

The Effect of Transformational Leadership on Innovative Work Behavior in SMEs: Test of a Mediating Model

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ABSTRACT

In today's advancing small-business competition, SME leaders are forced to build superior and innovative employees to sustain competitive advantages. This study scrutinizes the link between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior by developing a mediating research model. The samples used in this study are 235 employees who work in the SME creative industries in Kebumen. Most of the respondents are working in the design and production divisions in the food, craft and fashion businesses. The analysis model used is the structural equation model (SEM) with Smart PLS software analysis. This study found that transformational leadership significantly affects innovative work behavior. Psychological safety and friendship at work significantly mediate the connection between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior. In addition, this research revealed that psychological safety shares a positive influence on friendship at work. This study provides insight for the transformational leader in the small business context to improve employees' innovative work behavior

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Innovative Work Behavior, Psychological Safety, Friendship at Work.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation is critical for every business to survive in the fierce competition, moreover, for small businesses that have limited resources. They must adopt unique business practices that competitors from large companies cannot imitate. However, innovation cannot be realized if only relying on the owner or manager. Employees have an essential role in the success of innovation because They are directly in contact with problems and work practices in the workplace. Scott & Bruce (1994) proposed the innovative work behavior (IWB) as a manifestation of innovative behavior at the individual level consisting of generating ideas, idea championing, and implementing ideas in the workplace.

In line with the growing awareness of the importance of individual innovation, past literature has examined the factors that influence IWB. Some research showed that personality (Mubarak, Khan, Yasmin & Osmadi, 2021), work climate (Shanker, Bhanugopan, R., van der Heijden, & Farrell, 2017), and job satisfaction (Usmanova, Yang, Sumarliah, Khan, & Khan, 202) significantly impact employee innovative work behavior. This present study focuses on the critical role of transformational leadership in encouraging employee innovative work behavior. The leadership and organizational management literature shows that transformational leaders can influence employee attitudes and behavior (Nguon, 2022). In addition, this research was motivated by the need for more clarity from the inconsistent results of previous studies. For example, Udin & Syaikh (2022) has examined the innovative behavior of mining workers in Indonesia. The results show that transformational leadership does not affect innovative work behavior. They argued that transformational leadership could sometimes lead to high employee shackles and dependence on the leaders. Employees only work to complete the target. They were not motivated to use their critical abilities to improves creative ideas. Similar results, Afsar, Adir, and Bin Saeed (2014) has studied employees in Asia. They concluded that employees with a collectivist culture tended to work according to standards and were less likely to seek out-of-the-box solutions. This fact indicates that transformational leadership can lead to high dependence on leaders. In contrast to previous research, Ferdinan & Lindawati (2021) found that transformational leadership has a negative effect on innovative behavior. Transformational leaders often evoke challenges that put pressure on employees. Employees who cannot follow the leader's directions will become stressed and unable to develop (Wei, Li, Li, & Chen, 2021). This inconsistency requires further investigation to reveal the ideal role of transformational leaders in improving employee's innovation behavior.

This study investigates the potential mediating role of psychological safety and friendship at work in the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior. Psychological safety is a feeling of trust and security when employees decide to take risks at work (Durrah, 2022). Meanwhile, friendship at work is conceptualized as a form of informal relationship with colleagues based on volunteerism and a personalistic focus (Helmy, Adawiyah, & Setyawati, 2020). According to the social exchange theory, this research assumes that transformational leadership can improve psychological safety and foster friendship in the workplace, which in turn impacts innovative employee behavior. This research provides strategic recommendations for SME managers on managing leadership and a work environment that can encourage innovative employee behavior.

This research was conducted in Kebumen Regency, a district with a reasonably high growth rate in the creative industry. In 2022, Kebumen was named the 67th creative city in Indonesia. The number of creative small businesses in Kebumen Regency in 2023 is 56,367. This number is dominated by food, beverage and handicraft businesses. The government always encourages the growth of creative industries in Kebumen Regency.

However, in 2022 Kebumen will still be the poorest district in Central Java. One of the main disadvantages of small businesses is the low level of business creativity. Therefore, this research will make an essential contribution to creative small businesses by examining the factors that encourage individual creativity in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior

Leadership is an important factor in the success of innovation at the individual level. Leaders provide the inspiration and support employees need in implementing new ideas. In addition, the leader ensures that the methods and way of working of the employees remain in line with the vision of the company (Hoang, Luu, Nguyen, Du, & Le, 2022). Several studies agree that transformational leadership can encourage employees to be more innovative (Udin & Muhammad Syaikh, 2022). Ferdinan & Lindawati (2021) concluded that transformational leaders provide support for the development of employee innovation in the workplace. A transformational leader gives his members more space to hone the various skills they need at work. This freedom allows them to be more creative in innovating to find new solutions to old problems, and to be able to see into the future. That way, every employee has the power to make decisions and act as needed in every job. Transformational leaders are more sensitive to dynamic environmental changes so they don't limit employees from continuing to change for the better (Musonnafa, Sumiati, & Djazuli, 2022). Research Nguon (2022) stated that transformational leadership can motivate employees to independently seek novel ideas. Transformational leaders always try to change outdated thoughts, techniques and targets that have been maintained so far. The goal is to get more useful results and for the greater common good. As a way of achieving this, leaders always open new opportunities for every employee to learn. Transformational leaders demand employees to be more proactive in exploring new ways of doing things and innovating to produce solutions. Based on preliminary studies, this study formulates the following hypothesis: H1: Transformational leadership has positive influence on innovative work behavior

Transformational Leadership and Psychological Safety

Transformational leaders provide intellectual stimulation which is an important characteristic of organizational communication (Rizka, Mahendro Sumardjo, & Iwan Kresna Setiadi, 2022). That is, transformational leaders could anticipate the emergence of negative sentiments that potentially become barriers to communication. A leader with a transformational leadership style is able to understand the individual differences of his subordinates. The reason is, every human being is a unique individual. One way to understand everyone is to listen. Good leaders can keep lines of communication open so that members feel free to share ideas to suggestions and criticism. With two-way communication as well, leaders can directly provide support or appreciation for the achievements and growth of their members. They can also directly pay special attention to the needs of everyone. Xie, Wu, and Song (2022) study revealed that transformational leaders gain trust and respect from employees because of support for resources, consistency and competency of the leader. Employees feel that leaders are competent to seek fair solutions when conflicts occur between employees. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H2: Transformational leadership has a positive influence on psychological safety.

Transformational Leadership and Friendship at Work

Transformational leadership is closely related to issues such as teamwork, organizational effectiveness, personnel satisfaction with supervisors, and perceived group performance. Transformational leaders encourage employees to thrive, including building a healthy communication climate. Employees are encouraged to interact and

work together to find solutions to problems. Previous research has found that transformational leadership positively influences the development of friendships in the workplace (Kohan, Safari, & Teimouri, 2018). Transformational leadership seeks to encourage teamwork. They put the interests of the company above personal interests while ensuring that all employees work well together. That is why this leadership encourages openness, honesty, and mutual understanding. Lee & Chon (2021) concluded that transformational leadership could generate communication inside and outside the organization and construct solid emotional bonds between employees. Based on previous studies, this research proposed hypothesis:

H3: Transformational leadership has a positive influence on friendship at work.

Psychological Safety and Innovative work Behavior

Psychological safety is the feeling of safety perceived by employees when they decide to take risks at work. Employees who have psychological safety are more open in communication, improving involvement and generating creative ideas (Cao & Zhang, 2020). An increasingly dynamic work environment can threaten the physical and mental health of employees if they feel psychologically insecure. Therefore, organizations that want to succeed need to create a culture that can facilitate innovation and good team collaboration that allows every employee to dare to take risks in the work environment. Research on psychological safety has been widely discussed in the SME field. For example, Andersson, Moen, and Brett (2020) stated that employees are more creative when the SMEs managers guarantees their freedom of expression. Psychological safety has an impact on increasing self-confidence to implement new ideas as a solution to problems at work (Chen, Wadei, Bai, & Liu, 2020). In addition, research also argued that the higher the psychological safety, the higher the involvement of employees in making new products (Harvey, Johnson, Roloff, & Edmondson, 2019). In other words, psychological safety can increase employee innovative behavior. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H4: Psychological safety has a positive influence on innovative work behavior

Friendship at Work and Innovative Work Behavior

Research on friendship at work is growing (Ahmad, Ishaq, & Raza, 2023). Several previous studies have proven that friendship at work can increase employee productivity and happiness at work (Badri, Yap, & Ramos, 2022; Guohao, Pervaiz, & Qi, 2021). Other research also reveals that friendship can encourage knowledge sharing behavior (Helmy, Adawiyah, & Banani, 2019). The accumulation of knowledge gained through friendship activities can trigger the emergence of new ideas that are important for new product and services development. Close friends at work are one of the most important factors for overall success and happiness at work. Forging strong friendships with colleagues in the office can improve everything in many areas, from health and well-being to everyday productivity and creative thinking. However, friendship also has negative impacts on organizations such as the emergence of jealousy, gossip, and unproductive behavior (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Therefore it is important for management to manage friendship in the workplace to prevent deviations that are detrimental to the company (Tjadi, Rawis, Londa, & Lengkong, 2021). This study proposes a hypothesis:

H5: Friendship at work has a positive influence on innovative work behavior.

Psychological Safety and Workplace Friendship

The previous study supports the role of psychological safety in fostering friendship at work. The higher the psychological safety employees feel, the greater the possibility of building beyond just co-workers' relationships. Psychological safety describes the employee's perception of the consequences of his actions in taking risks interpersonally (Harvey et al., 2019). Psychological safety as an important factor in understanding

individual behavior, namely the behavior of the courage to take risks for the good of learning during changing conditions (Andersson et al., 2020). Psychological safety provides employees with the flexibility to communicate in the workplace. When employees feel psychologically safe, they can express their creativity, personal opinions, and thoughts related to their work to increase their involvement (Kepramareni & Pradnyawati, 2021). In addition to this involvement, it will encourage high levels of interaction between employees. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H6 : Psychological safety has a positive influence on workplace friendship.

Mediating Role of Psychological Safety and Workplace Friendship

This research examines the mediating effect of psychological safety in the relationship between transformational leadership and IWB. Previous research has placed psychological safety as a variable that mediates innovative behavior (Hoang et al., 2022; Liu, Huang, Kim, & Na, 2023). This study assumes that transformational leadership can increase employee psychological safety, which in turn can encourage them to perform innovative work behavior. This study proposes a hypothesis:

H7: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior.

Furthermore, work friendship is also proposed as a mediator between transformational leadership and IWB. The concept of friendship in the workplace is vital in improving innovative employee behavior. Previous research has stated that friendship at work is an effective channel for fostering employees' innovative work behavior (Helmy et al., 2020; Zhao, Yi, & Chen, 2022). This study argues that transformational leadership can trigger the growth of friendship bonds in the workplace and, in turn, will impact the development of innovative behavior.

H7: Workplace friendship mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted by surveying employees working in the creative industry in Kebumen, Central Java. The creative industries in this study are focused on the food and beverages, craft and fashion businesses. A total of 235 employees were involved in the survey, which was conducted from December 2022 to January 2023. Consultants assisted in the survey of this study from Central Java PLUT and Kebumen PLUT.

Variables in the research model were tested using a survey instrument with a 5-point Likert scale, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Transformational leadership variables are measured using a 7-item instrument developed by (Carless, Wearing, & Mann (2000). The psychological safety variable is measured by the 6 item scale used by Edmondson (1999). Furthermore, the friendship at work variable uses 6 items developed by Helmy et al., (2020) and the IWB variable uses a 6 item scale developed by Scot and Bruce (1994).

RESULTS

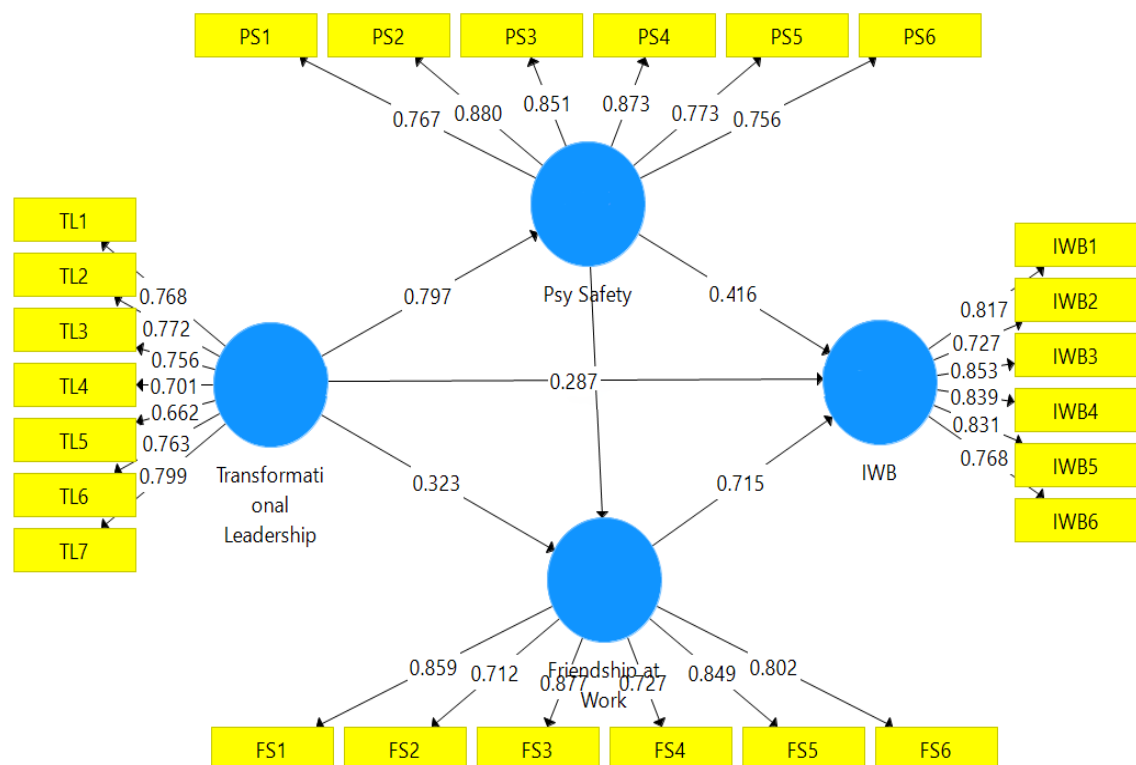
Data analysis in this study used the Smart PLS version 3.0. The data analyses are divided into two stages, beginning with measurement model assessment and structural model assessment. The model measurement test or also known as the outer model aims to specify the relationship between latent variables and their indicators. This outer model test uses the help of the PLS Algorithm procedure. The analysis phase in the outer model is measured using validity and reliability testing. Second stage, structural model or inner

model is used to predict causal relationships (causation relationships) between latent variables or variables that cannot be measured directly. The structural model (inner model) describes the causal relationship between latent variables that has been built based on the substance of the theory. In the structural model test (inner model) using the help of Bootstrapping procedures. Tests on the structural model were carried out to examine the relationship between latent constructs

Measurement Model Assessment

The testing of the outer or measurement model aims to examine the validity and reliability of the constructs in the research model. The measurement construct must fulfill convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability.

Figure 1. Measurement Model Analysis



Based on the figure 1, it is known that the loading factor value for all items are above 0.7 which complete convergent validity for all variable construct. Tabel 1 describes the result of construct reliability, composite reliability and discriminant validity. According to the table 1. the composite reliability value of 0.8 indicates that the data has high reliability. Furthermore, discriminant validity can be tested by comparing the CR square root value of AVE with the correlation value between constructs. From the table above it can be seen that the square root value of AVE (bold text) is greater than the correlation of each construct. The results of this test show that the data analysis carried out has fulfilled the assumptions of the feasibility of the measurement model which consists of convergent validity, composite reliability and characteristic validity.

Table 1. Construct Reliability, Composite Reliability and Discriminant Validity

Constructs	CA	CR	AVE	FW	IWB	PS	TL
Friendship at Work (FW)	0.891	0.918	0.651	0.807			
IWB (IWB)	0.892	0.918	0.651	0.709	0.819		
Psychological Safety (PS)	0.875	0.907	0.622	0.772	0.718	0.813	
Transformational Leadership (TL)	0.835	0.874	0.501	0.733	0.749	0.797	0.807

Structural Model Assessment

Table 2. shows that transformational leadership significantly affects IWB ($\beta=0.287$, $\alpha < 0.05$), thus providing acceptance for H1. Transformational leadership also shared significant influence both on psychological safety ($\beta = 0.797$, $\alpha < 0.00$) and friendship at work ($\beta = 0.323$, $\alpha < 0.05$); thus, H2 and H3 are supported. This study also claimed that psychological safety ($\beta= 0.416$, $\alpha < 0.000$) and friendship at work ($\beta = 0.715$, $\alpha < 0.000$) have significant effects on IWB. We conclude that H4 and H5 are supported. In addition, H6, which connects psychological safety and friendship, is supported ($\beta = 0.515$, $\alpha < 0.05$). Furthermore, this present study also tested mediating effect of psychological safety and friendship at work. The result indicated that both psychological safety ($\beta= 0.341$, $\alpha < 0.003$) and friendship at work ($\beta= 0.423$, $\alpha < 0.003$) channel the relationship between transformational leadership and IWB, thus support H7 and H8.

Table. 2 Structural Model Assessment

Variables	Path Coefficient	SD	t-Statistics	Sig.	Hypothesis
Transformational Leadership -> IWB	0.287	0.128	2.25	0.025	H1: Supported
Transformational Leadership -> Psychological Safety	0.797	0.037	21.379	0.000	H2: Supported
Transformational Leadership -> Friendship at Work	0.323	0.106	3.06	0.002	H3: Supported
Psychological Safety -> IWB	0.416	0.095	4.334	0.000	H4: Supported
Friendship at Work → IWB	0.715	0.095	7.537	0.000	H5: Supported
Psychological Safety → Friendship at Work	0.515	0.112	4.603	0.000	H6: Supported
Specific Indirect effect					
Transformational Leadership -> Friendship at Work -> IWB	0.341	0.14	2.435	0.003	H7: Supported
Transformational Leadership -> Psy Safety -> IWB	0.423	0.09	4.701	0.000	H8: Supported

Note: TL= Transformational Leadership; COM= Compensation; WE=Work Engagement; WP= Work Performance.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine the direct effect of transformational leadership on IWB and investigate potential indirect effects through psychological safety and workplace friendship as mediating variables. The test results show that transformational leadership significantly affects innovative work behavior. This study demonstrates that transformational leaders can shape employees' innovative behavior in the workplace. Leaders who provide intellectual stimulation and are open to change can inspire employees to develop creative ideas. Transformational leaders can stimulate employees to solve problems carefully and rationally. In addition, transformational leaders will encourage employees to solve problems effectively and efficiently, encouraging individuals to be more innovative. The results of the analysis also indicate that in the context of small business, transformational leaders tend to empower employees that in turn, improves innovative work behavior. Leader encourages employees to involve in business strategy and build cooperation at works.

Furthermore, transformational leadership has a positive effect on psychological safety. One of the characteristics of transformational leadership is individualized consideration. This means that a transformational leader can understand individual character differences in each of his employees. In this case, the transformational leader will hear every aspiration from employees and be able to see the needs of each member. Furthermore, transformational leaders support and recognize employees to be involved in formulating the company strategy and transfer dignified values that. This ability is important to foster employees' trust which will ultimately foster psychological safety.

The result also found the positive connection between transformational leadership and friendship at work. A transformational leader has a focus on building an organizational culture where everyone in it will help each other to achieve common goals. For example, transformational leaders empower employees and encourage them to cooperate. influencing friendships in the workplace. Small businesses adopt more informal organizational practices, including communication patterns. Employees interact in the workplace informally. This informality factor encourages individual employees to establish friendly relations at work. Transformational leaders in small business are more open to managing the company. Leaders inspire employees to coordinate with each other at work, for example, by conducting knowledge sharing. This activity triggers the growth of friendly relations in the workplace.

Psychological safety has a significant mediating effect in bridging the connection between transformational leadership and IWB. Employees with high psychological safety feel supported to adopt creative alternative working methods. The results of this analysis indicate that transformational leaders can encourage employees to continue to change with their creative ideas. Meanwhile, the implementation of creative ideas requires the support of resources and at the same time attaches the risk of failure to the detriment of the company. Therefore, the role of psychological safety is important so that employees are not afraid to come up with new ideas and only carry out orders from their superiors.

Friendship at work is also confirmed to have a significant mediating effect on the transformational leadership and IWB relationship. As previously explained that innovative behavior is not only about generating new ideas, but how these ideas are implemented in the workplace. Implementation can be realized in the form of work methods or new product designs. To implement IWB, it requires support from all members of the organization, including colleagues at work. This support is higher when workers are involved in friendly relations. In the context of small businesses, the results of this study indicate that transformational leaders are able to stimulate the growth of

friendship in the workplace. Leaders can inspire employees to interact positively and be friendly with each other. Therefore, this study conclude that Transformational leaders can create a friendly work climate that supports innovative employee behavior.

This research revealed the significant effect of psychological safety and friendship at work. This connection indicates that the more employee feels psychological safety, they tend to create friendship relation with others. Psychological safety provides employees feeling of confidence and trust, particularly when they are taking a risk at work or proposing a new idea that probably impacts a disadvantage for organization. This research revealed the significant effect of psychological safety and friendship at work. This connection indicates that the more employees feel psychological safety, they tend to create friendships with others. Psychological safety gives employees confidence and trust, particularly when taking a risk at work or proposing a new idea that may be a disadvantage for the organization. Psychological safety also motivates employees to build positive interactions with other employees. Every employee needs support, feedback, and backers for their work. Working in a small business, the leader often takes many things into decision-making. Thus, psychological safety becomes essential in empowering employees to produce more innovative ideas.

CONCLUSION

According to the research investigation, this study concludes that transformational leadership significantly positively affects innovative work behavior. The more the leader has a transformational characteristic, the more employees are motivated to perform innovative work behavior. This study also successfully tested the mediating model in the connection between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior. Psychological safety and friendship at work significantly mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative work behavior. A transformational leader can improve employees' psychological safety and nurture a friendly work environment, encouraging employees innovative work behavior.

This study also provides an alternative model to resolve research gaps in previous literature. This research found that psychological safety and workplace friendship can bridge the relationship between transformational leadership and IWB. Practically, this research provides insight for leaders to provide psychological support to employees and nurture friendship in the workplace to increase innovative work behavior. A leader in a small business should perform transformational characteristics. We also suggest that SMEs manager provide employees with psychological safety and enable workplace friendship in the business organization.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors state that there is no potential conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

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