

Article

Evaluating the Impact of Positive Implicit Followership towards Employees' Feedback-Seeking: Based on the Social Information Processing Perspective

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Abstract: Amid the growth of COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs are facing greater uncertainties and pressures to survive because even though they are efficiently managed, their human resource organizations lack a large number of resources and a well-developed training system to foster the sustainable development of employees. Employees are important assets of the company, and their continuous growth and development are keys to the survival of the company. In this context, the individual worker's assessment of his or her job role and how the assessments drive the employee to exhibit an appropriate proactive work behavior are particularly important. Previous research has typically focused on how organizations and leaders perceive employees but has rarely explored employees' own implicit followership cognitive states. This study integrates the traits of positive implicit followership of employees, namely, industry trait, enthusiasm trait, and good citizen trait, with perceived supervisor support (PSS) and feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) into one research framework. In this study, 207 valid questionnaires were collected by using offline convenience sampling, and structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was conducted. The results show that employees' industry traits directly and positively influence FSB, while enthusiasm traits and good citizen traits have no direct effect on promoting FSB. In addition, industry trait, enthusiasm trait, and good citizen trait significantly and positively influence PSS, with good citizen trait having the greatest positive effect on PSS. Furthermore, PSS has a significant positive effect on FSB. Finally, PSS was found to mediate between industry traits and FSB. Corresponding to the results of the study, the actions shaping employees' positive implicit followership cognition and forming a good supportive atmosphere to promote employees' performance of more feedback-seeking behaviors are recommended.

Keywords: industry trait; enthusiasm trait; good citizen trait; perceived supervisor support (PSS); feedback-seeking behavior (FSB); implicit followership



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1. Introduction

With the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, the uncertainty faced by SMEs is becoming elevated because although they are efficiently managed, their human resource organizations lack a large number of resources and a well-developed training system to foster the sustainable development of employees. In order to achieve the sustainable development of enterprises, the enhancement of the sustainable development ability of enterprise employees is the key to achieving this [1]. Therefore, if employees want to develop sustainably, they must use their initiative. Feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) is one of the types of employee-initiated work behaviors and was first introduced by Ashford in 1983 [2]. FSB mainly describes the behavior of corporate employees to effectively self-adjust by actively obtaining performance feedback from multiple feedback sources in order to continuously adapt to organizational changes and promote sustainable individual performance [3]. In addition, employees who actively seek feedback are perceived to perform better and are perceived to be more effective among their leaders, colleagues, and

subordinates [4,5]. Feedback-seeking is the act of interpersonal interaction and seeking the views of others at work by seeking advice and evaluation from colleagues and superiors during or after work [6]. Feedback-seeking can be defined as the process of obtaining information by employees. The sustainable development ability of employees is defined by their ability to continuously acquire new knowledge and information in internal and external environments in order to improve their overall quality and contribute to their development in the organization [1]. Therefore, employees' FSB is an extremely significant behavioral manifestation in the process of workers' ability to improve sustainability. Earley et al. [7] divided feedback-seeking into process feedback-seeking, which includes seeking information about enhancing personal competence and improving work, and outcome feedback-seeking, which seeking information related to job performance.

Followers' implicit followership theory (IFT) is based on societal construction theory and provides additional importance to the intellectual development of various followers [8]. According to the study by Carsten et al. [8], different individuals can build various implicit followership schemas. Individuals develop positive implicit followership cognitions that support individuals in their efforts to attain the characteristics and behaviors of optimistic followers and, thus, be further certain of accomplishing career achievements. Corresponding to the cognitive classification framework model, once an individual's IFT is triggered, the individual compares the typical individual follower schema with his or her traits, and this comparison is used as the cognitive basis for the individual's subsequent behavioral guidance and the implementation of a subsequent behavioral framework corresponding to this cognition [8,9], which includes the follower's own beliefs about the qualities and actions that describe the follower. Researchers have found that implicit followership includes both positive and negative valence, and this study focuses on positive implicit followership, which includes three dimensions of industry, enthusiasm and good citizenship [10]. Corresponding to the self-actualization effect, the positive physical and emotional understanding of the follower is progressively stimulated and continuously developed up towards the self-actualized follower role perception [11].

Perceived supervisor support (PPS) has received a great deal of interest from researchers because it influences individual work behaviors and job outcomes [12]. Past research has linked IFT to the consequences of followers' attitudes and behaviors, and the relationship concerning IFT and the beliefs of actual followers is usually acknowledged; however, this resemblance has not been immediately confirmed. Thus, these studies ignore followers' perspectives on their theories about implicit followership when generating attitudinal and behavioral outcomes [13]. The goal of this study was to fill this gap with the assessment of the link between IFT and PSS. The consistency of the IFT dimensions is also important. Therefore, this study hypothesized that the association between the three traits included in positive implicit followership and PSS could trigger the results of the corresponding employee behaviors.

Information processing theory (IPT) may help to describe the correlation between PSS and FSB. Salancik and Pfeffer [14] proposed the existence of diverse knowledge handling practices concerning social knowledge and individual conduct. Zalesny and Ford [15] reviewed the social information processing model based on previous research and proposed that social information processing theory includes three processes, learning, attribution, and judgment, and that different information processing processes will have different effects on individual behavior. IPT indicates that individual experiences related to work will influence individual behavior through work attitudes or work needs. In an organization, individual feedback-seeking behaviors arise when employees perceive better organizational mutual trust, and better organizational mutual trust, as well as a good working climate, can be provided in the form of employee-perceived supervisory support [16]. Supervisor's support as one of the positive environmental factors can facilitate individual feedback-seeking behavior. Therefore, the present study explored the relationship between perceived supervisor support and feedback-seeking behaviors. In addition, this study proposed and

analyzed the indirect relationship between positive implicit followership and FSB through the mediation of PSS.

In this study, the three dimensions of positive implicit followership by followers are analyzed as independent dimensions on the influence of feedback-seeking behavior of followers. Positive implicit followership cognition has received more extensive attention from researchers in past studies. Some investigations have indicated that individuals' implicit attitudes are further expected to be matched with positive implicit followership [17]. This research intends to answer four research questions. First, this study analyzed the effect of three traits of positive implicit followership on feedback-seeking behavior; second, this study explored the relationship between followers' positive implicit followership and perceived supervisor support; third, this study explored the effect of PSS on feedback-seeking behavior; and fourth, this study explored the mediating role of perceived supervisor support between three traits of positive implicit followership and feedback-seeking behavior.

2. Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Positive Implicit Followership Traits and Feedback-Seeking Behaviors

Sy [9] initially suggested the study of implicit follower theories (IFTs) in 2010 [10]. Over the previous three decades, the academic community has developed a detailed body of implicit leadership concepts; however, inadequate studies have been conducted on IFT. With the gradual emphasis on the significance of followers in the field of leadership, the study of ILT has extended to IFTs [18]. In an organization, people certainly have a tendency to categorize individuals as followers or leaders. Consequently, Sy [10] proposed the notion of IFT as opposed to implicit leadership, which considers implicit followership as an individual's schema and beliefs about the characteristics and behaviors of workers. The concept is primarily obtained from implicit theory [19]. For example, over time, centered on the knowledge accrued over time, people develop a predetermined cognitive framework of the behavior and qualities of the roles (leaders or employees) within the company [20]. The cognitive model of implicit followership is an implicit perception about a follower who is unable to be located at the conscious point, and this is additionally the fundamental nature of IFT. Such implicit perceptions may influence an individual's judgment and conduct.

Corresponding to the content and elements of IFT, individuals' perception patterns of follower roles are separated into negative and positive implicit followership [10]. Positive IFT is an intellectual construct regarding the constructive traits of followers, which is a collection of likely positive follower traits and developmental interpretations such as being hardworking, outgoing, and being loyal. Alternatively, negative IFT is the intellectual construct of the unfavorable qualities of the worker. In the conceptual representation of the mind, it is a set of detrimental worker traits and conducts: for instance, inexperience, follower trends, and rudeness. While this study focuses on the impact outcomes of positive IFT, the main focus is on positive implicit followership of followers. IFT is not as easily observed as explicit behavior; thus, there is some controversy regarding its measurement [21].

Since the introduction of implicit followership theory, investigators have discovered that the insight–conduct link by presuming that stimulation of the IFT structure indicates conduct in accordance to that system [18]. A study on self-fulfilling or Pygmalion prophecies based on implicit followership theory demonstrates the perception–behavior link [22]. The social construction perspective suggests that individuals interact with their environment in such a manner that they effectively interpret and provide feedback on their situation and then construct ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that match the situation [23]. It has been shown that the “implicit leadership theory” of industry managers makes an important contribution in guiding leadership behavior [24]; if leaders have a significant influence on their behavior based on the “implicit leadership theory,” it is reasonable to assume that individuals as employees may also be guided to perform work behavior that is consistent with this perception based on the implicit followership theory [8].

Positive implicit followership includes three dimensions such as industry, enthusiasm, and good citizenship [10]: When employees believe that they should have the trait of hard work as followers, they are more demanding at work and will actively exchange work ideas with significant others in the workplace; enthusiasm, as a conceptualized positive emotion [25], is believed to promote constructive attitudes and behaviors at work [26]; and the good citizen trait is believed to focus on communication and cooperation. Northcraft and Ashford [27] found that individuals with low-performance expectations sought less feedback than those with high expectations. In other words, individuals are more likely to engage in feedback-seeking behavior when they have high expectations of themselves [27]. This research approves a worker's viewpoint in analytically examining how followers' positive implicit followership dimensions play a role in self-actualization effects. Feedback-seeking behavior, as one of the proactive work behaviors, has been found by some researchers to be less frequently reported in employees' proactive work behaviors [28], and it is worth exploring how employees can be motivated to exhibit more feedback-seeking behaviors and to explore the influence of positive implicit followership traits on their feedback-seeking behaviors. Based on the literature, the following hypotheses can be inferred.

Hypothesis 1a (H1a). *Employee industry trait has a positive impact on FSB.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b). *Employee enthusiasm trait has a positive impact on FSB.*

Hypothesis 1c (H1c). *Employee good citizen trait has a positive impact on FSB.*

2.2. Positive Implicit Followership Traits and Perceived Supervisor Support

PSS is the overall perception of employees about the extent to which their immediate supervisors value their contributions to the organization and care about the benefits they receive and is an important antecedent for employees to perceive and respond to leadership behaviors [29]. There are different academic opinions concerning the components of PSS. On the one hand, some scholars hold a monolithic view of perceived supervisor support as a separate concept [29]. On the other hand, there are also scholars with a multidimensional perspective who divide perceived competent assistance into instrumental and emotive assistance [30]. In addition, some other scholars consider PSS as a dimension of perceived organizational assistance, which is separated into project-based support and relational assistance [31]. This study focuses on employees' overall assessment of PSS. Thus, PSS uses a unidimensional viewpoint.

The traits and behaviors included in implicit followership theory help leaders and followers make judgments about specific followers. Moreover, once corresponding to the individual positive implicit followership theory, the positive attributes exhibited will increase the influence of the partner in the relationship. A study by Engle and Lord [32] depicts somewhat similar findings, suggesting that supervisors often use their implicit followership theory to determine the importance of the leader–member discussions. This study makes it clear that the followers' additional implementation of the constructive traits and behaviors included in the leader's constructive IFT will exhibit more constructive leader expectations in evaluating his or her impact on the team. In addition, different partners have different levels of perceptions of the quality of their relationships with each other [33], and from a follower's perspective, the match between an employee's behavior and positive implicit followership results in a perception of a higher contribution to the relationship [9], which in turn results in a belief that when they contribute to the supervisor or the organization, they trust the supervisor to support their actions [34].

Furthermore, when employees have positive implicit followership perceptions, they are likely to have higher levels of supervisor support. According to information processing theory, in addition to information from the social environment, an individual's values and past experiences are also important factors influencing his or her information processing and perception. Employees form their implicit followership cognitions and judgments

through past experiences [10], and this positive implicit followership cognition serves as an individual-based cognitive framework for information processing of the input. In the process of information processing, people make their interpretations of the environment, keep it organized, make choices by reviewing and predicting, etc., and finally develop a reasonable (rather than completely accurate) orientation to guide behavior [35]. Some studies have shown that leaders are more enthusiastic in devoting time and effort in developing their employees when employees demonstrate higher levels of trust and loyalty to their leaders [36].

Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesized the following.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a). *Employee industry trait has a positive impact on PSS.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b). *Employee enthusiasm trait has a positive impact on PSS.*

Hypothesis 2c (H2c). *Employee good citizen trait has a positive impact on PSS.*

2.3. Perceived Supervisor Support and Feedback-Seeking Behavior

FSB is the effortful conduct of corporate employees to reduce the acceptable uncertainty of their performance and is an important resource for individuals and organizations [37]. Feedback-seeking provides diagnostic and error correction information about the aspects of a person's behavior or performance that are not meeting expectations and can provide information on how these can be improved [38]. Individuals exhibit feedback-seeking behaviors stemming from three main motivations: instrumental motivation to achieve goals or perform well, egoistic motivation to defend or enhance the self, and image-based motivation to enhance and protect others' impressions of them [39].

When deciding whether to adopt feedback-seeking behavior, individuals assess the possible costs and benefits of adopting the behavior [40]. Feedback information differs from other information in that it is information about the self [2]. Psychological studies have shown that people are motivated to defend and protect themselves [39]. Thus, individuals employ different cognitive mechanisms to avoid or distort information that is relevant to them and, thus, decide whether to adopt feedback-seeking behavior by evaluating costs and benefits. Feedback seekers want information to enhance personal success and impression management, whereas feedback avoiders want to minimize exposure of their poor performance to protect their egos and maintain a positive image [41].

Past research has shown that leadership style is a key factor in determining whether followers seek or avoid feedback. Specifically, factors such as supportive leadership as well as employee leadership relationships can influence employees' feedback-seeking behavior [42]. The costs associated with seeking feedback are reduced when leaders show individualized consideration for their subordinates [43]. Furthermore, when employees feel more supported by their leaders, this safe environment makes employees perceive less loss in taking on feedback-seeking behavior [43].

Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesized the following.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Employee perceived supervisor support is positively related to employee feedback-seeking behavior.*

2.4. Mediating Role of Perceived Supervisor Support

IFT is a mental conceptualization of the elaboration and beliefs associated with followers. The ideas are encoded as intellectual categories and are stored in the memory of the person [44]. Furthermore, positive implicit followership theory represents individuals' beliefs about constructive characteristics and behaviors of follower roles, including industry, enthusiasm, and being a good citizen. Research has shown that when individuals hold a belief or have a mental model, this perception influences the way individuals respond in a manner consistent with that belief or mental model [32,45]. The qualities and actions are aggregated as a result of the individual's earlier experiences, giving rise to its implicit

follow-through theory. These role perceptions of implicit following operate on the individual's evaluation of and response to the follower [13]. The great connection between leaders and followers evolves through the efforts of both parties to be valued by the other. The role perceptions developed by positive implicit followership theory are traits and behaviors that are typically expected by individuals to produce contributions in an organizational context. For followers, it is believed that the leader's viewpoint of the typical worker is comparable for all workers, and this is also in harmony with the general conceptualization of IFT and implicit leadership theory [9,10]. Furthermore, the intellectual representation of the typical worker is constant across a variety of workers. This view is implicitly accepted in numerous findings on IFT, asserting that merely the real employees are evaluated on the corresponding implicit followership dimension [46].

The perceived supervisory support may be one reason that motivates employees to exhibit feedback-seeking behavior. A supportive climate is considered to be one of the important factors that motivate employees to safely engage in feedback-seeking [47]. In organizational contexts, social information processing theory is often used to explain the influence of leadership behavior on the formation of organizational climate [48]. When supportive leadership creates a positive climate and can be perceived by employees, this psychological safety can help employees feel confident that they can safely seek feedback rather than avoid it [49]. Supervisors are often considered to have a wide range of expertise, and they are able to properly understand the needs of their subordinates. In addition, they have a high understanding of the current state of management and are responsible for the progress and performance of their subordinates [50]. In addition, employees' work tasks and expertise are assigned to them by their supervisors [51]. In everyday life, employees usually receive feedback from their supervisors. Vandewalle et al. [42] integrated a model of antecedent influences on employee feedback-seeking behavior and concluded that individual traits and leader behavioral styles can influence whether employees exhibit feedback-seeking behavior through their perceptions of cost and value evaluations [43]. It has been shown that when conducting experimental observations, participants in an environment where the experimental operator is supportive (e.g., the operator is more polite and welcoming) are more willing to seek feedback about their task performance [43]. Therefore, a supportive supervisor can create a safe atmosphere to motivate employees to exhibit more feedback-seeking behavior, and when employees feel a greater sense of supervisory support, they can also have a stronger sense of psychological safety for their feedback needs.

The above elaboration suggests that individuals' beliefs about followership role perceptions formed in organizational situations influence their feedback-seeking behavior. Therefore, the present study considers PSS as a mediating variable between positive IFT and feedback-seeking behavior.

Hypothesis 4a (H4a). *PSS mediates between employee industry trait and employee FSB.*

Hypothesis 4b (H4b). *PSS mediates between employee enthusiasm trait and employee FSB.*

Hypothesis 4c (H4c). *PSS mediates between employee good citizen trait and employee FSB.*

The research model in this study is shown in Figure 1.

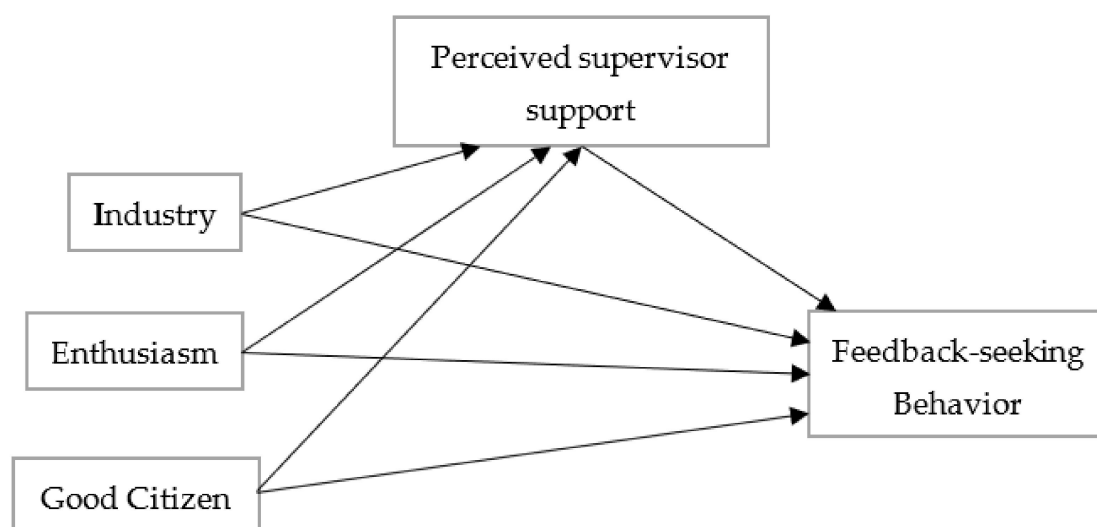


Figure 1. Research model.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Collection

This research focuses on a sample of SME employees. Questionnaire data were collected using a convenience sampling method by contacting the company's human resources manager to collect a list of employees and then randomly selecting some employees from the company's list for the study. The human resources department arranged a separate meeting room where members of this group distributed paper questionnaires to employees in order to fill in the questionnaires. The survey sample was mainly located in Wuhan and Shenzhen, China, and the respondents were mainly grassroot employees of the company. It took two months to send out 280 employee questionnaires and 228 questionnaires were collected, and after eliminating invalid questionnaires, the number of valid questionnaires was 207.

3.2. Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire contained a survey of basic participant background data and their evaluation of study constructs. In the first part of the questionnaire, the information including education, gender, age, and years of work was investigated. In the next part of the instrument, latent constructs were determined by employing a Likert scale. The measurement scales were mostly altered from previous research, and each item was primarily composed in the Chinese language and adapted for the investigators to match the expression in Chinese contexts.

First, the scale of the employee's positive implicit followership originated from Sy [9], and its scale has good applicability in China. In this study, 9 entries of 3 dimensions indicating positive implicit followership were selected, and the 3 dimensions were industry, enthusiasm, and good citizen [10]. The scale was self-rated by employees based on the Likert-7 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Afterward, the perceived supervisor support scale was derived from the 4-entry scale used by Cheng et al. (2003) in a Chinese organizational context [52], and employees rated it based on a Likert-6 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). Then, employee feedback-seeking behavior was measured using a scale developed by Vandewalle et al. with five entries [43]. This scale was completed by the employee and was evaluated based on the Likert-7 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

3.3. Data Analysis

The findings were divided into two parts, including measurement model validation and structural equation modeling (SEM) evaluation, to draw applicable assumptions. Anderson and Gerbing's [53] method was applied to validate the research framework through validation of convergent authenticity, reliability assessment, and discriminant authenticity. Afterward, structural equation modeling was analyzed based on the study model, including path analysis and mediating effects analysis by using statistical software AMOS (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

4.1.1. Frequency Distribution

Disaggregated data elements for the 207 valid questionnaires included gender, education, years of experience, and time spent with the current immediate supervisor. Among the respondents, 110 men accounted for 53.1%; 97 women accounted for 46.9%. Eight-two people accounted for those with high school education and below, 39.6%, followed by 67 people accounting for 32.4% for undergraduate education and above. At present, 90 people who have worked in the company for 1 year or less accounted for 43.5%, followed by 59 people who have worked for more than 1 year to 3 years or less, who account for 28.5%. The majority of people who have worked with the current leader for one year or less number 119, accounting for 57.5%, followed by 63 people who have worked for more than one year to less than three years, accounting for 30.4%. The specific data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency distribution.

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	110	53.1
	Female	97	46.9
Education	High school certificate or below	82	39.6
	College graduate	58	28
	Bachelor or above	67	32.4
Years of Work	1 year	90	43.5
	1~3 years	59	28.5
	3~10 years	42	20.3
Experience	Above 10 years	19	9.2
	Under 1 year	119	57.5
	1~3 years	63	30.4
Working time with the current leader	Above 3 years	25	12.1

4.1.2. Item Statistical Analysis

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation values of the items for each construct. The lowest mean of the three traits of positive implicit following was 4.74 or "excellent excellence" in the industry trait construct. In contrast, the greatest mean value is 6.06, which is the "team player" of the good citizen trait. Among the constructs of perceived supervisor support, employees are most concerned about "my immediate supervisor's willingness to give me a chance to fix my mistakes when I make them," with a mean value of 4.82 and a standard deviation of 0.891. Among the constructs of feedback-seeking behavior, the item with the highest mean was "I asked my immediate supervisor about my job role and his expectations of me," which also had the lowest standard deviation of the construct.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of items.

Item	Mean		Std. Deviation
IND1	5.66		1.096
IND2	5.09	5.16	1.138
IND3	4.74		1.169
AUT1	4.93		1.115
AUT2	5.32	5.17	1.155
AUT3	5.26		1.086
GCZ1	5.78		0.973
GCZ2	5.91	5.92	0.943
GCZ3	6.06		0.871
PSS1	4.38		1.093
PSS2	4.79	4.63	0.969
PSS3	4.53		0.965
PSS4	4.82		0.891
FSB1	4.90		1.315
FSB2	4.79	4.58	1.332
FSB3	4.19		1.387
FSB4	4.45		1.420

4.2. Measurement Model Verification

4.2.1. Convergent Validity

This study evaluates measurement and structural models by using the SEM two-phase method proposed by Anderson and Gerbing [53]. The structural reliability and convergent validity of the research models were examined by using the first step of validation factor analysis (CFA). In addition, the discriminant authenticity of the research framework was evaluated. Discriminant validity, convergent validity, and factor loadings were calculated by the employment of maximum likelihood estimation (MLE). The next phase assessed the significance of the path effect and its research framework.

Fornell and Larcker [54] suggested three metrics to measure the convergent authenticity of the research model. The initial one measures the reliability of each item, while the next one calculates the constructed composite reliability (CR), and the final phase is the analysis of extracted average variance (AVE). The CR of a construct implies the internal consistency of every item. Table 1 shows that the standardized factor loadings of the indicators varied from 0.634 to 0.936, implying that all items were within a reasonable range of convergent validity. All CRs of the structures range from 0.851 to 0.874, thus exceeding the threshold of 0.6 and indicating that all structures are internally consistent [54]. Finally, all AVEs from 0.598 to 0.699 exceed the 0.5 suggested by Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black [55] and Fornell and Larcker [54]. All structures had sufficient convergent validity (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Results for the measurement model.

Construct	Item	Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
IND	IND1	0.711	0.863	0.680
	IND2	0.936		
	IND3	0.811		
ENT	ENT1	0.769	0.851	0.655
	ENT2	0.807		
	ENT3	0.851		
GCZ	GCZ1	0.815	0.874	0.699
	GCZ2	0.908		
	GCZ3	0.744		
PSS	PSS1	0.710	0.856	0.598
	PSS2	0.845		
	PSS3	0.764		
	PSS4	0.768		
FSB	FSB1	0.634	0.872	0.633
	FSB2	0.815		
	FSB3	0.889		
	FSB4	0.822		

Note: IND = industrious trait; ENT = enthusiasm trait; GCZ = good citizen trait; PSS = perceived supervisor support; FSB = feedback-seeking Behavior.

4.2.2. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity compares the construct's square root of the AVE along with the construct's relationship with other constructs [54]. The metrics are additional firmly associated with the measurement structure of the construct than the others, if its AVE square root is greater than the non-diagonal components in the subsequent columns and rows. As shown in Table 4, the square root of AVE is indicated by the diagonally directed bold numbers. Since all the diagonally directed numbers are found to be greater than the non-diagonally directed numbers, the discriminant authenticity of all structures is achieved.

Table 4. The result of discriminant validity analysis.

	AVE	IND	ENT	GCZ	PSS	FSB
IND	0.680	0.825				
ENT	0.655	0.501	0.809			
GCZ	0.699	0.561	0.598	0.836		
PSS	0.598	0.458	0.487	0.506	0.773	
FSB	0.633	0.464	0.398	0.441	0.594	0.796

Note 1: Values on the diagonal are the square-root of AVE. Note 2: IND = industry trait; ENT = enthusiasm trait; GCZ = good citizen trait; PSS = perceived supervisor support; FSB = feedback-seeking Behavior.

4.3. Structural Equation Model

4.3.1. Structural Model Analysis

In this study, eight common models proposed by Jackson, Gillaspy, and Purc-Stephenson were implemented for fit validation [56]. In addition, if the sample size is greater than 200, the Chi-square value yields an insignificant result. Therefore, the bootstrap method provides an alternative method in obtaining better results. By dividing the degrees of freedom (DF) by using Chi-square, the ideal result should be less than three. In addition, other criteria provide a more stringent criterion for model fit validation, as shown in Table 5. For example, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value should be less than 0.08, while the comparative fit index (CFI) criterion should be higher than 0.9. The test results are shown in Table 5. All tested model fit criteria met the recommended criteria.

Table 5. Model fit verification.

Index	Criteria	Model Fit
Chi-square	The small the better	177.719
DF	The large the better	109
Normed Chi-square (χ^2/DF)	<3	1.630
GFI	>0.9	0.911
AGFI	>0.9	0.875
RMSEA	<0.08	0.055
CFI	>0.9	0.965
TLI	>0.9	0.956

Note: χ^2 = Chi-square; DF = degree of freedom; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; TLI (NNFI) = Tucker–Lewis Index; CFI = comparative fit index; GFI = goodness of fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index.

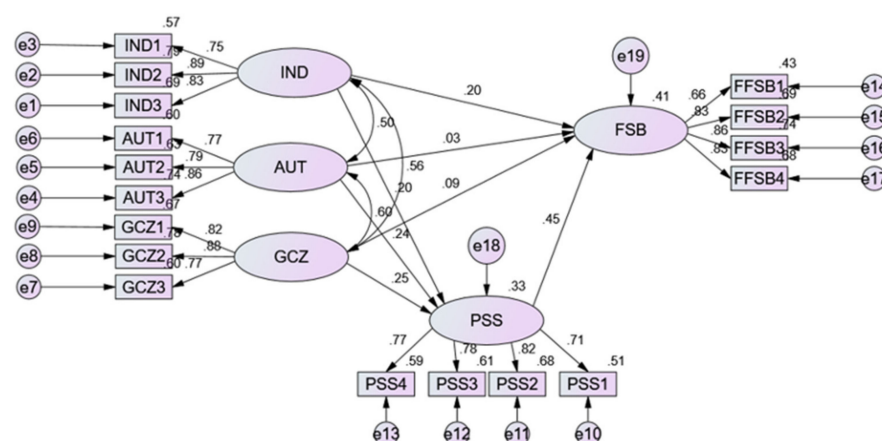
4.3.2. Path Analysis

Table 6 and Figure 2 show the path coefficient analysis of the causal relationship between the validated variables. Industry trait (IND) ($\beta = 0.159, p < 0.05$), good citizenship trait ($\beta = 0.198, p < 0.05$), and loyalty trait ($\beta = 0.295, p < 0.05$) significantly influenced employee feedback-seeking behavior; therefore, hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c were accepted. In addition, the industry trait (IND) ($\beta = 0.174, p < 0.05$) significantly influenced perceived supervisor support (PSS); thus, hypothesis 2a was supported. Perceived supervisor support (PSS) ($\beta = 0.493, p < 0.01$) significantly influenced feedback-seeking behavior (FSB), supporting research hypothesis 3.

Table 6. Path analysis.

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	<i>p</i> -Value
H1a: IND→FSB	0.159 *	0.032
H1b: AUT→FSB	0.198 *	0.016
H1c: GCZ→FSB	0.295 *	0.013
H2a: IND→PSS	0.174 *	0.028
H2b: AUT→PSS	0.029	0.740
H2c: GCZ→PSS	0.113	0.369
H3: PSS→FSB	0.493 ***	0.000

Note 1: IND = industry trait; ENT = enthusiasm trait; GCZ = good citizen trait; PSS = perceived supervisor support; FSB = feedback-seeking behavior; Note 2: * *p*-value < 0.05; *** *p*-value < 0.001.

**Figure 2.** SEM statistic model.

4.3.3. Mediation Effect Analysis

Empirical studies that consider the use of bootstrap mediation analysis are superior to B-K methods or coefficient products when assessing indirect/mediated effects [57]. When performing bootstrap analysis, 5000 sampling procedures were recommended and at least 1000 were required [58]. Due to the fact that bootstrap mediated analysis can provide confidentiality intervals to check for indirect effects, it is superior to other mediated testing methods. A preferred bootstrap-mediated analysis method is the bias-corrected bootstrap [57,59].

As shown in Table 7, the indirect effect IND→PSS→FSB is supported. Therefore, H4a holds and H4b and 4c do not hold.

Table 7. Indirect effect analysis.

Variables	Point Estimate	Product of Coefficients		Bias-Corrected 95% CI	
		SE	Z	Lower	Upper
Total Effect					
IND→FSB	0.252	0.104	2.423	0.069	0.485
AUT→FSB	0.126	0.113	1.115	−0.095	0.352
GCZ→FSB	0.258	0.140	1.843	−0.008	0.550
Indirect Effect					
IND→FSB	0.078	0.052	1.500	0.001	0.225
AUT→FSB	0.097	0.065	1.492	0.005	0.273
GCZ→FSB	0.145	0.085	1.706	0.019	0.372
Direct Effect					
IND→FSB	0.174	0.097	1.794	0.000	0.379
AUT→FSB	0.029	0.101	0.287	−0.195	0.205
GCZ→FSB	0.113	0.127	0.890	−0.141	0.364

Note: IND = industry trait; ENT = enthusiasm trait; GCZ = good citizen trait; PSS = perceived supervisor support; FSB = feedback-seeking behavior.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study focuses on the study of employees' implicit followership in the SME context and explores its impact on the results in China. The study is based on social information processing theory, incorporating feedback-seeking behavior and using perceived supervisor support as mediating variables and then introduces research structure and related hypotheses.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The implicit perceptions that employees hold about the follower role determine the state in which they will exhibit their work behavior. Therefore, SME employees need to understand their implicit followership perceptions of the organization. However, past research has focused on the effects of leaders' implicit followership on employees and less on how followers' cognitive states guide their behaviors or attitudes. This study attempts to explore factors influencing the feedback-seeking behavior of SME employees from the perspective of follower's implicit followership, based on social information processing theory and integrating the interactive factors of perceived supervisor support, in order to discuss how the perception of three traits of positive implicit followership of SME employees affects their feedback-seeking behavior, and the following results were obtained.

5.1.1. The Effect of Follower Implicit Followership on Feedback-Seeking Behavior

The results of the study showed that positive implicit followership had a positive effect on employees' perceived supervisory support; this finding is the same as that of previous studies [17]. The mean of the good citizen trait dimension "team player" was 6.06, which is the highest of all the dimensions, and its standard deviation was 0.871, which proves that employees in SMEs have a strong sense of teamwork. It also indicates that under the influence of collectivist culture, employees usually think that cooperation with others is a consensus that they should have. This positive should have a team spirit cognitive able to guide employees to cooperate with their leaders and colleagues.

Furthermore, among all the questions of the three dimensions included in the positive implicit followership, the mean values of the three questions of the good citizen trait dimension are relatively high compared to the mean values of the other dimensions, and the standard deviation is relatively low, which proves that employees have less variability in their perceptions of loyalty, reliability, and teamwork under the influence of long-term Confucianism. Among the questions of the industry trait, the lowest mean value of "excellent and outstanding" is 4.74, and the standard deviation is 1.169, which is the highest among all three dimensions, indicating that employees are not particularly confident in their work and there is a large variation in this point, which may be related to the fact that the research subjects of this study are grassroot employees. This may be related to the fact that the sample of grassroot employees in this study is usually not highly educated, with more than 50% of the employees in this study being college graduates or below. The high mean and low standard deviation of the "work hard" dimension indicate that most employees believe that they should work hard.

In the path analysis of the effects of the traits of positive implicit followership on feedback-seeking behavior, industry trait had an unstandardized coefficient of 0.17, which was the only statistically significant path among the three paths. Furthermore this finding is more consistent with Gong et al.'s [4] findings that when employees believe that they should work hard and have good performance as a follower, this implicit expectation will stimulate feedback-seeking behavior. The two traits of enthusiasm and good citizen did not contribute to the occurrence of the behavior.

5.1.2. Mediating Influence of Employee Supervisor Support Perception

First of all, in the path analysis of the effects of the three traits of IFT on PSS, the unstandardized coefficient of the good citizen trait was 0.29, the unstandardized coefficient of the enthusiastic trait was 0.20, the unstandardized coefficient of the industry trait was

0.16, and the effects of all three traits on perceived supervisor support were statistically significant, thus confirming the hypothesis of this study that the industry, enthusiastic, and good citizen traits have a significant positive effect on supervisor support compared to the positive correlation between good citizen trait and perceived supervisor support, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies [36].

Second, in the section on the effect of perceived supervisor support on feedback-seeking behavior, it is known from the results of this study that PSS has a positive impact on feedback-seeking behavior, and this result is similar to the results of previous studies [60].

The positive perception of the perceived supervisor support construct represents an increase in the performance of feedback-seeking behaviors after the SME employees feel encouraged by their managers. In the segment of supervisor support, question four, “When I make a mistake, my immediate supervisor is willing to give me a chance to make up for it,” has the highest mean score of 4.82 and the lowest standard deviation of all questions in this dimension, indicating that SMB employees are very concerned about whether their leaders can understand and provide them a chance to make up for their mistakes. Employees in the Chinese context have high self-esteem and a sense of face and are, therefore, more concerned about the outcome of wrongdoing. When employees feel either emotional encouragement or practical instrumental support from their supervisors, this supportive atmosphere motivates employees to exhibit more feedback-seeking behaviors, which in turn improves their work results.

5.2. Practical Contribution

Feedback-seeking behavior of SME employees is extremely important for the development of the company. The Chinese context attaches more importance to top-down feedback; however, with the characteristics of employees in different times, the individual characteristics of the post-1980s employees and new generation employees have a greater difference, and secondly small and medium-sized enterprises relatively lack resources, especially when human resource management systems are not perfect, and the lack of effective corporate management tools, leaders, and employees often contributes to a “feedback vacuum. Based on the results of this study, we recommend driving the organization to improve its corporate policies in order to promote positive feedback-seeking behaviors among employees and thereby enhancing their sustainability.

5.2.1. Guiding Employees to Build Positive Implicit Followership

Research on the effects of the three traits of implicit followership on outcomes has shown that when employees have positive implicit followership such as industry, enthusiasm, and good citizen traits, they are able to promote positive perceptions of supervisor support, which in turn motivates their feedback-seeking behaviors. Therefore, first, when recruiting new employees, organizations should recruit employees who have positive implicit followership, even though they do not possess the appropriate distinct skills but have positive implicit perceptions and self-expectations about the followership role; in addition, they should guide employees in developing positive employee traits in their daily training and communication activities; more importantly, they should internalize these traits and behaviors into followers’ perceptions of followership.

5.2.2. Providing Multi-Faceted Support for New Employees

Research has found that perceived supervisor support is effective in promoting employee feedback-seeking behavior. When employees perceive a supportive climate, their perceived feedback-seeking behavior may be less costly [2]. When individuals feel supported by their supervisors in their work, especially when they make mistakes or errors in their work, they are more motivated to seek feedback from their leaders if they are understood and appreciated by them [60]. Therefore, companies can support their employees by using two approaches. Firstly, the company offers further encouraging strategies to assist the company’s workers. Since the manager typically performs as the company’s agent, the

company's provision for the employee will be taken by the employee as the supervisor's support, which will enhance the promotion of his or her FSB; conversely, the company communicates with the supervisor to generate a helpful management environment, and because the supervisor has distinct assets and authority in the corporation and typically has a wider perspective than the employee, it is suggested that the supervisor provide additional care and assistance to the employee, which in turn will stimulate his or her feedback-seeking behavior.

5.3. Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study focuses on a sample of SME employees as the research population. First, this research utilized a one-dimensional measurement construct for PSS. Nevertheless, several investigations have indicated that PSS is multidimensional and that managers may offer both emotive and instrumental assistance in the organization; thus, future research could adopt multidimensional leadership support perceptions into the study. Second, this research used cross-sectional data even though longitudinal studies can produce more realistic and credible results; therefore, it is recommended that future researchers conduct studies using a longitudinal cross-sectional design. In addition, this paper only explored perceived supervisor support and its effect on feedback-seeking behavior among employees holding positive implicit followership and did not explore whether the organizational environment and climate factors affect how individual perceptions influence their interpretation of leadership behavior during social information processing; therefore, future research should consider the interaction of individual factors and context to draw more valuable conclusions.

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