conditions cause poor mental health by 76% of employees are anxious, 48% are depressed, and 16% and 17% are diagnosed with bipolar and some personality disorders. The consequences of.



Unhealthy workloads, unethical management, and overall negative work situations have clear mental and emotional effects on employees and impact the overall health of the organization. With the highest representation in the creative industry, young employees are particularly attuned to these conditions. According to the Jakpat (2023) report reasons for Gen Zs resigning are unhealthy corporate work culture including mismatched workloads and compensation, irregular schedules, mismatch leadership styles represent unethical leadership. High turnover intention rates ultimately create consequences for companies such as increase recruitment and training costs and ultimately declining creative service quality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Unethical Leadership

Unethical Leadership happens when leaders ignore morals and rules and lead the people underneath them to do the same (Hassan et al., 2023). These behaviours including dishonesty, unfair treatment, manipulative tendencies, irresponsible, non-adherence to rules, law, and regulations, corruption and criminal, egocentric, lack of empathy, and unethical role modelling (Hassan et al., 2023; Joosten et al., 2014). Narcissism, hubris, psychopathology are the traits that lead to most of these kinds of problems which came from individual itself (Akstinaite et al., 2020). Additionally, the structural dynamics of the organization also cause unethical leadership to occur. When there is a lack of unstructured accountability and system, leaders are more likely to defend their unethical actions as a matter style in management. In terms of Social Cognitive Theory, a leader's behaviour is a results of the interplay between individual and situational factors. If organizations fail to set sufficient behavioural standards, there is a higher potential for unethical behaviours to be developed (Nabavi & Mohammad Sadegh Bijandi, 2011). Therefore, it is inappropriate to see unethical leadership only as a factor of personality, but it can be the result of the organizational structure from that leader.

B. Psychological Distress

A negative emotional condition including anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout from prolong exposure to unhealthy work environment. The primary causes of distress are explicated using the Job Demands Resources (JDR) theory and termed as high work requirements such as time pressure, role ambiguity, and extra work hours with low support from the organization (Li et al., 2025). Uncertainty and inequity trigger anxiety (Koutsimani et al., 2019). Depression came from powerless over work situations on Learned Helplessness Theory. Stress happens when demands of work exceed from abilities. Burnout emerges when everything of work is out of control (Agyapong et al., 2022). Psychological distress may also arise from a process which there are encounters with ambiguity, lack of role clarity, and poor interpersonal relations, leading to overall reductions in mental violence. From a Learned Helplessness theory perspective, in relation to uncontrollability, an individual's depression and overall emotional state move towards a more helpless state (Boddez et al., 2022). Therefore, psychological distress is a complex phenomenon that arises from work-related stress, perceived inequity, and the emotional response from the individual. Because of these factors, psychological distress is critical element to understand the impact of unethical leadership behaviours affecting of turnover intention in the organization.

C. Turnover Intention

Turnover intention defines when an employee begins to think about plan to leave a company (Cialdini et al., 2021). According to the Social Exchange Theory, the decision to leave occurs when an employee feel that the balance between effort that is put into work is no longer equal to the reward of effort that received, especially when there is inequity, stress, or when the organization fails to achieve a reasonable goal (Robbins & Judge, 2024). Moreover, job dissatisfaction, unclear roles, or values misalignment, makes individuals start to evaluate their job options. Mobley's Turnover Model also explained that prolonged stress results in a persistent frustration that worsen to apathy and an overall dissatisfaction that leads to an assessment of available job opportunities which in the end results in the intention to leave. Consequently, this condition generates considerable adaptive response. The loss of productivity, overwork of remaining staff, loss or organizational memory, and the outflow of valuable resource to the organization as a direct effect to desire to quiet. Turnover intention is a strong prediction of actual turnover and results in organizational losses through a lack of productivity, the loss of knowledge and organizational costs.

Based on the explanation provided above, the conceptual framework for this research can be formulated as follows:

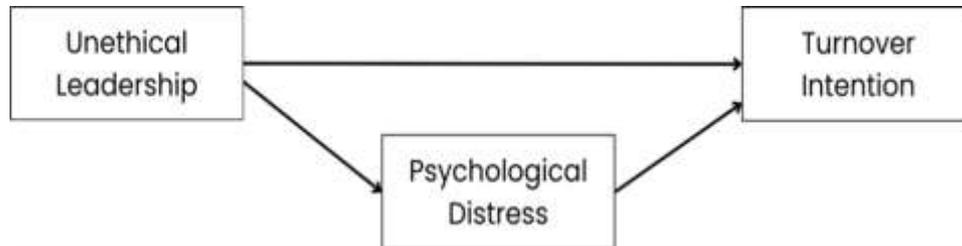


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework established from previous studies by Ahmad et al. (2018); Hassan et al. (2023) shown on psychological distress as a mediator of how unethical leadership influences intentions of turnover intention. The framework identifies two directions. First, unethical leadership creates a morally distressing work environment, leading to turnover intentions as employees as leave to pressure their mental well-being. Second, more importantly, unethical leadership creates psychological distress which leads to turnover intentions due to a desire to the situation. The framework suggests that reducing employee turnover requires addressing both unethical leadership practices and supporting employee’s mental health, rather than simply trying to convince employee to stay.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study examines the correlation between unethical leadership, psychological distress, and turnover intention using a quantitative approach. This method allows to analyze phenomena in mores systematic, measure hypothesis testing, and get result as the solution within strategies that can be generalized. The research design is explanatory, aiming to explain the influence between variables and relationship of variables (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the study attempts connection between unethical leadership, psychological distress, and turnover intention.

B. Data Collection

The technique of this study is utilizing an online questionnaire using Google Form. This approach chosen because aligns the study’s demands and more practical for reaching larger number of respondents in the digital creative agency. The study employed a purposive sampling technique for the respondents specifically those currently or previously employed at an Indonesian digital creative agency and who have experienced unethical leadership practice from their leaders. Demographic of respondents were also collected to providing a profile on the characteristics of the sample. This included age, position in the company, type of agency, and the number of employees in the company. The research tool consists of three key components with four-point Likert scale from (1) strongly agree (2) agree (3) disagree (4) strongly disagree. The unethical leadership was assessed using unethical leadership practices evidence by Hassan et al. (2023; Pelletier (2010). Psychological distress contains four indicators using GAD-7 adapted from Asiwe et al. (2014; Mardea & Kristina (2020). Turnover intention has three indicators was derived from Ahmad et al. (2018). The minimum total sample size was determined based on the indicator template. According to Hair et al. (2022) the sample size was established by the formula ($N = \text{indicators} \times 10$) resulting in a study with a minimum representative sample of 160 respondents.

C. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted based on Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as a framework for validity, reliability also cause and affect relationships between variables. The analysis consisted of various measurement. First, descriptive statistics which outlined the profile of the respondents and the patterns of their responses. Second, measurement model included convergent validity, discriminant validity, and Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability. Third, structural model assessment which involved hypothesis testing through t-statistic and p-value included the model’s strength indicators R^2 and Q^2 .



IV. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

A. Respondents Profile and Frequency Analysis

Table 1: Respondents Profile

	Choices	Total	Percentage
Eligibility Question	Yes	191	91%
	No	18	9%
Gender	Female	115	60%
	Male	76	40%
Age	17-25 th	73	38%
	26-35 th	99	52%
	36-45 th	18	9%
	>45 th	1	1%
	Staff	172	90%
Position	Leader	19	10%
	Digital Marketing	32	17%
Digital Creative Agencies	Social media	34	18%
	Advertising	32	17%
	Branding	35	18%
	Studio	26	14%
	Multi-channel	20	10%
Number of Employee	Others	12	6%
	<20 people	55	29%
	21-50 people	102	53%
	>50 people	34	18%

From the total of 209 respondents only 191 of them who qualified to participate of this study. Most of respondents were Gen Z from 17-35 years old were experiencing the life stage of being productive and working in the middle level of their careers, with high of exposure to the dynamics of creative work. They were employed as staff, thereby experiencing first-hand effects of their leadership’s styles in the daily work context. They came from various types of agencies including branding, social media, advertising, and digital marketing, and most happens in small to medium size agencies. These representativeness of the sector condition of the flexible and project oriented of digital creative agency.

Table 2: Frequency Analysis of Unethical Leadership and Psychological Distress

Variables	Type of behavior	Total
Unethical Leadership	Unfair Treatment	114
	Lack of Empathy	111
	Egocentric	95
	Irresponsible Behaviors	79
	Manipulative Tendencies	71
	Non-Adherence to rules, laws, and regulation	39
	Dishonesty	35
	Unethical Role Modeling	23
	Corruption Criminal	11
	Burnout	144
Psychological Distress	Stress	99
	Anxiety	43
	Depression	26



Respondents reported the following unethical leadership practices as the most prevalent consist of unfair treatment, lack of empathy, irresponsible, manipulative tendencies, and egocentric. This indicates that digital creative agencies’ ethical violations are not only structural but also interpersonal. Respondents also report the psychological distress they experience as most dominantly the form of stress and burnout. The main causes of emotional exhaustion are the excessive workloads and the pressure of deadlines, as well as the relentless demand for creativity. This phenomenon is also shown by the respondent’s increase desire to seek alternative employment, which indicate of turnover intention.

B. Measurement and Structural Model

Table 3: Measurement and Structural Result

Item	Convergent Validity		Discriminant Validity		Reliability		Structural	
	Outer Loading	AVE	Cross Loading	Fornell Lacker	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	R ²	Q ²
UL1	0.789		0.849					
UL2	0.724		0.861					
UL3	0.840		0.858					
UL4	0.711	0.766	0.833	0.875	0.937	0.949		
UL6	0.795		0.845					
UL7	0.768		0.863					
UL8	0.720		0.859					
PD1	0.839		0.881					
PD2	0.870	0.798	0.875	0.894	0.898	0.929	0.750	0.570
PD3	0.855		0.868					
PD4	0.892		0.876					
TI1	0.846		0.893					
TI2	0.853	0.727	0.906	0.853	0.874	0.922	0.691	0.543
TI3	0.859		0.882					

From the measurement model testing results, all indicators in three variables achieved loading factors over the minimum limit, except for UL5 and UL9, which were then removed due to weakness in the value. The AVE of all constructs are greater than 0.50 indicating that convergence is good. Discriminant validity was also satisfied through cross-loading and through Fornell-Larcker. The Cronbach’s Alpha and Composite Reliability being over 0.70 for all the variables confirmed the internal consistency of the instrument.

For the structural model, the R square value for psychological distress was 0.75 which mean that unethical leadership is accountable for 75% of the variation in distress. The R square for turnover intention is 0.69 which that distress and unethical leadership collectively accounted for almost 70% of the variation in resignation intention. The Q square value of all variables was greater than zero meaning that the model had strong predictive relevance.

C. Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	T-statistic	P-value	Outcome
Unethical Leadership → Psychological Distress	3.056	0.000	Supported
Unethical Leadership → Turnover Intention	5.056	0.000	Supported
Psychological Distress → Turnover Intention	3.094	0.002	Supported

This finding demonstrates a mediation model examining how unethical leadership influences turnover intention through psychological distress. The findings confirm that unethical leader behavior not only directly impacts employee’s intention to leave but also worsens their psychological condition which further strengthen that intention.

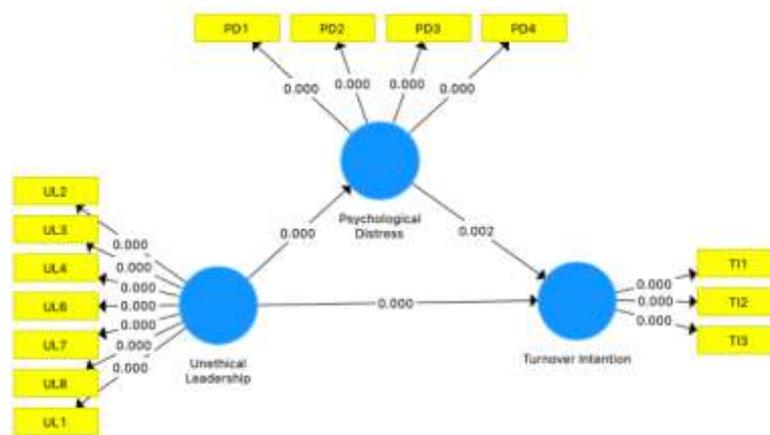


Figure 2: Hypothesis Testing Framework

H1: Unethical Leadership → Psychological Distress

The results can be concluded that unethical leadership has a positive and statistically significant impact on psychological distress (p value < 0.05) meaning employees experiencing unethical leadership practices such as unfair treatment, lack of empathy, manipulative tendencies, irresponsible, and egocentric tend to be distress psychologically at higher level including stress and burnout. This type of leadership in the digital creative agencies increase the distress already present from tight project-based work deadlines. As employee perceive less support from the leaders, they lose psychological safety, and they have no opportunity to express their burdens. Thus, Hypothesis 1 strengthens states that unethical leadership practices is the main trigger of psychological distress that employees experience.

H2: Unethical Leadership → Turnover Intention

The hypothesis proved positive that there is significant impact of unethical leadership on turnover intention (p value < 0.05) which indicates that employees experiencing unethical leadership are more likely to develop the intention to leave the company. The findings show that inequity, lack of communication, forced overtime, lack of control, and authoritarian leader decisions lead to decrease in employee emotional attachment to the organization. The consideration to leave the company is to facilitate the employees in searching for other companies with more secure environments and to appreciate the employee’s work environment. The results of Hypothesis 2 are consistent with the previous study that unethical leadership is the primary factor explaining worker’s retention or turnover intention.

H3: Psychological Distress → Turnover Intention

This Hypothesis is also supported and significant (p value < 0.05) showing that psychological distress has direct effect on turnover intention. This means, the higher of distress with factors such as prolonged stress and burnout, the more reason that employees are considering resigning. Distress acts as a signal that the work environment is no longer supportable. The emotional burden of work would lead to resigning from work as a strategy to avoid distress. In the digital creative agencies, work-related distress affects motivation, productivity, and emotional attachment. So, Hypothesis 3 confirms that psychological distress is not simply outcome of the unethical behavior of the leaders, but also a main driver of the worker’s decision to seek a healthier work environment.

D. Discussion

This study shows that the link between unethical leadership, psychological distress, and turnover intention is not singular, but rather an outcome of the interrelatedness of factors that influence each other. This aligns with the perspective of Blair et al. (2017); Kondo & Ogana (2025); Mitchell et al. (2023) that some factors of unethical leadership behavior occur because of individual characteristics, organizational context, and situational pressures. Using this perspective, the creative industry can be analyzed and understood concerning the following three factors. The individual factor came from traits of the leader. Leader who narcissistic, low of empathy, and defensive styles communication present higher cases on unethical behavior under pressure and are likely to act unethically. Blair et al. (2017) states that personality traits play a dominant role in determining how leaders became stress, and how the deal with people.



In the case of digital creative agencies where flexibility, creativity, and rapid decision-making is required, leaders are most likely to direct pressure to their subordinates through unethical behavior such as manipulative and irresponsible. Disregarding ethical principles of leading do not develop from one reason. An example of this could be a leader with defensive personality traits in an organization with no clear behavioral guidelines and high stress work conditions. In this case, the organization does not only provide a space for unethical conduct, but also helps in the consolidation for unethical behavior. When this intensely occurs will bring high pressure psychological distress to the employees. This relationship also impacts motivation and engagement work activities in the long run. When leaders act unethically, a subordinate may have value dissonance and internal conflict concerning the ethically right position. These conflicts cause one to be emotionally drained and worsen health issue. Blair et al. (2017) stated distress related to personal integrity and trust in social systems make recovery difficult and this gap also increases due to value conflict and interpersonal stress. When employee feel their integrity is repeatedly disrespected, their commitment and loyalty to the organization decreases, and they feel the need to look for alternative sources of employment is increased. The next factor is organizational, creative industry functions with loose organizational frameworks, lack of standard operating procedures, and weak accountability provides an opportunity for leaders to have authority to conduct unethical and systematic control dysfunction. When employees believe that there are no opportunities for within-system improvements and internal problems will never be resolved, they feel that nothing can change and that there is no opportunity to resolve any issues from within. In such a context, the absence of unethical behavior becomes a source of concern that strengthens the belief that the organizations lack a reasonable and fair approach to the working conditions. This perception leads to an increased motivation to leave from the organizations as a form of self-protective behavior. This ambiguity creates desire to leave the organization. The last one is situational factor. These is realities of the creative industry itself. Kondo & Ogana (2025) explains that industries with a project-based model and clients demand-oriented can create pressure which also shape the behavior of leadership. Short deadline and high demands often motivate leaders to creating work in unethical ways. When conditions at work become stressful, Kondo & Ogana (2025) argue that leaders become increasingly vulnerable to making careless, damaging decisions regarding their subordinates. This creates a stress cycle where situational pressure causes unethical conduct, which in turn causes distress causes a decrease in effective leadership styles, and the leader when places pressure on their employees because of the performance decline. This cycle can continue indefinitely without any changes within the structure. This has negative implications for employees already overloaded with cognitive and emotional pressure. Employees decide to get more stability and healthier work environment the lead to leave the company.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study focused on unethical leadership, psychological distress, and turnover intention in digital creative agencies, which operate in highly competitive and demand environment that can rise unethical leadership. This study utilized quantitative approach to confirms psychological distress mediates the relationship between unethical leadership and employee's intention to leave. The study concludes some findings. The most common forms of unethical leadership include unfair treatment, lack of empathy, egocentric, irresponsible, and manipulative tendencies. Most employees report stress and burnout as symptoms of psychological distress. Moreover, there is significant and positive relationship between unethical leadership and turnover intention, unethical leadership and psychological distress, psychological distress and turnover intention. A strategic framework for these issues including leadership competence and development through leader's training, ethical governance strengthening by ethical code, and workload management reform by redesigning workflow to get well-being management.

To preserve employee mental health, fast-paced creative industries need strong managerial structures that address and mitigate unethical behaviors. Research suggests that interventions should target not only individual leader's behaviors, but also address the organizational structures and situational frameworks that define employee's daily work experiences.

1) Ethical Leadership Development

The initiation of ethical leadership is important, it will influence leadership behavioral patterns as a significant cause of distress among employees. Self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation are identified as a critical component that shape leader's behaviors in a constructive manner (Hassan et al., 2023). Scenario training, micro-coaching, and leadership reflection feedback are some ways to leaders can appreciate the consequences of their decisions on their team. Ethical actions as part of leader's key performance indicators also enables organizations to evaluate relevant choices made by leaders to a certain extent. By developing leadership long-term learning processes like continuous leadership mentoring, ethical workshops, and reflection sessions, leaders



revisit the tough decision, they have made. Leaders not only learn ethical theories, but they are also acting as organizational value level. In addition, organizations can develop a leadership scorecard that includes behavioral dimensions like fairness, transparently and empathetic communication. These must be reported to create empowerment and to avoid the emergence of feedback mechanism also provides a space for the staff to communicate their perceptions of the standard of leadership.

2) *Strengthening Organizational Governance*

Weak structures, SOPs, and accountability mechanisms are significant risk factors for unethical leadership. These align with the previous study that weak control within an organization allows the possibility to manipulate and abuse control (Benlahcene & Meddour, 2020). Therefore, organizations must introduce code of ethics by providing secure and anonymous whistleblowing mechanisms allow employees to report violations without concern. Addressing these governance issues reduce of distress while increasing trust within the organization. To help determine governance for the organization, decision-making needs to be mapped out to remove any ambiguous command structures. The company incorporates a code of ethics and procedures for resolving violations. Conduct periodic audits of ethics by creating safe report to assess the lessons of policies that have been set.

3) *Workload, Process Redesign, and Employee Well-being Program*

There is an imbalance of demands and resources caused by distress to employees due to concern regarding workload. Companies should mitigate these risks by redesigning work process include task flows, defines revision boundaries, reasonable deadlines and distribution of work. Utilizing project management systems is beneficial for task allocation visibility and equity. Additionally, distress is well documented to increase when employees do not have a space for emotional recovery to psychological resources (Koutsimani et al., 2019; Winefield et al., 2012). Reducing stress is possible through programs including peer support groups, sports, and creative recharge sessions. When employee feel safe and appreciated, they can sustain motivation and creativity. To achieve a more balanced work process, companies should reorganize their project flows to maximize employee's time and energy. Streamlining steps and setting goals can prevent work overload and cut down on needless revisions. Tracking the capacity and workload of employees also facilitates equitable work distribution through project planning platform. Additionally, employees can bond with one another and recover emotionally with well-being programs that include sports, karaoke, or team recreative activities.

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