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How Paternalistic Leadership Shapes Employee Creative Behavior: A Mediation Model of Creative Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: *This study looks into whether a leadership style that combines both strictness and care, similar to that of a parent, either hinders or fosters creativity at work. It examines how paternalistic leadership shapes employee creative behavior indirectly, with creative self-efficacy acting as the mediating factor. How various dimensions of paternalistic leadership influence employee creative behavior remain highly controversial. We used a questionnaire-based approach to acquire valid sample responses from multiple employees then used mediation effects to test the model and validate proposed hypotheses. Our results show that benevolent leadership is substantially associated positively with creative self-efficacy and with creative behavior, with creative self-efficacy acting as a full mediator. Virtuous leadership and authoritarian leadership, in contrast, did not exhibit statistically significant direct or indirect effects on creative self-efficacy or on creative behavior within this study. These results indicate that corporate managers should concentrate on curbing authoritarian tendencies and enhancing employees' confidence in creativity through benevolent leadership, thereby more effectively promoting employee creativity.*

Keywords: *Paternalistic leadership, Creative self-efficacy, Authoritarian leadership, Benevolent leadership, Virtuous leadership*

1. Introduction

Recently, how leadership styles influence employees' workplace behaviors has become an increasingly prominent concern for both academic researchers and business practitioners within the management context of large domestic firms. As a local leadership style deeply embedded in traditional Chinese culture, paternalistic leadership is still commonly used and exists in various local enterprises. This type of leader often takes "combining kindness and severity, and winning people over with virtue" as its core characteristics, which directly affects employees' work attitude and daily behavior choices, and has therefore become a key research focus direction in the domain of organizational behavior [1]. Innovation has increasingly become the core of improving competitive power of enterprises in the market. The effective stimulation of employees' creative behavior is the core link for enterprises to achieve creative development. As a crucial external element within the work environment of employees, leadership style will directly affect employees' willingness to innovate, and thus affect their actual creative performance [2]. In actual corporate management, the contributions of various subdomains of paternalistic leadership in shaping employee creative behavior remain highly controversial. Some research suggests that the benevolence and virtue aspects of paternalistic leadership can positively promote employee creative behavior by enhancing employee identification with the organization. However, other studies have pointed out that authoritarian leadership in paternalistic leadership, which emphasizes absolute obedience and restricts employee work behavior, may actually inhibit employees' attempts at creative behavior. Some studies have even found no significant correlation between certain dimensions and employee creative behavior. Whether paternalistic leadership promotes or inhibits employee creative behavior will be explored and some conclusions drawn within this study.

Scholars recognize paternalistic leadership as a style marked by strict discipline and authority, paternal benevolence, and moral integrity, all within a context of rule by man. Its core comprises three dimensions: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership and virtuous leadership. Within these, authoritarian leadership points up that the leader's authority is unchallengeable and requires subordinates to absolutely observe his instructions and ideas; benevolent leadership focuses on the personal employee welfare and provides long-term and comprehensive care for them; virtuous leadership emphasizes that the leader sets an example and influences subordinates with his own moral integrity and behavioral model

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[3]. The creative behavior of employees is not a single creative idea, but a complete procedure from the emergence of creative ideas, to the gradual promotion and dissemination, and finally to the implementation. The occurrence of this behavior not only depends on the employee's own creative ability, but is also significantly affected by his internal psychological cognitive state [4]. Creative self-efficacy identifies as an employee's subjective assessment of their ability to successfully generate creative ideas, complete various creative activities, and ultimately achieve creative results. As an important psychological cognitive variable, it shows a notable positive correlation with employees' creative behavior and is also a key psychological foundation for motivating employees to transform their internal creative ideas into actual work behaviors.

Current research has shown that psychological variables such as parent-child attachment and loneliness serve as a mediator between external influencing factors and employee behavior. Creative self-efficacy has also been verified to be a mediating variable that conveys the effect of external contextual factors like leadership style on employee creative behavior [5]. Previous studies have also verified that various aspects of paternalistic leadership have different effects on employees' psychological cognitive state [3]. The enhancement of creative self-efficacy can also effectively promote employees' creative behavior. However, most existing studies only discuss the effect of paternalistic leadership on employees' creative behavior, or analyze the nexus between creative self-efficacy and creative behavior. There is a lack of results in incorporating the three important factors of paternalistic leadership, creative self-efficacy and employee creative behavior into the same research framework and conducting analysis. At the same time, employees in enterprises are in a specific workplace environment, and their work behavior is directly guided and influenced by the leadership styles of different leaders. Whether creative self-efficacy can play a mediating role between various dimensions of paternalistic leadership and employee creative behavior is still unclear and has not yet been clearly and uniformly concluded by the academic community. Therefore, this study will focus on different groups of employees in various enterprises, examining the influence path of "paternalistic leadership—creative self-efficacy—employee creative behavior." The hypothetical model is shown in Figure 1. A sample of employees drawn from various enterprises will be surveyed in order to test whether creative self-efficacy mediates the relationship between paternalistic leadership and employees' creative behavior. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that this mediating effect will exhibit different characteristics under the three aspects of authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and virtuous leadership.

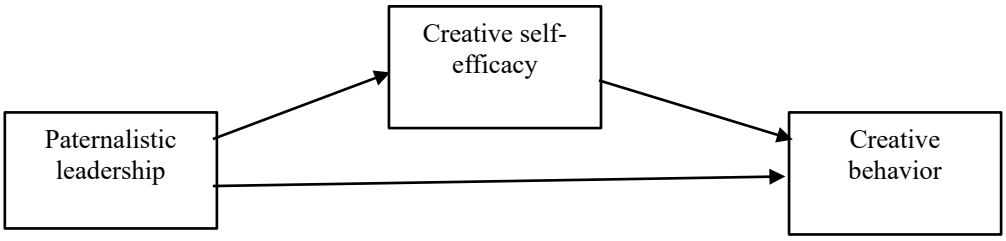

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

This study clearly reflects the varied effects of three leadership styles within paternalistic leadership on creative behavior, confirming that their effects are not simply positive or negative, but rather exhibit significant differences across different dimensions. Only benevolent leadership can significantly enhance creative behavior by enhancing creative self-efficacy. Furthermore, it clarifies the mediating mechanism of this process, verifying the full mediating mechanism of the link between benevolent leadership and employee creative behavior. This reveals that benevolent leadership can stimulate creative behavior by enhancing employees' confidence in innovation, providing direct evidence for subsequent research exploring the divergent influences of these three different components, and also helping to deepen the academic understanding of the mechanisms of paternalistic leadership.

On the basis of the above, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is a positive correlation between benevolent leadership and creative behavior.

H1b: There is a positive correlation between virtuous leadership and creative behavior.

H1c: There is a negative correlation between authoritarian leadership and creative behavior.

H2a: Creative self-efficacy mediates the effect of benevolent leadership on creative behavior.

H2b: Virtuous leadership's impact on creative behavior is mediated by creative self-efficacy.

H2c: Authoritarian leadership and creative behavior are linked via the mediating mechanism of

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creative self-efficacy.

2. Data

2.1 Research Subjects and Data Sources

This study made use of convenience sampling to select employed workers from a portion of China as research subjects. Questionnaires were distributed on March 27, 2026, with 82 electronic questionnaires distributed through the Credamo platform, and 80 valid questionnaires were obtained. The sample primarily consisted of employed individuals. Among them, 41.3% were male and 58.7% were female. With respect to educational background, 72.5% of respondents obtained a bachelor's degree, 2.5% obtained a doctorate or higher, 10% held a master's degree, 5% held a junior college diploma, and 5% held a diploma or lower. In terms of age, the 26-36 age group comprised the largest proportion, accounting for 45% of the total. As for employment history, 31.3% of the sample had worked for 2-5 years; the largest group (13.8%) had worked for 3 years since graduation.

2.2 Measuring tools

2.2.1 Scale

Benevolent Leadership Scale: The benevolent leadership subscale of the paternalistic leadership scale compiled by Zheng Boxun et al. (2000) [6]. We adopted a 5-point Likert scale (the same below). This subscale consists of 6 items and aims to measure the degree of concern and care that leaders show for their subordinates' personal lives outside of work. A typical sample item is "The leader is very concerned about my life and my family's life." ($\alpha = 0.871$)

Virtuous leadership Scale: The Virtuous leadership Subscale of the Paternalistic Leadership Scale compiled by Zheng Boxun et al. (2000) [6] was used. The subscale consists of 6 items, which measure the degree to which leaders set an example, are fair and just, and do not abuse their power. A typical sample item is "Leaders are able to set an example". ($\alpha = 0.922$)

The Authoritarian leadership Scale: The Authoritarian leadership Subscale of the Paternalistic Leadership Scale compiled by Zheng Boxun et al. (2000) [6] was used. The subscale consists of 9 items and measures the degree to which leaders emphasize absolute obedience, control over subordinates, and belittle the abilities of subordinates. A typical sample item is "The leader requires me to obey his orders without reservation". ($\alpha = 0.923$)

Creative Self-Efficacy Scale: The Creative self-efficacy Scale developed by Tierney and Farmer (2002) [7] was used. The scale consists of 8 items and measures an individual's confidence in their ability to generate novel and useful ideas. A typical sample item is "I am confident that I can solve problems in a creative way." ($\alpha = 0.910$)

Creative Behavior Scale: The Innovation Behavior Scale developed by Janssen (2000) [8] was used. The scale consists of 6 items and measures employees' behavior in generating, promoting and implementing creative ideas at work. A typical sample item is "I will find suitable ways to promote new ideas". ($\alpha = 0.862$)

2.2.2 Control Variables

To control for the influence of extraneous factors, the analysis included gender, age, education level, and years of service at the current company., and effective length of service from graduation to the present as control variables in this analysis. Furthermore, in the mediation effect test, two other leadership styles were controlled as covariates (e.g., controlling for virtuous leadership and authoritarian leadership when analyzing benevolent leadership) to eliminate common influences.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Summary Statistics

The table presents the mean values, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all variables. Descriptive statistics show that the mean for creative behavior is 4.09 (SD = 0.70), the mean for benevolent leadership is 4.08 (SD = 0.75), the mean for virtuous leadership is 4.09 (SD = 0.88), the mean

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for authoritarian leadership is 2.12 (SD = 0.94), the mean for creative self-efficacy is 4.07 (SD = 0.67), the mean for the male dummy variable is 0.41 (SD = 0.50), the mean for years of education is 2.99 (SD = 0.74), and the mean for current term is 2.31 (SD = 1.03).

Table 1 Summary Statistics and Intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Creative Behavior	4.09	0.70	—						
2.Benevolent leadership	4.08	0.75	.64 ***	—					
3.Virtuous leadership	4.09	0.88	.59 ***	.87 ***	—				
4.Authoritarian leadership	2.12	0.94	–.37 ***	–.58 ***	–.54 ***	—			
5.Creative self-efficacy	4.07	0.67	.86 ***	.71 ***	.62 ***	–.32 **	—		
6. Gender	0.41	0.50	.12	.14	.12	–.04	.17	—	
7.Educational background	2.99	0.74	.08	–.15	–.16	.05	.01	–.05	—
8.Current term	2.31	1.03	.01	.18	.16	–.25 *	.12	.24 *	.02

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. *The same below.*

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis results (see Table 1) show that creative behavior is significantly positively correlated with benevolent leadership ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$), significantly positively correlated with virtuous leadership ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), and significantly positively correlated with creative self-efficacy ($r = 0.86$, $p < 0.001$), and significantly negatively correlated with authoritarian leadership ($r = -0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Benevolent leadership is significantly positively correlated with virtuous leadership ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$), significantly positively correlated with creative self-efficacy ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), and significantly negatively correlated with authoritarian leadership ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Virtuous leadership was significantly positively correlated with creative self-efficacy ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly negatively correlated with authoritarian leadership ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.001$). Creative self-efficacy was significantly negatively correlated with authoritarian leadership ($r = -0.32$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, current term was significantly negatively correlated with authoritarian leadership ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.05$) and significantly positively correlated with the male dummy variable ($r = 0.24$, $p< 0.05$). The correlation coefficients among years of education and other variables were not statistically significant. These results indicate a strong positive association between creative behavior, benevolent leadership, virtuous leadership, and creative self-efficacy, while they are all negatively correlated with authoritarian leadership, consistent with theoretical expectations. The negative correlation between authoritarian leadership style and current tenure may indicate that employees with longer tenures tend to have lower identification with authority. Furthermore, the positive correlation between gender and current tenure may be related to the gender distribution in the sample or specific job characteristics.

3.3 Hierarchical Regression

This study used hierarchical regression analysis to examine the predictive effects of benevolent leadership, virtuous leadership, authoritarian leadership, and creative self-efficacy on employee creative behavior, while controlling for demographic variables such as gender, age, education level, and current term. The regression results are shown in Table 2. The hierarchical regression included variables stepwise in the order of "control variables → leadership style dimensions → mediating variables." The change in R^2 (ΔR^2) was used to test the improvement in the explanatory power of the model after the variables were introduced. The significance level was determined by $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, and $p < 0.001$.

Model 1 only included control variables. The results showed that the overall predictive effect of the control variables on employee creative behavior was not significant ($R^2 = 0.02$, $\Delta R^2 = -0.02$, $p > 0.05$). Among them, current tenure ($\beta = -0.01$, $p > 0.05$), education background ($\beta=0.08$, $p>0.05$), and gender ($\beta = 0.18$, $p > 0.05$) all did not have a significant impact on creative behavior, and the overall model fit

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was low.

Model 2 introduced three independent variables—benevolent leadership, virtuous leadership, and authoritarian leadership—in addition to the control variables, significantly improving the model's explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.46$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.42$). The results showed that benevolent leadership had a significant positive predictive effect on employee creative behavior ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$); virtuous leadership also showed a positive predictive effect but it was not significant ($\beta = 0.14$, $p > 0.05$); and authoritarian leadership showed a negative predictive effect that was not significant ($\beta = –0.01$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, H1a was supported, whereas H1b and H1c were not.

Model 3 further incorporated the mediating variable of creative self-efficacy, significantly improving the model's explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.77$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.75$). Creative self-efficacy showed a strong positive predictive effect on employee creative behavior ($\beta = 0.85$, $p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, the direct effect of benevolent leadership on employee creative behavior changed from a significant positive effect in Model 2 ($\beta = 0.49$) to a non-significant negative effect ($\beta = –0.07$, $p > 0.05$). The predictive effect of virtuous leadership changed from non-significant ($\beta = 0.14$) to still non-significant ($\beta = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$); authoritarian leadership remained a non-significant predictor ($\beta = –0.10$, $p > 0.05$). Introducing creative self-efficacy significantly enhanced the model's ability to interpret results, laying the foundation for further testing of the mediation effect.

To sum up, the hierarchical regression results suggest that before the mediator is added, only benevolent leadership directly predicts employees' creative behavior. Creative self-efficacy also turns out to be a strong predictor. However, once self-efficacy is controlled for, none of the leadership dimensions show a significant direct effect on creative behavior.

Table 2 Regression Models

	(1) creativity_m	(2) creativity_m	(3) creativity_m	(4) efficacy_m	(5) efficacy_m
(Intercept)	3.80***	1.17	0.69	3.80***	0.57
	(0.38)	(0.63)	(0.42)	(0.36)	(0.56)
tenure_current_num	–0.01	–0.09	–0.09*	0.05	–0.00
	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.06)
edu_num	0.08	0.18*	0.08	0.02	0.12
	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.10)	(0.07)
factor(male_dummy)1	0.18	0.09	0.00	0.21	0.11
	(0.17)	(0.13)	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.11)
benevolent_m		0.49**	–0.07		0.65***
		(0.17)	(0.12)		(0.15)
virtuous_m		0.14	0.09		0.06
		(0.14)	(0.09)		(0.12)
authoritarian_m		–0.01	–0.10		0.10
		(0.08)	(0.05)		(0.07)
efficacy_m			0.85***		
			(.09)		
R^2	0.02	0.46	0.77	0.04	0.53
Adj. R^2	–0.02	0.42	0.75	–0.00	0.49
Num. obs.	80	80	80	80	80

Note. Values are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors appear in parentheses.

3.4 Mediation Effect Test

This study also used the SPSS PROCESS v3.3 plugin (Model 4) to examine the mediating role of creative self-efficacy in the relationships between benevolent leadership, virtuous leadership, authoritarian leadership, and employee creative behavior. Control variables included gender, age, education level, length of service at the current company, and total length of service, and the other two dimensions were controlled for when examining one leadership dimension.

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3.4.1 Testing the Mediating Effect of Benevolent Leadership

For benevolent leadership as X, creative self-efficacy as M, and creative behavior as Y, the indirect effect was significant (β = 0.5230, Boot SE = 0.2358, 95% CI = [0.1485, 1.0648]), with the interval not including zero. The results indicate that creative self-efficacy plays a fully mediating role between benevolent leadership and creative behavior, confirming H2a.

3.4.2 Testing the Mediating Effect of Virtuous leadership

For virtuous leadership as X, creative self-efficacy as M, and creative behavior as Y, the indirect effect (β = 0.0378, Boot SE = 0.1978, 95% CI = [-0.4417, 0.3007]) included zero, pointing to an insignificant mediation. Consequently, creative self-efficacy does not mediate the virtuous leadership–creative behavior relationship, and H2b is rejected.

3.4.3 Testing the Mediating Effect of Authoritarian leadership

Regression analysis was run using authoritarian leadership as X, creative self-efficacy as M, and creative behavior as Y. The indirect effect (β = 0.0555, Boot SE = 0.0575, 95% CI = [-0.0568, 0.1738]) included zero, indicating that mediation is not significant. These results show that creative self-efficacy does not serve as a mediator between authoritarian leadership and creative behavior; consequently, H2c is rejected. (Table 3)

Table 3 Summary of Mediation Effect Tests

Variables	Indirect effects	Boot SE	95% CI
Benevolent leadership	0.5230	0.2358	[0.1485, 1.0648]
Virtuous leadership	0.0378	0.1978	[-0.4417, 0.3007]
Authoritarian leadership	0.0555	0.0575	[-0.0568, 0.1738]

4. Discussion

This study aims to clarify whether a strict but paternalistic leadership style in the workplace promotes or inhibits employee creativity. We categorized paternalistic leadership styles into three dimensions: benevolent, virtuous, and authoritarian, and examined how these dimensions ultimately affect employee creative behavior through the indirect variable of "creative self-efficacy." Findings derived from a self-report survey clearly indicate that benevolent leadership style positively and significantly predicts employees' creative self-efficacy. Furthermore, this leadership style indirectly promotes creative behavior by enhancing creative self-efficacy, and creative self-efficacy fully mediates the relationship between the two. In contrast, virtuous and authoritarian leadership styles did not show significant direct or indirect influences on creative self-efficacy or creative behavior. Moreover, the study detected no significant inhibitory influence of authoritarian leadership on creativity. Ultimately, employees' willingness to create largely depends on their personal judgment, which is influenced by benevolent leadership and centered on their confidence in their own creativity. This suggests that the influence of paternalistic leadership regarding employee creativity is not simply a matter of positive or negative; the key factor lies in the specific leadership style employed. Benevolent leadership helps employees build confidence in creativity, while in this study, neither virtuous nor authoritarian leadership had a reliable impact on creative behavior. However, the willingness to innovate still largely depends on individual self-evaluation.

This study provides valuable theoretical insights by exploring three facets of paternalistic leadership—benevolent leadership, authoritarian style, and virtuous leadership—along with creative self-efficacy and employee creative behavior within a unified research model. Our results highlight that creative self-efficacy serves as a complete mediator linking benevolent leadership to creative behavior. This research approach offers a deeper understanding than simply examining how paternalistic leadership directly shapes creative behavior. Previous research has yielded inconsistent conclusions regarding whether paternalistic leadership promotes or inhibits creativity. Our study helps clarify this discrepancy, showing that the effects differ across dimensions: benevolent leadership has a positive impact, while authoritarian leadership shows a negative correlation in the bivariate analysis. Therefore, it cannot be simply concluded that paternalistic leadership has only a positive or only a negative impact on employee creativity.

From an organizational management perspective, although authoritarian leadership was significantly negatively associated with creative behavior at the correlation analysis, its direct effect failed to reach statistical significance in the multivariate regression adjusting for other factors. However, managers still

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should remain aware of the potential negative implications of authoritarian leadership. This means that when managers habitually issue orders, ignore employee opinions, or frequently criticize and negate employee ideas in communication, they are likely to inhibit employees' enthusiasm for trying creative approaches. Therefore, reducing the use of authoritarian leadership and giving employees space to share ideas and experiment freely is crucial for improving the team's creativity capabilities. Another important insight comes from the beneficial role of benevolent leadership. Data shows that leaders who demonstrate genuine care for their employees tend to enhance employees' confidence in their creative abilities, thereby promoting creative behavior. This indicates that when evaluating leaders, companies should not only focus on their professional competence but also consider their ability to care for subordinates and act fairly. For managers with strong authoritarian tendencies, targeted interventions such as case studies and behavioral feedback can guide them towards a more supportive leadership style. The third implication is that organizations should re-examine their performance evaluation and promotion standards. Focusing solely on results and obedience may inadvertently encourage authoritarian leadership behaviors. Conversely, incorporating factors such as "supporting employees' new ideas" and "treating team members fairly" into performance appraisals can help cultivate a more caring and compassionate leadership style. This study offers practical pathways for applying these managerial insights.

This study has several limitations. First, data collection occurred at one time point only, meaning that while this approach reveals relationships between variables, it cannot establish clear causal connections, which weakens the persuasiveness of the findings to some extent. Second, all responses were provided by the employees themselves, which may reflect their specific needs or biases. Including some self-assessment items might enhance the trustworthiness of the measurements. Third, we only examined how creative self-efficacy serves as a mediator, but additional factors may also influence this process, such as the company's support for creativity, or whether employees are inherently driven or have a personality trait of liking challenges. These potential variables have not been explored in this study.

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