

Exploring Emerging Patterns of Accountable Governance:  
Experiences, Challenges, and Opportunities

# Blame Avoidance in Response to Low Performance

## *A Gamification Approach*

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0 1  
Theory

# 1. Research Motivation

- Various types of performance information use (PIU) proposed, with the majority of research focusing on purposeful use, which includes learning and controlling (Moynihan, 2008; Behn, 2003; Van Dooren et al., 2015)
- Low performance evaluation results can act as negative signals for public managers. Behavioral economics studies in the public sector have shown public managers display a negativity bias, showing sensitive responses to negative information (Holm, 2018; James et al., 2016; Nielsen & Baekgaard, 2013)
- Our study focuses on public managers' behaviors to navigate these negative situations. Special attention is paid to blame avoidance behaviors as a response to low performance evaluation results.
- The current performance management literature has not adequately considered how performance information influences blame avoidance behaviors. There is also a lack of answers regarding this connection in blame avoidance literature (Rajala, 2018)

## 2. Research Questions

- Linking performance feedback theory with blame avoidance literature, this study examines:
  - whether public managers exhibit blame avoidance behaviors in response to low performance information
  - the influence of reference type and level on their blame avoidance behaviors
  - the role of public service motivation on blame avoidance behavior

# 3-1. Literature: Blame Avoidance in the Public Sphere

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- Blame avoidance is a key aspect of public managers' behaviors (Charbonneau & Bellavance, 2012).
  - Defined as minimizing expected blame when unwanted events occur in the public sector (Hood, 2014)
  - In decision-making, public officials often prioritize avoiding blame over claiming credit, due to negativity bias (Hood, 2011; Twight, 1991).
- Blame avoidance literature primarily focuses on strategies used within political spheres (Hood, 2011).
  - These strategies elucidate how public officials and politicians maneuver to avoid blame (Hinterleitner, 2017).
  - None of these strategies necessitate the use of performance information, providing potential insights into why public managers resort to blame avoidance strategies.

## 3–2. Literature: Performance Feedback Theory

- According to behavioral theory, PA researchers have examined the influence of performance feedback on public organizations' decisions and behaviors (Salge, 2010; Meier et al., 2015; Holm, 2018; Hong, 2019; Zhu & Rutherford, 2019; Chen & Jia, 2021)
  - A key idea of the performance feedback theory is that decision makers evaluate performance using a reference level (Greve, 2003).
  - These studies have analyzed the effects of two types of comparative performance information (i.e., social and historical reference point) on public managers' decision-making (Nielsen, 2014; Salge, 2011; Webeck & Nicholson-Crotty, 2020).

# 3-3. Literature: Blame Avoidance & Performance

## Information

- Public managers tend to avoid risk when their performance meets expectations (Nicholson–Crotty et al., 2016). Thus, it is natural to perceive public sector employees as engaging in blame avoidance behaviors when performance is low or problems arise (Qin, 2022).
- Considering the importance of performance evaluations in public organizations, public managers who receive low performance scores may be likely to exhibit blame avoidance behavior.
- However, the existing literature on performance management and measurement has given limited attention to blame avoidance behavior and its effective integration into performance measures (George et al., 2017; Nielsen & Baekgaard, 2015).



## 3–4. Literature: Role of Public Service Motivation

- Drawing on the literature regarding unethical and dishonest behavior, we explore the role of PSM in blame avoidance behavior. Blame avoidance behavior may not be unethical, but it can alter the purpose of using performance information in accountability regimes.
- Numerous studies suggest that the prosocial impact can curb unethical behavior (Yam & Reynolds 2016; Grant & Hofmann 2011). In contrast, there is some empirical support suggesting that prosocial impact can either reinforce unethical behavior (Erat & Gneezy 2012; Bolino & Grant 2016) or have no influence on it (Christensen & Wright 2018).

## 4. Research Hypotheses

- Social Aspirations

**Hypothesis 1:** *When his/her department's performance is lower than other departments, an individual within the public organization will be more likely to exhibit blame-avoidant behavior.*

- Social and Historical Aspirations

**Hypothesis 2:** *When his/her department's current performance is lower than both its past performance and other departments' performance, an individual within a public organization will be more likely to engage in blame-avoidant behavior.*

- PSM

**Hypothesis 3:** *Higher levels of public service motivation (PSM) are associated with lower levels of blame avoidance.*

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## Data & Methods

# 1. Data Collection

- Gamification approach
- Experimental design: survey experiment + list experiment
- Data collection through online experiment using a mobile game tool, targeting employees of the central government, local governments, and public institutions in South Korea
- Pre-registered online panel in Gallup research company
- 1,273 individuals clicked on the link, and the final number of participants completed the game was 1,020. After excluding insincere responses, a total of 964 respondents were used in the final analysis.

# 2-1. Gamification Approach



*“As the head of your department within your organization, you hold the responsibility of managing its performance.”*



*“Your organization conducts annual evaluations for each department.”*



*“These evaluations employ a grading system - S (Excellent), A (Superior), B (Good), C (Average), D (Poor), and E (Very Poor) - and involve a comparative assessment against other departments.”*



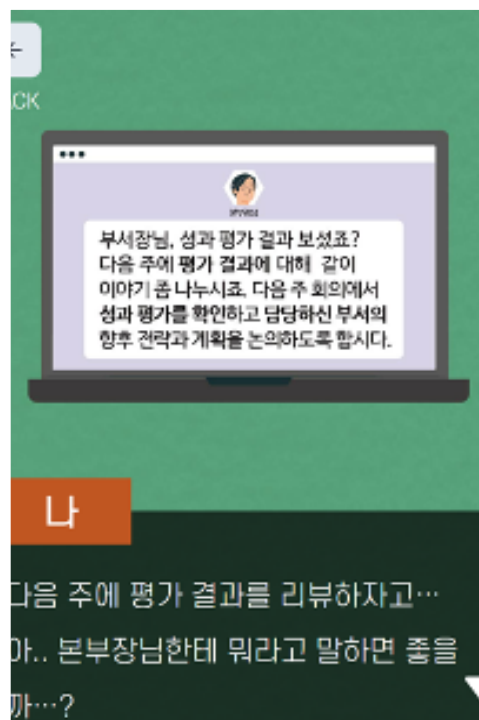
*“The results of these performance evaluations are crucial, as they influence both performance bonuses and personnel evaluations for department members.”*

## 2-2. Gamification Approach



*Performance Review Outcomes for 2022*

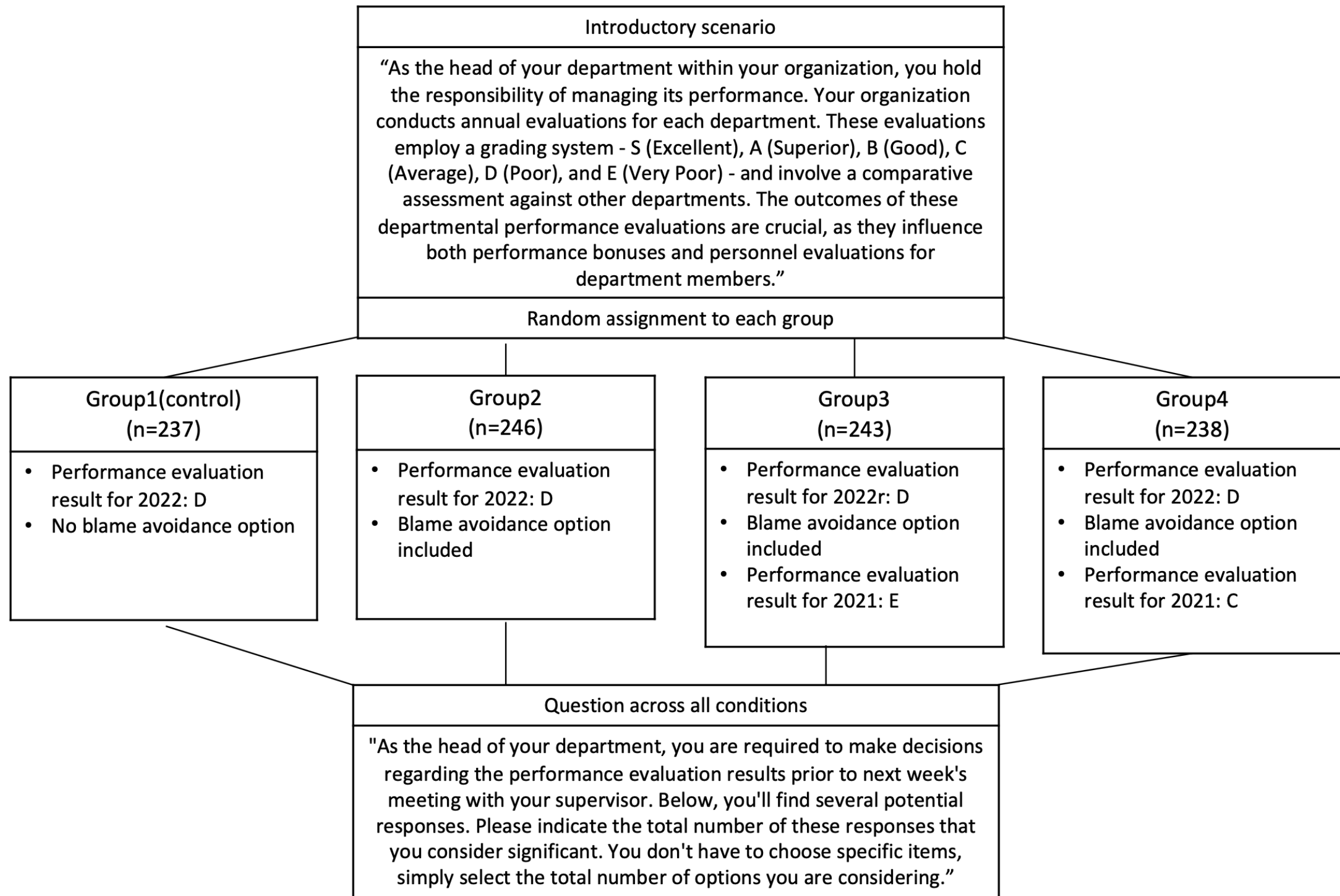
*Departmental Breakdown: D*



**General Manager:** *“Department Head, have you had the opportunity to review your performance evaluation results? Let's schedule a discussion about this for next week. During our meeting, we will delve into the specifics of your appraisal and address the future strategy and plans for your department.”*

**Me (Department Head):** *“I'll be discussing my evaluation outcomes next week... Hmmm.. what would be the appropriate response when I meet with the general manager...?”*

# 3. Experimental Design Structure





## 4. List Experiment

- The list experiment (also known as the item count technique) is a useful tool when estimating sensitive or socially undesirable behaviors or opinions (Imai, 2011; Blair & Imai, 2012).
- *"As the head of your department, you are required to make decisions regarding the performance evaluation results prior to next week's meeting with your supervisor. Below, you'll find several potential responses. Please indicate the total number of these responses that you consider significant. You don't have to choose specific items, simply select the total number of options you are considering."*

<b>Control</b>	(a) Setting program priorities
	(b) Identifying program problems to be addressed
	(c) Changing work processes
	(d) Revising existing performance goals
<b>Treatment</b>	The four control group items and
	(e) Establishing grounds for minimizing blame



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0 3  
Results

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# 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
PSM		964	4.69	0.94	1	7
Gender (male=1)		964	0.57	0.50	0	1
Age		964	2.68	0.99	1	5
Education		964	3.08	0.67	1	4
Grade (highest=1)		964	4.80	1.27	1	6
Department performance evaluation (conducted=1)		964	0.78	0.42	0	1
Organization type	Central government	964	0.25	0.43	0	1
	Local government	964	0.22	0.42	0	1
	Public institution	964	0.53	0.50	0	1

# 2. Randomization Results via Multinomial Regression

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4	
	Coef.	R.Std.	Coef.	R.Std.	Coef.	R.Std.	Coef.	R.Std.
Gender (male=1)	base outcome		0.392*	0.197	0.124	0.196	-0.079	0.197
Age			-0.170	0.105	-0.072	0.104	0.035	0.103
Education			-0.034	0.142	-0.089	0.142	-0.121	0.142
Grade (highest=1)			-0.031	0.084	-0.028	0.084	0.009	0.085
Department performance evaluation (conducted=1)			0.074	0.222	0.073	0.221	0.154	0.224
Local government			-0.035	0.277	0.216	0.276	-0.045	0.274
Public institution			-0.095	0.225	0.016	0.231	-0.265	0.228

N = 964,  $p = 0.8313$ , Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.0055$ ,

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

# 3. Observed Data <sup>0 3 Results</sup> & Treatment Groups

Response value	Control group (Group 1)		Treatment groups					
			Group 2		Group 3		Group 4	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	10	4.22	17	6.91	18	7.41	15	6.30
2	91	38.40	79	32.11	79	32.51	58	24.37
3	67	28.27	82	33.33	63	25.93	87	36.55
4	69	29.11	55	22.36	65	26.75	61	25.63
5	-	-	13	5.28	18	7.41	17	7.14
Total	237	100.00	246	100.00	243	100.00	238	100.00

## 4. Difference-in-Mean Estimates in Each Pair of the Groups

0 3 Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
<b>Sensitive Item</b>	0.0471 (0.0869)	0.120 (0.0911)	0.207* (0.0882)
<b>Control Items</b>	2.823*** (0.0586)	2.823*** (0.0586)	2.823*** (0.0586)
<b>N</b>	483	480	475

+  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Note: Estimated coefficients from the item count technique regression models where the sensitive item is the blame avoidance approach option. Coefficients are based on linear least squares estimates without covariates. Models 1–3 include observations from Control and Treatment 1, observations from Control and Treatment 2, and observations from Control and Treatment 3. Control items estimate the predicted number of affirmative responses to the non-sensitive items; on average, public managers exhibited more than 2.82 affirmative responses to the non-sensitive items in Model 1. Although this statistic is not directly relevant to our research question, it should be estimated simultaneously (Tsai, 2019).

# 5. Multivariate Analysis, Results List Experiment (MLE)

Variable		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Sensitive item (Delta)</i>							
PSM		-0.583+	-0.323	-1.802**			
		(0.305)	(0.274)	(0.641)			
Gender (1= male)		-3.288**	-0.956	-1.523			
		(1.121)	(0.708)	(0.989)			
Age		0.327	0.236	0.643			
		(0.428)	(0.268)	(0.501)			
Education		0.815	0.0955	3.122**			
		(0.667)	(0.334)	(1.197)			
Grade (1= highest)		-0.127	0.114	0.406			
		(0.294)	(0.222)	(0.459)			
Performance evaluation (1= conducted)		0.294	-0.285	-1.069			
		(0.898)	(0.540)	(0.937)			
Organization type (ref. category: central gov't)	Local gov't	-0.173	2.565*	-1.249			
		(1.001)	(1.261)	(1.386)			
	Public institution	-1.407	-0.196	0.849			
		(1.014)	(1.173)	(0.939)			
Constant		0.260	-1.641	-5.593			
		(3.768)	(2.454)	(5.104)			
<i>Control items</i>		$h_0(y; x, psi0)$			$h_1(y; x, psi1)$		
PSM		-0.00568	0.159*	0.0289	0.0176	0.263+	0.552**
		(0.0731)	(0.0671)	(0.104)	(0.151)	(0.159)	(0.201)
Gender (1= male)		-0.179	0.278*	-0.0728	64.24	-0.971	0.528+
		(0.212)	(0.142)	(0.144)	.	(0.594)	(0.303)
Age		-0.0488	-0.0780	-0.149+	-0.0806	-0.753*	-0.151
		(0.0717)	(0.0656)	(0.0820)	(0.197)	(0.293)	(0.222)
Education		0.212*	0.0898	0.145	-0.00645	0.517	-1.047*
		(0.0907)	(0.0875)	(0.108)	(0.352)	(0.412)	(0.520)
Grade (1= highest)		-0.0337	0.00973	-0.0892	-0.115	-0.306	-0.0717
		(0.0547)	(0.0536)	(0.0650)	(0.186)	(0.297)	(0.134)
Performance evaluation (1=conducted)		0.0508	0.0490	-0.0753	0.166	0.526	-0.0934
		(0.155)	(0.147)	(0.175)	(0.443)	(0.474)	(0.346)
Organization type (ref. category: central gov't)	Local gov't	-0.125	-0.213	-0.0305	0.133	-0.0384	0.299
		(0.209)	(0.268)	(0.168)	(0.407)	(0.719)	(0.874)
	Public institution	-0.0267	0.0169	0.0971	0.0742	34.27	-0.548
		(0.156)	(0.144)	(0.161)	(0.454)	(7517646.7)	(0.541)
Constant		0.621	-0.233	1.170	0.984	1.229	3.355
		(0.677)	(0.611)	(0.726)	(2.175)	(2.724)	(2.698)
N		483	480	475	483	480	475

*Note:* Estimated coefficients are derived from the regression models using the item-count technique. The sensitive item is the blame avoidance strategy option. The key coefficient of interest is PSM. All coefficients were obtained from logistic regression models using unconstrained maximum likelihood estimation (Imai, 2011).

The Psi0 and Psi1 equations represent counts of respondents' affirmative responses to non-key items. While not directly related to our interest, they are instrumental in ensuring the validity of the delta coefficients (Tsai, 2019).

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## Discussion

# 1. Conclusions

- Public managers do not engage in blame avoidance behaviors simply because they receive a poor performance rating compared to other units.
  - In a prior list experiment focused on performance cheating (data alteration), not blame avoidance, no group differences were observed (Kroll and Vogel, 2021)
- Public managers with high level of PSM are less likely to avoid blame in performance system.
- When both types of reference points are low, public managers tend to exhibit less blame avoidance behavior. Rather, they demonstrate purposeful use of performance information for improving performance.



## 2. Implications

- **[Method-wise]** We combine a list experiment with a gamification approach in order to capture public managers' blame avoidance behaviors.
  - Unlike typical survey experiments that use simple text or images to illustrate interventions, our study incorporates game-like elements, creating a more engaging context for eliciting responses.
  - This approach helps to broaden our understanding of the causal mechanisms within blame avoidance in the context of performance management.
- **[Theory-wise]** This study expands upon the existing research pertaining to performance evaluation and blame avoidance, an area thus far under-researched.

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# Questions & Answers

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