



The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Employees' Deviant Innovative Behaviour

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Abstract

Introduction: China's economic recovery and increasing competition drive innovation demand, but resource constraints may lead employees to adopt deviant innovation strategies. The impact of deviant innovation remains debated, and the role of transformational leadership in this process needs further exploration. **Objective:** This study examines how transformational leadership influences deviant innovation and the mediating roles of employees' innovation self-efficacy and work mission. **Methods:** A survey of 237 virtual R&D team members from high-tech firms in Southwest China was conducted. Structural equation modelling (SPSS 26.0, Amos 26.0) was used to analyse the relationship between transformational leadership and deviant innovation. **Results:** This study is limited to virtual R&D teams in Southwest China, and future research should expand to other regions and industries. The reliance on survey data may introduce subjectivity, which could be mitigated through interviews or company records. **Conclusion:** Transformational leadership indirectly drives deviant innovation by enhancing employees' innovation self-efficacy and work mission, both of which serve as partial mediators.

Keywords: Deviant Innovative Behaviour; Employee; Enterprise Management; Innovative Self-Efficacy; Sense of Work Mission; Transformational Leadership

Introduction

Employee deviant innovation has become a critical topic in organisational research, especially in the context of a rapidly evolving business environment. With the continuous recovery of the Chinese economy, competition among enterprises continues to intensify. The constantly changing external environment presents both opportunities and challenges for enterprises in their development process (Qi *et al.*, 2022). In order to achieve sustained competitiveness, it is crucial to have the courage to break the deadlock and innovate. However, when the resources within an organisation cannot meet the demands of everyone to propose and implement different creative ideas, the organisation will inevitably reject the ideas and proposals of the majority of employees (Augsdorfer, 2012). When employees' ideas are rejected, they believe that the leader's rejection of their ideas is due to higher expectations of them, which prompts them to actively make adjustments in their subsequent work, carefully analyse, and explore different possible alternative solutions, thereby strengthening employees' motivation to continue engaging in innovative practices and promoting their deviant innovation (Molloy *et al.*, 2024). In existing research, there are two attitudes toward employee deviant innovation behaviour. The constructive deviant school believes that employee deviant innovation can bring constructive and beneficial effects to organisations (Zhang & Cui, 2022); the destructive deviant school believes that deviant behaviour is harmful to both organisations and individuals. Therefore, further exploration is needed on the formation mechanism of employees' deviant innovative behaviour.

Compared to traditional leadership styles, transformational leadership does not emphasise complete supervision but rather empowers employees with full trust and autonomy (Tresi & Mihelič, 2018), encourages bold innovation, and emphasises the purpose of work. Under the influence of this leadership style, will it promote employees to generate ideas of deviant innovation and implement them? The sense of work mission, as a positive work resource, is a psychological perception of employees that has altruism and prosocial qualities. It promotes a positive attitude towards work by making individuals perceive the meaning of their work (Mendes *et al.*, 2024). As another trait of employees, innovative self-efficacy can be used to evaluate their confidence in possessing new skills or achieving creative results in innovative work (Wang, Liu & Shalley, 2018). Through reviewing existing literature, it is found that innovation self-efficacy and work mission are mediating pathways between many leadership factors and individual innovation. Based on the above analysis, this article will simultaneously examine these two mediating paths in exploring transformational leadership and employee deviant innovation behaviour.

This study has the following innovative significance: firstly, as an emerging research hotspot, deviant innovation lacks sufficient understanding of its antecedents. This study enriches the research in this field to a certain extent; Secondly, the influencing factors of employees' deviant innovative behaviour were analysed from the perspective of personal traits, and the mediating role of innovative self-efficacy and work mission was examined, enriching and expanding the research on the mechanism of transformational leadership. Finally, this article found through research that it provides practical significance for managers to guide employees in innovation in order to enhance organisational efficiency.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational Leadership and Employee Deviant Innovation

Transformational leadership was first proposed by Burns (Khanin, 2007). The traits of vision description, pioneering innovation, trust in subordinates, and intellectual motivation possessed by transformational leadership in a team can promote team members' cognitive and motivational abilities to engage in creative work, thereby enhancing their creativity (Nasir *et al.*, 2020). Deviant innovation is an informal innovation process in which employees actively mobilise informal resources to promote the implementation of ideas by secretly or disobeying superior orders for the benefit of the organisation in a situation where organisational resources are scarce (Nasir *et al.*, 2020). Its behaviour has the characteristics of bottom-up, correct purpose, and deviant contradiction and uncertainty (Yang, Chen & Wang, 2024). Once successful, deviant innovation will bring destructive innovation to the organisation and enhance the core competitiveness of the enterprise.

One viewpoint of trait elicitation theory is that an employee's personality trait level affects the work behaviour associated with that trait, which in turn reflects the advantages of personality traits in performance outcomes (Tett & Burnett, 2003). On the one hand, employees with deviant innovation consciousness will be more actively explaining their views and effectively communicating with their leaders under the leadership of transformational leaders, and even when faced with difficulties, they will be encouraged by their leaders to enhance their courage to overcome them; on the other hand, transformational leaders have a spirit of exploration and adventure, which can significantly influence members to engage in innovative behaviour (Duan *et al.*, 2023), stimulate employees' work enthusiasm, and encourage them to pursue responsible innovation goals (Cui & Guo, 2022), to create a good innovation atmosphere for employees. Based on this, this article proposes hypothesis 1:

H1: Transformational leadership positively influences employees' deviant innovative behaviour.

The Mediating Role of Innovative Self-Efficacy

Innovation self-efficacy, proposed by Tierney and Farmer (2002), is defined in the Chinese context as an individual's belief in their ability to engage in innovative behaviour, namely confidence in their ability to creatively complete work tasks, achieve work goals, and creatively overcome difficulties and challenges (Gu & Peng, 2011). Social cognitive theory holds that individuals are active agents of motivation, emphasizing that self-efficacy beliefs influence all factors that affect successful operations, such as thinking patterns, motivation levels, persistence, and emotional states (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Specifically, the stronger an employee's innovative self-efficacy, the stronger their belief in completing a

task, and the more likely they are to attempt deviant innovative behaviour out of achievement motivation. According to Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory, four sources of information can affect an individual's self-efficacy: direct experience, indirect experience, verbal persuasion, and psychological state. Firstly, in terms of direct experience, transformational leaders will convey affirmation and support for their subordinates' work in the process of interacting with employees, enhancing their confidence (Pundt, 2015). Benefiting from positive cognitive evaluations, employees' self-efficacy will be improved, and they are more likely to take risks and engage in deviant behaviour when faced with challenging innovative tasks. Secondly, in terms of indirect experience, charismatic leaders possess confidence, foresight, and a high level of work enthusiasm. In this work, employees will be influenced by their leaders to enhance their self-efficacy, overcome difficulties, implement deviant innovation in resource-constrained situations, and increase organisational benefits. Finally, transformational leadership can provide spiritual encouragement to employees, depict a beautiful vision for them, inspire their passions and aspirations for a better future, meet their reasonable needs, and encourage them to sacrifice personal interests for the team and organisation (Park *et al.*, 2022). Under this spiritual encouragement and emotional comfort, employees are likely to enhance their self-efficacy and engage in deviant innovative behaviour in order to increase organisational efficiency. Based on the above analysis, this article proposes hypotheses H2a and H2b:

H2a: Innovation self-efficacy positively influences employees' deviant innovation behaviour.

H2b: Innovative self-efficacy mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee deviant innovative behaviour.

The Mediating Role of Sense of Work Mission

A sense of work mission, also known as a vocational calling, is a belief that originates from and transcends the self. It is through experiencing a specific role that one gains the value and meaning of life, viewing one's career as a sustained perception of life's significance (Shie *et al.*, 2024). Social information processing theory emphasises personal adaptability, where individuals adjust their behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs according to the social environment (Sun *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, they display appropriate work attitudes and behaviours tailored to the environment. An individual's information processing, handling, and reactions are influenced by commitment processes, the relevance of information, and social rules (Molly *et al.*, 2024). Employees with a strong sense of work mission are more sensitive to the organisational environment. When transformational leaders show personalised care and spiritual encouragement, these employees pay more attention to moral environmental factors and are more likely to accept the idea that employees should make greater efforts for organisational improvement. Under resource constraints, they deeply feel the company's vision, have clear career goals, and, when faced with difficulties and setbacks, mobilise their psychological capital of self-persistence and self-adjustment to increase work engagement (Gu, Diao & Cao, 2024). They are willing to take on the risks and uncertainties of deviant innovation, ignore mandatory norms, and ultimately achieve self-value while enhancing organisational benefits. Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes hypotheses H3a and H3b:

H3a: Sense of work mission positively influences employees' deviant innovative behaviour.

H3b: Sense of work mission mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employees' deviant innovative behaviour.

As shown in Figure 1, there are three mechanisms through which transformational leadership influences employee deviant innovation behaviour: the direct influence mechanism, innovation self-efficacy, and a sense of work mission.

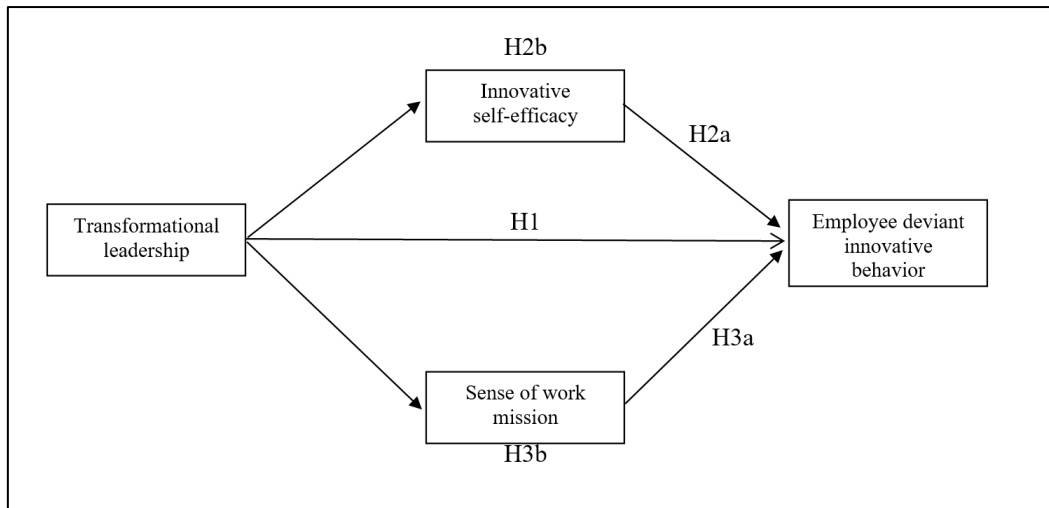


Figure 1: Theoretical Model Diagram

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

This study adopted a questionnaire survey method and distributed 300 questionnaires to virtual R&D team members in the high-tech manufacturing industry in Southwest China. 237 valid questionnaires were returned, with an effective rate of 79%. Among 237 valid observational data, the gender distribution of the surveyed subjects was even, with males accounting for 43% and females accounting for 57%. From the perspective of age distribution, it is mainly concentrated around the age of 25; from the distribution of educational backgrounds, the proportion of those with a bachelor's degree or above is 86.3%. From the perspective of the working experience of the surveyed sample, the majority of people have worked for three years, accounting for 45.4%. From the perspective of job positions, the majority of the surveyed sample are middle-level managers and below, accounting for 93.7%. The surveyed sample work is located in enterprises with uniform size distribution and high cultural level, which has certain validity for the hypothesis to be verified.

Measures

1. Transformational leadership: This study draws on Bass' (1985) revised scale. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.928.
2. Employee deviant innovation behaviour: This study draws on the scale revised by Criscuolo, Salter & Wal (2014). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.928.
3. Innovative self-efficacy: This study draws on the scale revised by Tierney and Farmer (2002). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.861.
4. Sense of work mission: This study draws on the scale revised by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.967.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

This study mainly used Amos 26.0 software to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on transformational leadership, work mission, innovative self-efficacy, and employee deviant innovative behaviour and compared the fitting results of each model. The results are shown in Table 1. According to the results in Table 1, the four-factor model has a satisfactory fitting degree and is significantly better than other models ($\chi^2/df=1.591$, $RMSEA=0.087$, $CFI=0.951$, $TLI=0.939$). Therefore, the four variables selected in this study have excellent discriminant validity and belong to completely different constructs.

Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model	Structure	X ²	df	X ² / df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Four factor model	A; B; C; D	133.666	84	1.591	0.087	0.951	0.939
Three factor model	A; B; C+D	324.896	87	3.734	0.187	0.767	0.719
Two factor model	A+B; C+D	363.957	89	4.089	0.199	0.731	0.682
Single factor model	A+B+C+D	374.311	90	4.159	0.201	0.722	0.675

A: Transformational leadership; B: Employee deviant innovative behaviour; C: Innovative self-efficacy; D: Sense of work mission.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

This study conducted descriptive statistical analysis on the main variables using SPSS 26.0, and the results are shown in Table 2. According to the data in Table 2, transformational leadership is significantly correlated with innovation self-efficacy ($r=0.652$, $p<0.01$), work mission ($r=0.639$, $p<0.01$), and employee deviant innovation behaviour ($r=0.709$, $p<0.01$); the self-efficacy of innovation ($r=0.686$, $p<0.01$) and the sense of work mission ($r=0.804$, $p<0.01$) are significantly positively correlated with employees' deviant innovative behaviour. H1, H2a, H2b, H3a, and H3b have received preliminary support and can be further analysed.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	1.570	0.498	1									
2	2.041	1.182	-0.168	1								
3	2.410	0.793	0.058	-0.071	1							
4	2.191	1.272	-0.072	0.720**	-0.395**	1						
5	3.042	0.993	0.215	-0.482**	0.241*	-0.544**	1					
6	2.244	1.222	-0.165	0.047	0.229*	0.061	-0.039	1				
7	5.387	1.088	-0.024	0.243*	-0.343**	0.298**	-0.356**	-0.254*	1			
8	5.244	1.292	-0.149	0.252*	-0.370**	0.346**	-0.347**	-0.086	0.652**	1		
9	5.243	1.139	-0.111	0.214	-0.269*	0.253*	-0.385**	0.030	0.709**	0.686**	1	
10	5.063	1.371	-0.183	0.314**	-0.197	0.248*	-0.415*	-0.059	0.639**	0.534**	0.804**	1

1. Gender 2. Age 3. Educational level 4. Work experience 5. Job position 6. Enterprise size 7. Transformational leadership 8. Innovative self-efficacy 9. Employee deviant innovation 10. Work mission.

Hypothesis Testing

Main effect test.

In order to test whether there is a linear regression relationship between the variables in the main effect, this study used SPSS 26.0 software for hierarchical regression analysis and constructed models 1 to 8 for verification. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing Regression Analysis Table

independent variables \ dependent variables	Sense of work mission			Innovative self-efficacy			Employee's deviant innovative behaviour	
	Model 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Gender	-0.079	-0.096	-0.084	-0.102	-0.018	-0.039	0.062	0.043
Age	0.267	0.197	0.07	0.001	0.097	0.014	-0.097	-0.094
Education	-0.156	-0.023	0.269*	-0.138	-0.216	-0.059	-0.02	-0.008
Years of work experience	-0.192	-0.19	0.085	0.088	-0.081	-0.078	0.009	0.001
Job Position	0.339*	-0.184	-0.186	-0.034	0.326*	-0.144	-0.045	-0.034
Enterprise scale	-0.05	0.076	-0.054	0.07	0.004	0.153	0.056	0.092
Transformational leadership		0.591***		0.581***		0.696***		0.209*
Innovative self-efficacy							0.361***	0.281**
Sense of work mission							0.631***	0.547***
R ²	0.16	0.435	0.164	0.43	0.118	0.503	0.723	0.738
R ² value variation	0.225	0.261	0.228	0.253	0.186	0.362	0.565	0.583
F value	3.476	36.102	3.552	34.651	2.735	56.845	79.485	57.965

From the results in Table 3, it can be concluded that after removing control variables, transformational leadership in Model 6 has a significant positive correlation ($\beta=0.696$, $p<0.001$) with employees' deviant innovative behaviour, and H1 is validated. In Model 7, the sense of work mission ($\beta=0.631$, $p<0.001$) and innovation self-efficacy ($\beta=0.361$, $p<0.001$) have a significant positive correlation with employees' deviant innovation behaviour, as verified by H2a and H3a; After adding the mediating variables of innovative self efficacy and work mission, combined with Model 6 and Model 8, it can be seen that the coefficient of influence of transformational leadership on employees' deviant innovative behaviour decreased from 0.696 to 0.209 ($p<0.05$), indicating that the relationship between innovative self-efficacy and work mission weakened, and it is preliminarily judged that innovative self-efficacy and work mission play a partial mediating role. Next, the process method will be used to further examine the mediating effect between the two.

Mediating Effect Test of Innovative Self-Efficacy and Work Mission

In order to better examine the mediating effects of innovation self-efficacy and work mission, this article first analyses the mediating effects of both separately and then puts them into a dual mediation model for analysis. The specific operation is to use the process plugin in SPSS 26.0 software, select Model 4, set bootstrapping to repeat sampling 5000 times, set the confidence interval (CI) to 95%, and test the mediating effect between the two.

From Table 4, it can be seen that transformational leadership has a strong indirect effect on employees' deviant innovative behaviour through innovative self-efficacy, with confidence intervals of [0.0506, 0.5043], excluding 0, which confirms the mediating role of innovative self-efficacy. Therefore, H2b is valid; the indirect effect of transformational leadership on employees' deviant innovative behaviour through a sense of work mission is strong, with a confidence interval of [0.1922, 0.5492], excluding 0, which confirms the mediating role of work mission. Therefore, H3b is valid.

Table 4: Indirect Effect Test of The Mediating Role of Innovation Self-Efficacy and Sense of Work Mission

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Innovative self-efficacy	0.2154	0.1201	0.0506	0.5043
Sense of work mission	0.3509	0.0904	0.0904	0.5492

According to the results of the mediation effect test, it can be concluded that innovative self-efficacy and work mission have a positive mediating effect on the relationship between transformational leadership and employees' deviant innovative behaviour. To further confirm the dual mediator model, the results are shown in Table 5: the CI for the total effect is [0.5116, 0.8795], the CI for the indirect effect of innovation self-efficacy is [0.0388, 0.3890], and the CI for the indirect effect of work mission is [-0.1728, -0.5004]. The confidence intervals for each indirect effect do not include 0. Overall, when both innovation self-efficacy and work mission are present in the relationship between the two, the mediating effect remains significant.

Table 5: Indirect Effect Test of Intermediary Role

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total effect	0.6955	0.0923	0.5116	0.8795
Direct effect	0.209	0.0912	0.0272	0.3909
Innovative self-efficacy	0.1631	0.0910	0.0388	0.3890
Sense of work mission	0.3234	0.0847	0.1728	0.5004

Discussion

This study confirms that transformational leadership partially stimulates employees' deviant innovation behaviour through the mediating effects of innovative self-efficacy and work missions. This finding aligns with existing research to a certain extent. First, Sun *et al.* (2024) highlight that digital leadership enhances employees' innovative self-efficacy, promoting deviant innovation behaviour. This aligns with the finding that under transformational leadership, employees develop confidence in their innovative abilities, increasing their likelihood of engaging in deviant innovation when resources are limited. Similarly, Nabi, Zhiqiang and Akter (2022) emphasise that transformational leadership fosters radical innovation through knowledge management capabilities and competitive intensity, further validating the role of leadership style in driving innovative behaviour. Second, this study finds that work mission positively influences employees' deviant innovation behaviour. This is consistent with Yuan and Liu (2022), who demonstrate that employees' sense of mission, shaped by power dynamics and local culture, motivates deviant innovation. Additionally, Lyu *et al.* (2022) point out that the formation of deviant innovation is closely linked to employees' sense of mission, which encourages persistence in innovation despite challenges.

The findings further validate the mediating role of innovative self-efficacy and work missions in the relationship between transformational leadership and deviant innovation behaviour. This supports the view of Gu, Diao & Cao (2024), who suggest that empowering leadership enhances employees' self-efficacy, fostering deviant innovation behaviour. This indicates that by enhancing employees' self-efficacy and sense of mission, transformational leadership can effectively guide employees toward innovative efforts, even in resource-constrained environments.

This study deepens the understanding of how transformational leadership stimulates employees' deviant innovation behaviour. It provides practical guidance for managers: leaders should leverage transformational traits, enhance employees' innovative self-efficacy, cultivate their sense of work mission, and encourage innovative potential to improve organisational efficiency.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to virtual R&D team members in the high-tech manufacturing industry in southwestern China. This restricts the generalisability of the findings to other regions, industries, or types of organisations. Second, the study

relied on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to infer causal relationships. Longitudinal studies would provide more robust insights into the dynamic relationship between transformational leadership and deviant innovation behaviour. Third, the data was collected through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce social desirability bias or subjective interpretation. Combining self-reports with objective performance data could enhance the validity of the findings. Finally, this study focused on two mediating variables—innovative self-efficacy and work mission—but other potential mediators or moderators, such as organisational climate or employee personality traits, were not considered.

Conclusion

This article starts from existing research and combines social information processing theory, trait stimulation theory, and self-efficacy theory to bridge transformational leadership and employee deviant innovation behaviour through work mission and innovative self-efficacy. Through empirical testing of 237 samples in southwestern China, it was found that transformational leadership can effectively stimulate employee deviant innovation behaviour; the positive impact of innovative self-efficacy on employees' deviant innovative behaviour; the sense of work mission and innovative self-efficacy partially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and employees' deviant innovative behaviour. This article is rooted in local Chinese enterprises, enriching the current understanding of outcome variables related to transformational leadership, deepening the understanding of antecedents of deviant innovation behaviour, and further opening up the "black box" of the process of transformational leadership inspiring employees' deviant innovation behaviour. It is suggested that leaders should unleash their transformative characteristics, enhance employees' innovative self-efficacy, use employees with a high sense of work mission, and rationally deal with employees' deviant behaviour.

Future research can explore several areas to build upon this study's findings. First, expanding the sample size and including different regions, industries, and cultural contexts will help generalise the conclusions. Second, incorporating longitudinal data could provide insights into how transformational leadership and deviant innovation behaviour evolve over time. Third, examining additional mediating and moderating factors such as organisational climate, employee personality traits, and industry-specific challenges could further clarify the mechanisms behind deviant innovation. Lastly, integrating qualitative research methods, such as interviews or case studies, may offer a deeper understanding of the dynamics between leadership and deviant innovation behaviour.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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