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My fault or yours? Leaders' dual reactions to abusive supervision via rumination depend on their independent self-construal

Hong Deng[1] | **Catherine K. Lam**[2] | **Yanjun Guan**[1] | **Mo Wang**[3]

[1] Department of Management and Marketing, Durham University Business School, Durham, UK

[2] Department of Management, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

[3] Warrington College of Business, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida

Correspondence
Yanjun Guan, Department of Management and Marketing, Durham University Business School, Durham DH1 3LB, UK.
Email: yanjun.guan@gmail.com
Hong Deng, Department of Management and Marketing, Durham University Business School, Durham DH1 3LB, UK.
Email: xhxghome@gmail.com

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Abstract

In this research, we propose a novel goal-failure perspective based on cognitive theories of rumination to examine how leaders react to their own abusive supervision in distinct ways. Findings from two multi-wave, multisource field studies conducted with organizational leaders and an online experiment support hypotheses that leaders ruminate on their abusive behavior and this rumination triggers reconciliation efforts (a problem-solving reaction) or the blaming of victims (a self-serving reaction). In line with cognitive theories of rumination, leaders' independent self-construal functions as a key qualifier for the effects of rumination, such that when they ruminate, leaders who have low levels of independent self-construal are more likely to seek reconciliation, whereas leaders who have high levels of independent self-construal are more likely to blame their victims. Furthermore, reconciliation is not significantly related to subordinates' evaluation of their leaders' effectiveness but blaming is negatively related to it. These findings are an important extension of nascent perpetrator-centric research regarding abusive supervision.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A plethora of research has attested to the harmful effects of abusive supervision on subordinates (i.e., victims) (for meta-analytic reviews, see Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). However, understanding how offenders respond to their own actions has important implications (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). Recently, scholars have started to take a perpetrator-centric perspective to examine how abusive supervision affects abusive leaders themselves. Some studies have found that abusive supervision may temporarily benefit abusers' own work-related behaviors through improving their recovery and sense of power (Ju et al., 2019; Qin, Huang, Johnson, Hu, & Ju, 2018). Others have suggested that abusive leaders do not walk away scot-free and can be negatively affected by their own wrongdoing: They may have trouble fulfilling psychological needs and relaxing and experience feelings of guilt and a loss of moral credit (Foulk, Lanaj, Tu, Erez, & Archambeau, 2018; Liao, Yam, Johnson, Liu, & Song, 2018). To counter this psychological discomfort (e.g., guilt), abusive leaders may display compensatory behaviors/intentions toward subordinates to make reparations (Liao et al., 2018; Shum, Gatling, & Tu, 2020).

Despite valuable contributions made by the above-cited studies, "more research that explores the implications of abusive supervision for actors (i.e., leaders) would be informative" (Zhu, Song, Zhu, & Johnson, 2019, p. 226). Specifically, when answering the question of how perpetrating leaders cope with the psychological costs induced by their own abusive behavior, the guilt-based moral perspective may fall short. It argues that leaders will engage in constructive reparatory behavior out of guilt, an emotion of "regretting" a wrong action (Ferguson & Stegge, 1998) that urges perpetrators to put themselves in their victims' shoes and make amends (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006). However, this perspective is seemingly incompatible with the broader literature on how perpetrators react to their own misconduct: beyond constructive attempts at amelioration, they may justify and rationalize their wrongdoing (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004; Lowell, 2012). The possibility of leaders displaying negative reactions cannot be explicated by the guilt-based mechanism. Therefore, a new theoretical perspective is needed to account for both the positive and negative reactions of abusive leaders and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how they cope with self-inflicted psychological distress.

Building on cognitive theories of rumination that view goal failure as the ultimate reason for rumination (Martin & Tesser, 1989; Martin, Shrira, & Startup, 2004), we conceptualize abusive supervision as an indication of leaders' failure to act congruently with leadership role expectations. The role of leaders is socially constructed such that they must fulfill the expectations of various stakeholders in the relational context (e.g., subordinates, peers, superiors, and clients) and their behaviors carry public significance (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). Leaders should adhere to prescribed role requirements, such as treating subordinates in socially acceptable manners (Greenberg, 2006; Skarlicki & Latham, 1997). It is reasonable to assume that most leaders accept the goal of projecting an appropriate, role-congruent public image. As avoiding incivility toward subordinates is the most basic role requirement (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004), organizations and the public at large generally disapprove of leaders who abuse subordinates (Dupré & Barling, 2006). Managing through abuse may be interpreted by stakeholders as "failing to fulfil key role responsibilities" or "leadership failure" (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011, p. 275). Because "being a perpetrator threatens one's image as moral and socially acceptable" (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, p. 116), abusive supervision may evoke leaders' concern that their social goal of maintaining a role-congruent image has been compromised. This goal-failure conceptualization does not necessarily entail leaders' feelings of guilt about their abusive behavior, but rather their awareness that such behavior may have threatened their goal of meeting the social expectations of their position.

Scholars of cognitive theories of rumination (Martin et al., 2004; Martin, Tesser, & McIntosh, 1993) define rumination as the tendency to think repetitively about a thwarted goal without immediate cueing and regard goal failure as its major trigger. Unlike the guilt-based mechanism, rumination does not involve a morality assumption, as it can
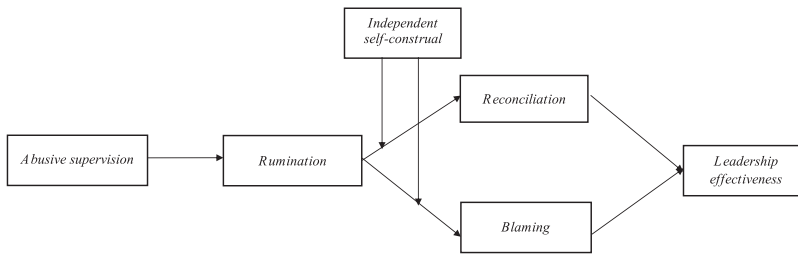
FIGURE 1 The overall conceptual model

even be caused by the failure of selfish goals (Martin & Tesser, 1996). Because abusive supervision thwarts leaders' core social goal and increases their risk of being considered unsuited to a leadership position (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011), we expect abusive leaders to ruminate. Cognitive theories of rumination further explain that rumination causes internal tension that evokes various subsequent coping reactions (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). The intrapsychic pain can be relieved by a problem-solving reaction, such as reconciliatory actions to restore the goal (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). It may also be alleviated using a more self-protective and self-serving approach, such as blaming the victim(s) (Bandura, 1999).

The examination of the coexistence of two opposing reactions from perpetrating leaders is important because it challenges the guilt-based compensatory perspective, which argues that abusive supervision incurs moral costs and triggers constructive reparations (Liao et al., 2018; Shum et al., 2020). This coexistence also makes it essential to understand who is likely to attempt reconciliation or cast blame. Therefore, we examine how leaders' independent self-construal, defined as a unitary self that is fundamentally individual and separate from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), qualifies their reactions to rumination following abusive supervision. Our focus on this variable is theoretically informed. Generally, rumination is triggered by goal failure and represents a psychological manifestation of self-threat (Martin et al., 2004; Martin et al., 1993); theorists have argued that the way people see the self in relation to others, or their self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), profoundly shapes actions taken in response to goal failure (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). They "respond differently to self-threats depending on their self-construal" (Escalas et al., 2013, p. xv; White, Argo, & Sengupta, 2012). Specifically, one major difference between the two reactions is the level of self-protection, reconciliation being less self-serving and blaming highly so. A key attribute of independent self-construal is that it determines the self-protection tendency in response to goal failure (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). This conceptual match makes independent self-construal a likely contingency factor for the occurrence of the two reactions.[1]

Finally, we examine the implications of leaders' behavioral reactions for subordinates' evaluations of them. Prior work has not examined what happens after abusive leaders react to their own abuse. This is a significant omission because it is not enough to know only how leaders react to abusive supervision and ignore the consequences of such reactions. Abusive leaders' reactions are stimulated by their rumination over their failure to project an appropriate leadership image. It is therefore important to integrate our theorizing with an outcome-oriented perspective to understand how useful these reactions are in restoring supervisors' image. We test the associations of reconciliation and blaming with leader effectiveness perceived by subordinates. The integrated model is presented in Figure 1.

Our research makes several contributions to the literature. First, the conceptualization of abusive supervision as a goal failure for leaders provides a novel approach to understanding how leaders are affected by the intrapsychic consequences of abusive supervision and how they cope with them. It allows us to propose a new mechanism—rumination—that explains both positive and negative reactions from abusive leaders. Doing so complements the guilt-based account, which assumes that offense only leads to "efforts to repair the harm one has done" (Morris & Keltner, 2000, p. 19), contributing to a more balanced view of how leaders are influenced by their own misconduct. Second, our research extends cognitive theories of rumination by introducing it to a new literature (i.e., abusive supervision) and integrating it with the self-construal framework to identify a critical contingency for different rumination–reaction associations. It enables cognitive theories of rumination to make more specific predictions about when individuals

react to rumination and with what actions. Third, we are among the first to examine how abusive leaders' different reactions affect their effectiveness, as perceived by subordinates. Given that leaders' reactions are initially driven by concerns over the damage done to their leadership image, it is important to assess subordinates' evaluations of their leadership based on their reactions.

2 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | A goal-failure view of abusive supervision and rumination

Interpersonal aggression is considered to be undesirable in most modern societies (Baumeister, 2005). Those in leadership positions in particular are expected to be people oriented and considerate of subordinates' feelings, to choose constructive methods of leading, and to avoid destructive approaches (Bass, 1990; Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Yukl, 1994). Organizations have explicit prescriptive norms according to which leaders are expected to control aggressive impulses and to refrain from abusing subordinates (Dupré & Barling, 2006; Jungmann, Wegge, Liebermann, Ries, & Schmidt, 2020; Skarlicki & Latham, 1997). It is conceivable that most leaders are mindful of the principle of doing no harm to subordinates and desire to maintain an acceptable public image to fulfill their leadership role (cf. Aquino & Reed, 2002). Abusive supervision, defined as leaders' sustained displays of hostility toward their subordinates, repeatedly violates this most basic social expectation of a leader, thwarting their goal to be viewed as suitable for their role. Although leaders sometimes instrumentally abuse subordinates to elicit productivity (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011), it rarely works (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). Leaders should be aware that there are many other constructive ways to boost performance (Liu & Batt, 2010). Therefore, leaders may perceive their abusive supervision as goal thwarting.[2]

Human thoughts are goal directed, and ruminative thinking is no exception (Koole, Smeets, Van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999). Rumination represents "conscious thoughts that revolve around a common instrumental theme and that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts" (Martin & Tesser, 1996, p. 7). It is a state of having repetitive, intrusive thoughts for an extended period of time (Martin & Tesser, 1996, 1993). Cognitive theories of rumination explain that it is prompted when a desired goal is threatened. Because abusive supervision violates leaders' goal of maintaining an appropriate social image and fulfilling social expectations, abusive leaders are likely to worry about others' acceptance of their legitimacy and to experience discomfort by repeatedly wondering about their failure in this area (Foulk et al., 2018). Drawing upon cognitive theories of rumination, we expect leaders who display more abusive behavior to experience rumination. Supporting our notion, social psychologists have noted that offenders are likely to ruminate on their offenses (da Silva, vanOyen Witvliet, & Riek, 2017). Empirical research has also demonstrated that bad habits and behavioral tendencies, such as excessive use of social media, problem gambling, and chronic procrastination, are related to rumination (Lindberg, Fernie, & Spada, 2011; Stainton, Lay, & Flett, 2000; Wang et al., 2018). The finding that abusive supervision prevents leaders' relaxation at home provides additional support for our proposal (Foulk et al., 2018).

In contrast to guilt, abusive leaders' rumination may not necessarily stem from an awareness of their behavior's moral consequences or their victims' distress. Although moral awareness may play a role, the perception that their personal goal is thwarted by their behavior is a more direct trigger of rumination (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Martin et al., 1993). An abusive leader may ruminate even if he or she has little sympathy for the victim. Consider gamblers' rumination as a similar example. A large part of the reason why gamblers ruminate is that gambling hurts their goal of taking control of their life, rather than the realization that gambling is morally wrong or hurts their family (Lindberg et al., 2011). Even incarcerated criminals and legal psychopaths can experience ruminative thoughts about their intentional violence (e.g., "why it happened to me" and "what life would be like if it had not happened"; Evans, Ehlers, Mezey, & Clark, 2007; Kruppa, Hickey, & Hubbard, 1995). Based on the above reasoning and evidence, we believe that abusive leaders are likely to ruminate.

Hypothesis 1: Leaders' abusive supervision is positively related to their rumination.

2.2 | Distinct reactions to rumination and the role of independent self-construal

According to cognitive theories of rumination, rumination is not entirely dysfunctional and may be adaptive (Martin et al., 1993). Because of its unwanted and unintentional nature, rumination is unpleasant and tension provoking, and people are motivated to eliminate such psychological discomfort (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Watkins, 2008). Theoretically, ruminative individuals may ease their discomfort by abandoning their goal or by finding distractions, but such coping mechanisms are often unrealistic or ineffective, especially for important goals (Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001; Martin & Tesser, 1996). The "stop rule" is that ruminators eventually achieve or restore their threatened goal (Martin & Tesser, 1989). Goal attainment is subjective, and how a goal can be achieved is somewhat open to subjective interpretation. One could directly tackle the problem to get back on track or use reframing to ease the internal tension experienced and rationalize failure in one's favor (Koole et al., 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011).

In our research context, one sensible reaction of perpetrating leaders to rumination is to promote their goal of being seen as capable of executing leadership in an appropriate way by displaying reparative behavior, such as reconciliation. Reconciliation is defined as leaders' efforts to extend acts of goodwill toward their subordinates to mend strained relationships and restore their positive public image as socially acceptable and role congruent (McCullough et al., 1997). This is a method of substantive goal attainment because it could directly repair the damage that has been done. The use of reconciliation may help leaders manage their image in the eyes of their victim(s) and/or other subordinates who witness the abuse and develop negative impressions of them (Bowler & Brass, 2006). The relevance of reconciliatory effort toward victims is obvious. Exhibiting reconciliation toward other subordinates could overturn unfavorable impressions and enhance leaders' overall public image. Other subordinates are able to alter victims' negative view of their leaders because a team environment may socialize members toward congruent judgments (Heider, 1958). We note that leaders may wholeheartedly display reconciliation to correct their wrongdoing or they may do so instrumentally as an impression management tactic. Regardless of the motive, this strategy can serve the purpose of restoring leaders' image and repairing thwarted social goals, alleviating their concerns about the damage done by their abusive behavior.

Alternatively, these leaders can adopt a different perspective on their abuse to make it less threatening. One approach is to blame the victims, "exonerat[ing] the self by placing fault with the target of the harmful behavior" (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008, p. 376). Doing so can allow perpetrating leaders to view themselves as faultless, driven to abusive conduct by external provocation from their victims (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Because the abused subordinates are the ones to blame, such leaders may feel absolved of the need to take responsibility for their thwarted goal; they may even feel that their abusive act is a righteous leadership function.

It is noteworthy that, although the rationalization approach through blaming is target specific, the problem-solving approach through extending goodwill is not necessarily directed at victims alone (as mentioned above). This is because the goal of this act is to globally restore a positive leadership image in the relational context of all stakeholders, rather than just repairing a specific wrong (cf. Miller, 2010). Witnesses of abusive supervision have a direct bearing on this matter, as they react negatively to perpetrators with anger and moral outrage (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). Therefore, ruminative leaders may display reconciliatory efforts to both victims and nonvictims for rumination alleviation. This notion is consistent with experimental evidence that rumination can be assuaged by actions irrelevant to the source of provocation (Koole et al., 1999). It is also echoed by research documenting that, to alleviate guilt, individuals engage in prosocial behavior toward victims, as well as toward ostensibly unrelated people (Estrada-Hollenbeck & Heatherton, 1998).

Both reactions are plausible and broadly fit the "stop rule" of rumination. But when will perpetrating leaders use them? Having integrated theories from the self-construal literature, we propose that leaders will respond to rumination with reconciliation or blame depending on their level of independent self-construal—that is, the extent to which they define themselves as possessing attributes, preferences, and abilities that separate them from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Independent self-construal guides individuals to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and actions toward

realizing their uniqueness and independence (Singelis, 1994). It has a stable dispositional basis (Cross et al., 2011; Guan, Deng, Risavy, Bond, & Li, 2011), causing individuals to think in terms of the singular "me," rather than the plural "we" (Brewer, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Particularly relevant to our research is that people who have high independent self-construal tend to show a strong self-serving bias in social judgments and information processing because the focus on "me" drives strong needs to maintain positive self-evaluation (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Empirical research has found that when receiving negative feedback, people from a high independent self-construal culture show stronger self-protection tendencies than people from a low independent self-construal culture (Brockner & Chen, 1996).

Based on the above reasoning, we suggest that, when experiencing rumination stemming from their own abusive supervision, leaders with low levels of independent self-construal are more likely to resort to reconciliation, whereas leaders with high levels of independent self-construal are more likely to blame their victims to cope with the internal tension. Specifically, independent self-construal orients leaders toward a tendency to self-protect and self-bolster (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009). Reconciliation, however, represents perpetrators' gesture to admit that "I was wrong" and "I should take responsibility for what happened" (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). It signals to subordinates that abusive leaders appear to recognize their faults, feel repentant, and want to rectify their mistake. Because reconciliation indicates that responsibility is fully ascribed to oneself, self-serving high independent self-construal perpetrators are particularly unwilling to resort to it, even if they ruminate on their abuse. In other words, initiating reconciliation in public is too ego threatening for these leaders and is therefore rejected. Leaders with low independent self-construal are less bound by such a self-serving motive and more likely to cease rumination through reconciliation.

Blaming, on the other hand, is self-oriented and functions as a way for leaders to rationalize abusive behavior and explain away their goal failure without threatening their ego (Detert et al., 2008). It fulfills high independent self-construal leaders' desire for self-protection and dissociates them from feelings of obligation to compensate for the implications of their abusive actions (Baumeister, 1999; Mikula, 2002). To cope with rumination resulting from their abusive behavior, such leaders may shirk responsibility by blaming their subordinates' provocation. By contrast, leaders with low independent self-construal are less driven by self-protection and less likely to alleviate their rumination by shifting responsibility from themselves to subordinates. Therefore, in response to rumination, higher independent self-construal makes blaming more likely.

> **Hypothesis 2**: *Leaders' independent self-construal moderates the relationship between rumination and reconciliation, such that this positive association is stronger for those with a lower level of independent self-construal.*
>
> **Hypothesis 3**: Leaders' independent self-construal moderates the relationship between rumination and blaming, such that this positive association is stronger for those with a higher level of independent self-construal.

Our logic indicates that moderated indirect relationships exist between leaders' abusive supervision and their reactions to rumination. As suggested by Hypothesis 1, abusive supervision causes perpetrators to ruminate. Hypotheses 2 and 3 suggest that independent self-construal may moderate how rumination is associated with reconciliation and blaming. We therefore propose two conditional indirect effects to show that rumination mediates the associations of abusive supervision with reconciliation and blaming, and that the strength of each indirect effect hinges on the levels of independent self-construal.

> **Hypothesis 4**: Leaders' independent self-construal moderates the indirect effect of their abusive supervision on reconciliation, mediated by rumination. This indirect effect is stronger for those with a lower level of independent self-construal.
>
> **Hypothesis 5**: Leaders' independent self-construal moderates the indirect effect of their abusive supervision on blaming, mediated by rumination. This indirect effect is stronger for those with a higher level of independent self-construal.

2.3 | Leaders' reactions and subordinates' perceptions of leadership effectiveness

Strained leader–subordinate relationships can create interpersonal anxiety and impede normal team functions (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). When interpersonal tension characterizes supervisor–subordinate interactions, victims and witnesses form negative impressions of leaders' effectiveness (Xin & Pelled, 2003). Recall that reconciliation is an other-oriented remedial reaction in which leaders try to restore damaged relationships, secure future cooperation, reduce interpersonal tensions, and ensure that work continues properly (McCullough et al., 1997). Reconciliation efforts signal that abusive leaders recognize their faults and are making efforts to rectify their wrongdoing. Subordinates observing these efforts may perceive leaders to have humility and other awareness, relational qualities essential to leadership effectiveness (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005), defined as subordinates' perception of leaders' ability to direct followers toward work goals and create positive outcomes, such as stability and harmony (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Therefore, we believe that reconciliation attempts will enhance subordinates' perceptions of leadership as effective.

In contrast, leaders who blame their victims exonerate themselves through biased cognitive reframing (Bandura, 1999). By blaming victims, inappropriate conduct becomes justifiable. Due to its self-focused nature, blaming victims will cause perpetrators to avoid remedial behaviors. Thus, hierarchical conflicts will cause interpersonal tensions and anxiety, eventually compromising normal team functioning (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In addition, because leaders who blame their victims believe the latter deserve their negative treatment, they will feel indifferent toward them and even act self-righteously (cf. Bandura et al., 1996; Moore, Detert, Klebe Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). Such leaders are likely to appear self-absorbed, arrogant, unfair, and morally unaware; as a result, victims and other team members form negative perceptions of them. Both suboptimal team functioning and negative evaluations of leaders' character resulting from leaders' external blaming may lead subordinates to believe that their leaders are not effective. Thus, we propose that blaming will damage subordinates' perceptions of leader effectiveness.

> *Hypothesis 6*: Reconciliation is positively related to subordinates' perceptions of leadership effectiveness.
> *Hypothesis 7*: Blaming is negatively related to subordinates' perceptions of leadership effectiveness.

We examined our hypothesized model in two main studies (Studies 1 and 2) and a supplementary study. In Study 1, we tested the hypotheses with a sample from a private company in China. In Study 2, we constructively replicated the findings from Study 1 by improving the research design and measurement, using a sample from a state-owned company in China. These two studies were supplemented by an online experiment with participants from the United Kingdom, which strengthened the causal inference of the effects of abusive supervision on rumination and demonstrated its cultural generalizability. We also directly tested the goal-failure view of abusive supervision in this online experiment.

3 | STUDY 1: METHOD

3.1 | Sample and procedures

We asked a firm that consulted with various private companies in China to invite their clients to participate in this study. We sent invitations to 300 leaders who agreed to complete two waves of online questionnaires. In the second wave, we sent a separate link of electronic questionnaire to two randomly selected subordinates of each leader. At Time 1, we measured abusive supervision, rumination, independent self-construal, and demographic and control variables. Three weeks later, at Time 2, we measured reconciliation and blaming. Subordinates also evaluated their leaders' leadership effectiveness at Time 2. Leaders and their subordinates worked in small groups in these

companies and frequently interacted with each other. Participation in the study was voluntary. We assured confidentiality to participants; only the researchers in this project—no one from their company—would have access to their data, which would be analyzed as a whole, rather than on an individual basis.

After matching leader and subordinate responses (one leader and two subordinates), we obtained 172 sets of valid questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 57%, comparable to response rates in many previous studies on similar topics (e.g., Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Among the 172 leaders, 57% were women; 94% had undergraduate or postgraduate degrees; their average age was 33.5 years; and their average organizational tenure was 6.0 years. Among the 344 subordinates, 63% were women; 81% had undergraduate or postgraduate degrees; their average age was 30.4; and their average organizational tenure was 4.5 years.

The data collection of all studies in this research project was approved by Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee at City University of Hong Kong (HSESC Reference Number: 2A-43-201303, Abusive Supervision and Consequences).

3.2 | Measures

We followed the back-translation procedure to translate all scales from English into Chinese (Brislin, 1980). Responses were provided on 6-point scales from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*, unless otherwise stated.

3.2.1 | Abusive supervision

We used a five-item scale to measure abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). These five items were originally from the 15-item scale of Tepper (2000) and reflect "active interpersonal abuse," rather than "passive acts of abuse" (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007, p. 1162). The scale is consistent with our research focus because the items capture unambiguously inappropriate behaviors that leaders would recognize as clearly transgressive and with the potential to hurt their goal of being seen as an appropriate leader. It is therefore reasonable to focus on these active abusive behaviors as an initial step in testing our model. We used self-reported data from leaders because, for leaders to respond to their own abusive behavior, they must first be cognizant of it. If a behavior is seen as abusive only by subordinates, it will not elicit the proposed psychological responses. Leaders indicated how often they had engaged in each type of abuse of subordinates in the preceding few weeks. Previous research has used a similar approach and supports the view that managers are best placed to report how they treat subordinates (Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012; Qin et al., 2018). Although social desirability may lower average levels of self-reported abusive behavior, it is a more stringent test if relatively low levels of abusive supervision can generate the hypothesized effect. In fact, Tepper et al. (2017) encouraged scholars to use a self-report method for abusive supervision as an informative alternative approach. Sample items are "I ridiculed a subordinate" and "I put a subordinate down in front of others" (1 = *never* to 6 = *frequently*; $\alpha = .70$).

3.2.2 | Rumination

Leaders evaluated their rumination in the previous few weeks. We used a seven-item scale originally developed by Horowitz, Wilner, and Alvarez (1979) and validated by McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, and Johnson (2001). Previous research has followed a similar interindividual approach to measuring rumination (e.g., Baranik, Wang, Gong, & Shi, 2017; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Sample items are "I thought about how I treated my subordinate when I didn't mean to" and "Pictures about how I treated my subordinate popped into my head" (1 = *not at all true of me* to 6 = *extremely true of me*; $\alpha = .92$). We instructed the participants at the beginning that "how I treated my subordinate" refers to hostile supervisory behaviors such as yelling at or ridiculing a subordinate.

3.2.3 | Independent self-construal

We measured independent self-construal using Yamawaki's (2008) seven-item scale. Sample items are "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects" and "My personal identity independent of others is very important to me" ($\alpha = .67$). Although this reliability was slightly lower than the cutoff of .70, it is comparable to previous studies (e.g., Yamada & Singelis, 1999; Yamawaki, 2008).

3.2.4 | Reconciliation

We assessed reconciliation with a scale originally developed to assess a perpetrator's willingness to reconcile with a victim (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009). We adapted five items to reflect reconciliatory behavior rather than intentions. Leaders assessed how extensively they had shown specific behaviors in the previous 3 weeks. Sample items are "I acted to promote reconciliation between myself and my subordinate" and "I expressed goodwill toward my subordinate" ($\alpha = .81$).

3.2.5 | Blaming

We measured this variable with a three-item scale from Detert et al. (2008), but slightly modified the wording to make the items appropriate for the leader–subordinate context. Leaders rated their engagement in blaming in the preceding 3 weeks. Sample items are "The subordinate I mistreated deserved it" and "I was not at fault for yelling at a subordinate who performed poorly" ($\alpha = .84$).

3.2.6 | Leadership effectiveness

Two randomly selected subordinates under each leader responded to four items about leadership effectiveness (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008). Sample items are "My supervisor is a good leader" and "My supervisor is effective" ($\alpha = .96$). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of the two sets of ratings was .81 ($p < .01$). We used the aggregation of the two raters' responses to indicate leaders' overall leadership effectiveness ($\alpha = .96$).

3.2.7 | Control variables

We controlled for leaders' gender, which may influence the likelihood of rumination (Mezulis, Abramson, & Hyde, 2002) and leader–subordinate perceptions (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema & Aldao, 2011). To demonstrate the unique role of rumination in explaining how abusive supervision causes supervisors' positive and negative reactions, we also controlled for guilt because it has been identified as a mechanism underlying the effect of abusive supervision on leaders' constructive reactions (Liao et al., 2018). We measured guilt with a four-item scale from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule – Expanded Form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994) used by Ilies, Peng, Savani, and Dimotakis (2013). We asked participants to rate the extent to which they had experienced certain emotions (e.g., "guilty" and "blameworthy") recently ($\alpha = .78$). We repeated the analyses without controls and the significance of the results remained virtually the same. We report the results with the controls included.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations (Study 1)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender[a]	0.57	0.50	–							
2. Guilt	2.28	0.67	−.04	–						
3. Abusive supervision	1.34	0.38	−.12	.15*	–					
4. Independent self-construal	4.39	0.58	−.16*	−.16*	.12	–				
5. Rumination	2.17	0.95	−.04	.50**	.18*	−.08	–			
6. Blaming	1.97	0.82	−.00	.10	.20**	.05	.10	–		
7. Reconciliation	4.57	0.72	−.09	.05	−.03	.07	.08	−.03	–	
8. Leadership effectiveness	5.10	0.96	−.14	−.13	−.03	−.01	−.29**	−.27**	.07	–

[a]0 = man; 1 = woman.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

4 | STUDY 1: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations. Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to examine the discriminant validity of the six self-reported leader variables: abusive supervision, independent self-construal, rumination, guilt, reconciliation, and blaming. With a moderate sample size, the subject-to-item ratio was far below the recommended 10:1 for accurate estimation (Bandalos, 2002). We thus randomly created three parcels for each construct that had more than three items, a strategy considered reasonable to ensure reliable estimations under a low subject-to-item ratio, particularly when all constructs are unidimensional (Bandalos & Finney, 2001). The hypothesized six-factor model ($\chi^2 = 221.87$, $df = 120$, $p < .01$, CFI = .92, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .07) fit the data better than the model combining guilt and rumination ($\triangle\chi^2 = 95.94$, $\triangle df = 5$, $p < .01$, CFI = .84, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .10), the model combining abusive supervision and rumination ($\triangle\chi^2 = 81.47$, $\triangle df = 5$, $p < .01$, CFI = .85, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .09), the model combining reconciliation and blaming ($\triangle\chi^2 = 227.43$, $\triangle df = 5$, $p < .01$, CFI = .74, SRMR = .11, RMSEA = .12), and the single-factor model combining all variables ($\triangle\chi^2 = 655.76$, $\triangle df = 15$, $p < .01$, CFI = .39, SRMR = .15, RMSEA = .18).

4.1 | Hypotheses tests

We analyzed the data in an integrative way using regressions in Mplus. Rumination and independent self-construal were mean-centered to create the product interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 2 shows the results. As expected, abusive supervision was positively related to rumination ($b = .43$, $p = .02$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 states that rumination will be more strongly associated with reconciliation among leaders with lower levels of independent self-construal. Hypothesis 3 states that rumination will be more strongly associated with blaming among leaders with higher levels of independent self-construal. As shown in Table 2, the interaction effect between rumination and independent self-construal on reconciliation was negatively significant ($b = −.27$, $p = .01$). As plotted in Figure 2, under low independent self-construal (1 SD below its mean), rumination was positively related to reconciliation (simple slope = .17, $p = .02$). However, under high independent self-construal (1 SD above its mean), the relationship was not significant (simple slope = −.15, $p = .17$), supporting Hypothesis 2. By contrast, the interaction effect between rumination and independent self-construal on blaming was positively significant ($b = .31$, $p = .04$). We plotted this interaction in Figure 3; rumination was positively related to blaming under high independent self-construal (simple slope = .27, $p = .05$) but not under low independent self-construal (simple slope = −.09, $p = .37$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

TABLE 2 Results of regression analysis for the proposed model (Study 1)

|	Guilt	Rumination	Reconciliation	Blaming	Leadership effectiveness
Gender[a]	−.03 (.11)	−.04 (.14)	−.09 (.11)	.03 (.13)	−.29 (.13)*
Abusive supervision	.26 (.12)*	**.43 (.19)***	−.11 (.14)	.38 (.19)*	.15 (.19)
Guilt			.07 (.10)	.02 (.11)	.01 (.09)
Rumination			.01 (.07)	.09 (.08)	−.28 (.11)*
Independent self-construal			.07 (.09)	.10 (.13)	−.08 (.13)
Rumination × Independent self-construal			**−.27 (.11)***	**.31 (.15)***	.13 (.18)
Reconciliation					**.13 (.11)**
Blaming					**−.30 (.11)****
R^2	.02	.03	.06	.09	.19

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients in bold denote our hypothesized effect.
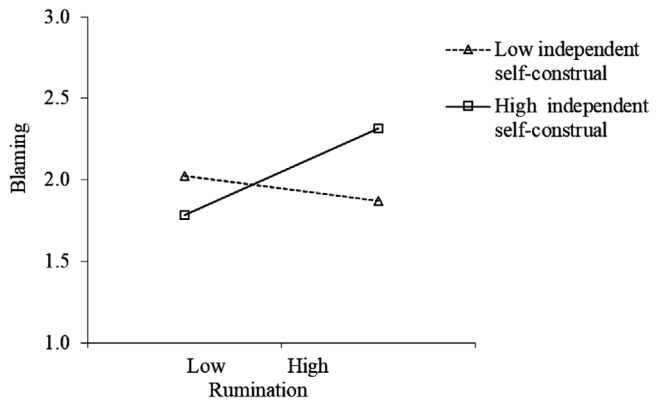[a]0 = man; 1 = woman.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

FIGURE 2 Interaction between rumination and independent self-construal on reconciliation (Study 1)
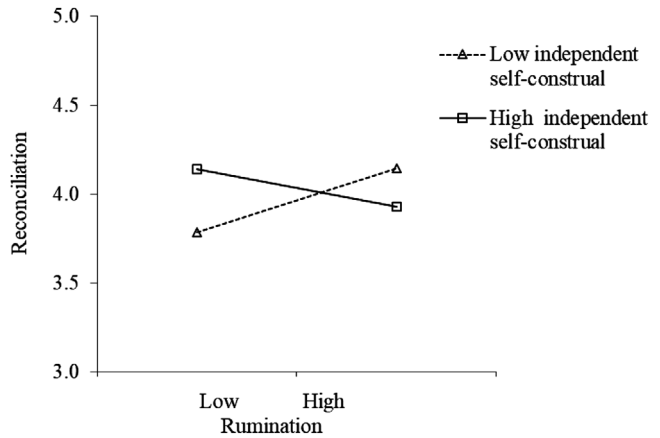
FIGURE 3 Interaction between rumination and independent self-construal on blaming (Study 1)

Using a bootstrap approach, we tested the conditional indirect effects (Hypotheses 4 and 5). Bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated using estimates from 10,000 bootstrapped samples. Abusive supervision had a significant conditional indirect effect on reconciliation through rumination under low (effect = .07, 95% CI [.01, .20]) but not high independent self-construal (effect = −.06, 95% CI [−.23, .01]). Moreover, the conditional indirect effect of abusive supervision on blaming through rumination was significant under high (effect = .12, 95% CI [.01, .35]) but not low independent self-construal (effect = −.04, 95% CI [−.16, .03]), supporting Hypotheses 4 and 5.

We found that reconciliation was not significantly related to leadership effectiveness ($b = .13$, $p = .27$), but blaming had a negative association with it ($b = −.30$, $p = .01$). Thus, the findings failed to support Hypothesis 6 but did support Hypothesis 7. To provide additional support for the overall model, we calculated the serial conditional indirect effects of abusive supervision on perceived leadership effectiveness through rumination and blaming under different levels of independent self-construal. The overall serial indirect effect was negatively significant when independent self-construal was high (effect = −.04, 95% CI [−.13, −.01]) but nonsignificant when independent self-construal was low (effect = .01, 95% CI [−.01, .07]). We did not calculate the serial conditional indirect effects of abusive supervision on perceived leadership effectiveness through rumination and reconciliation because of the nonsignificant reconciliation–effectiveness connection.

Taken as a whole, the results of Study 1 support our proposed model, except for the expected positive effect of reconciliation on perceived leadership effectiveness. In Study 2, we addressed measurement and design issues in Study 1 and constructively replicated it in a different context. We measured abusive supervision and rumination at the same time point in Study 1, raising concerns about common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). In Study 2, we allowed a time lag between the two constructs. Moreover, in Study 1, we used a shortened five-item scale (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007) that mainly captures active abuse. Although the choice of measure was consistent with our research goal, we could not determine whether our model applied to passive abuse. We therefore used the full 15-item scale in Study 2 (Tepper, 2000). To enable constructive replication, we used an updated version of the rumination scale revised by McCullough, Bono, and Root (2007) based on the original instrument by Horowitz et al. (1979) used in Study 1. Finally, to more rigorously demonstrate the unique predictive power of abusive supervision on rumination, we controlled negative affectivity, which may influence rumination (e.g., Wupperman & Neumann, 2006).

5 | STUDY 2: METHOD

5.1 | Sample and procedures

We collected data from leaders and their direct subordinates in a large state-owned energy company in China. Several members of the human resources management department coordinated the data collection process with us. Leaders were invited to schedule sessions to complete pencil-and-paper questionnaires. As in Study 1, the company randomly selected two subordinates for each leader to complete the subordinate version of the questionnaire in separate sessions. Participants returned completed questionnaires directly to the research assistants on site. Again, leaders and their subordinates had frequent interactions in this setting. As in Study 1, confidentiality was guaranteed to the participants.

We administered questionnaires to 320 leaders at three measurement times (Podsakoff et al., 2012). At Time 1, we measured abusive supervision, independent self-construal, and demographic and control variables. At Time 2, 2 weeks later, we measured rumination and guilt. At Time 3, another 2 weeks later, we measured reconciliation and blaming, whereas subordinates evaluated their supervisors' leadership effectiveness. After matching questionnaires, we obtained 301 valid sets, each including one leader and two subordinates, resulting in a response rate of 94%. Among the leaders, 64% were men, 44% had an associate degree, 37% had a university degree, and 19% had a postgraduate degree. Their average age was 33.0 years and their average organizational tenure was 6.1 years. Among the 602 sub-

ordinates, 56% were men; their average age was 29.0; their average tenure was 2.3 years; and 93% had an associate or a university degree.

5.2 | Measures

Again, all scales were originally developed in English and underwent a back-translation process (Brislin, 1980). Responses were provided on a 6-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 *strongly agree*, unless otherwise stated. With the exception of abusive supervision, rumination, and negative affectivity, we measured all variables using the same scales as in Study 1. Their reliability was as follows: independent self-construal (α = .88), reconciliation (α = .95), blaming (α = .91), and perceived leadership effectiveness (α = .91). As in Study 1, we averaged the scores of leadership effectiveness across two subordinates (ICC = .84, p < .01).

5.2.1 | Abusive supervision

We measured it using the well-established 15-item scale of Tepper (2000). Sample items are "I expressed anger at a subordinate when I was mad for another reason" and "I was rude to a subordinate" (1 = *never* to 6 = *frequently*; α = .96).

5.2.2 | Rumination

Leaders evaluated rumination experienced in the preceding 2 weeks on an eight-item scale from McCullough et al. (2007). Sample items are "Thoughts and feelings about the negative way I treated my subordinate(s) kept running through my head" and "I found myself playing the inappropriate way I treated my subordinate(s) over and over in my mind" (1 = *not at all true of me* to 6 = *extremely true of me*; α = .96). As in Study 1, we instructed participants that "inappropriate/negative way I treated my subordinate(s)" refers to hostile supervisory behaviors such as yelling at or ridiculing subordinate(s).

5.2.3 | Control variables

In addition to gender, we considered the influence of leaders' negative affectivity. Using four negative markers (Watson, 1988), we asked participants to assess in general how often they experienced negative emotions, such as feeling upset and nervous (1 = *never* to 6 = *frequently*; α = .70). We also measured guilt, using the same items as in Study 1 (α = .83). The results were similar when these controls were not included in the analyses. We present the results based on the analyses with the controls.

6 | STUDY 2: RESULTS

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations. We also performed CFAs to examine the distinctness of leaders' self-reported variables: negative affectivity, abusive supervision, independent self-construal, rumination, guilt, reconciliation, and blaming. Although Study 2 had a larger sample than Study 1, the subject-to-item ratio was still below the recommended level of 10:1 (Bandalos, 2002). We thus randomly formed three parcels for the longest measure (i.e., abusive supervision). The hypothesized seven-factor model fit the data well (χ^2 = 1021.95, df = 506, p < .01, CFI = .93, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .06) and achieved a better fit than the model combining guilt and

TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations, and correlations (Study 2)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender[a]	0.36	0.48	–								
2. Negative affectivity	2.41	0.76	−.07	–							
3. Guilt	2.37	0.87	−.05	.42**	–						
4. Abusive supervision	1.39	0.60	.03	.31**	.29**	–					
5. Independent self-construal	4.08	1.11	−.12*	−.01	−.09	−.15*	–				
6. Rumination	2.60	1.24	−.00	.14*	.26**	.16**	−.22**	–			
7. Blaming	1.86	1.00	.10	.19**	.22**	.28**	−.10	.16**	–		
8. Reconciliation	4.19	1.21	−.01	−.07	−.14*	−.08	.16**	.00	−.30**	–	
9. Leadership effectiveness	5.22	0.73	−.03	−.08	−.16**	−.07	.03	−.14*	−.18**	.06	–

[a]0 = man; 1 = woman.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

TABLE 4 Results of regression analysis for the proposed model (Study 2)

	Guilt	Rumination	Reconciliation	Blaming	Leadership effectiveness
Gender[a]	−.05 (.09)	−.00 (.15)	−.01 (.15)	.23 (.12)	−.04 (.09)
Negative affectivity	.41 (.08)**	.16 (.11)	−.07 (.10)	.12 (.09)	.00 (.07)
Abusive supervision	.26 (.10)**	**.26 (.10)***	−.02 (.09)	.34 (.10)**	.01 (.07)
Guilt			−.16 (.09)	.10 (.08)	−.09 (.06)
Rumination			.07 (.06)	.08 (.05)	−.06 (.03)
Independent self-construal			.16 (.07)*	−.01 (.06)	−.01 (.04)
Rumination × Independent self-construal			**−.14 (.06)***	**.09 (.04)***	.02 (.03)
Reconciliation					.01 (.03)
Blaming					**−.11 (.05)***
R^2	.20	.03	.08	.14	.05

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Unstandardized coefficients in bold denote our hypothesized effect.
[a]0 = man; 1 = woman.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

rumination ($\triangle \chi^2 = 460.17$, $\triangle df = 6$, $p < .01$, CFI = .87, SRMR = .09, RMSEA = .08), the model combining abusive supervision and rumination ($\triangle \chi^2 = 2320.32$, $\triangle df = 6$, $p < .01$, CFI = .63, SRMR = .16, RMSEA = .14), the model combining reconciliation and blaming ($\triangle \chi^2 = 592.83$, $\triangle df = 6$, $p < .01$, CFI = .86, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .09), and the single-factor model ($\triangle \chi^2 = 4599.41$, $\triangle df = 21$, $p < .01$, CFI = .33, SRMR = .19, RMSEA = .18).

6.1 | Hypotheses tests

We used the same analytical strategies as in Study 1 to test our hypotheses. Table 4 shows all the results. As expected, abusive supervision was positively related to rumination ($b = .26$, $p = .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Independent

FIGURE 4 Interaction between rumination and independent self-construal on reconciliation (Study 2)
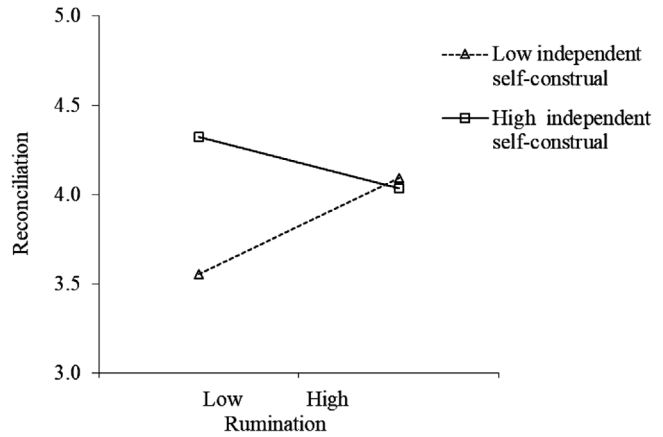
FIGURE 5 Interaction between rumination and independent self-construal on blaming (Study 2)
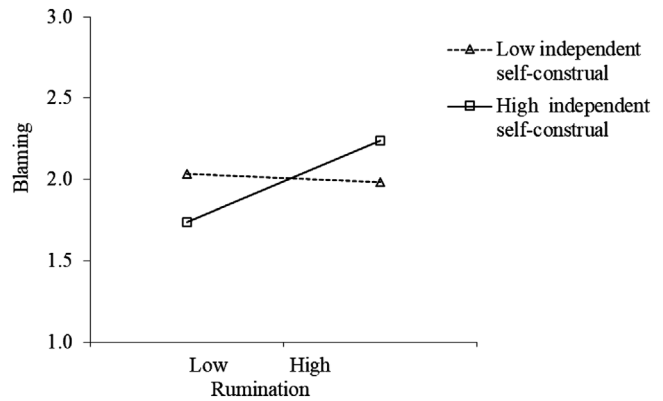
self-construal negatively interacted with rumination to drive reconciliation ($b = -.14$, $p = .02$). Figure 4 shows that under low independent self-construal, the relationship was significant (simple slope $= .22$, $p = .00$) and nonsignificant under high independent self-construal (simple slope $= -.08$, $p = .38$), supporting Hypothesis 2. By contrast, independent self-construal interacted with rumination positively to drive blaming ($b = .09$, $p = .01$). Figure 5 shows a significant relationship between rumination and blaming under high independent self-construal (simple slope $= .18$, $p = .01$) but a nonsignificant relationship under low independent self-construal (simple slope $= -.02$, $p = .65$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

We next tested the conditional indirect effects (Hypotheses 4 and 5). We found that abusive supervision had a significant conditional indirect effect on reconciliation through rumination under low independent self-construal (effect $= .06$, 95% CI [.02, .14]) but not under high independent self-construal (effect $= -.02$, 95% CI [−.09, .02]). Furthermore, abusive supervision had a significant conditional indirect effect on blaming through rumination under high independent self-construal (effect $= .05$, 95% CI [.01, .11]) but not under low independent self-construal (effect $= -.01$, 95% CI [−.04, .02]). These results supported Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Consistent with Study 1, reconciliation was not significantly related to leadership effectiveness ($b = .01$, $p = .87$), but blaming was negatively associated with it ($b = -.11$, $p = .05$), refuting Hypothesis 6 but supporting Hypothesis 7. As in Study 1, we tested the serial conditional indirect effects that flow from abusive supervision to perceived leadership effectiveness through rumination and blaming, and found that the effect was negatively significant under high independent self-construal (effect $= -.01$, 95% CI [−.018, -.001]) but nonsignificant under low independent self-construal (effect $= .001$, 95% CI [−.002, .007]).[3]

7 | SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY

Although the two field studies yielded convergent results, two questions remained regarding the relationship between abusive supervision and rumination, the foundation of the current model. The first question is whether this relationship is robust enough to exist in different situations, including when abusive behaviors are triggered by subordinates' poor performance and seem "justifiable" (Liang et al., 2016). The second question is whether the relationship is indeed underpinned by the proposed goal failure mechanism. To address these issues, we conducted an experiment in which abusive supervision was manipulated and goal failure was directly captured. The randomization of the experiment can increase our confidence that there is a general tendency for abusive leaders to ruminate on their behaviors (although its strength may vary across leader types and situations).

7.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 196 participants in the United Kingdom working in full-time managerial positions in various industries from prolific.ac, a recommended online crowdsourcing platform (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). They were paid £1.25 for their participation. Among these 196 participants, 51% were male, with an average age of 38.9 years and an average managerial tenure of 8.6 years. We used the autobiographical narratives method, a technique that can evoke responses similar to those triggered by direct manipulations. (Baumeister et al., 1990; Deng, Coyle-Shapiro, & Yang, 2018; Deng, Wu, Leung, & Guan, 2016). Following this method, we manipulated the independent variables by asking participants to recall a relevant experience. We used exactly the same procedure and instructions as those developed by Ju et al. (2019). Their manipulation emphasizes poor subordinate performance as a contextual feature. This feature is helpful to demonstrate the robustness of our effect as it creates some "legitimacy" for the abuse and provides a more conservative situation to detect a significant effect. Specifically, using the instructions below, we invited participants to recall a time when one of their subordinates had performed poorly at work and they treated them in an abusive way (experimental condition) or a nonabusive way (control condition). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the following two conditions ($N = 93$ and 103, respectively):

1. Experimental condition: "Please recall a particular incident in which one of your subordinates exhibited poor performance at work and you treated him or her in one or several of the following ways: ridiculed him or her, told him or her that his or her thoughts or feelings were stupid, and/or made negative comments about him or her to others." (Ju et al., 2019, pp. 87–88).
2. Control condition: "Please recall a particular incident in which one of your subordinates exhibited poor performance at work and you treated him or her in one or several of the following ways: pointed out his or her low performance at work, discussed the reasons behind his or her low performance, and/or expressed your expectation for him or her to improve." (Ju et al., 2019, p. 88).

Immediately following the recall task, participants were instructed to vividly describe what had happened in this incident in detail, so they could relive the experience. After that, they were invited to complete a questionnaire that included rumination, perceived goal failure, and a manipulation check.

7.2 | Measures

Responses for all measures were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

7.2.1 | Rumination

Rumination was measured with the same scale used in Study 2. Participants were asked to evaluate to what extent they had ruminated on their behavior toward their subordinates in the days following the incident ($\alpha = .97$).

7.2.2 | Goal failure

To measure goal failure, we adapted a six-item goal progress scale from Wanberg, Zhu, and Van Hooft (2010) and reworded the statements so that they reflected "failure" rather than "progress." Sample items are "My behaviors toward the subordinate were a violation of my leadership goal" and "I saw my behaviors toward the subordinate as a failure of my leadership goal" ($\alpha = .85$).

8 | RESULTS

We first tested the effectiveness of the manipulation for abusive supervision. Three questions were used for this purpose ($\alpha = .85$): "My behaviors toward the subordinate were hostile," "My behaviors toward the subordinate were abusive," and "My behaviors toward the subordinate were not hostile" (reverse coded). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) results showed that participants in the experimental condition scored significantly higher on these questions than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.14$ vs. $M = 1.96$, $p = .00$), suggesting that our manipulation was successful.

We next tested Hypothesis 1 and the proposed mechanism (i.e., goal failure). The results revealed that rumination was significantly higher in the experimental group than in the control group ($M = 3.35$ vs. $M = 2.78$, $F(1, 194) = 7.07$, $p = .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. The results also showed that participants in the experimental group perceived significantly more goal failure in relation to their behaviors, compared to those in the control group ($M = 3.66$ vs. $M = 2.41$, $F(1, 194) = 50.58$, $p = .00$). We examined whether goal failure plays a mediating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and rumination using the bootstrap approach of Hayes (2017). We found that goal failure was positively related to rumination ($B = .64$, $p = .00$). The bootstrapping indirect effect was also significant (indirect effect = .80, 95% CI [.52, 1.10]), indicating that those in the experimental condition (abusive supervision) experienced more rumination due to the perception of goal failure. Overall, the results of the supplementary study support our conceptualization of abusive supervision as a goal failure for perpetrating leaders and its connection with rumination.

9 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this research, we integrated cognitive theories of rumination and the self-construal literature to shed light on how abusive supervision discomforts perpetrators, as manifested in rumination, and when they take recourse to counteractions of reconciliation or blaming to deal with such rumination. Across three studies with mixed methods, we found that abusive supervisors ruminate on their wrongdoing and are prompted to engage in reconciliation or blaming. Moreover, their level of independent self-construal determines their likely reaction: Leaders with a low level of independent self-construal are more likely to try reconciliation; leaders with a high level of independent self-construal are more likely to blame their victims. Consequently, blaming can prompt subordinates to perceive their leader negatively.

9.1 | Theoretical implications

Abusive supervision has been studied as a violation of morality (e.g., Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, & Quade, 2017; Walter, Lam, Van Der Vegt, Huang, & Miao, 2015). Perpetrator-centric research has followed this moral perspective to investigate the negative intrapsychic consequences of abusive supervision for leaders and how they cope with them. Adopting an experience sampling approach, Liao et al. (2018) identified guilt and jeopardized moral credit as immediate psychological costs for abusive leaders, arguing that abusive supervision motivates positive reparative behavior in leaders as they want to make amends for their misconduct. A related stream of research has shown that counterproductive work behavior induces guilt, which, in turn, results in positive compensatory behavior (Ilies et al., 2013). Guilt explains this ironic shift in behavior because it is an emotion that drives the rectification of problems (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996).

Our research departs from prior work and adopts a between-individual level approach to highlight the far-reaching consequences of abusive supervision for leaders themselves. This approach creates a new conceptualization of abusive supervision and carries important implications. Specifically, we suggest that abusive supervision can be characterized as a goal failure relating to leaders' managerial role, which requires them to be seen as suitable for their position by various stakeholders. Accordingly, we point to rumination, a rarely studied cognition-based construct in leadership contexts (cf. Wang et al., 2013), as a core mechanism explaining how perpetrators react to their own abusive actions. Cognitive rumination theories stipulate that constructive actions are only one approach to dispel the uncomfortable feelings provoked by abusive behavior (Martin & Tesser, 1989; Martin et al., 2004). Perpetrators may try to cope with goal failure through corrective actions, but they may also shirk their responsibilities (Tillman, Gonzalez, Whitman, Crawford, & Hood, 2018), a possibility ignored in previous abusive supervision research. We simultaneously investigated two reactions: one that solves problems through reconciliation and one that reframes leaders' failure through blaming victims. Thus, we enrich the existing understanding of leaders' reactions to their own abuse. Blaming can be self-reinforcing and become habitual so that perpetrators fail to scrutinize their real problems (cf. Bandura et al., 1996). This possibility increases the importance of studying how leaders might fail to learn from their mistakes.

It is interesting to note that some studies, again based on daily diary data, have documented the beneficial effects of abusive supervision for leaders, such that it allows abusive leaders to recover better from stress and become more engaged at work (e.g., Qin et al., 2018). However, these positive effects are short lived. This temporary cathartic function of abuse is understandable, as abusive supervision usually occurs when leaders are resource depleted (Courtright, Gardner, Smith, McCormick, & Colbert, 2016) and abuse releases leaders momentarily from exerting self-control and generates a sense of power (Ju et al., 2019). Our research suggests that the between-individual level effect of abusive supervision is harmful to leaders because it induces rumination.

Moreover, not only is this the first study to take a goal-failure perspective and develop an opposing dual-pathway model of abusive supervision, we also provide insight into the boundary condition of each pathway. That is, perpetrators who have a low level of independent self-construal will be less self-protective in response to rumination on their failure to attain managerial goals. They will be, or will appear to be, "self-incriminating," accepting responsibility, and seeking reconciliation. By contrast, the managerial failure will cause leaders who have a high level of independent self-construal to protect themselves by blaming others. The finding that different levels of the same construct determine two opposing reactions represents a form of theoretical parsimony and helps validate the proposed mechanism underlying the effects of rumination (Whetten, 1989).

In addition, we show that leaders' choice of reconciliation or blame may determine how subordinates perceive them. Subordinates' evaluations are not only informative of the effectiveness of leaders' coping reactions, but also have important implications for their future interactions with their leaders (Lian, Yam, Ferris, & Brown, 2017; Peng, Xu, & Matthews, 2020; Thrasher, Biermeier-Hanson, & Dickson, 2020). Consistent with our hypotheses, blaming was negatively related to perceptions of leadership effectiveness. This suggests that, when leaders use blaming to mitigate the discomfort of rumination, they risk further harming their perceived effectiveness. The serial conditional indirect

effect confirms that, for leaders with a high level of independent self-construal, abusive supervision negatively influences perceived leadership effectiveness through blaming induced by rumination. However, for leaders with a low level of independent self-construal, such damage to their perceived effectiveness may be broken down and not occur. Countering our expectations, however, reconciliation failed to affect leadership effectiveness. Although we know that leaders may display reparative behavior after misconduct, "we have little knowledge about how followers react to leaders' such behavioral shift" (Liao et al., 2018). Our results show that, although reconciliation seems to lay the foundation for restoring a favorable supervisory image, it is not enough to undo the damage of abusive supervision.

Our research also has implications for rumination theories. Previous research has found that victims of abusive behavior may experience intrusive thoughts because of ego depletion (Thau & Mitchell, 2010). The finding of a direct relationship between abusive supervision and leaders' rumination allows us to confirm that even actors of abuse ruminate on their misconduct. It is interesting to see that the same relationship exists for perpetrators and victims, but through different mechanisms. We have further tested and extended the goal-failure view of rumination in the leadership context. We have also added new knowledge to the rumination literature by showing how self-concepts can shape responses to rumination. Although cognitive theories of rumination indicate the general principles that counter rumination and how individual differences may shape the strategies taken (Eccleston & Crombez, 1999; Martin & Tesser, 1996), they have not specified concrete actions that can be taken to do so, nor when each action is likely to happen. Our findings contribute a more complete theoretical framework of rumination to the literature.

9.2 | Practical implications

Leaders may be irritable and exhausted by factors within or outside the workplace, or they might be angry with poorly performing subordinates (Courtright et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2015). Although leaders have power and status, which allow them to break moral norms and abuse subordinates, abusive supervision incurs uncomfortable psychological costs, as manifested in rumination. Our findings have managerial implications in that we urge organizations to make leaders aware that lashing out at subordinates will incur costs for both victims and themselves. For example, organizations may provide leadership development sessions in which they invite leaders who have mistreated subordinates to share their ruminative experiences with peers. Organizations are also encouraged to imbue leaders with strong leadership values so that they unambiguously understand that abuse violates their managerial goals and evokes potential psychological discomfort.

Abusive leaders may try to reduce the distressful experience of rumination. Blaming their victims may seem to be the easiest means of exonerating themselves, but it carries further costs. Instead, reconciliation or other forms of compensatory behavior may be more effective ways of breaking negative spirals. However, we show that only leaders who have a low level of independent self-construal are likely to seek reconciliation and avoid blaming because they have weaker self-protection tendencies. Therefore, organizations should create a psychologically safe climate in which everyone can comfortably admit and learn from their mistakes without concerns about social ridicule and repercussions (Edmondson, 1999). Moreover, norms that encourage an apologetic environment will counter defensiveness and increase reconciliatory actions (Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009). Such positive norms may also help turn impression management-based reconciliation into an authentic one, which may be more effective in restoring leaders' image.

Although our results suggest that reconciliation might be a better choice than blaming, we recognize that leaders must devote a great deal of time and effort to regain trust and positive assessments of their leadership effectiveness. It is unwise to assume that reconciliation can completely erase all the harm that has been done. Leaders should consistently act in a role-congruent manner to convince their subordinates of their determination to be a good leader (Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006). More importantly, leaders should be made aware that, if abusive behavior occurs repeatedly, compensatory actions lose their effectiveness and the damage to their perceived effectiveness becomes permanent (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Schweitzer et al., 2006).

9.3 | Limitations and future directions

Although our conceptual model received consistent support across three studies conducted in different contexts, our research has several limitations that should be noted. First, although the abuse–rumination connection was tested in two different cultures, other parts of the model were examined in China only. However, our theorizing is not tied to any specific cultural dimension, and the key constructs are well-established and have been investigated across cultures. Chinese culture has a relatively high level of power distance (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, abusive supervision, although universally viewed as negative, may be more tolerated in China than in Western cultures (Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013). This feature provides a more conservative test of our model: If abusive supervision can elicit rumination from leaders in China, it is only more likely to do so in cultures with low power distance. Our supplementary study supports this claim. Therefore, we believe our findings are generalizable to different cultures (e.g., China and the United Kingdom). That said, future studies should test our full model cross-culturally to further establish its validity.

Second, we followed previous perpetrator-centric research on abusive supervision and measured this construct using self-reports by leaders (Foulk et al., 2018; Liao et al., 2018). However, we acknowledge that leaders' interpretation of whether the behaviors involved in this scale are abusive is tied to their values and may differ from that of subordinates. What leaders view as "tough love" may come across as abusive to subordinates. Therefore, future validation of our findings using employee ratings or objective measures is encouraged (Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Scheibe, 2020).

Third, when we measured subordinates' perceptions of leadership effectiveness, we did not differentiate between victims and nonvictims, for two reasons: (a) theoretically, witnesses of workplace mistreatment or even people who have heard about it may react similarly to victims in feeling indignation in response to injustice (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015); and (b) in practical terms, it is important to consider how nonvictims evaluate perpetrators to show the need to avoid abuse. Nonetheless, future studies might replicate the relationships focusing on victims only.

Beyond addressing its limitations, our research offers several new directions for future work. First, there may exist (additional) moderators for the proposed relationships in our model. Although we believe that rumination may be a default effect following rumination theories, some boundary conditions may shape the strength of this effect. It would be interesting to investigate what types of leaders ruminate about their abusive supervision and what types do not. For example, individual factors such as leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and environmental factors such as norms against hostility (Inness, LeBlanc, & Barling, 2008) may influence how deeply leaders perceive abuse to be incongruent with role-related goals and, thus, the intensity of rumination. Leaders who strongly identify with their leadership role or who work in organizations that have a low tolerance for hostility may ruminate more intensively than those who do not have a clear leader identity or work in organizations without an antihostility norm. Moreover, we focused on independent self-construal as a moderator to understand when leaders use reconciliation or blaming to deal with their rumination. However, this is certainly not the only relevant variable; other alternatives exist. For example, research has found that self-esteem may determine whether people adopt a connectedness approach or a self-protection approach in interpersonal relationships (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). Perpetrating leaders with high self-esteem may resort to reconciliation to assuage their distress, but their low self-esteem counterparts may use blaming. Investigating other potential moderators would be helpful to substantiate the current model. Finally, a further examination of leader motives regarding reconciliation (e.g., prosocial vs. impression management motives; Grant & Mayer, 2009) may help to explain its nonsignificant role in leadership effectiveness.

Second, we chose reconciliation and blaming to represent positive and negative reactions to rumination, but other variables may reflect substantive and spurious ways to ease rumination. For example, perpetrators may show goodwill and remorse through interpersonal altruism. On the other hand, perpetrators may distort the consequences of their abusive behavior to assure themselves that a little abuse harms no one or to convince themselves that yelling at poor performers is corrective leadership, to disconnect themselves from harm (Detert et al., 2008). To further validate our theorizing, future research can constructively replicate our model by using these alternative variables.

Third, previous research has documented that the daily within-individual effects of abusive supervision on leaders may be different from its between-individual effects. For instance, abusive supervision has been found to improve leaders' recovery level and sense of power temporarily, but reduce these aspects in the long term (Ju et al., 2019; Qin et al., 2018). Thus, it is necessary to test whether our model holds with an experience-sampling design. Moreover, a longitudinal design at the event or daily level could allow us to gather panel data to examine an interesting research question: How would subordinates' negative evaluations of abusive leaders change those leaders' future abusive behavior?

Finally, we corroborated the goal-failure view of rumination in the context of a negative leadership style. We found that abusive leaders ruminate on their own abuse because such behavior thwarts their social goal of maintaining a good leadership image. It follows that positive leadership styles, such as ethical leadership and transformational leadership, should be negatively associated with leaders' rumination by being goal congruent. Testing this interesting idea provides a unique opportunity to validate our theory. In addition, despite the support received for it, the goal-failure view only helps understand one way in which abusive supervisors may react to their past abusive behaviors. It is very likely that after abusing followers, supervisors may react in other ways.

10 | CONCLUSION

Considering abusive supervision as goal thwarting for leaders, we develop a dual-pathway process model to show that abusive leaders can be plagued by rumination because abusive supervision indicates that they have failed to meet their leadership goals. To relieve their distress, they may attempt reconciliation or blame their victims, depending on their level of independent self-construal. Their reactions differentially affect their leadership effectiveness, as perceived by their subordinates. Our novel conceptualization opens several promising directions for future research.

ORCID

Hong Deng https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6033-0162
Catherine K. Lam https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2183-1180
Yanjun Guan https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1782-1027
Mo Wang https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3518-7368

NOTES

[1] We chose not to consider interdependent self-construal, defined as a social self that emphasizes connections with groups, because it is more salient to collective, rather than self-goal threats (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We revisit this issue empirically in Section 6.

[2] It is important to note that abusive behavior may still occur repeatedly, despite leaders' awareness of the goal-thwarting ramifications of abusive supervision. Abuse often occurs when leaders lose their temper or get carried away in the heat of the moment. Numerous studies have confirmed that the impairment of self-regulatory resources by environmental stressors (e.g., work–family conflict, lack of sleep, role overload) is a proximal cause of abusive supervision (Courtright, Gardner, Smith, McCormick, & Colbert, 2016; Eissa & Lester, 2017; Lian et al., 2014). The idea is that although leaders may well understand how abusive behavior hinders their social goal (for the reasons presented above), they may temporarily yield to their anger, frustration, or other impulsive forces and enact abuse.

[3] As noted before, we did not expect interdependent self-construal to serve as a moderator in our model because it is more relevant in contexts of collective goal threats (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We nevertheless tested its possible moderating role in a supplementary analysis by replacing independent self-construal with interdependent self-construal. A six-item scale from the same source as independent self-construal was used to measure interdependent self-construal (Yamawaki, 2008). We repeated all analyses for both studies. The results were as follows: the coefficient of the interaction term of rumination and interdependent self-construal on reconciliation was −.15 (n.s.) in Study 1 and −.06 (n.s.) in Study 2. The coefficient of the interaction term on blaming was .04 (n.s.) in Study 1 and −.11 ($p = .00$) in Study 2. Although interdependent self-construal showed a significant moderating effect on the rumination–blaming relationship in Study 2 such that this relationship was more likely to occur when interdependent self-construal was low, this moderating effect was only found in one of the two studies, which raises doubts about the robustness of the finding. Moreover, the other interaction terms were not

significant, showing that the moderating role of interdependent self-construct is not substantial. In summary, the overall pattern of this additional analysis is in line with our expectations that interdependent self-construal may not consistently shape the relationship between rumination and reconciliation or blaming.

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