

The Effect of Transformational Leadership on Employee Innovative Behavior: A Case Study Of County-Level Integrated Media Centers on the China-Vietnam Border

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ABSTRACT

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Transformational leadership has been widely recognized as a key driver of organizational innovation, yet its application in public-sector media organizations remains underexplored. This study examines the impact of transformational leadership on employee innovative behavior within county-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) along the China-Vietnam border. Using a mixed-method approach, this research identifies the direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership, emphasizing the mediating role of organizational identification. The findings reveal that transformational leadership fosters a culture of creativity and adaptability by enhancing intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation. The study further distinguishes transformational leadership from other leadership styles, such as transactional and empowering leadership, demonstrating its unique role in driving sustainable innovation. Additionally, the research offers practical recommendations for improving leadership practices in CIMCs, including targeted leadership development programs, digital transformation initiatives, and strategies to enhance organizational identification. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse by integrating social identity theory with leadership research and providing empirical insights into leadership-driven innovation in state-affiliated media institutions. Future research should explore the role of policy changes and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, in shaping leadership effectiveness in media organizations.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Employee Innovation, Media Organizations, Organizational Identification.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation is a critical driver of organizational sustainability and competitiveness, especially in knowledge-intensive industries such as media and communication (Anderson, Potočník, & Zhou, 2014). As digital transformation reshapes the global media landscape, fostering employee innovative behavior (EIB) has become a strategic imperative for

organizations aiming for long-term adaptability and resilience (Cai et al., 2018). Transformational leadership (TL), characterized by intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration, has been identified as a pivotal factor in promoting employee innovation by creating a supportive environment, enhancing intrinsic motivation, and encouraging a problem-solving mindset (Mittal & Dhar, 2015; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009).

While extensive research has explored the impact of transformational leadership in corporate and technology-driven sectors, its influence within public-sector media organizations, particularly county-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) in China, remains underexplored. CIMCs are essential platforms for local news dissemination and governmental communication, integrating digital tools with traditional broadcasting to improve regional information services (Yang et al., 2024). Since the implementation of China's media integration policy in 2018, over 2,500 CIMCs have been established to modernize media governance, leverage digital technologies, and enhance localized content production (Zhang et al., 2023).

Despite these policy-driven advancements, CIMCs face significant challenges in cultivating an innovative workforce and effectively navigating digital transformation. These challenges stem from organizational inertia, technological limitations, bureaucratic structures, and the necessity to balance editorial independence with state regulatory compliance (Zhang & Mora, 2023). Transformational leadership has the potential to address these issues by fostering a culture of innovation and strengthening employees' engagement in creative processes. However, empirical studies examining how transformational leadership influences innovation in this unique media context are limited, highlighting a critical research gap.

Existing literature suggests that transformational leadership encourages innovation by motivating employees to question traditional practices, experiment with new ideas, and undertake calculated risks (Mittal & Dhar, 2015; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). However, most studies have focused on corporate or high-tech environments, leaving a gap in understanding how transformational leadership fosters innovation in public-sector media organizations, where regulatory oversight and political constraints significantly influence decision-making (Lee, 2024).

Moreover, recent research emphasizes the role of organizational identification—a psychological state where employees align with their organization's values and objectives—as a key mediator in the relationship between leadership and innovation. Employees with strong organizational identification demonstrate higher intrinsic motivation, creativity, and collaborative behaviors, contributing to an innovation-driven work culture (Rast III, Hogg, & van Knippenberg, 2018). However, the extent to which organizational identification mediates the link between transformational leadership and employee innovative behavior in media organizations remains underexplored, especially in CIMCs, where employees must navigate complex state-imposed content regulations alongside digital transformation efforts.

Additionally, the effectiveness of transformational leadership in promoting innovation depends on organizational and environmental factors, such as institutional support for innovation, digital infrastructure, and regulatory constraints (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai, & Baker, 2014). Given that CIMCs operate under strict state oversight while striving for digital modernization, it is unclear whether transformational leadership can effectively promote innovation in this setting and what contextual factors may enhance or impede its impact.

To address these research gaps, this study investigates:

RQ1. What are the effects of transformational leadership on employee innovative behavior in county-level integrated media centers?

RQ2. How does organizational identification mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and employee innovative behavior?

RQ3. What environmental and organizational factors moderate the effectiveness of transformational leadership in fostering innovation in county-level media enterprises?

By exploring these questions, this study aims to extend transformational leadership theory within the context of public-sector media governance and contribute to the ongoing discourse on leadership, innovation, and digital transformation in media organizations.

This study offers three primary contributions to the literature on leadership, innovation, and media management:

1. Extending Transformational Leadership Theory

While prior research has extensively examined transformational leadership in corporate settings, limited studies have explored its application in public-sector media organizations. This study applies transformational leadership theory to CIMCs, providing insights into how leadership fosters media innovation in state-affiliated institutions.

2. Examining the Role of Organizational Identification

Drawing upon Social Identity Theory (Islam, 2014), this study explores how employees' organizational identification strengthens the impact of transformational leadership on innovation. By assessing the mediating role of organizational identification, the research provides empirical support for the psychological mechanisms that drive leadership-driven innovation.

3. Providing Policy and Management Insights for Media Leadership

Findings from this study will offer practical recommendations for media policymakers, managers, and leadership trainers to enhance organizational creativity, employee engagement, and digital transformation in media enterprises. By identifying key moderating factors, this research will inform the development of leadership training programs that align with the realities of media governance and state-controlled journalism.

By addressing both the theoretical and practical dimensions of transformational leadership within county-level integrated media centers, this study presents a comprehensive framework for fostering innovation, leadership effectiveness, and digital governance in China's evolving media landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational leadership has been widely studied in organizational behavior and leadership research due to its effectiveness in fostering employee motivation, engagement, and creativity (Sudibjo & Prameswari, 2021). Transformational leaders inspire employees by articulating a compelling vision, fostering intellectual stimulation, and encouraging innovative thinking (Fatin & Mazlan, 2023). Recent empirical studies confirm that transformational leadership enhances an organizational climate conducive to experimentation and risk-taking, which ultimately

promotes employee innovative behavior (Azinga et al., 2023). However, while transformational leadership has been extensively examined in corporate and technology-intensive sectors, its role in public-sector media organizations, particularly county-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) in China, remains underexplored.

Existing research identifies four core dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—all of which contribute to fostering employee innovation. Among these, intellectual stimulation plays a pivotal role in challenging employees to rethink conventional practices and explore novel solutions. Studies indicate that transformational leaders cultivate psychologically safe work environments where employees feel encouraged to take initiative and propose creative solutions without fear of failure. In highly regulated industries, such as media organizations, transformational leadership may be particularly valuable in mitigating bureaucratic constraints and promoting innovation through shared vision and participatory decision-making.

Organizational Identification as a Mediating Factor

Organizational identification, defined as the extent to which employees align their self-concept with their organization's mission and values, has been identified as a critical psychological mechanism influencing innovation. Employees with strong organizational identification are more likely to display higher intrinsic motivation, greater commitment to organizational goals, and increased discretionary effort in creative problem-solving.

Transformational leaders actively foster organizational identification by reinforcing a collective identity, fostering trust, and enhancing employees' sense of belonging. Recent studies suggest that organizational identification mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee innovative behavior, as employees who strongly identify with their organization are more inclined to engage in knowledge-sharing, initiate creative initiatives, and persist in innovation efforts despite challenges. However, the mediating role of organizational identification remains underexplored in media organizations, particularly in state-regulated environments, where top-down decision-making and ideological alignment requirements may influence employees' perceptions of leadership and innovation.

External Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Transformational Leadership

While transformational leadership is widely recognized as an enabler of innovation, its effectiveness is highly contingent upon external and organizational factors. Research suggests that a supportive innovation climate—characterized by psychological safety, autonomy, and leadership encouragement—facilitates leadership-driven innovation. However, in bureaucratic or highly regulated environments, such as state-affiliated media organizations, excessive performance pressures, rigid hierarchical structures, and compliance-driven policies may inhibit employees' ability to engage in creative problem-solving.

County-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) in China face unique socio-political constraints, where leadership must balance regulatory compliance with fostering an innovative workforce. These organizations often contend with limited financial resources, hierarchical decision-making structures, and evolving state policies on media governance. Although transformational leadership has been identified as a potential driver of innovation in media settings, its effectiveness is moderated by institutional support, technological infrastructure, and editorial autonomy. For

example, leaders in CIMCs may face challenges in implementing creative initiatives due to political oversight and bureaucratic inertia, raising concerns about whether transformational leadership alone is sufficient to drive innovation without structural and policy-level interventions.

Identified Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the growing body of research on transformational leadership and innovation, several key gaps remain unaddressed:

1. Limited Empirical Studies on Leadership-Driven Innovation in Media Organizations

While transformational leadership has been extensively examined in corporate and high-tech sectors, its application in public-sector media institutions, particularly CIMCs, remains underexplored.

Further empirical studies are needed to investigate how leadership dynamics influence innovation in state-controlled media environments.

2. Underexplored Role of Organizational Identification as a Mediator

Although organizational identification has been identified as a mediating factor in leadership-innovation relationships, its interaction with cultural, political, and structural elements in media organizations has not been sufficiently examined.

Understanding how employees' sense of belonging to CIMCs influences their engagement in innovation-driven activities requires further exploration.

3. Impact of External Environmental Factors on Leadership Effectiveness

Existing literature lacks comprehensive studies on how policy changes, digital transformation initiatives, and technological advancements moderate the leadership-innovation relationship in media organizations.

Future research should assess the extent to which regulatory frameworks shape leadership strategies in fostering innovation in CIMCs.

By addressing these gaps, this study advances transformational leadership research in the context of county-level integrated media centers, offering theoretical and practical insights into leadership strategies that enhance media innovation. Understanding how transformational leadership interacts with organizational identification, policy regulations, and external environmental factors will provide valuable guidance for media organizations navigating the complexities of digital transformation and regulatory compliance.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the relationship between transformational leadership and employee innovative behavior in county-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) along the China-Vietnam border. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches ensures both statistical generalizability and in-depth contextual exploration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). A sequential explanatory research design was employed, where an initial quantitative survey established statistical relationships among transformational leadership, organizational identification, and employee innovative behavior, followed by qualitative

interviews to further investigate underlying mechanisms (Bryman, 2016). This design allows for an initial broad examination of patterns through quantitative analysis, while qualitative insights provide a richer understanding of contextual influences on leadership and innovation.

Primary data were collected through an online and paper-based survey distributed to employees in county-level integrated media centers. A total of 368 employees, including journalists, editors, producers, and news anchors, participated in the study, ensuring representativeness across different professional roles through stratified random sampling (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The data collection period spanned from July 1 to July 30, 2024. The survey employed validated measurement instruments to assess key constructs: transformational leadership was measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) (Givens, 2008), covering four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Organizational identification was assessed using the scale developed by Parker & Haridakis (2008) and later refined by Egold & Van (2015), capturing employees' alignment with their organization's mission and values. Employee innovative behavior was evaluated using Janssen's (2000) scale, covering idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation. All survey items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to ensure response consistency and minimize potential bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

To complement the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected employees to capture diverse perspectives based on job roles, tenure, and leadership exposure (Tracy, 2024). The interview guide focused on perceptions of transformational leadership, organizational climate, and experiences with innovation. Interviews were conducted via online platforms and in-person meetings, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized (Surmiak, 2018).

The collected survey data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 24.0. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test hypothesized relationships, with model fit assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The following indices were used to evaluate model fit (Kline, 2023): comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ 0.90 , Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) ≥ 0.90 , and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) ≤ 0.08 . Mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping procedures as recommended by Hayes & Preacher (2013) to examine the indirect effects of organizational identification on the relationship between transformational leadership and employee innovative behavior.

To mitigate common method bias, several statistical procedures were implemented. Harman's single-factor test was performed to ensure that a single factor did not account for the majority of variance (Howard et al., 2024). Confirmatory factor analysis validated the distinctiveness of the latent constructs, ensuring that transformational leadership, organizational identification, and innovative behavior were conceptually and empirically separable. Temporal separation was applied in the questionnaire design to minimize respondents' tendency to provide socially desirable answers (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015).

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke's (2024) six-step framework: data familiarization, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final report. The qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software, ensuring systematic data

organization and coding (Gale et al., 2013). Emerging themes were identified inductively while being guided by established leadership and innovation theories.

To ensure rigor and credibility, multiple reliability and validity checks were employed. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, with a minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Kennedy, 2022). Construct validity was evaluated using CFA, ensuring that factor loadings met the threshold of ≥ 0.60 for convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using Rönkkö & Cho (2022) criterion, ensuring that the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded inter-construct correlations. Content validity was confirmed through expert review, where management scholars reviewed the questionnaire to ensure clarity and relevance.

By adopting a rigorous mixed-methods research design, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the impact of transformational leadership on employee innovative behavior in county-level integrated media centers. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enhances the robustness of findings, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for leadership development in public-sector media organizations.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide strong empirical support for the positive influence of transformational leadership on employee innovative behavior within county-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) along the China-Vietnam border. The findings confirm that transformational leadership fosters an innovation-friendly organizational climate by strengthening employees’ identification with their organization, thereby enhancing their intrinsic motivation, commitment, and engagement in creative activities. Statistical analysis demonstrates that transformational leadership exerts both direct and indirect effects on innovative behavior through the mediating role of organizational identification. These findings align with previous research that suggests transformational leaders enhance employees' commitment, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, all of which are critical for fostering innovation (Manu, 2022; Afsar & Umrani et al., 2024).

Moreover, this study highlights the multidimensional nature of transformational leadership, with different components—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—playing distinct roles in driving employee innovation. Intellectual stimulation, in particular, was found to be a key driver of creative engagement, as it encourages employees to challenge conventional thinking, experiment with new ideas, and develop novel solutions. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that transformational leaders cultivate an environment that nurtures cognitive flexibility and problem-solving capabilities among employees (Wang & Shao 2024).

Table 1. Key Findings on Transformational Leadership and Employee Innovation

Finding	Description
Direct and indirect influence	Transformational leadership has both direct and indirect effects on employee innovation through the mediating role of organizational identification.

Intellectual stimulation	Encourages employees to challenge traditional norms, enhancing problem-solving capabilities.
Social Identity Theory	Strengthens employees' innovative behavior by fostering a sense of belonging and shared organizational values.

This study makes several significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge on leadership and innovation. First, it extends transformational leadership theory by demonstrating its relevance in the public-sector media industry, particularly in CIMCs. While prior research has extensively examined transformational leadership in corporate and technology-driven environments, its role in media organizations, especially under state regulatory frameworks, remains underexplored. By applying transformational leadership theory in this unique context, this study provides empirical validation for its effectiveness in fostering adaptive innovation in response to the challenges posed by digital transformation.

Second, this research integrates insights from Social Identity Theory (Steffens et al., 2021) to explain the mechanisms through which transformational leadership enhances employee innovative behavior. The findings underscore the importance of organizational identification as an intermediate process, reinforcing the idea that employees who strongly associate with their organization exhibit higher levels of proactive and innovative work behaviors (Mubarak et al., 2021; AlEssa & Durugbo, 2022).

Additionally, this study differentiates transformational leadership from other leadership styles—such as empowering leadership and transactional leadership—to highlight its unique role in promoting innovation. Unlike empowering leadership, which focuses on delegation and employee autonomy (JH Coun et al., 2022), transformational leadership actively inspires and challenges employees to think beyond their conventional roles. Moreover, in contrast to transactional leadership, which emphasizes performance-based rewards and structured goal-setting (Thneibat & Sweis, 2023), transformational leadership cultivates a long-term vision for change and intrinsic motivation for innovation. This comparative analysis strengthens the theoretical foundation for applying transformational leadership in media organizations.

Table 2. Theoretical Contributions of the Study

Theoretical Framework	Contribution to Literature
Transformational Leadership Theory	Extends leadership theory to the media sector, illustrating its role in fostering innovation in county-level media organizations.
Social Identity Theory	Identifies organizational identification as a key mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and employee innovation.

Leadership Effectiveness	Highlights the role of organizational climate and institutional support as moderators of leadership-driven innovation.
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From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study offer several practical recommendations for media policymakers and managers within county-level integrated media centers. First, leadership development programs should be designed to enhance transformational leadership capabilities among media managers. Given the direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership on innovation, media organizations should prioritize leadership training initiatives that cultivate intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration.

Second, this study underscores the importance of fostering organizational identification as a means of enhancing innovation. Media organizations should implement strategies to strengthen employees' sense of belonging, such as transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and recognition programs. Moreover, digital transformation efforts in CIMCs should be supported by institutional infrastructure, technology investment, and innovation-friendly policies that allow employees to experiment with new digital content and creative production techniques.

Table 3. Practical Implications and Management Recommendations

Practical Area	Recommended Strategies
Leadership Development	Implement targeted leadership training programs focusing on intellectual stimulation and motivation.
Organizational Culture	Promote transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and formal employee recognition programs.
Institutional Support	Invest in digital transformation initiatives and provide infrastructure to facilitate knowledge-sharing and innovation.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant further investigation. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causality. Future studies should employ longitudinal research designs to assess the long-term impact of transformational leadership on employee innovation over time. Second, this study was conducted in county-level integrated media centers along the China-Vietnam border, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other media organizations or industries. Future research should examine whether similar leadership dynamics hold in private-sector media companies or multinational media corporations.

Additionally, while this study identified organizational identification as a key mediating mechanism, future research should investigate additional mediating and moderating variables, such as psychological empowerment (Llorente-

Alonso et al., 2024) and organizational culture (Naveed et al., 2022), to gain a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying the leadership-innovation relationship.

Table 4. Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitation	Proposed Future Research Directions
Cross-sectional Research Design	Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of transformational leadership on innovation.
Industry-Specific Focus	Expand research to various industries and international media organizations to enhance external validity.
Single Mediation Variable	Investigate additional mediators such as psychological empowerment and job satisfaction.
Self-reported Data	Use multi-source data collection, including supervisor ratings and objective performance metrics.

This study provides empirical evidence that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in fostering employee innovative behavior in county-level integrated media centers, with organizational identification serving as a key mediating mechanism. The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on leadership and innovation by demonstrating the applicability of transformational leadership theory in the media sector. Moreover, the study highlights practical strategies for enhancing leadership effectiveness, strengthening organizational identification, and creating supportive environments for innovation.

By addressing the limitations and exploring new research avenues, future studies can further advance the understanding of transformational leadership’s impact on innovation in media organizations undergoing digital transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence demonstrating the significant impact of transformational leadership on employee innovative behavior within county-level integrated media centers (CIMCs) along the China-Vietnam border. By integrating insights from transformational leadership theory and social identity theory, the findings confirm that transformational leadership not only directly fosters employee innovation but also exerts an indirect influence through the mediating role of organizational identification. The results suggest that leadership practices emphasizing intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation create an organizational climate conducive to creativity, adaptability, and proactive problem-solving (Nurhaeda et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). Moreover, in an industry undergoing rapid digital transformation, transformational leadership serves as a key enabler for overcoming institutional inertia and driving continuous media innovation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends transformational leadership research by applying it to public-sector media organizations, particularly CIMCs—an underexplored domain in leadership and organizational behavior literature. While prior studies have predominantly examined corporate and technology-driven environments (Yigit & Kanbach, 2023), this study highlights the role of transformational leadership in fostering adaptive innovation within state-affiliated media organizations undergoing digital transformation. By incorporating social identity theory, this research bridges leadership and organizational behavior theories, reinforcing the argument that employees' sense of belonging and alignment with organizational values significantly influence their innovative behaviors (Salem et al., 2023). Additionally, this study differentiates transformational leadership from other leadership styles, such as transactional and empowering leadership, demonstrating that transformational leadership fosters a long-term vision for change and promotes intrinsic motivation for innovation (Khalifa Alhitmi et al., 2023; Gui, Lei, & Le, 2024).

The findings also provide important practical implications for media organizations and policymakers. Leadership development programs should be prioritized to enhance the competencies of media managers, particularly in digital transformation strategies and innovation-driven leadership. Training initiatives should focus on strengthening intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration to cultivate a pro-innovation leadership style (Abbas, 2024). Strategies aimed at enhancing organizational identification, such as promoting participatory work cultures, recognizing employee contributions, and fostering collaboration, can further support innovation-driven initiatives. Additionally, structural and institutional support mechanisms—including resource allocation, technological investment, and streamlined regulatory processes—are crucial for maximizing the benefits of transformational leadership in media innovation (Attah et al., 2023).

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant further research. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality, highlighting the need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of transformational leadership on innovation. Since the study was conducted within a specific geographical and institutional context, its generalizability to other types of media organizations remains limited. Future research should explore leadership-driven innovation across diverse cultural, institutional, and media industry contexts (Ribeiro et al., 2024). Furthermore, while organizational identification was examined as a mediator, other psychological and structural factors—such as psychological empowerment, work autonomy, and organizational culture—may also play crucial roles in shaping the leadership-innovation relationship (Wiroonrath et al., 2024). Addressing these gaps can refine leadership models and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of transformational leadership in media governance.

As media organizations continue their digital transformation, fostering leadership practices that encourage creativity, adaptability, and strategic vision will be essential for maintaining competitiveness and driving sustainable innovation (Bari et al., 2022). Future research should further explore the evolving leadership dynamics in media organizations to refine theoretical models and inform evidence-based leadership development programs. Additionally, examining the role of policy changes and new technologies in shaping leadership effectiveness will be critical in understanding how transformational leaders can drive innovation in rapidly evolving media environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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