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# Change management practices and counterproductive work behavior among South African academics: does gender matter?

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Globally, higher education institutions are continuously involved in change in response to advances in digital technology, geopolitics, population dynamics, gender mainstreaming, and climate change. At the same time, reports of counterproductive work behavior among academics are alarming. The alarming rates have raised concerns on whether the change management practices adopted by university management in institutions of higher education learning can explain these academic behaviors. The change management practices will likely have an impact on academics' behavior. However, to date, without empirical evidence, this remains speculative. The purpose of this paper was therefore to establish the relationship between change management practices and counterproductive work behavior of academics, and whether gender moderates this relationship. Quantitative data were collected from academics at a selected higher education institution in South Africa, and the final sample was 129. The findings showed a statistically significant correlation between change management practices and counterproductive work behaviors. Gender moderates the relationship between change management practices and interpersonal counterproductive work behavior. The study contributes to existing literature on change management and counterproductive work behavior in higher education. The findings are practically relevant for enhancing gender sensitivity during the process of change among academics and elsewhere.

## KEYWORDS

counterproductive work behavior, change management practices, higher education sector, South African academics, gender differences

## 1 Introduction

Counter-productive or deviant work behaviors (CWBs) are intentional actions, such as theft and misuse of resources—hereafter called counterproductive work behaviors directed at the organization (CWBO) or actions such as bullying and harassment—hereafter called interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors (CWBI) (Gruys and Sackett, 2003; Marcus and Schuler, 2004). When employees engage in counterproductive work behaviors, an organization may experience outcomes such as reduced performance, a bad reputation, and loss of revenue (Wurthmann, 2020). Reducing the occurrences of counterproductive work behaviors through an understanding of their antecedents has generated a lot of interest among organizational behavior researchers in both the public and private sectors.

Internationally, within the higher education sector, there is disturbing news of academics involved in deviant behaviors, highlighting that it is a real problem that needs to be investigated in terms of its causes among this population group (Baysal et al., 2020). Previous researchers in South Africa have investigated several antecedents of counterproductive work behavior in the public service environment. For example, Chipunza (2020) focused on the individual antecedents, such as perceived stress and personality, among academics. Nzimande (2020) found transactional leadership associated with counterproductive work behavior among uniformed soldiers. A study by Majova (2022) examined the relationship between personality, emotional intelligence, and counterproductive work behavior. Masukela et al. (2023) studied the work motivation of government employees, while Mvuyana et al. (2025) linked employee engagement with counterproductive work behavior. None of these studies, however, integrated change management practices and counterproductive work behavior in the same analytical framework within higher education institutions in South Africa.

The need to investigate change management and counterproductive work behavior in South Africa is critical, given the current global developments in the higher education landscape, such as the emergence of digital transformative technology (Govender et al., 2023), changes in population dynamics (Calderon, 2018), the internationalization of higher education [International Association of Universities (IAU), 2023], and the call for gender mainstreaming in the sector (Mdlanleni et al., 2021). As a result of these developments, the higher education sector has been called upon to: (1) increase and broaden participation, including greater access for black, women, and disabled mature students (2) restructure institutions to meet the needs of an increasingly technology-driven economy (3) improve the quality of teaching and learning and ensure curricula is responsive to national, regional and global contexts, and (4) create an enabling institutional environment and culture that is sensitive to and affirms diversity, promotes reconciliation and respect for human life (Muraina et al., 2024; Badat, 2010). These demands have necessitated ongoing transformation in the South African higher education landscape—marked by funding and infrastructure pressures, unequal student-staff ratios, student unrest, and demographic shifts (Mlambo et al., 2021).

Interestingly, as university administrators manage the ongoing changes, academics will likely experience pressure associated with teaching large classes, rampant student unrest, the need to do impactful research, and adjustment to the demands of the technologically driven academic environments (Shangase, 2023). The question then is, “What has been the effect of how university managements are managing the required transformation on academic employees’ counterproductive work behaviors?” This question becomes relevant, given the numerous allegations of academic research dishonesty, such as plagiarism, and misconduct such as harassment, maladministration, and fraud among academics in South Africa’s institutions of higher learning (Obalade et al., 2024). In addition, Dilchert et al. (2007) observed that counterproductive work behavior is becoming prevalent in universities, with about 75% of academics in higher learning institutions engaging in workplace deviant behavior such

as absenteeism, insubordination, and dereliction of duty. It is, therefore, possible to assume that while several attempts have been made to understand this prevalence, little attention has been given to how change management practices adopted by university managements may result in counterproductive work behaviors among academics.

The literature demonstrates that poor management practices, such as not affording employees’ voice, toxic leadership style, lack of monitoring systems, and poor communication, can directly result in various employee-related outcomes (Freres et al., 2021). Similarly, a study in Nigeria has demonstrated how management approaches to salary reductions can result in counterproductive work behavior among academics. Akinolu and Salawu (2010) argued that the capacity to manage change is critical for any organization as resistance to change may lead to deviant behaviors. While this evidence is worthwhile noting, these studies did not split counterproductive work behavior into its separate typologies. In addition, the issue of other variables that may confound or facilitate the outcome of change management practices on deviant behavior has not been addressed. One variable that has attracted the interest of researchers is gender. However, it has not been afforded much attention in research focusing on change and counterproductive work behaviors among academics elsewhere and in the South African higher education context.

The choice of gender as a moderating variable in this study is therefore premised on several reasons: Firstly, previous studies show that individuals experience or perceive the same event(s) differently because of gender (Gurieva et al., 2022). Secondly, studies in higher education have considered gender as a moderating variable in student’s motivation to learn (Daher et al., 2021) and gender as a moderating variable in predicting student success (Kirchner, 1993). Although not conducted in South Africa, the studies provide evidence on the role gender plays in understanding challenges within the higher education sector. Thirdly, gender mainstreaming is the “buzz” word in both private and public sector organizations when it comes to employment in South Africa (Public Service Commission, South Africa, 2006). The need for gender mainstreaming in the South African context arises from evidence that males still dominate managerial positions in both the public and private sectors than females, and that within higher education institutions, male academics still dominate compared to women (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

This study, therefore, proposes to close the identified gaps in the literature by investigating how academics at a South African university view change management practice and how these views influence their engagement in counterproductive work behaviors. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand whether the relationship is moderated by gender. The uniqueness of the study lies in (1) testing the change management practices and counterproductive work behavior in a higher education environment that is marked by ongoing reforms, (2) only focusing on academics, and (3) focusing on both dimensions of counterproductive work behavior in one study.

In the following subsections, the theoretical framework, change management practices, counterproductive work behavior, the relationship between the two, and the moderating role of gender

are discussed. This is followed by a presentation of the conceptual model of the study.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Counterproductive work behavior has previously been studied from several theoretical perspectives (Greenberg, 1987; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; Adams, 1965; Fox and Spector, 1999). While these are invaluable, the Cognitive Social Theory (Bandura and Walters, 1963) is best suited for this study. The theory emphasizes the interplay between personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences in shaping human behavior. Bandura (1986) argues that personal factors, such as being male or female, and environmental factors all operate in an interactional determinism fashion to determine outcomes. In simple terms, the theory postulates that both individual and situational factors influence human behavior (Otake-Ebiede et al., 2020). This focus on the interaction between the individual and situations makes it possible to argue for gender as a socio-contextual factor because interpretations and responses made by an individual to various situations can be influenced by it. Therefore, this interaction may influence how a person forms perceptions about a situation, which will influence his/her behavior. In the context of this study, this means that the interaction of academic employees (males and females) and their work environment or situation(s) (e.g., how management uses change management practices to drive change) can determine their counterproductive work behaviors. In this instance, Cognitive Social Theory clearly may explain why academic employees at the same university, male and female, exposed to the same change management practices, may behave differently when it comes to counterproductive work behavior directed at the organization or fellow individual employees.

### 2.1 Change management practices

Change management practices are several interventions instituted by an organization to facilitate the organizational change process (Meyer and Stensaker, 2006). Often those who are at the nexus of directing the change process forget these practices, resulting in inefficiencies in the process. Numerous authors propose these practices. For example, Hastings and Schwarz (2021), Buchanan et al. (2005) argue that the one practice involves a period of preparation and diagnosis of an organization and its environment. Some authors (Shaikh, 2020; Whelan-Berry et al., 2003) suggest the inclusion of a detailed plan on how change will be implemented. Included in some literature is the need to understand the needs of different stakeholders, to prepare to respond to their reactions, thereby eliminating any possible resistance to the process (Warrick, 2023; Holt et al., 2007). Literature also proposes some practices that are linked to the implementation of change. For example, Shulga (2020) states that facilitating communication during the change process enables different stakeholders to understand the need and participate fully in the change process. Some authors (Phillips and Klein, 2023) emphasize the role of leaders, arguing that employees who receive the impact of change must

perceive the leader as committed to the change process. All these practices have been found to have a significant impact on the accomplishment of change programme objectives (Raineri, 2011).

### 2.2 Counterproductive work behavior

The concept of counterproductive work behavior has received much attention in literature since its inception and has been labeled differently by authors such as Hollinger and Clark (1982); Robinson and Bennett (1995), as well as Gruys and Sackett (2003). As a result of these grounding authors, the commonly labeled dimensions are counterproductive work behavior directed at the organization (CWBO) and that directed at fellow employees (CWBI). The occurrence of counteractive work behavior is explained by several theoretical departure points, from stimulus response effect (Thorndike, 1905), social learning (Bandura, 1977) to organizational interactionism (Mead, 1934). Framed from these theoretical perspectives, studies have shown that counterproductive behavior can be a function of individual differences in personality and locus of control (Hafidz, 2012). Other studies (Afshar-Jalili et al., 2021) found organizational factors such as leadership as a factor of counterproductive work behavior. Failure to deter counterproductive work behavior leads to several negative outcomes. For instance, Sabokro et al. (2021) found that both typologies of counterproductive work behaviors can damage an organisation's relationship with internal and external stakeholders. Within the higher education sector, evidence shows that deviant behavior by academics results in bad institutional reputation, weakening of academic integrity, and loss of revenue (Obalade et al., 2024). Finding several strategies for reducing its occurrences is therefore critical.

### 2.3 Change management practices and counterproductive work behavior

Change management practices entail several management interventions to facilitate change process (Kanter et al., 1992). Counterproductive work behaviors are harmful actions by employees against organization or employees (Spector, 2021). The correct application and fairness in the use of change management practices to facilitate change can result in several employee-related outcomes (Iyaji et al., 2024). Literature has demonstrated that unfair treatment of employees impacts some organizational outcomes (Lind and Tyler, 1988). There is evidence that when employees sense unfairness in management processes that impact how they work, they tend to exhibit deviant behavior in the workplace (Abbasi et al., 2020; Dora and Azim, 2019). Within the higher education context, research by Mandal et al. (2023) has demonstrated that the way management dealt with the new normal of working from home during COVID-19 had an impact on academic employees' deviant behaviors. These studies suggest that deviant behavior among academics may be a function of their perceptions of how they are treated during the change process. In tandem with the Equity Theory (Adams, 1965),

employees compare the ratio of their inputs to outcomes. When they experience inequity, they may feel frustrated and tend to restore equity by engaging in deviant behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2001). In the same vein, changing management practices that are used by management and creating dissonance among academics in terms of how much they are investing in their work and what they are getting in return may lead to counterproductive work behavior.

## 2.4 Moderating effect of gender on management practices and counterproductive work behavior

The role of gender in counterproductive work behavior is vital. Musetsho et al. (2021) found that gender equality in and outside the workplace is still gloomy, as men still dominate women. The link among change management practices, gender and counterproductive work behavior can therefore be based on the argument that when employees feel management is using wrong practices or using correct practices wrongly to drive change, they may feel unfairly treated and often attempt to retaliate with acts that are harmful to the organization (Henle, 2005). The expression of unhappiness through counterproductive work behaviors is framed within the Social Exchange Theory. Despite this, some studies have noted that people react differently when exposed to same stimulus (Del Popolo Cristaldi et al., 2021). This entails that whether academics will react defiantly or not to how management uses change management practices is a function of numerous variables, gender included. Counterproductive work behavior is an organizational matter that gender has been used to moderate. Lipińska-Grobelny and Narska (2021) found that the role of gender in the relationship between organizational climate and counterproductive work behavior was achieved for sabotage and withdrawal behaviors. A study by Ozturk (2021) emphasized the role of gender in the positive relationship between dark triad personality and counterproductive work behaviors, with males and females' differences noted in personality, as well as in counterproductive work behaviors. In Indonesia, Wati et al. (2024) found that gender amplifies the impact of organizational justice on counterproductive work behavior. Males felt unjustly treated than females and therefore had an increase in engaging in counterproductive work behaviors. These studies, although different from the present one in terms of context, sample, and independent variables used, offer insights into the role of gender differences in counterproductive work behavior investigations. Against this background, seeks to provide answers to the following research questions and test hypotheses.

## 3 Research questions and hypotheses

### 3.1 The primary research question

The primary research question of this study is to what extent does gender moderates the relationship between change

management practices and counterproductive among academics in higher education institutions in South Africa.

### 3.2 Subsidiary research questions

The subsidiary research questions include the following:

- What are change management practices?
- What are counterproductive behaviors?
- To what extent change management practices contribute to the incidence of interpersonal counterproductive work behavior (CWBI)?
- To what extent change management practices influence the occurrence of counterproductive behavior directed at the organization (CWBO)?
- Does gender moderate the relationship between change management practices and interpersonal counterproductive work behavior (CWBI)?
- Does gender moderate the relationship between change management practices and counterproductive work behavior (CWBO)?

## 4 Research hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were postulated.

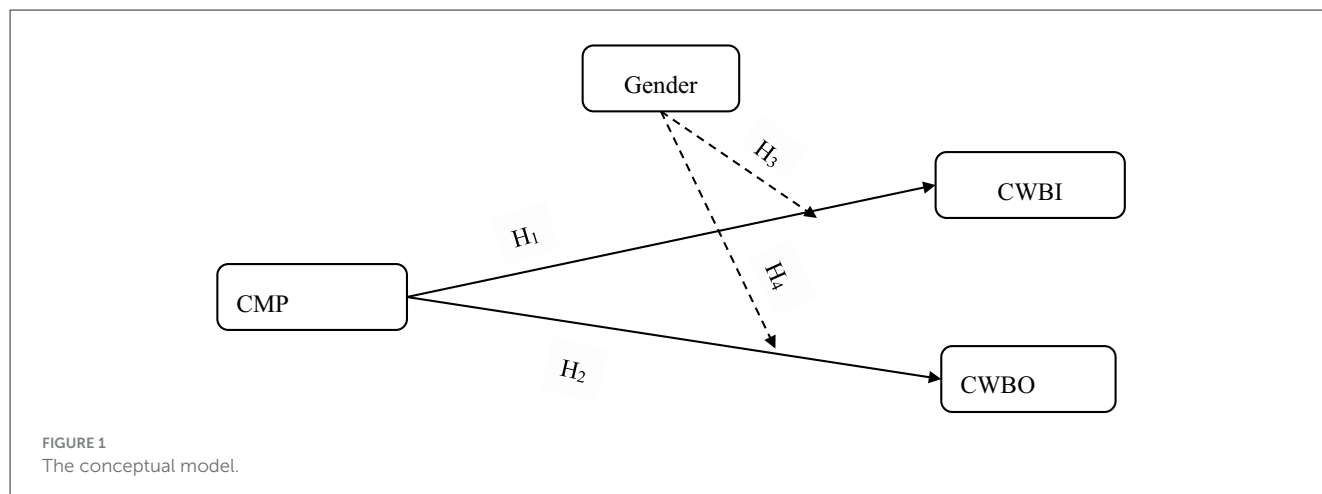
- H1: Change management practices have a significant positive relationship with interpersonal counterproductive work behavior (CWBI).
- H2: Change management practices have a significant positive relationship with counterproductive work behavior directed at the organization (CWBO).
- H3: Gender moderates the relationship between change management practices and interpersonal counterproductive work behavior (CWBI).
- H4: Gender moderates the relationship between change management practices and counterproductive work behavior directed at the organization (CWBO).

The conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1.

## 5 Materials and methods

A positivist epistemological stance, that is, a deductive approach, and a cross-sectional design, which involved the formulation of hypotheses and statistical analysis, were used to achieve the objectives of the study. The target population was full-time academic staff members from different faculties at a selected university in South Africa and were selected using a non-probability convenient sampling method. The final sample was 129, out of a total of 300 academics, representing 43% response rate. This was considered acceptable as a threshold for Structural Equation Modeling when measuring less than seven constructs (Hair et al., 2014).





## 5.1 Data collection and measurement of variables

A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect data. Four research assistants were recruited, trained, and helped with data collection for 2 months. The Change Management Practices were measured using the 42-item Change Management Questionnaire by [Beitsch and Moran \(2017\)](#). Respondents were asked to choose the best response that describes their feeling about change management practices in their organization on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (6) I don't know. Counterproductive work behavior was measured using an instrument developed by [Spector et al. \(2010\)](#). The scale had 32 items, 17 items measured interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors with statements like 'started an argument with someone at work', 16 items measured counterproductive work behaviors directed at the organization, with items such as 'left work earlier I am allowed to'. Respondents were asked how often they do each of these items at work on a 5-point Likert scale ranging as follows: 1—Never; 2—Once or Twice; 3—Once or Twice per month; 4—Once or Twice per week; 5—Everyday. Where necessary, items in each scale were adjusted to suit the context of the study.

## 5.2 Reliability analysis

The internal consistency and validity of Change Management Practices (CMP), Counterproductive work behavior directed at fellow individual employees and organization (CWBI and CWBO) were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was also evaluated to confirm construct distinctiveness and was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. All values met acceptable thresholds, indicating reliable and valid measurement, as shown in [Table 1](#).

[Table 1](#) shows that all constructs meet the required reliability and validity criteria. Cronbach's alpha values for CMP (0.985),

CWBI (0.881), and CWBO (0.920) are all above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency ([Hair et al., 2019a](#)). Composite Reliability (CR) values for CMP (0.985), CWBI (0.908), and CWBO (0.935) also exceed the 0.70 cutoff, confirming the reliability of the constructs ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for CMP (0.628), CWBI (0.623), and CWBO (0.674) are greater than the minimum acceptable level of 0.50, demonstrating good convergent validity ([Hair et al., 2019b](#)). Discriminant validity is supported as the square root of each construct's AVE, shown in bold on the diagonal, is greater than its correlations with other constructs, meeting [Fornell and Larcker's \(1981\)](#) criterion. In [Table 2](#), the factor loadings for each item of CMP, CWBI, and CWBO are illustrated with each exceeding the threshold of 0.5. These results confirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid. The  $R^2$  values for the endogenous constructs CWBI (0.090) and CWBO (0.070) are both above zero, indicating that the model has some predictive relevance, according to [Briones-Penalver et al. \(2018\)](#).

## 5.3 Model evaluation

The Partial Least Squares (PLS) model's predictive significance was assessed primarily through  $R^2$  values, key model performance indicators. To evaluate the overall predictive power, the Goodness of Fit (GoF) index, as proposed by [Tenenhaus et al. \(2005\)](#), was calculated following the method outlined by [Wetzels et al. \(2009\)](#). The GoF is computed as:

$$GoF = \sqrt{(Average\ AVE \times Average\ R^2)} = \sqrt{(0.642 \times 0.080)} \approx 0.2266$$

This value lies between the thresholds for small (0.10); medium (0.25) and large (0.36) effect sizes suggested by [Aker et al. \(2011\)](#), indicating that the model possesses moderate explanatory power. Thus, the results support the developed PLS model's global validity and predictive relevance.

TABLE 1 Reliability and validity results.

Variables	$R^2$	CA	CR	AVE	CMP	CWBI	CWBO
CMP	–	0.985	0.985	0.628	<b>0.792</b>		
CWBI	0.090	0.881	0.908	0.623	0.203	<b>0.790</b>	
CWBO	0.070	0.920	0.935	0.674	0.202	0.776	<b>0.821</b>

CA, Cronbach's Alpha; CR, Composite Reliability; and AVE, Average Variance Extracted. The number in bold is the square root of AVE.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Demographic analysis

The data collected revealed that 69 (53.5%) were males and 60 (46.5%) were females. In terms of title, 73 (56.6%) were Lecturers, 30 (23.3%) were Senior lecturers, 15 (11.6%) were Junior Lecturers, 6 (4.70%) were Full Professors, only 5 (3.9%) were Associate professors. With regards to tenure, 81 (62.8%) had been at the university for 11–15 years, 18 (14%) had spent 16 or more years, while 30 (23.2%) were at the university for 60–10 years and <5 years, respectively. Age-wise, the largest group fell within the 46–54 age range (34.1%).

### 6.2 Structural model

The data were analyzed using SmartPLS software, employing the partial least squares (PLS) method to examine relationships among the measured variables. Structural Equation Modeling's (SEM) distinctive capability allows researchers to test comprehensive theories and complex models by estimating the combined relationships between constructs (Gil-Garcia, 2009). The structural model results from the PLS analysis are summarized in Table 3.

The results presented in Table 3 show that CMP significantly and positively influences CWBI ( $\beta = 0.345$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). This implies that ineffective or poorly communicated change management practices may increase interpersonal counterproductive behaviors among employees. Similarly, CMP positively affects CWBO ( $\beta = 0.299$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ), indicating that change management practices influence organization-directed counterproductive behaviors. Both hypotheses H1 and H2 are supported.

### 6.3 Moderating role of gender

The third and fourth hypotheses examine the moderating role of gender on the relationship between change management practices (CMP) and counterproductive work behaviors. Specifically, these hypotheses test whether the impact of CMP on CWBI and CWBO differs between male and female employees.

The results in Table 4 show that gender significantly moderates the relationship between CMP and CWBI ( $\beta = -0.372$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ), supporting Hypothesis H3. This indicates that the effect of change management practices on interpersonal counterproductive work behavior differs between males and females. However, gender does not significantly moderate the relationship between CMP

and CWBO ( $\beta = -0.258$ ,  $p = 0.156$ ), so Hypothesis H4 is not supported. This suggests that the impact of CMP on organizational counterproductive behavior is similar for both genders.

Figure 2 further illustrates the complete model, including all coefficients and factor loadings, providing a visual summary of these findings.

The labels “ORD” and “0|1” in the blue nodes indicate that the variables were measured on ordinal and binary scales. The model results show that CMP explains approximately 9% of the variance in CWBI. CMP explains about 7% of CWBO, suggesting a modest but meaningful predictive power of change management practices on both types of counterproductive work behavior. Furthermore, all factor loadings exceed 0.5, indicating that the observed indicators reliably represent their respective latent constructs and confirm the measurement model's validity.

### 6.4 Slope analysis

Given the significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between CMP and CWBI, a slope analysis was conducted to determine which gender shows a more potent effect. Figure 3 illustrates these results, highlighting the differences in the impact of CMP on CWBI between males and females.

The results indicate a significant moderating influence of gender on the relationship between CMP and CWBI. As illustrated in Figure 3, the graph shows a steeper and more positive slope for female employees than male employees.

## 7 Discussion

The study argues that if change management practices are not communicated well, employees would engage in counterproductive work behavior. Along with this stance, this study explored how academics perceived the use of change management practices by university management and how this is associated with engaging in counterproductive work behavior against the organization or other fellow employees. The results indicate that change management practices have a significant positive relationship with both dimensions of counterproductive work behavior among academics, implying that change management practices are important predictors of counterproductive work behavior, and change management practices are part of the human resource function. As such, unlike the current study, a previous study by Omoankhanlen and Mutairu (2021) found that human resource management practices had a significant, but negative relationship with both interpersonal and organizational deviant behavior.

TABLE 2 Factor loadings for CMP, CWBI, and CWBO.

CMP	CWM loadings per item	CWBI	CWBI loadings per item	CWBO	CWBO loadings per item
BC1	0.768	CWBI1	0.779	CWBO1	0.818
BC2	0.770	CWBI12	0.815	CWBO10	0.817
BC3	0.722	CWBI13	0.748	CWBO2	0.814
BC4	0.791	CWBI15	0.790	CWBO4	0.844
CG1	0.802	CWBI17	0.803	CWBO6	0.817
CG2	0.798	CWBI19	0.801	CWBO7	0.811
CG3	0.792			CWBO8	0.826
CG4	0.731				
CG5	0.857				
CM1	0.818				
CM2	0.837				
CM3	0.809				
CM4	0.795				
CM5	0.839				
CM6	0.860				
CM7	0.769				
CM8	0.771				
CP1	0.803				
CP2	0.860				
CP3	0.846				
CP4	0.831				
CP5	0.838				
CP6	0.721				
CP7	0.762				
CR10	0.873				
CR2	0.736				
CR3	0.795				
CR5	0.845				
CR6	0.791				
CR7	0.739				
CR8	0.740				
CR9	0.810				
PTC1	0.806				
PTC2	0.781				
PTC3	0.771				
PTC4	0.769				
PTC5	0.734				
PTC6	0.672				
PTC7	0.786				
PTC8	0.801				

Despite this contradiction, most notable studies provide support for the current findings.

For example, the finding concurs with studies that found associations between management practices and employee deviant behavior (Mandal et al., 2023), unfairness in the treatment of employees and counterproductive work behavior (Abbasi et al., 2020; Dora and Azim, 2019). In a study on how management can deal with resistance to change, results showed that employees engage in deviant behaviors as a sign of resistance to change when they feel unfairly treated (Akinlolu and Salawu, 2010). This aligns with the Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), which associates behaviors of employees with experiences of inequity. Turner (2017) investigated university administrative staff's attitudes and behavior toward the change process. The results indicated that inadequate assistance and a lack of communication from management created feelings among employees that they were undervalued, which led to negative employee behaviors. Sarwar and Muhammad (2021) did a study to determine whether organizational dehumanizing-perception of being undermined by management was associated with deviant behaviors amongst employees. Results indicate that organizational dehumanization leads to perceived incivility and, therefore, perceived incivility propels deviant work behaviors amongst employees. The suggestion in the current context is that during the process of organizational change, undermining employees can lead to counterproductive work behaviors.

This study further argues that academics engage in different types of counterproductive work behaviors when they perceive change practices as unfavorable is a function of gender. The results reveal that gender only moderates the relationship between change management practices and interpersonal deviant behavior. This suggests that the impact of change management practices on interpersonal counterproductive work behavior is more substantial for female employees. In other words, female employees are more sensitive to the use of CMP by management, with favorable use of CMP associated with a greater rise in CWBI among females than males. This finding highlights the importance of considering gender differences when implementing and managing organizational change. This finding supports the notion that people react differently when exposed to the same stimulus (Del Popolo Cristaldi et al., 2021). The fact that women show an increase in interpersonal counterproductive work behavior than males is supported by Frankel (2025), who argues that women display primary impulsive antisociality than males, often using relational tactics like rumor-spreading. However, some previous studies found no gender differences in anti-social behavior between male and female undergraduate students (Eteng et al., 2021) and adolescents (McCoy et al., 2019). The problem with these studies is that they did not focus on the different dimensions of anti-social behaviors, as in this current study. These results are not consistent with previous studies that found gender differences in terms of counterproductive work behavior between males and females, with males displaying more significant behaviors than females (Korn and Bonny-Noach, 2018; Heyder et al., 2021). The surprising part of the results is the rise in interpersonal counterproductive work behavior by females, commensurate with the favorable use of change management practices by management. This concurs with

TABLE 3 Direct PLS results.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. beta	T	P-values	Decision
H1	CMP → CWBI	0.345	2.789	0.005	Supported
H2	CMP → CWBO	0.299	2.342	0.020	Supported

TABLE 4 Gender moderating role.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient	T statistic	P-values	Decision
H3	Gender x CMP → CWBI	−0.372	2.129	0.034	Supported
H4	Gender x CMP → CWBO	−0.258	1.422	0.156	Not Supported

Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which argues that women are socialized, even in the workplace, to be cooperative and relational than men. In this instance, when management shows inclusive change management practices, they create high relational expectations in women. However, if the change management practices appear superficial or inconsistent, women may feel betrayed and get frustrated than men.

## 7.1 Recommendations

The current wave of counterproductive work behavior among academics is not good, and ways to address it should be sought. Based on the results of this study, there are some deficiencies in current change initiatives within the institution, hence increased counterproductive work behaviors. Practically, it means organizations must be clear and transparent about change. For academic institutions, the increased involvement of academics in the change process to foster ownership may reduce counterproductive work behaviors such as resistance to the change process. The provision of training, mentoring, and some psychological support may make employees ready for change and avoid detrimental actions. Tailor-made change management practices for academics may also help ensure they enjoy their academic freedom and collegiality. Lastly, organizations should be gender-sensitive in any management process, at the same time upholding the egalitarian principles.

## 7.2 Implications for social research, economy and management

Counterproductive behaviors like gossip, resistance to change, absenteeism and others have negative repercussions for both employees across gender and organizations or institutions, which contribute to suboptimal performance by perpetrators. These employees lose focus on individual performance, team and organizational goals or targets, and are disruptive to the productive efforts of other employees, leading to below par organizational productivity and profitability as well as institutional ineffectiveness and inefficiency. These unbearable results may hurt employees in the form of layoffs or retrenchments as organizations and institutions attempt to stay afloat. Poor performance of organizations or institutions has a negative bearing on any country's

national economy. It is for these reasons that social science researchers must engage robustly in research to unravel the dynamics of counterproductive behaviors and their ramifications in the workplace.

To turn the tide, managers need to have a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and develop strategies to counter its occurrence in workplaces. As this study has demonstrated, counterproductive behaviors can manifest differently across genders contingent upon cultural norms or social conditioning. In societies that emphasize patriarchy, male workers may exhibit outright defiance characterized by confrontation and unproductive dominance whereas their female counterparts may show counterproductive behaviors in a somehow passive way through negative gossiping and silent resistance to change. It is without doubt that these complex behaviors require managers to be trained to observe, identify and deal effectively with counterproductive behaviors geared toward obliterating or undermining change initiatives. Avoiding gender stereotypes, effective communication, conflict resolution that exist between genders through inclusive dialogue, zero-tolerance policies, and providing psychological safety are some of the strategies managers can utilize to deal with counterproductive behaviors; hence continued research in this field is imperative.

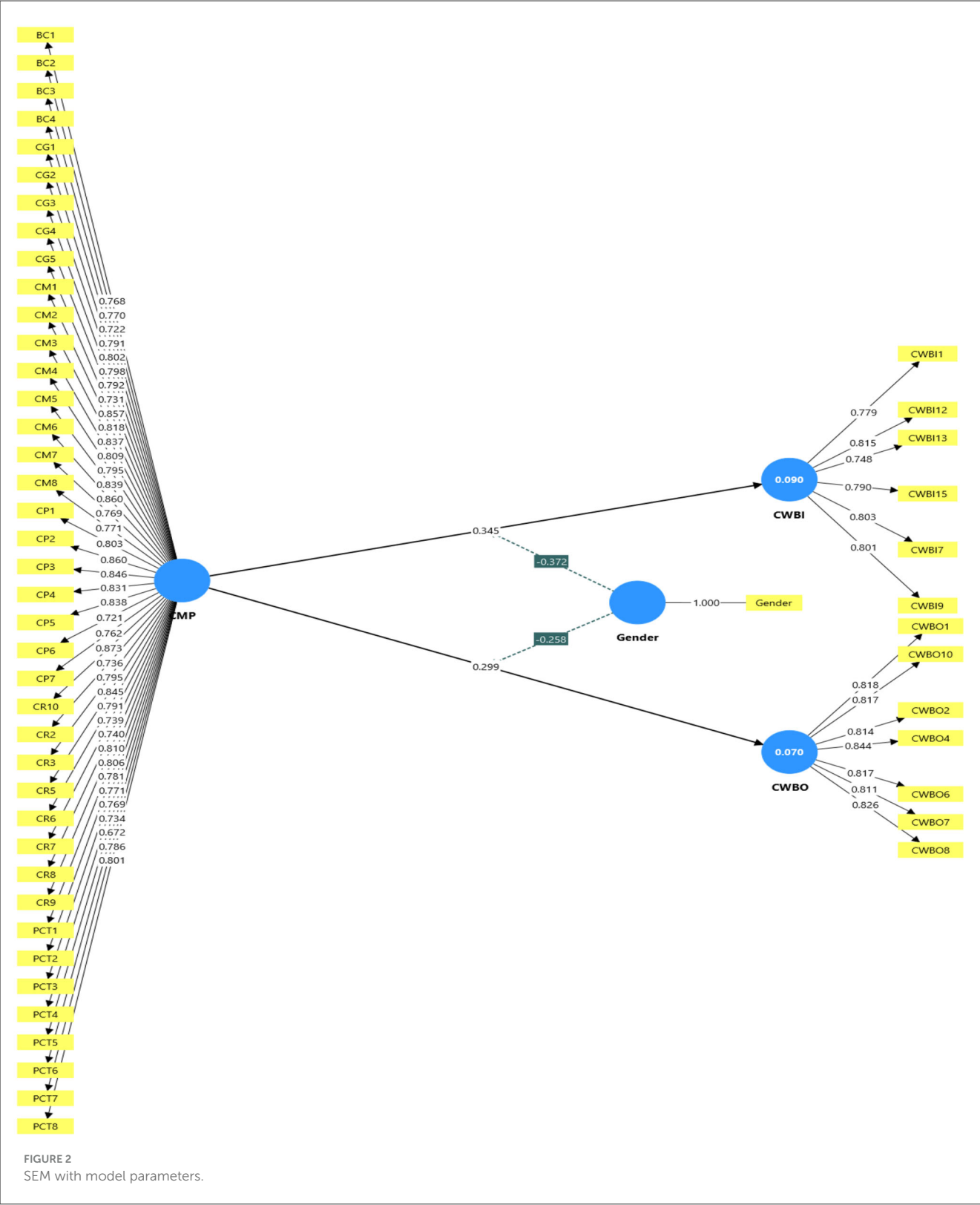
## 7.3 Limitations and future research

The study used a cross-sectional design, with academics who had different work and tenure experiences. These were not included and controlled for in the analysis and could have confounded the results. Future studies could control other demographic variables, such as years of experience. The focus was only on one academic institution. This means the results cannot be generalized, as organizational cultures about change management are not the same. Also, the use of self-report is another limitation. This could have led to common method bias and impression management when responding to the counterproductive work behavior items. Future studies should consider using multiple data sources to curtail this limitation.

## 8 Conclusion

The study aimed to establish the extent to which change management practices were related to counterproductive work





behaviors among academics at a selected South African university and the role played by gender in the relationship. From the findings, the study concludes that change management practices positively influence organizational and interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors, while gender moderates the relationship between change management practices and interpersonal counterproductive work behavior, and not between change management practices and organizational counterproductive work behavior. The study contributes to the application of classical theories on deviant behavior in an academic environment. At the same time, it

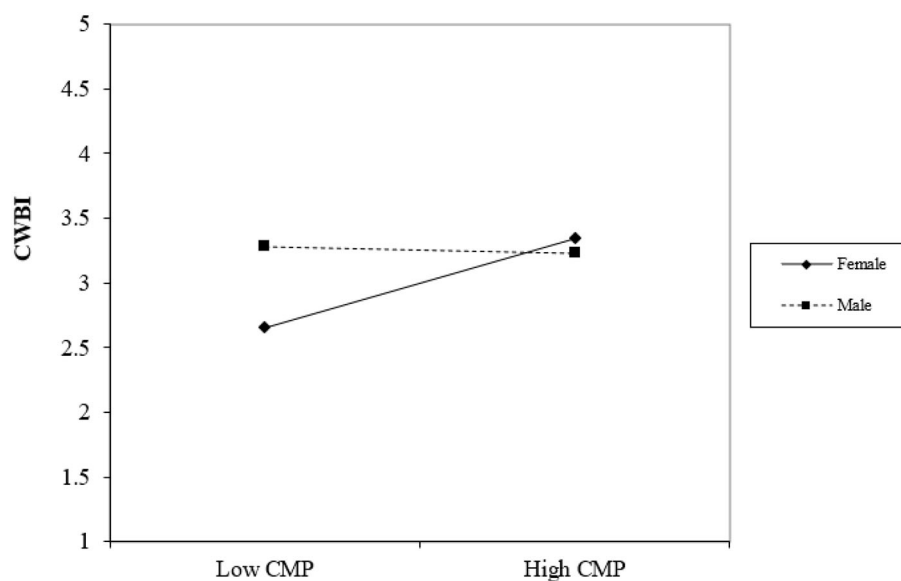


FIGURE 3  
Gender moderation effect CMP and CWBI.

contributes to the literature by examining change management practices and counterproductive work behavior, with gender as a moderating variable, in a country like South Africa that is at the forefront of promoting egalitarianism in the workplace and society at large.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The study, involving humans, was approved by Human Research Ethics Committee (CUT HREC), Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa. The study was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

CC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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