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An exploration of internal communication dimensions and transformational leadership to improve employee advocacy: a study based on an employee perspective in China's broadcasting stations

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Introduction: Employee advocacy (EA) has become an essential organisational behaviour, remarkably reflecting its influence on companies' internal and external perceptions. Notwithstanding its significance, limited research subsists on the drivers of EA, especially in non-Western backgrounds such as China. The purpose of this study is to explore whether transformational leadership (TL) and internal communication dimensions (ICD), including transparent communication (TC) and symmetrical communication (SC), can improve employee advocacy (EA) in China's television broadcasting stations (CTBS).

Methods: A qualitative research design was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 employees from a CTBS in Shandong province. The data, using thematic analysis supported by ATLAS.ti software, was analysed.

Results: The findings disclosed that employees reckon the TL and ICD's importance in improving EA and see employees engagement (EE) as an important prerequisite. Remarkably, EE plays a significant role in mediation, impacting EA. The efficiency of these relations is also hindered due to limited opportunities for professional development, hierarchical structures, and sometimes obstacles in communication practices.

Discussion: The study portrays its contribution to the literature by spotlighting the dynamics and challenges of promoting EA in China's organisational background. Future research should focus on challenges, taking up these hindrances, and further investigate how to adapt communication strategies for effective leadership in the context of Chinese organisations' unique cultural and structural landscape.

KEYWORDS

employee advocacy, employee engagement, transformational leadership, transparent communication, organisational communication, symmetrical communication, Chinese media sector

1 Introduction

Employee advocacy (EA) is increasingly recognised as an important element in organisational communication, where employees act as brand ambassadors, defending and promoting the achievements and values of an organisation. A distressing trend has appeared in organisations worldwide, including those in China, where employee advocacy has declined (Tao and Chao, 2024).

The decrease in employee advocacy (EA) links to lower employee engagement (EE), reflecting employees' emotional and cognitive commitment. Engaged employees are more likely to support their organisation, whereas disengagement dampens advocacy behaviours (Saks, 2006; Men and Yue, 2019a,b). Employees are disconnected from sharing positive organisational information, abstaining from recommending organisational undertakings, and excluding stakeholder interactions (Men et al., 2023; Thelen, 2021). Such behaviours are detrimental to organisations' internal and external reputations and range transcend organisational boundaries while developing trust deficit between stakeholders and employees (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). It eventually results in weakened productivity, enhanced criticism, and higher employee gross revenue (Ahli et al., 2024; Zhu and Kong, 2023).

The subject of employee advocacy has been identified as an important area that requires more attention, with 45% of public relation scholars recognising it as a priority-based topic for future research (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). For example, in the United States, EA-concerning challenges are unchecked. Seventy-one percent of organisations consider EA as serious to their business processes (Kruse, 2018), yet a remarkable ratio of employees (69%) account for not participating in advocacy-related activities for their organisations (Efectio, 2021). A Gallup (2023) study disclosed a decline in employee active participation in advocacy programs, from 36% in 2020 to 31% in 2023, indicating the influence of autocratic leadership styles and ineffectual communication channels.

Similarly, Chinese organisations face distinctive challenges in raising employee advocacy owing to high job pressure, inadequate acknowledgement, lack of active internal communication, and unyielding leadership structures (Zhu and Kong, 2023; Jiang and Shen, 2023). These challenges are undeniable within China's television broadcasting stations (CTBSs). Transformational leadership (TL) is critical due to its key behaviours—motivational inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration—that challenge autocratic structures in CTBS. Challenging autocratic structures is crucial because they restrict bottom-up communication, reduce trust, and hinder employee voice, which lowers engagement and advocacy behaviours. TL fosters trust and intrinsic motivation, vital for EA in hierarchical settings (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Zhou et al., 2021). Recent combined reforms have been implied which made various state or government organisations mixed-ownership one handled by private and state-owned enterprises yet not expanded to CTBS (Alsharairi et al., 2023), although this conversion has led to remarkable inequalities in employee wellbeing, social status, and communication between management and employees, further overwrought engagement of an employee and advocacy behaviours (Yuan and Gao, 2022; Zhang and Su, 2020). These state-media reforms have created a hybrid environment with clashing bureaucratic hierarchies and emerging market demands. This context is ideal for studying how transformational leadership and communication practices can either bridge or exacerbate the resulting communication barriers and low advocacy (Yuan and Gao, 2022).

In this background, EA becomes grave for the success of an organisation, especially in industries such as television transmission, where public awareness is dominant. The declination in EA within CTBS has become a crucial concern, raising queries about the fundamental factors driving this trend. Some of the major issues include internal communication dimensions such as transparent communication (TC) and symmetrical communication (SC), which have been shown to influence employee engagement (Men and Yue, 2019a,b). Moreover, styles of leadership, primarily transformational leadership (TL) that

accentuate intellectual stimulation and employee motivation, are essential in determining advocacy behaviours (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

Through qualitative content analysis (see Aslam et al., 2024; Alyaqoub et al., 2024 for more details) and comprehensive interviews with employees from broadcasting stations in Shandong province, the study aims to furnish a nuanced perception of the factors that influence EA. This research contributes significantly to the developing body of literature regarding employee advocacy by offering insights into how leadership and communication practices can rejuvenate EA in Chinese organisations, specifically in the media sector.

The deterioration in EA, particularly in sectors that depend significantly on public understanding, such as television broadcasting, raises remarkable challenges. Currently, employees are not entirely willing to keep themselves engaged in advocacy behaviours, influencing organisations' internal and external reputations (Tao and Chao, 2024; Men et al., 2023). EA is not merely a matter of community relations; it affects organisational reliance, overall performance, and stakeholder relationships (Nazari et al., 2022; Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). For example, the desire for employee advocacy can weaken employee engagement and increase business and output issues (Ahli et al., 2024).

For organisations in economically strong countries such as the United States, the EA also has to face a decline. A survey conducted in 2018 disclosed that 71% of businesses identified the vitality of EA, but a remarkable ratio of employees stayed disengaged (Kruse, 2018). Correspondingly, EA programs in the U. S. declined from 36% in 2020 to 31% in 2023, a drop accredited to poor communication practices and ineffectual leadership (Gallup, 2023). These findings highlight the significance of ineffectual communication and leadership channels that nurture employee adherence and participation in advocacy-favoured activities.

Suppose China is compared with a quickly developing but challenging economy, in that case, it also faces the same challenges, especially in organisations such as CTBS, where restructurings have familiarised new communication dynamics (Yuan and Gao, 2022). The transition of CTBS from government-controlled bodies to state-owned organisations has shaped a gap in employee–manager relations, worsened by variances in communication practices and social status (National Radio and Television Think Tank, 2018). This transition has called attention to the necessity of leadership styles that connect these holes and generate an environment in which employees are eager to depict advocacy for their organisation.

In this area, research is specifically crucial for CTBS, where EA is significant to retain managerial trust as well as performance among rising modernisation (Zhang and Su, 2020). Transformational leadership shows focus on motivating and inspiring employees, and strategies of internal communication, such as translucent and balanced communication, are fundamental to address these challenges (Men et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the particular factors that contribute to the decline in EA within CTBS remain under-researched, making this research essential to uncovering the basic causes and prospective solutions.

2 Literature review

2.1 Employee advocacy (EA)

Employee advocacy (EA) has become an integral topic in recent public relations, corporate communication, and marketing (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). EA includes employees willingly recommending

and defending their organisation at the internal and external levels, with insinuations for organisational reputé, relationships of the stakeholders, and trust (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). Scholars in public relations observe EA as the decisive trial of the organisation–employee relationships, where the power of the relationship shows reflection of the strength for advocacy the employs exhibit (Bozeman et al., 2023).

Although the importance of EA is well admitted, research remains comparatively in underdeveloped form, specifically in public relations (Hassan et al., 2023). Early scholarship has investigated EA from different angles, comprising employee–organisation relationships role, employee engagement, and organisational reputation (Men et al., 2023; Kim, 2019; Meng and Berger, 2019). However, a scarcity of empirical research examines EA from the perspective of employees, especially in non-Western backgrounds such as China (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). This study seeks out the facts to fill this breach by discovering the past history of EA in China's television broadcasting stations (CTBSs) and showing focusing on the employee engagement (EE)'s mediating role.

2.2 Transformational leadership (TL)

Transformational leadership (TL) has long been recognised as crucial in developing positive organisational behaviours, comprising EA. TL is often encouraged by the leaders who inspire and motivate the employees, encouraging them to transcend personal interest which is considered positive for the organisation's improvements (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Several studies have revealed that TL positively influences organisational commitment, employee engagement, and employee advocacy (Crucke et al., 2022; Tsarenko et al., 2018). Transformational leadership (TL) has four key dimensions: (1) idealised influence, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individualised consideration (Bass and Avolio, 1994). These dimensions enhance employee engagement (EE) by fostering psychological empowerment, which leads to increased employee activation (EA) (Purwanto, 2020). Leadership behaviours that accentuate TL can considerably improve belief of the employees in their organisation and enhance their chance of being engaged in activities of positive advocacy (Purwanto, 2020). Transformational leadership (TL) fosters employee advocacy (EA) by aligning employee values with organisational goals, reducing self-interest, and encouraging voluntary support (Tsarenko et al., 2018). Employees under TL see advocacy as a moral duty rather than just an extra responsibility (Chen et al., 2020).

In the Chinese situation, nonetheless, limited experimental research has been conducted in the context of the specific influence of TL on EA (Fang et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). Previous research claims that leadership style research in the context of China mostly remains autocratic or transactional, which obstructs employee engagement and motivation development (Xie et al., 2018; Liu, 2020). The gap in comprehending the way TL influences EA within China's organisational setting, especially in state-controlled organisations such as CTBS, required further exploration (Xing et al., 2023). To address this, the current study examines how TL affects EA through the facilitating mechanism of EE in CTBS, contributing to the ever-increasing literature on employee outcomes and leadership in non-Western contexts.

2.3 Internal communication dimensions (ICDs): transparent and symmetrical communication

Internal communication plays a key role in framing employee behaviour and understanding within an organisation (Alsharairi et al., 2022). Two crucial aspects of internal communication—transparent communication (TC) and symmetrical communication (SC)—are necessary for developing EA (Men et al., 2023). Transparent communication comprises freely sharing information with the employees, which develops trust and increases employees' relationship with the organisation (Rawlins, 2009). Transparent communication (TC) has three dimensions: (1) substantiality (providing meaningful information), (2) participation (encouraging input), and (3) accountability (explaining decisions) (Jiang and Shen, 2023). These dimensions reduce uncertainty and build trust, vital for EE and EA. On the contrary, symmetrical communication inspires two-way dialogue between management and employees, permitting mutual perception and response, which encourages an awareness of inclusion (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). TC aids EA by closing information gaps. When workers trust management's openness, they adopt and promote the organisation's values (Rawlins, 2009). For example, Rawlins (2009) and Jiang and Shen (2023) argue that transparent communication improves psychological safety and trust, which enhances employee engagement and fuels advocacy behaviours.

Notwithstanding the acknowledged significance of these communication aspects/dimensions, their particular influence on EA in China remains underexploration. In China's CTBS, transitioning from a government section to a state-owned public institution has generated challenges in upholding effective communication channels (National Radio and Television Think Tank, 2018). The deep-rooted cultural values and hierarchical structures, which often support dominance over free communication, have obstructed the application of SC and TC (Balakrishnan et al., 2020; Raza et al., 2023). Furthermore, discrepancies in the implementation of communication policies throughout regional and local CTBS further intensify the breach in symmetrical and transparent communication practices (Lin et al., 2020). Scholars have observed that TC and SC are necessary to developing EA, but further research is required to understand their influence utterly on Chinese organisations (Sulaiman et al., 2023; Thelen and Men, 2023a,b).

2.4 Employee engagement (EE)

Employee engagement (EE) includes cognitive aspects (like belief in organisational values), emotional components (such as pride), and behavioural dimensions (for instance, extra-role behaviours) (Saks, 2006). Transformational leadership (TL) and inclusive corporate diversity (ICD, TC/SC) enhance EE by meeting employees' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which in turn promotes employee advocacy (EA) (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). EE intends to refer to the cognitive and emotional commitment of employees headed for their organisation. The research has revealed that engaged employees are more likely to show advocacy for their organisation (Saks, 2006). Somehow, in spite of the rising importance of EE in developing advocacy behaviours, it rests under exploration in public

domain relationship research, especially in non-Western backgrounds (Men et al., 2023; Kent and Li, 2020).

In CTBS, the desire for employee engagement is partially endorsed by the ordered structures, autocratic styles of leadership, and poor practices of internal communication (Liu, 2020; Xie et al., 2018). Often the employees come to feel empowered less and disengaged from their organisations, which weakens their disposition to be engaged in advocacy behaviours (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). Moreover, past studies recommend that EE facilitate the association between EA and ICD and also between TL and EA (Walden and Kingsley Westerman, 2018). The aim of the current study is to build on this by discovering how EE mediates the relationship between ICD, TL, and EA within CTBS, contributing to a deeper perception of the mechanisms that determine advocacy behaviours.

2.5 Gaps in the literature

Even with the developments in perceiving the drivers/tools/sources of EA, remarkable gaps persist, especially in the Chinese situation. The studies conducted in the past have initially ignored TL and ICD potential impact on EA, particularly regarding the mediating role of EE in Chinese institutions such as CTBS (Duan, 2020). The prevailing literature on EA in China has limitations, providing only an apparent understanding of how leadership and communication practices affects advocacy behaviours (Liu et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Furthermore, research on SC's direct impact on EA is still at its very initial stage (Hui et al., 2020), and more experimental work is required to understand how these factors act together within China's exceptional organisational environment (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b).

In addition, the limited accessibility to professional and leadership advancement chances in CTBS further impairs the detachment of employees, influencing their advocacy behaviours (Shen, 2022). As far as CTBS concerns, it carries on to be modernise, and it is imperative to discover the ways these reforms can talk about the present leadership, communication, and employee engagement breaches to nurture a more advocacy-oriented workforce (Lin et al., 2020). The present study aims to bridge these holes/breaches by understanding employees' understanding of TL, EE, and ICD on EA within CTBS, through structured interviews with employees, offering practical and theoretical understandings to improve leadership practices and organisational communication in China.

RQ1: How do TL and ICD influence EA in CTBS?

RQ2: In what ways does EE influence the relationships between TL, ICD, and EA as perceived by CTBS employees?

RQ3: What barriers hinder the effectiveness of TL and ICD in fostering EA within CTBS?

3 Methodology

3.1 Assumptions/characteristics of qualitative research

Qualitative research is entrenched in the supposition that actuality is built through individual as well as collective experiences, interactions, and perceptions (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This

methodology permits researchers to find out multifaceted social occurrences by understanding participants' experiences and meanings within their backgrounds (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research tends to focus on perception instead of foreseeing inferences, making it specifically beneficial for studies discovering organisational dynamics and human behaviour (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research is signalled by its naturalistic inquiry, elasticity, and stress on rich descriptive data (Patton, 2015). It analyses mostly open-ended interviews, documented data, or observations to apprehend the depth and breadth of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). In the present study, the qualitative approach was selected since it permits an understanding of employee perceptions of the relationships that existed between transformational leadership (TL), employee engagement (EE), internal communication dimensions (ICDs), and employee advocacy (EA) within China's television broadcasting stations (CTBSs) (Alyaqoub et al., 2024). Choosing this approach, the study explores understanding how leadership and communication practices affect an employee's advocacy behaviours.

3.2 Participants and sampling

Participants were selected based on (1) their role in internal communications (e.g., HR and department liaisons), (2) direct involvement in leadership decisions, and (3) evidence of engagement levels (in interviews, initiative-taking and commitments were expressed, e.g., tenure over 3 years and peer-nominated "high-initiative" employees reflecting behavioural EE dimensions per Saks, 2006). Selecting participants through purposive sampling based on their knowledge and experience related to the research topic (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) ensures meaningful perceptions about the proposed gap under research (Patton, 2015). This study included 30 employees performing various job duties at a television broadcasting station in Shandong Province, China, who were recruited through HR referrals based on their relevance to the research questions, with an emphasis on voluntary participation and confidentiality.

The selection criteria for the participants were based on their internal communication, direct participation with leadership, and employee engagement performance. The members who participated were chosen to present different perspectives on TL, EE, ICD, and EA. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2013) proposal that qualitative studies benefit from several perspectives to understand the full intricacy of organisational phenomena.

While this single-site method enables thorough contextual analysis, it limits the applicability of the results. Future multi-site research should investigate these findings across various levels of CTBS (national vs. provincial), different media sectors (print/digital vs. broadcast), and state-owned enterprises in non-media sectors.

3.3 Data collection

Data were composed utilising semi-structured interviews, a broadly renowned tool in qualitative research to capture participants' experiences in their personal words (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix A. Semi-structured interviews permit elasticity, allowing the researcher to ask

follow-up questions or discover evolving and appearing themes when the conversation is in progress still sticking to a pre-planned set of topics (Tracy et al., 2012).

The developed interview guide was based on the essence of research questions, focusing on the partakers' experiences with internal communication practices, transformational leadership, employee engagement, and their advocacy behaviours within the domain of CTBS. Questions were based on established scales: TL (Bass and Avolio, 1994), TC/SC (Rawlins, 2009; Grunig and Hunt, 1984), EE (Saks, 2006), and EA (Thelen and Men, 2023a,b). These questions encouraged detailed, open-ended responses. For example, below are some sample questions:

- TL: "Can you describe how your leader inspires you to exceed expectations?"
- SC: "Do leaders solicit feedback during meetings? Give an example."
- TC: "How often are difficult decisions explained to you?"
- EA: "Would you recommend this station to job seekers? Describe a time you defended the station publicly."
- EE: "Do you feel emotionally invested in your work? Why?" (see Appendix A for more information)

Each interview, conducted privately, lasted approximately 45–60 min, ensuring that participants felt relaxed discussing their experiences openly. The researcher recorded interviews with the consent of participants and transcribed them verbatim for analysis. Following ethical rules, participants were informed about the aims of the study. They were also informed that they had the right to withdraw themselves at any time, explaining how their privacy would be secure (Tracy, 2010).

3.4 Data analysis process

Using thematic analysis, data were analysed, a standard method in qualitative research that comprises identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Two researchers generated codes using open coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Interrater reliability was $\kappa = 0.82$, with discrepancies settled through discussion. Thematic analysis was selected since it offers flexibility and permits for a thorough interpretation of the selected data, making it appropriate to examine the complex relationships between TL, EE, IC, and EA in this study.

The analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

1. *Familiarisation with the data*: the researcher transcribed and read the interview transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data.
2. *Generating initial codes*: the data were systematically coded to identify key phrases, concepts, and patterns that related to the research questions.
3. *Searching for themes*: codes were organised into broader themes that captured essential aspects of the data related to TL, ICD, EE, and EA.
4. *Reviewing themes*: the themes were refined by checking their relevance to both the coded data and the entire dataset.

5. *Defining and naming themes*: each theme was assigned a clear definition and a name that reflects the underlying concept.
6. *Writing the report*: a narrative was developed to explain how the themes relate to the research questions and existing literature.

For the present study, ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software (similar to NVivo) yet with an intuitive interface, eased the coding process, enabling proficient organisation of data (Friesse, 2019). ATLAS.ti is specifically designed for managing text, audio, or video data in qualitative research, which assists complex qualitative analyses, which ultimately makes it ideal for the current study (Aslam et al., 2023). Interviews conducted in Mandarin were translated to English by bilingual researchers, with back-translation checks for accuracy (Brislin, 1970).

Figure 1, using ATLAS.ti, illustrates the thematic map of themes and subthemes and their relationships following the coding process mentioned in the specific section.

3.5 Verification procedures

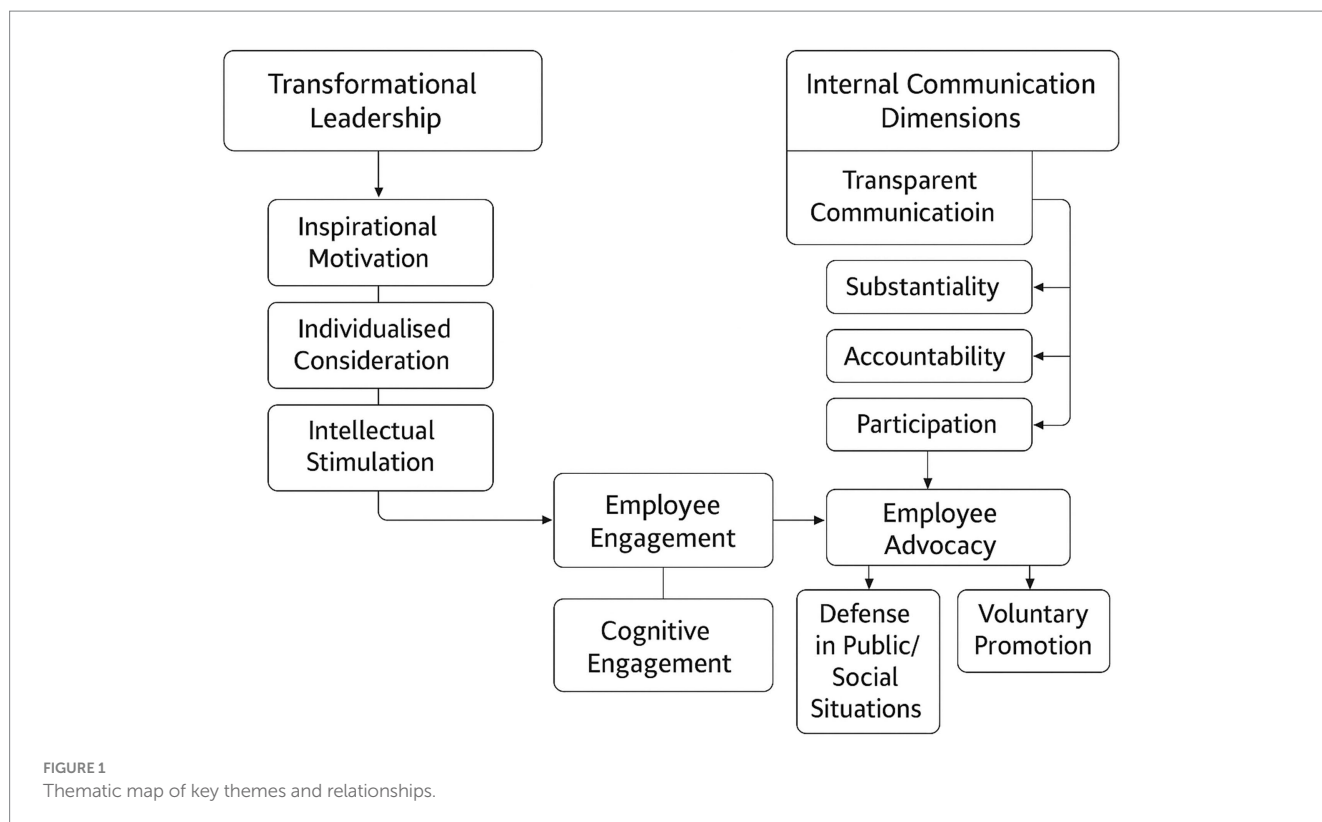
To make the certainty of the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, a number of verification procedures were applied, following recognised practices in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These comprise the following:

- *Member checking*: after transcribing the interviews, the participants were permitted to review and confirm their responses' exactness (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).
- *Triangulation*: data were triangulated by comparing given information from several sources which included interviews with employees at various organisational levels, to make sure that the findings were stable and comprehensive (Patton, 2015).
- *Peer debriefing*: the research process with its findings was discussed with experts and colleagues in the field to challenge suppositions and provide substitute interpretations (Creswell and Poth, 2018).
- *Audit trail*: documentation of the research process with full detail, including decisions made while data collecting and analysis, was sustained to permit for translucency and replication of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

These measures increased the study's trustworthiness and validity, ensuring that the findings exactly revealed the participants' experiences and thoughts.

3.6 Role of the researcher/ethical considerations

The lead researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record biases about Chinese media hierarchies. During peer debriefing sessions, these biases were acknowledged and set aside during the analysis (Creswell, 2013; Finlay, 2002). In qualitative research, the researcher plays a vital role in the collection and analysis of data, making it necessary to admit ethical considerations and potential biases (Creswell, 2013). As the instrument of primary data collection, the



researcher in this study retained reflexivity throughout the research process on a regular basis by reflecting on how assumptions, personal experiences, and biases might affect the understanding of the data (Finlay, 2002).

This study gave priority to ethical consideration, making sure that the rights and participants' rights and wellbeing were given protection all the times. Participants were made aware of the aims of the study, their right to secrecy, and their will to withdraw at any stage without any concerns. Informed consent in written form was taken before the interviews started (Tracy, 2010). Data were stored in a secure way, and any recognising information was detached from the transcripts to protect the participants' privacy.

4 Findings and analysis

The following sections reflect the key findings inferred from the semi-structured interviews held and managed with 30 employees at a television broadcasting station in Shandong province, China. These findings have been prearranged around the key themes of transformational leadership (TL), employee engagement (EE), internal communication dimensions (ICDs), and employee advocacy (EA).

4.1 Transformational leadership and employee advocacy

Participants persistently highlighted how TL behaviours such as individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulus increased their keenness to be engaged in EA. Employees felt that leadership, especially when it is

transformational, created a more comprehensive and inspirational workplace, thus developing a sense of advocacy and loyalty (Lynn-Sze, 2021).

For example, a senior producer stated how the director's vision encouraged them:

"Most of the times, our director discusses regarding the insight for the station and the way we are a part of something which is bigger in its essence. This makes me feel gratified while representing the station, and I ever discuss highly of it while discussing with colleagues or friends outside of work." (Participant 7)

This exemplifies TL's inspirational motivation. The director highlights a 'bigger purpose' that fosters pride and transforms passive employees into active advocates, showcasing TL's role in connecting EE and EA.

This participant's response highlights how transformational leadership can generate a common sense of purpose, largely through motivation and inspiration. The leader's stress on the bigger picture inspires employees to judge their work as part of a larger and more purposeful mission. The participants' pride highlights that they take on this vision, guiding them to advocacy behaviours. In this situation, advocacy ranges away from the workplace as the participants voluntarily communicate highly of the organisation in their social spheres.

A junior editor further expressed his views on the impact of individualised contemplation:

"I perceive that my manager is aware of my personal objectives and assists me to grow. It makes me more faithful to my organisation. I would never feel hesitation in defending the station if someone tends to criticise it." (Participant 14)

Individualised consideration is a serious driver of advocacy and loyalty. The leader develops a strong relationship based on reciprocal respect and trust by focusing on an employee's personal development. This personalised focus develops engagement and produces an emotional tie with the organisation. The participant's eagerness to defend the workplace suggests that this leadership practice creates a protecting and devoted attitude, directly providing to EA.

A middle-management employee depicted his expression on how TL behaviours nurtured/promoted ownership:

"While the leadership appreciates my input and tends to encourage me in taking initiatives, I feel myself more engaged to the station and wish to encourage its success or achievements." (Participant 22)

The idea of ownership in the response is vital. Transformational leaders encourage employees to take the initiative, which gives them the power to feel like shareholders in the organisation's success. This association, where employees realise that their contribution is valuable, guides them to advocate for the organisation willingly. The participant's usage of "promote its achievements" indicates that advocacy can be practical, not just self-justifying.

Nevertheless, some of the participants observed the absence of TL behaviours that lead to disengagement. A technical staff member shared his observation:

"Department of ours is surely top-down, and I never feel myself included in decision making process. I perform my own job, yet I would not be able to say that I feel motivation to go beyond my way in defending the station on public level." (Participant 9)

The prior mentioned quote reveals the negative outcomes of a want of transformational leadership. Feeling of exclusion of the participant from the process of decision-making manifests a transactional or autocratic leadership style. This "top-down" decision-making approach smothers engagement and decreases any deep-rooted motivation for the advocacy of the organisation. The employees consider their role purely functional and hence has little emotional relation to the organisation's broader goals, making advocacy behaviours limited.

Employees experiencing TL behaviours were remarkably more likely to favour advocacy for the organisation by promoting its achievements or its defence against external criticism. These findings make themselves parallel with the theory of transformational leadership positing that individualised and inspirational leadership generates more deep employee commitment and positive organisational results (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

4.2 Internal communication dimensions (ICDs) and employee advocacy

In establishing trust, engagement, and eventually EA, transparent communication (TC) and symmetrical communication (SC) were integral elements. Employees persistently judged that open, transparent, and two-way communication generated a sense of trust and inclusion, enabling those more probably regarding the advocacy for the station. Three themes of TC emerged: (1) accountability (justifying difficult decisions), (2) substantiality (providing strategic information), and (3) participation (requesting feedback).

An officer of human resources spotlighted the effect of transparent communication:

"Whenever the management goes to share the logics behind the decisions, though tough ones, this makes me trusting them more. It feels as I am a part of the big one picture and more probably to discuss in a positive way to others about the station." (Participant 2)

This instance demonstrates how transparent communication supports bridging the loop between employee understanding and leadership decisions. The sense of trust of participants originates from having information regarding "difficult decisions," which establishes an honest and more open relationship. This transparency comes ahead, boosts employees' engagement, and reinforces their desire to engage in advocacy behaviours. By making the employees realise they are part of the bigger picture, "TC" allows them to adopt organisational values and make them regular ambassadors.

A staff member from marketing sector detailed the practices regarding symmetrical communication:

"We relied on peer debriefing sessions to reflect on the findings and raise questions about interpretations to the leadership. It makes me realise similar to my voice matters, and I feel proud in advocating for the station." (Participant 16)

This illustrates the symmetrical communication loop (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Leaders seek feedback and incorporate it into decisions, acknowledging employees as co-creators of strategy, which promotes employee advocacy. The pride of a participant while advocating in favour of the station originates from the belief that their active voice shares a lot to the functioning of an organisation. This perception of joint respect and participation makes employees realise more associated with the organisation, which raises their spirits in promoting and defending it enthusiastically. The relation between engaging in EA and feeling valued is obvious in the participant's disposition to talk about the station in a positive manner.

On the contrary, some participants highlighted symmetrical communication lacking in specific areas, guiding to disengagement. An assistant from administrative side observed:

"In my own department, a little room exists for upholding of a dialogue. We receive instructions, yet there remains no space for feedback. It becomes difficult to realise oneself as an advocate when one does not feel heard." (Participant 23)

The absence of symmetrical communication generates a one-sided dynamic in which employees feel disengaged from the decision-making process. The space lacks for feedback, which depicts the employee feeling underrated, hindering their emotional relation with the organisation. Without ownership or involvement sense, it is challenging for employees to feel themselves as advocates. This finding indicates a two-way critical role of communication in developing employee advocacy.

The departments in which communication practices were not consistent, employees conveyed frustration. One participant expressed:

"In some of the departments, communication is openly held, but in a few, it seems going opposite. This irregularity makes it tough to

have a trust on the leadership completely and show an advocacy.”
(Participant 12)

Inconsistency in communication practices in all departments generates confusion and undermines trust in leadership. While communication is going on openly in some areas and closed in others, employees seem struggling in maintaining an incorporated sense of organisational loyalty and identity. This kind of inconsistency harms the credibility of the leadership inclusively and decreases employees' motivation to support for the sake of their organisation. The participant's use of “hard to trust” emphasises the prominence of constancy in communication to maintain employee's loyalty and advocacy.

These findings illustrate that SC and TC are central in developing engagement, trust, and advocacy. Discussing straightforward, in two-way and honesty based communication, employees more probably feel themselves included and valued, moving to constructive advocacy behaviours (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Rawlins, 2009).

4.3 Employee engagement

EE emerged as a vital keyword between ICD, TL, and EA. Participants who felt cognitively and emotionally engaged with their work were probably to demonstrate advocacy behaviours. Engagement strengthens the connection between communication practices, leadership, and EA.

An editor having seniority demonstrates how their engagement tends to influence advocacy:

“I am keenly captivated in my work since I offer contribution to something which is meaningful. It makes me debate in a positive way regarding the station, even when I am free of work. I wish others to observe the worth in what we all do.” (Participant 6)

This prior discussed sense of engagement by the participants maintains a link to an in-depth meaning regarding their work, which excels the limitations of the workplace. The feeling of imparting contribution to something meaningful promotes their emotional investment, directing to advocacy behaviours in both professional and personal backgrounds. When the participant desires for others to notice, the value in the organisation indicates the way engagement moves ahead to voluntarily and provocative advocacy. While being engaged, employees execute their task fully well and perform as ambassadors for their organisation, whether they have to act in informal situations.

From the IT department, a participant shared the similar experience:

“When I'm engaged, I feel like I am a part of the station's success. It is not just a job, and I am always happy to talk about the station in a positive light.” (Participant 11)

The above example highlights how engagement of employees develops an awareness of ownership or belonging over the success of an organisation. The participant's conversion from seeing their role as “just a job” in considering, as they are a part of the station's success, points out how engagement converts employees' relationship with

their work. This change in understanding inspires employees to talk positively about the organisation, further stressing the connection between engagement and advocacy. Engaged employees observe themselves as contributing providers to the organisation's mission, inspiring their desire to advocate for it.

However, the employees who exhibited lower levels of engagement were less tending to advocate. One of junior administrative employees remarked:

“I do not feel very connected to my work, and because of that, I do not care about defending the station or promoting it to others.”
(Participant 27)

In the above-mentioned case, lack of engagement creates disengagement between the organisation and its values. The participant's insignificance towards advocacy exhibits how disengagement makes an employee's willingness limited in openly favouring or defending the organisation. This disengagement is probably an outcome of poor leadership, unfulfilled hopes, or insufficient communication practices. The quote under discussion indicates that without being engaged, employees are improbable tend to emotionally invest in the organisation, thus causing decrease in advocacy behaviours.

These findings line up with research proposing that EE is an important mediator in nurturing positive organisational results such as EA (Saks, 2006). Engaging employees are more probably to advocate and internalise for the organisational values.

According to the findings, transparent and symmetrical communication concerning TL and ICD has a significant role in EA promotions within the settings of CTBS. More engaging advocacy is found in employees whose transformational and internal communication was effective for their organisation. Although lacking professional development, hierarchical structures, or inconsistent communication practices may obstruct these positive results, an advocacy-originated and more engaged workforce may be needed to address such issues.

5 Discussion

The current study examined the relationships between transformational leadership (TL), internal communication dimensions (ICDs), employee engagement (EE), and employee advocacy (EA) within CTBS. By discovering how TL and ICD tend to put its impact on EE and EA, the present research contributes sufficiently to the wider perception of the way communication practices and leadership produce positive organisational behaviours (see Figure 2). This section of the study discusses previous studies' findings, indicating critical comparisons identifying new visions considered unique to CTBS contexts. We structure the discussion around our research questions (RQs): RQ1 (TL/ICD • EA pathways), RQ2 (EE's mediating role), and RQ3 (contextual barriers).

To help clarify the relational dynamics discussed in this study, we include a conceptual diagram (Figure 2) that illustrates the influence pathways identified through thematic analysis. It highlights how transformational leadership (TL) and internal communication dimensions (ICDs: transparent and symmetrical communication) positively impact employee engagement (EE), which in turn

encourages employee advocacy (EA). The model also points out some contextual barriers such as hierarchical culture and inconsistent communication that can hinder these pathways (Table 1).

5.1 The impact of transformational leadership on employee advocacy

Addressing RQ1, the findings of the present study endorse the significant contributions of transformational leadership concerning employee advocacy with the alignment of existing literature reporting the experienced TL behaviours of employees, such as inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation, to support their organisation. Bass and Avolio (1994) also endorsed this type of hypothesis, arguing that transformational leaders mostly provide inspiration to employees in transcending their interests for the benefit of the organisation.

For instance, one of the participants opined that how their leader's vision made the organisation's representation, which made them feel proud. This argument supports the results of past studies, which propose that TL behaviours develop an understanding of loyalty and ownership (Tsarenko et al., 2018). Similarly, individualised consideration was depicted as deeply influencing employees' willingness to defend their organisation, for instance, personalised leadership generates a sturdy emotional relationship between employees and their leaders (Crucke et al., 2022).

Somehow, the findings also reflect an exceptional contextual challenge in CTBS: Hierarchical and top-down leadership styles in some departments reduced employees' willingness to be engaged in EA. This creates contrasts with Western literature, which often emphasises the positive results of TL in different organisational contexts (Bass and Avolio, 1994). In CTBS context, the profoundly deep-rooted hierarchical structures may obstruct TL's full comprehension of potential, such as autocratic or transactional leadership styles yet manifest their dominance in particular departments (Xie et al., 2018). This finding coincides with Fang et al. (2019) and Zhou et al. (2021), who observed

that the impact of TL in Chinese organisations is mostly moderated by inflexible hierarchical systems, which limit the employees' sense of advocacy and empowerment.

5.2 Internal communication dimensions and employee advocacy

Addressing the RQ1, the data confirm the multifaceted role of internal communication, specifically symmetrical communication (SC) and transparent communication (TC) in developing EA. Employees regularly noted that honest, open communication and the chance for two-way discourse enhanced their faith in the organisation and enabled them more likely to advocate for it. These findings are constant with the literature, where symmetrical and transparent communication are crucial mobilisers of engagement and trust (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Rawlins, 2009).

Many participants indicated the significance of transparency in building trust, inspiring them to endorse the organisation to the external audience. This resonates the findings of Men et al. (2023) who claimed that when employees feel well-informed and involved in the decision-making process, they are more likely to perform as advocates. Symmetrical communication also played a vital role, with reporting about the participants that consistent meetings and freely held dialogues with the leadership made them realise valued and heard, further strengthening their advocacy behaviours. This favours Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2023), who observed that two-way communication employee identification strengthens organisational values, consequently enhancing EA.

Nevertheless, the study recognised remarkable irregular gaps in communication practices throughout the departments. In some fields, communication was defined as open and comprehensive, while in others, it was categorised as hierarchical and closed. This inconsistency frustrated the employees, particularly when they realised that they were excluded from the decision-making process. The ultimate finding differs from Lee and Abdullah (2023), who claimed that stable internal

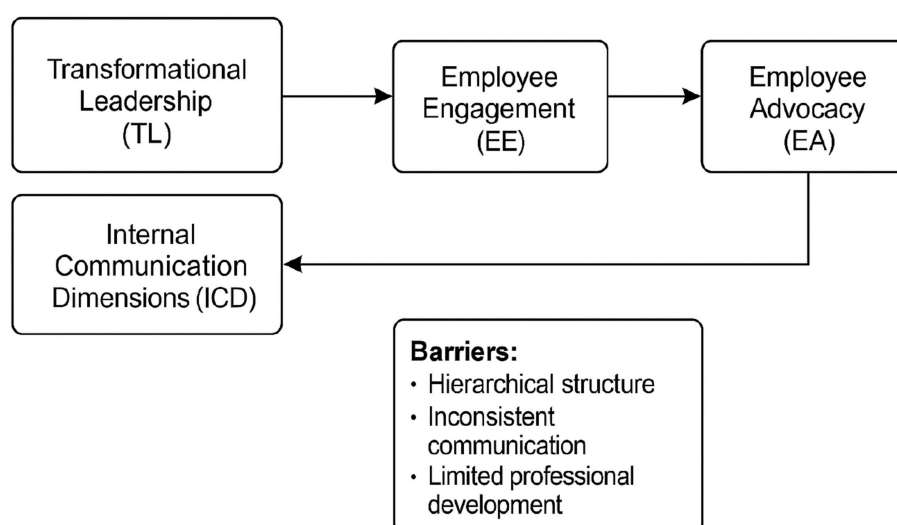


FIGURE 2
Conceptual model of TL, ICD, EE, and EA.

TABLE 1 Sample specifications.

Characteristic	Detail
Total participants	30
Gender (male/female)	12/18
Avg. age	37.5 years
Avg. Tenure	6.5 years
Managerial staff	10 (33.3%)
Represented departments	Admin (6), Marketing (4), News (8), Production (7), IT (5)

communication is important for nurturing a united organisational advocacy and culture. The inconsistency existing in CTBS indicates a potential obstacle in developing a consistent advocacy culture, proposing that more efforts are required to standardise communication practices throughout departments.

5.3 Employee engagement

Addressing RQ2, this study established that employee engagement is a key factor in the relationship between TL, ICD, and EA. The employees engaged prominently in advocating their organisation as they realised an in-depth emotional link to their work and its mission. This finding supports the work of Saks (2006), who suggested that engaged employees are more likely to demonstrate obligatory behaviours such as advocacy.

A number of participants reported regarding their engagement that it arose from realisation, that their work was expressive, and that they were providing their contribution to the station's accomplishment. This is compatible with past studies that recognised engagement as a critical forecaster of positive organisational results (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Nevertheless, the study also pointed out that disengaged employees—mostly due to lack of communication or leadership support—were unlikely to show advocacy for their organisation. This finding reinforces Men and Yue (2019a,b), who maintained that disengaged employees are more probably to be uninterested or even critical of their organisation, consequently obstructing advocacy efforts.

A new understanding from this study was the recognition of obstacles to engagement, especially within the CTBS' contexts. Participants described that hierarchical structures, restricted chances for professional development, and irregular communication practices provided to disengagement. This finding is expanded on Liu (2020)'s work; he identified same obstacles in Chinese organisations but did not straight connect them to engagement and advocacy. By pointing out these barriers' role in making EE and EA limited, this study enhances the developing body of literature emphasising the necessity for structural restructurings in hierarchical organisations.

5.4 Barriers to employee advocacy

Addressing RQ3, although this study found strong support for the positive link between TL, EE, ICD, and EA, several barriers could hinder these inferences. Within CTBS, hierarchical structures were observed as a prominent obstacle to leadership effectiveness and communication transparency. Participants reflected that they felt

disengaged from the effectiveness of making decision, which diminished their consent to be engaged in EA. This finding is aligned with Duan (2020), who judged that inflexible hierarchies in Chinese organisations mostly suppress an employee's freely held communication and empowerment.

Irregular consistency in communication practices within departments was an extra critical barrier. Although some departments developed open-managed communication, others were suggested as top-down and lacked transparency. This inconsistency destabilised trust in leadership creating a split organisational culture and making it problematic for the employees to accept advocacy behaviours completely. This creates contrasts with the studies conducted in the Western situations/backgrounds in which internal communication mostly exists in more standardised form within departments (Rawlins, 2009; Lee and Abdullah, 2023). The exceptional challenges CTBS faced point out the urge for personalised communication strategies, which reflect the intricacies of Chinese organisational culture.

A professional development lacking regarding opportunities was also recognised as a hindrance to engagement and advocacy. Participants reflected frustration over restricted chances for growth, which guided to detachment and, eventually, faced a lacking in advocacy. This finding favours Shen (2022), who claimed that professional development is vital to employee engagement in Chinese organisations. Somehow, the relation between professional development and EA has not been explored fully in past research, making this a new contribution to the present study.

5.5 Comparison with previous studies

The findings of this study ally with much of the prevailing literature on ICD, TL, and EE while also catering new understandings particular to the background of CTBS. The past studies have pointed out the positive effect of TL on organisational results, i.e., engagement and commitment (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Tsarenko et al., 2018). This study verifies these findings in the background of EA. Correspondingly, the significance of TC and SC in nurturing trust and engagement is well-authenticated (Men et al., 2023; Rawlins, 2009). Moreover, the current study expands these findings to the dominion of EA.

Somehow, this study recognises several background differences too between CTBS and organisations in Western situations. The hierarchical structures and irregular consistencies in communication practices within CTBS reflect exceptional challenges to nurturing TL and ICD, limiting their effectiveness in developing engagement and advocacy. These findings also propose that although TL and ICD are important at universal level, their employment must be adapted to the particular context of culture and organisation (Ramli and Sukor, 2021).

5.6 Implications for practice

While these findings originate from CTBS, their relevance also applies to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) undergoing marketisation reforms. Leadership should standardise internal communication dimension (ICD) practices through structured interventions: quarterly immersive workshops for mid-level managers on transformational leadership (TL) behaviours (e.g., inspirational motivation and individualised consideration) and digital anonymous feedback systems

(e.g., real-time pulse surveys) to facilitate symmetrical communication. Concurrently, organisations must institutionalise employee engagement metrics, such as advocacy KPIs; employee-generated social content shares, referral program participation rates, and EA-EE linkage indices; and correlation scores between engagement surveys and advocacy behaviours. For policymakers, prioritising professional development subsidies for SOEs could dismantle hierarchical barriers—particularly funding cross-departmental mentorship programs to bridge communication silos.

5.7 Theoretical contributions

This research fundamentally advances employee advocacy theory by addressing critical gaps: confirming EE as the key mediator in the TL/ICD → EA pathway within non-Western hierarchies—a mechanism previously underexplored outside Anglo-European contexts (cf. Men and Yue, 2019a,b). It clarifies transparent communication (TC) in hierarchical systems through its three dimensions: accountability (decision-justification rituals), participation (inclusive co-creation forums), and substantiality (strategic information disclosure), “challenging Western-centric assumptions in Jiang and Shen (2023).” It also contextualises TL’s limitations in hybrid state-market entities, showing how bureaucratic legacies limit inspirational motivation, thereby redefining TL’s boundary conditions in transitional economies.

6 Conclusion

This study discovered that employees recognise relationships existed between transformational leadership, internal communication dimensions, and employee advocacy and engagement within television broadcasting stations in China. The findings show that transformational leadership and influential internal communication are vital in developing engagement and reconciling employee advocacy. Employees who experience individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, symmetrical communication, and transparent communication are possibly to be engaged in advocacy behaviours in favour of their organisation. Nevertheless, cultural and structural hindrances such as irregular consistency in communication practices, hierarchical leadership styles, and limited professional development chances obstruct the recognition of these positive results. The current study affirms present literature on the importance of internal communication and transformational leadership and indicates exceptional challenges within the context of CTBS. The research exhibits that although transformational leadership and communication practices are worldwide relevant, their specific employment in culturally and hierarchical contexts such as China needs careful adaptation.

7 Future theoretical implications

Based on the findings, several theoretical implications emerge: Chinese organisations in hierarchical sectors should develop departments that could design programs specifically focusing on transformational leadership behaviours. This conversion would assist in overcoming the autocratic leadership, creating a more engaged and

advocacy-oriented workforce. There should be efforts to standardise transparent and symmetrical communication practices throughout the offices and branches, including all departments within CTBS. Regular communication constructs trust and makes sure that all employees feel appreciated, which can directly increase their advocacy behaviours. Organisations should invest in and provide opportunities for professional development for employees, thereby increasing employee engagement and encouraging them to advocate for their organisation, which would make employee engagement an integral component of cultivating a positive organisational culture. Hierarchical hindrances must be addressed in future research and organisational strategies, ensuring employee participation and advocacy, collaboratively and inclusively, to overcome these obstacles.

8 Limitations of the study

Although the current study provides valuable insights into the relationships between TL, EE, ICD, and EA within CTBS, several limitations must be acknowledged: The station’s provincial status may underrepresent metropolitan CTBS dynamics. Transferability depends on shared hierarchical traits in Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Only 30 participants from a single television broadcasting station in the province of Shandong were involved in this study. While this sample size allows for in-depth qualitative analysis, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other regions or sectors within China. This study is qualitative, so the findings are context-specific and based on the participants’ subjective experiences. Future studies might consider this approach, alloying it with quantitative methods to create more generalisable relations between or among keywords. The study focuses only on the Chinese media sector, and it may happen that the findings may not be directly applied to organisations in different industrial or cultural backgrounds. It is suggested that future research explores the same relationships in other sectors or countries to observe whether similar dynamics are working. As Chinese researchers studying local media, we may have normalised certain hierarchical practices. Future collaborations with cross-cultural teams could surface implicit assumptions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Informed consent in written form was taken before the interviews started.

Author contributions

SD: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. RR: Investigation, Supervision, Validation,

Writing – review & editing. JC: Data curation, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1560270/full#supplementary-material>

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