

Abusive Supervision and Employee Creativity: The Mediating Effect of Role Identification and Organizational Support

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Abstract

Enhancing employee creativity is one of the biggest challenges for organizations because business environments are fast-paced and extremely competitive. Employee creativity is the extent to which employees can solve problems through concrete and creative solutions, and generate novel business and operations ideas to improve productivity, competitiveness and business performance. The extant literature shows a big proportion of studies examining the effect of the positive aspects of leadership, such as transformational leadership, on employee creativity, and rarely relating to abusive leadership. This study, thus, aims to fill a gap. Building on the theory of organizational climate, this study proposes role identification and organizational support to mediate the relationship between abusive leadership and employee creativity. The aim of this study is twofold; to test the negative relationship between abusive leadership and employee creativity, and to examine the mediating roles of role identification and organizational support in the dynamics of interest. A self-administered survey tool was employed in this study for data collection, which draws the participation of three hundred and fifty-four corporate employees, both general employees and management staff of twelve companies involved in the information technology industry located in Beijing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Nanjing, and Shenzhen. The study found that abusive supervision negatively influenced role identity and organizational support. Role identification partially mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational support. While organizational support mediated the relationship between role identification and employee creativity, the negative effect of abusive supervision on employee creativity influenced role identification and organizational support. Creativity was found to have a mediating effect on role identification and organizational support through abusive supervision in the relational pathway. Thus, the study found inconsistent effects of abusive supervision on employee creativity, mediating role identification and organizational support, and explored role identity theory to inform the study of employee creativity.

Keywords: Employee Creativity; Role Identification; Organizational Support; Abusive Supervision.

Introduction

The creativity of employees is intrinsic to the development and competition of the company (Shalley, 1991), and this factor is also involved in the formation of original and practical services (Amabile et al., 2004). Employee creativity is an indispensable part of innovation, including new idea generation and implementation of these new ideas (Shalley, 1991). Therefore, many scholars and practitioners have begun focusing on improving employee creativity. Antecedents of employee creativity have revealed that the leader's positive behavior is an essential condition precursor of employee creativity (Farmer et al., 2003), such as empowering leadership (Zhang & Bartol, 2010), global leadership (Chi & Liang, 2013) and leader-member exchange (Liu et al., 2012). Nevertheless, rarely studies have disclosed that disruptive leadership is associated with employee creativity. According to Brem and Utikal (2019), it is necessary to prove the impact of negative contextual factors on employees' cognition and behavior. There are other studies that have determined the significance to demonstrate that work environment characteristics affect employee creativity (Aslam et al., 2015; Choi et al., 2009). In summary, the literature on the dark side of leadership as it relates to employee creativity will contribute to the evolution of theory and the development of identification of managerial implications.

The current literature has given partial attention to the abuse of supervision and has focused on it as the dark side of leadership, interpreted as employees' perceptions of supervisors engaging in hostile behaviors, verbal or nonverbal, during working hours, not including physical aggression (Tepper, 2000). Meanwhile, a study suggests that leaders are more likely to commit abusive supervisory behaviors when they possess higher organizational status and decision-making power (Tepper et al., 2009). Most scholars believe that abusing supervision may lead to negative psychological attitudes and behaviors among employees, such as emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression, mental illness, avoidance, and replacement (Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2000). Yet, few studies have examined its impact on employee performance through abusive supervision, such as studies on employee creativity (Alkayid et al., 2022; Chesbrough et al., 2006; Darroch & McNaughton, 2002). Furthermore, some scholars argue that abusive supervision negatively affects employees' creativity (Liu et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2016; Mackey et al., 2015). Meanwhile, other scholars have suggested that the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity exhibits an inverted U-shaped effect (Herstatt & Von Hippel, 1992; Yeşil et al., 2013). Therefore, the relationship between abusive supervision and creativity of subordinate's needs is being defined by further detailed studies.

Additionally, there is still much to learn for this study about how abusive supervision affects employee creativity (Baker & Sinkula, 2002). Among the studies that have verified the effect of abusive supervision by leaders on employee creativity, there are barely any studies that emphasize the effect of psychological mechanisms on employee creativity being influenced by abusive supervision (Liu et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2016; Mackey et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). Henle and Gross (2014) examines how abusive supervision might generate an employee' self-role evaluation that is not satisfying, and feeling pressure, anxiety, pain, and other negative emotions. This study suggests that role identification represents "member value and affective meaning perception," and organization identification is the proxy of "paranoid cognition," which shows employees' emotional and cognitive replay to the leader's abusive supervision.

Research Objectives

1. The study explains the impact of abusive supervision by leaders on employee creativity, which also revalidates the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity in the context of power distance.
2. The underlying mechanisms of role identification with the organization demonstrates that perspectives in abusive supervision are related to employee creativity. A hostile work environment perspective was explained in terms of employee creativity.
3. The study suggests a persistence model to find the role of both mediators.

The approach differs from prior studies by adopting the additive process model (Lim & Choi, 2009), which is an important recent model of employee role identification when subjected to abusive supervision by leaders.

Literature review

Abusive Supervision and Employee Creativity

Most studies have focused on the relationship between positive leader behaviors and employee creativity. Hirst et al. (2009), for example, reported that harmonious leaders positively influence employee creativity, while they have abundant resources to protect. Nevertheless, Zhang and Bartol (2010) found that empowered leaders were positively associated with employee creativity through role identification, creative psychological motivation, and conservation of resources. Wu et al. (2014) found that empowering leadership increases employee creativity despite bilateral interaction avoidance and interaction mistrust in leaders as creatively self-identified. Moreover, Tranfield et al. (2003) discovered that a leadership style characterized by friendliness enhances the creativity of employees who have high creative role identity and job autonomy. Yoshida et al. (2014) demonstrates that interaction with leadership influences employee creativity and mediates the positive relationship between leader identification and innovation. By employing the trickle-down model,

Though most studies focus on the positive or empowering side of leadership, there is equally a negative or dark aspect of leadership, and the notable one is known as abusive leadership. Subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in persistent displays of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact, are known to reflect the existence of abusive leadership (Tepper, 2000). Gumusluoglu and Ilsev (2009) validated that abusive supervision hinders employee creativity. In addition, Zhou and Oldham (2001) noted that the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity can be negatively influenced by psychological motivation. Besides, Ramamoorthy et al. (2005) suggested that abusive supervision by leaders can have an inverted U-shaped effect on employee creativity, demonstrating a latest explanation of the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity (Hao & Yu, 2022). Accordingly, the study further investigates the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity and discloses how abusive supervision by leaders leads to employee creativity through role identification and organizational support. Thus, the hypothesis is proposed that:

H1. Abusive supervision is negatively affecting employee creativity.

The Mediating of Work Role Identification

As an essential component of social identity, job role identification is included in the organization's unified knowledge (Lee et al., 2015; Shujahat et al., 2020). Assuming that the employees feel that the leaders are indifferent to them, do not trust them, and perhaps even be

verbally abused by them, in this case, the employees will consider that the attitude of the leaders is identical to the attitude of the organization, which will lead to a decrease in the employees' sense of belonging and identification with the organization (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Tan, 2023). Based on the theory of organizational climate, this paper analyzes the role of identification of employees and finds that organizational communication plays a positive role in the role identification of employees (Smidts et al., 2001). Additionally, the interpersonal dimension of the organizational atmosphere positively enhances job role identification (Farmer et al., 2003). Moreover, Elenkov (2002) indicated that transformation leadership has a positive relationship with organizational identity, and leadership support positively affects job role identification (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2017). Thus, based on the literature, it appears that there is a significant relationship between organizational atmosphere, constructive leadership, abusive supervision, and job role identity (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Brown and Leigh (1996) noted that employees are more engaged if the organization gives them adequate job status, even if they are not supervised. Their study also suggests that employees should choose a relaxed work environment, even if the employer pays less than the supervised work environment. Indeed, Hou et al. (2011) found that employee creativity through the individual perception of the interaction of internal and external environmental factors. Khan and Abbas (2022) pointed out that individual differences in the cognitive process partially mediate an organizational context and employee creativity. In addition, Zhang et al. (2020) believed that job role identification significantly influences employee creativity. Based on the literature evidence, the hypothesizes are proposed that role identification, which is a cognitive factor as illuminated by the theory of organizational climate, can significantly and positively influence employee creativity, and it also mediates the relationship between abusive leadership and employee creativity.

H2. Abusive supervision is negatively related to role identification.

H3. Role identification positively influences employee creativity.

H4. Role identification mediates the relation between abusive supervision with employee creativity.

The Mediating of Organization Support

Organizational support is the degree to which employees perceive that the organization values the contributions of employees and provides benefits (Eisenberger et al., 1986). A sense of organizational support enhances employees' social exchange value, strengthens their sense of mission to the organization, and allows them to devote more resources to their work, thus helping to achieve the organization's goals and contribute in return (Suifan et al., 2018). Akgunduz et al. (2018) pointed out that organizational support positively affects employees' positive behavior. Tsai et al. (2015) also note that organizational support was positively associated with employee creativity. Organizational support enables employees to receive emotional, technical, task and interpersonal support (Rhoades et al., 2001). Mumford & Shah (1989) argued that employee creativity is enhanced when members receive job and social support, while Suifan et al. (2018) stated that organizational support mediates the relationship between global leadership and employee creativity. Carey et al. (2013) investigated that perceived organizational support positively moderates the effect of job demands on employee creativity. As can be seen, employees with high perceived organizational support under work pressure are more likely to stimulate employee creativity. Therefore, organizational support is one of the important influencing factors on employees' creativity (Suifan et al., 2018). Moreover, Nelson (1975) pointed out that social recognition and motivate positive behaviors, but also change the beliefs and attitudes of other employees and stimulate their employee

creativity. Therefore, based on the above research review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Organization support positively influence employee creativity.

H6. Organization support mediates the effect of role identification on employee creativity.

H7. Abusive supervision influence employee creativity and is mediated by role identification and organizational support.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, the conceptual framework of the study is shown in Fig.1.

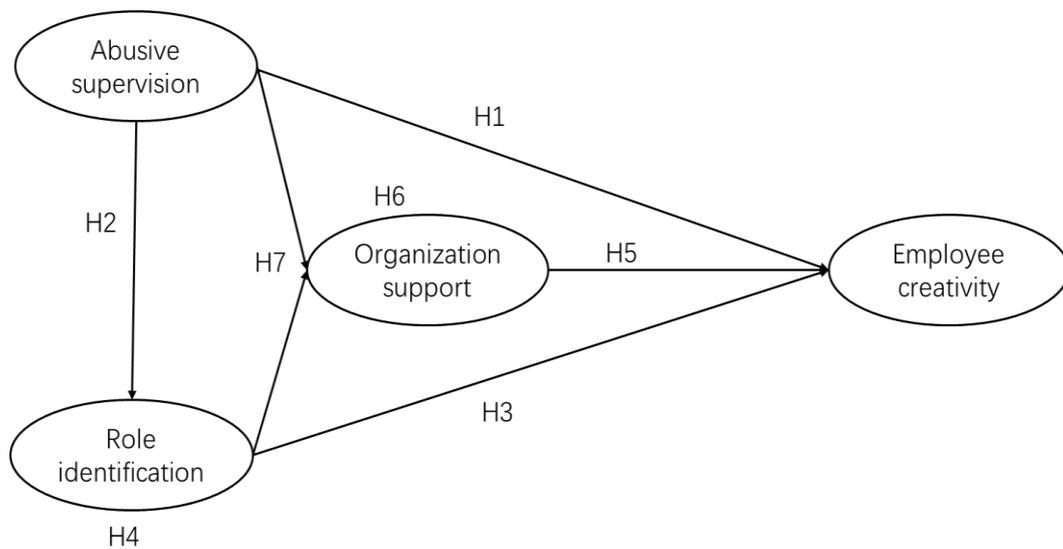


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

The study utilized a quantitative analysis method, and a corresponding questionnaire was designed for data collection through literature analysis. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts. The first part was basic information and included all control variables, which were: gender, age, marital status, education, family members, income and occupation. The second part contains measures of all variables, including the Abuse Supervision Scale, which consists of 10 items. The Role Identification Scale, which includes 5 items. Organizational Support Scale, which contains 3 items; and Employee Creativity Scale, which contains 4 items. The second part had a total of 22 questions. A Likert five-point scale was adopted (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The data was analyzed by utilizing SEM model.

Data Collection

The study employed a random sample of 354 corporate employees (including general employees and management staff) as the study subjects, and a total of 12 companies participated in the survey, distributed in five cities which are Beijing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Nanjing, and Shenzhen. The 12 companies involve in the information technology industry. The authors ensured the authenticity and validity of the data by using on-site surveys and collecting

questionnaires. First, members of the research team will instruct respondents to fill out the questionnaire correctly after on-site tutoring. Second, the collected questionnaires are screened, and questionnaires with incomplete or identical answers are considered invalid. A total of 400 questionnaires were sent out in the sample collection process, and 354 valid questionnaires were returned, with a valid return rate of 88.5%. The study also followed the sample size criteria developed by Green (1991), with a sample size of 5-10 times the number of questionnaire items that is suitable for structural equation modeling (see also Tan and Srivastava, 2022).

Measurement

The scale for abusive supervision was referenced from Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) based on Tepper (2000) study. After adopting the 15 items of the Abusive Management Scale, 10 items with good validity and reliability were retained. Items from Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) are opted such as "My boss ridicules my ideas as stupid" and "My boss criticizes me in front of other colleagues.", "My supervisor ignores my feelings." The role identification scale was adapted from the study by Smidts et al. (2001). A five-item recognition scale of the Role Recognition Scale was developed. For example: "My workplace makes me feel prouder", "My workplace gives me a strong sense of belonging", and "My workplace makes me feel safe". The organizational support scale is referenced from Siemsen et al. (2010) study. Organizational support is composed of job support, employee value recognition, and caring interest factors. The sample items were "promoting promotion opportunities", "making employees feel satisfied with their jobs", and "matching employees with the right jobs". The Employee Creativity Scale was developed as a four-item scale with reference to Farmer et al. (2003) study. It covers questions such as "He or she solves problems through concrete and creative solutions"; "He or she can come up with innovative ideas to change the current environment". Control variables such as age, gender, and education are opted based on existing literature suggestions (Zahra & George, 2002).

Research Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlation of the collected data. While it shows that abusive supervision is negatively related to employee creativity ($\gamma = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$). Employee creativity positive relations with role identification ($\gamma = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation of the Collected Data

	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Age	354	1.33	0.47						
Gender	354	1.45	0.65	0.18**					
Education	354	2.22	0.66	-0.03	-0.28**				
Abusive Supervision	354	2.25	1.03	-0.12*	0.02	-0.25**			
Role Identification	354	4.23	0.91	-0.11*	0.04	-0.02	-0.13**		
Organization Support	354	4.31	1.01	-0.10*	0.08	-0.04	-0.23**	0.52**	
Employee Creativity	354	4.34	0.99	-0.05	-0.07	-0.05	-0.34**	0.38**	0.29**

Notes: * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$

Although the significant direct effect of abusive supervision on employee creativity was not designed to test for mediating effects (Liu et al., 2012), the direct relationship of SD in this study preceded the hypothesis to validate the structural model. Similar to previous studies (e.g.,

($\beta=-0.53, p<0.01$); (Liu et al., 2012)), this study showed a significant relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity ($\gamma=-0.18, p<0.01$) after controlling for employee gender, age, education, and position. Outside of the control variables, abusive supervision accounted for 3.0% of the variance in creativity. Thus, the item is whether the relationship is mediated by role identity and organizational support, as suggested by this study.

The study tested the structural equation model several times. Following the explanatory process of Zhang and Bartol (2010), the effects of the control variables (gender, age, and education) represented in this study were derived by testing multiple times a structural model of equality. First, the baseline model of the study was the a priori model (Model 1), which tested the hypothesized relationships between all new variables. Second, this study summarizes the direct paths from abuse of supervision to role identity and organizational support, role identity to organizational support, and role identity and organizational support to creativity (Table 2 demonstrates the explanations about the model and the model information criteria).

Table 2. Multi-level Model Comparisons

Model	Structure	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	χ^2/df	RSMEA	SRMR	CFI	AIC	BIC
1		321.34	114		2.89	0.069	0.053	0.954	406.44	554.11
2		335.43	116	7.34**	2.97	0.067	0.064	0.951	411.17	563.23
3		411.32	116	92.54**	3.94	0.068	0.121	0.958	489.54	645.12
4		321.15	116	1.09**	2.87	0.069	0.056	0.948	405.65	564.12

Notes: Control variables are not for ease of presentation AS is a representative of abusive supervision, RI is a representative of role identification, OS is a representative of organization support, and CR is a representative of employee creativity.

Table 3 shows the unstandardized path coefficients and indirect effects in the multilevel model. As seen in Table 3, abusive supervision has a negative effect on both role identification ($\gamma= -0.421, p<0.01$) and organizational support ($\gamma= -0.154, p<0.01$), while role identification has a positive effect on organizational identification ($\gamma= 0.401, p<0.01$). The Sobel test showed that there was no significant effect of indirect effect from abusive supervision to role identification visa organizational support for role identification on creativity and therefore, not support. Moreover, role identification has a positive effect on employee creativity ($\gamma= -0.144, p<0.01$). The test results also indicated a significant indirect effect from creativity to organizational support through role identification ($\gamma= -0.101, p<0.01$). Lastly, the indirect effect of abusive supervision on creativity through role identification and organizational support and then through organizational support was significant ($\gamma= -0.105, p<0.01$). The study further validated the second model (Model 2). By removing the direct pathway from abusive supervision to organizational support in Model 1, role identity was either a partial or full mediator of the relationship between abusive supervision and role identification (e.g., assessing a full mediation model). Model 2 shows a lower adaptive result than model 1 ($\chi^2(df = 1)=7.34, p<0.01$). It produced better informative metrics (see Table 3), indicating that the mediating relationship between abusive supervision and organizational support did not weigh the full relationship between the two variables. Thus, role identification partially mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational support. In addition,

this study tested whether role identification was independent in influencing creativity and removed the direct path from role identification to organizational support from model 1. Since the third model (model 3) also had lower adaptation results than model 1, by testing the results from ($\chi^2 - Test, \chi^2(df = 1) = 92.54, p < 0.001$), and better information criteria (see Table 2).

Table 3. Unstandardized Path Coefficients and Indirect Effects in Multi-Level Models

Structural path	Unstandardized path coefficients			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
AS → RI	-0.421**	-0.421**	-0.445**	-0.422**
AS → OS	-0.154**	-	-0.311**	-0.124**
RI → OS	0.401**	0.416**	-	0.382**
RI → CR	0.034	0.048	0.052	-
OS → CR	0.144**	0.231**	0.273***	0.322**
Indirect effects (Sobel Test)				
AS → RI → OS	-0.122**	-0.171**	-	-0.171**
RI → OS → CR	0.101**	-0.117**	-	0.125**
AS → RI → OS → CR	-0.105**	-0.079**	-	-0.091**

Finally, the results thus far showed that the baseline model (Model 1) had a better model adapt than the inventory models (Models 2 and 3). The data from this model support a negative relationship between abusive supervision and role identification and organizational support, as well as a partial mediating effect of role identification on abusive supervision-organizational support. H4 is not supported because the path coefficients for the link between role identification and creativity in models 1, 2, and 3 are incomplete or significantly different. The data support a positive relationship between organizational support and creativity. In summary, these data provide support for H6, and this study explains that organizational support fully mediates the relationship between role identity and creativity. To further validate the data on H6, this study examined a fourth model (Model 4) that removed the direct path from role identity to creativity from Model 1. Model 4 was not significantly different from the model and produced a lower standard of information (see Table 2). Based on the principles of model parsing, model 4 was preferred. Sobel test showed that model 4 produced a significant indirect effect from role identity to creativity through organizational support (indirect effect=0.125, $p < 0.01$). Thus, the data show that it fully mediates the role identification-creativity relations (H6). In addition, Sobel's tests suggested that Model 4 produced significant indirect effects from abusive supervision to organizational support via role identification (indirect effect=-0.171, $p < 0.01$) and from abusive supervision to creativity by role identification via organizational support (indirect effect=-0.091, $p < 0.01$).

Discussions

The aim of this study is twofold; to test the negative relationship between abusive leadership and employee creativity, and to examine the mediating roles of role identification and organizational support in the dynamics of interest. The main findings of this study reveal

that abusive leadership has a negative impact on employee creativity. These results are consistent with those of previous research which found the negative impact of abusive leadership on the creativity of employees (Liu et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2020). Liu et al. (2016) identify that the psychological safety, which is a kind of organizational communication climate, can shape organizational identification, and mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity. Employees may find it challenging to get feedback from their boss and may limit their feedback seeking behavior, or simply avoid getting feedback when superiors are untrustworthy, unsupportive, and belittle their subordinates (Shen et al., 2020).

This study extends by anchoring on the theory of organizational climate, and proposes that role identification with the organization can positively and significantly influence the employees' perceptions of organization support, and in turn, alleviate the negative impact of abusive supervision on employee creativity. When employees feel they have the job support of the organization, and receive employee value recognition and caring interest of the organization, they tend to exhibit higher level of creativity, and mediate the relationship between abusive leadership and employee creativity. Organizational support can reflect that the organization promotes distributive and procedural justice, which gives the employees a psychological comfort and more favorable perception towards abusive leadership (Akram et al., 2021). The mediating role of role identification is also consistent with the concept of negotiation style fitness as role identification advocated by Tan (2023).

Thus, we contribute to the abusive leadership and creativity literatures through the theory of organizational climate. Specifically, in realizing the negative impact of abusive leadership on employee creativity, this study suggests that role identification and organizational support can serve as to develop positive organizational climate to cushion and alleviate the negative impact of abusive supervision on employee creativity.

Implications

On an academic level, abusive supervision negatively affects employee creativity in the context of power distance. The data suggests that abusive leadership affects employees' creativity. On the other hand, other characteristics can also influence leaders' negative attitudes toward employee innovation. The results are in line with the study of Yeoh and Mahmood (2013). Unlike earlier studies, the study proposes that aggressive supervision inhibits employee creativity. In this study, abusive supervisors limited employee creativity because they were more affected by power fluctuations. In this power shift, abusive leadership may hinder employee innovation (Loi & Ngo, 2010). Subsidiarily, this study examined the mediation mechanisms between abusive supervision and employee creativity using the Employee Emotional Events Model (Sarker et al., 2019). Finally, the process of abusing the emotional events and behavioral attitudes between supervision and employee creativity in the study also reveals the importance of cognition in the relationship between emotional events and employee creativity. Furthermore, the link between organizational support and employee creativity is more complex than expected. By employing McAllister's framework, this study identifies the mediating effects of role identity on organizational support and employee creativity.

On a practical level, the contribution of this study is that the findings related to the indirect effects of abusive supervision on employee creativity have practical implications. Abusive supervision reduces employee creativity. Organizations should reduce abusive supervision and stimulate employees' creativity. At the same time, organizations should pay attention to creating a good creative atmosphere, encouraging employees to pay attention to expanding interpersonal relationships, freely sharing work experiences, and conducting

adaptive psychological empowerment to enhance employees' sense of belonging. Organizations can organize regular emotional intelligence training for employees to improve their emotional control and application skills, reduce the impact of adverse emotional events, and strengthen the accumulation of employee knowledge and resources. Organizations can attach importance to rational thinking, improve work performance, and stimulate employee creativity. Balance organizational resources, allocate resources effectively, and optimize the resource structure. Reduce the power distance between leaders and employees, and fundamentally reduce the level of organizational awareness of power abuse. In addition, companies value employees with distinctive skills, build an excellent corporate culture, improve employee retention, and enhance employees' sense of social responsibility.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity, mediated via role identification and organizational support. The findings suggest that abusive supervision negatively affects role identification and organizational support, which in turn negatively impacts employee creativity. The study expands on the inconsistent effect of abusive supervision on employee creativity and provides a reference for the study of employee creativity. The study highlights the importance of organizational support and role identification in promoting employee creativity. Overall, the study emphasizes the need for organizations to address abusive supervision and promote a positive work environment to enhance employee creativity.

Limitations and Suggestions

Limitations of this study include the focus on person-level analysis, which may not fully reflect the impact of abusive supervision and role identification on organizational performance. Additionally, the study only surveyed employees in the information technology industry in four regions in eastern and southern China, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore the links between abusive supervision, employee creativity, job performance, and innovation performance more systematically. Combining job performance and employee creativity could be a promising direction for further research. Overall, the study provides several creative avenues for future research to discover more about the relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity.

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