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Authentic leadership and workplace deviance: The mediating roles of psychological capital and organizational identification in the era of artificial intelligence

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Abstract: This study explores how authentic leadership reduces workplace deviance behavior in the era of artificial intelligence (AI) through a chain mediation mechanism involving positive psychological capital and organizational identification. The sample comprised 619 business professionals who regularly used AI tools in their work (52% male; M = 34 years, 20.7% from the service education). The results revealed a significant workplace deviance behavior to be lower with authentic leadership. Organizational identification mediated the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior for lower workplace deviance. Although positive psychological capital alone did not mediate this relationship, it exerted an indirect effect on workplace deviance behavior by enhancing employees'organizational identification. These findings suggest that, in the context of AI, authentic leadership can effectively mitigate workplace deviant behaviors by strengthening employees' psychological resources and fostering stronger identification with the organization. Therefore, human resource departments should actively identify and support managers who demonstrate authentic leadership qualities.

Keywords: Authentic leadership; positive psychological capital; organizational identification; workplace deviance behavior; the era of AI

Introduction

In the artificial intelligence (AI) era, AI is widely applied across various sectors, including the service and high-technology industries for business efficiency (He et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2024). Although the adoption of AI enhances organizational productivity, employees may experience discomfort with technological innovation, and engage in workplace deviance behavior for a sense of control (Sha et al., 2025a; Zhao, 2025). Workplace deviance behavior is defined as employees' actions that violate organizational norms and are considered harmful to the organization or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Those whose positions are at higher risk of being replaced by AI are very uncomfortable with AI innovation (Chen & Cai, 2025). In coping, employees with AI trepidation may draw on their psychological capital comprising self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience (Kim & Lee, 2025), especially when they perceive authentic leadership. Authentic leadership is characterized by confidence, hope, optimism, resilience, transparency, and morality, and it prioritizes the development of employees into leaders themselves (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Moreover, there could be differences in how employees cope with AI work life based on their organizational identification, that is, the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as members of the organization and internalize its values and goals. Few studies have examined the interactive effects of psychological capital and organizational identification on the relationship between employee perceptions of authentic leadership and risk of workplace deviance behavior. The major exceptions are the studies by Niu et al. (2018) and Zhang et al. (2023). Therefore, under the new wave of AI-driven technological transformation, exploring how to prevent workplace deviance behavior becomes crucial for maintaining organizational performance and promoting employee well-being.

Authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior

More recent empirical evidence further indicates that authentic leadership significantly reduces employees' levels of workplace deviance behavior (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2013). Authentic leadership can regulate the words and behaviors of organizational members and clarify the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable within the organization, thereby reducing employees' ambiguity regarding expected behavior (Lloyd-Walker & Walker, 2011). From a social exchange theory perspective, when authentic leaders are perceived as morally upright, employees are more likely to reciprocate through constructive behaviors rather than engaging in workplace deviance behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Farid et al., 2020).

From a conservation of resources theory perspective, authentic leadership is conceptualized as a contextual resource that replenishes employees' psychological resources depleted by AI-driven technological change. Such technological change is found to heighten employees' psychological insecurity and anxiety, thereby eliciting defensive behaviors (Sha et al., 2025a). Through transparent communication and supportive practices, psychological safety boundaries are reinforced, reducing the likelihood that employees engage in coping-related workplace deviance behavior (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2013). Accordingly, authentic leadership not only exerts moral influence but also serves as a stress-buffering mechanism that mitigates workplace deviance behavior under conditions of technological uncertainty.

Psychological capital mediation

Psychological capital helps employees cope with workplace challenges (Luthans et al., 2007). In the era of AI, technological changes often generate considerable uncertainty, creating numerous challenges for employees' work lives. Psychological capital counteract work discomfort resource depletion caused by such uncertainty (Kim & Lee, 2025). Previous research indicates that employees' positive psychological capital is higher with authentic leadership (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009). This is because the transparency, trust, and consistent moral standards exhibited by authentic leaders in managing superior–subordinate relationships are regarded as a critical supportive context for the accumulation of employees' positive psychological resources (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009; Luthans et al., 2007). Employees with authentic leadership have hope and optimism (Kelly, 2023) to manage AI-induced uncertainty.

Prior research identifies stressors as key antecedents of workplace deviance behavior (Fox & Spector, 1999). For instance, during AI-driven technological change, employees' deviant behaviors are primarily elicited by anxiety and stress arising from future uncertainty (Zhang et al., 2025). Employees with high psychological capital, however, are more likely to perceive hope and demonstrate resilience, thereby transforming stress into developmental motivation (Norman et al., 2010) and reduce the likelihood that employees respond with deviant behavior (Raza et al., 2019).

Organizational identification mediation

Organizational identification could help employeed manage their work-related insecurity caused by AI technologies challenges (He et al., 2024). Organizational identification is closely associated with job insecurity (Piccoli et al., 2017), as it enables employees to perceive shared interests with the organization and to regard themselves as indispensable members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This sense of belonging is found to strengthen trust and psychological safety, thereby allowing employees to confidently engage in AI-related tasks and proactively adjust their behaviors instead of responding passively to potential challenges (Qin et al., 2025).

Employees' organizational identification would strengthen the authentic leadership effect on workplace deviance behavior (Niu et al., 2018; Jun et al., 2025). For instance, organizational identification reduces the likelihood that employees engage in workplace deviance behavior in response to uncertainty and perceived threats arising from AI technologies (Piccoli et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2026). Moreover, the enhancement of organizational identification often complements employees' positive psychological states, and together, these factors act to decrease workplace deviance behavior (Wang et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2025).

Conceivably, Psychological Capital and Organizational Identification would have a chain mediation effect on the authemtic leadership–employee workplace deviant behavior. For instance, the context of rapid AI technological development, employees with higher levels of positive psychological capital (such as hope, optimism), and resilience—are more likely to approach technological changes with a constructive mindset and align organizational goals with their personal development, thereby reinforcing organizational identification (Norman et al., 2010; Rajapaksha & Kalyani, 2020). Therefore, in the context of rapid AI development, it is plausible that authentic leadership reduces workplace deviance behavior through a chain-mediated effect by enhancing employees' positive psychological capital and organizational identification.

Theoretical foundations

Building on Social Exchange Theory, the present study incorporates positive psychological capital and organizational identification as variables and employs the framework of Conservation of Resources Theory to investigate the specific mechanisms through which authentic leadership influences workplace deviance behavior.

Social Exchange Theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationships between leaders and employees within organizations (Chen & Sriphon, 2022). Authentic leadership fosters a positive work environment through its moral qualities (Avolio et al., 2004), and employees respond to this influence with positive behaviors, such as trusting leaders and exhibiting organizational citizenship behaviors (Ilies et al., 2005; Iqbal et al., 2018). While Conservation of Resources Theory explains how authentic leadership shapes employee behavior for coping with work-related stress and uncertainty (Sha et al., 2025a). The qualities of authentic leadership align with this need, as leaders sincerely engage with employees, enhancing their sense of security and organizational identification, which in turn helps them develop positive psychological capital and prevents workplace deviance behavior.

The present study. Accordingly, the present study employs the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior with psychological capital and organizational identification mediation (see Figure 1 for conceptual model).

Based on our conceptual model, we tested the following hypotheses.

H1. Workplace deviance behavior is lower with authemtic leadership.

H2. Positive psychological capital mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior, for lower workplace deviance.

H3. Organizational identification mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior, for lower workplace deviance.

H4. Positive psychological capital and organizational identification sequentially mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior for lower workplace deviance than with either alone.

Methods

Sources of data

A total of 619 employees (females = 52%), "mean age is 34 years (SD = 3.03)." By educational attainment, the 57% had bachelor's degree, 15.5% hold a master's degree, and 6.5% hold a doctoral degree. In terms of industry affiliation, participants are drawn from the service sector (17.4%), information technology (19.6%), education

(20.7%), manufacturing (17.1%), finance (20.0%), and other industries (5.2%).

Measures

Participants self-reported their demographics and completed validated multi-dimensional scales. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Authentic leadership

Authentic leadership was measured using the 16-item scale developed by Avolio et al. (2007), which includes four dimensions: "My immediate supervisor admits mistakes when they occur" (self-awareness), "My immediate supervisor's actions are consistent with their expressed beliefs" (moral perspective), "My immediate supervisor solicits views that challenge their own position" (balanced processing), and "My immediate supervisor seeks feedback to improve interactions with others" (relational transparency). In the present study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of 0.881.

Positive psychological capital

Positive psychological capital was measured using the 18-item scale developed by Luthans et al. (2007), consisting of three dimensions. Example items for each dimension include: "I have a high level of confidence in my leader" (self-efficacy), "I always try to see the positive aspects of my work" (optimism), and "I am able to effectively overcome work-related stress" (resilience). In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of 0.919.

Organizational identification

Organizational identification was measured using the 6-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Sample items include: "The success of this organization is my success." "When someone criticizes the company, it feels like a personal insult." In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of 0.930.

Workplace deviance behavior

Workplace deviance behavior was measured using the 13-item scale developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000), which comprises two dimensions. Example items include: "I occasionally make fun of my colleagues" (interpersonal deviance) and "When under excessive stress, I try to leave work early or arrive late to relieve pressure" (organizational deviance). In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of 0.969.

Procedure

This study received ethical approval from This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Guangxi Eco-Engineering Vocational & Technical College (number: GXST20250401). All participants provided informed consent with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. The data were collected through an online survey administered via the Credamo platform, which is widely used for research data collection and is popular among Chinese scholars (Liang et al., 2022).

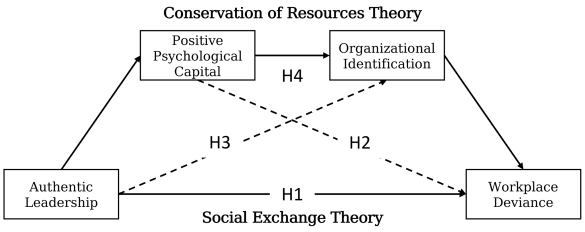

Figure 1. Theoretical model of the study (dashed line represents mediating effect)

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using AMOS 24 and SPSS 22. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the measurement model. Second, pearson correlation analyses were performed for the main variables, and common method bias was assessed using the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE). Finally, hypotheses were tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 6). Specifically, bootstrap procedures were employed to calculate 95% confidence intervals (CIs), and results were considered significant if the 95% CI did not include zero.

Common method variance

This study adopts a single-factor test to assess common method bias. An exploratory factor analysis is conducted on all items, and the first factor explains only 26.77% of the total variance, which is below the threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This indicates that common method bias is not a significant issue in this study.

Confirmatory factor analysis

To assess the potential impact of common method bias, CFA were conducted. The results are presented in Table 1. Two competing measurement models are examined. In the first-order model, the multidimensional structures of Workplace Deviance Behavior, Authentic Leadership, and Positive Psychological Capital are specified as distinct factors, whereas in the second-order model, their dimensions are aggregated into higher-order constructs. The results indicate that the overall model fit does not differ substantially between the two models; however, the second-order model demonstrates a superior fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.646$, CFI $=$ 0.910, TLI $=$ 0.905, RMSEA $=$ 0.065), indicating that the study's measurement structure is sound (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Correlation analyses and common method variance

To further assess the potential impact of common method bias, correlation analyses and common method variance tests were conducted. The results are presented in Table 2. All correlations among the variables fell within appropriate ranges, and the square roots of the AVE for each construct exceeded the correlations between constructs. According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity, these results indicate that the measurement model demonstrates acceptable discriminant validity and that no

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
First-order model	4888.54	1279	3.822	0.068	0.906	0.899	0.041
Second-order model	4772.90	1309	3.646	0.065	0.910	0.905	0.071

Table 2. Correlation analyses and common method variance results

Variables	Mean	SD	AL	PPC	OI	WDB
AL	4.015	0.471	0.809			
PPC	4.059	0.542	0.579**	0.860		
OI	3.988	0.695	0.378**	0.320**	0.815	
WDB	1.743	0.622	−0.248**	−0.198**	−0.348**	0.923
AVE		–	0.654	0.739	0.665	0.852

Note. n = 619. The diagonal line is the square root of AVE, **$p < 0.01$, AL = Authentic Leadership, PPC = Positive Psychological Capital, OI = Organizational Identification, WDB = Workplace Deviance Behavior.

significant common method bias is present (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Results

Descriptive statistics

The correlations, means, and standard deviations of the variables are reported in Table 2. Authentic leadership is found to be positively associated with psychological capital and organizational identification, and negatively associated with workplace deviance behavior ($p < 0.01$). These observed relationships establish a basis for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Authentic leadership and workplace deviance. As in Table 3, Model 1 indicates that authentic leadership has a significant negative effect on workplace deviance behavior ($\beta = -0.328, p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Model 2 shows that authentic leadership positively predicts positive psychological capital ($\beta = 0.667$, $p < 0.001$). Model 3 demonstrates that both authentic leadership ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$) and positive psychological capital ($\beta = 0.196$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive effects on organizational identification. To further verify the proposed hypotheses, the bootstrap method was employed, and the results are presented in Table 4. Authentic leadership has a significant negative effect on workplace deviance behavior (95% CI [−0.429, −0.227], excluding zero), supporting H1.

Psychological capital and organizational identification mediation. Positive psychological capital does not mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior (95% CI [−0.098, 0.041]), thus H2 is rejected.

Organizational identification mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior (95% CI [−0.156, −0.069], excluding zero), supporting H3.

Chain mediation of psychological capital and organizational identification. Model 4 reveals that, after including positive psychological capital and organizational identification, authentic leadership still exerts a significant negative influence on workplace deviance behavior ($\beta = -0.015, p < 0.05$), suggesting a potential chain mediation effect of positive psychological capital and organizational identification in the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior. Furthermore, positive psychological capital and organizational identification jointly exert a sequential mediating effect between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior (95% CI [−0.064, −0.009], excluding zero), providing support for H4.

Discussion

First, the results indicate that authentic leadership has a significant negative effect on workplace deviance behavior. This finding suggests that in the context of AI applications, authentic leadership, as a positive leadership style, effectively prevents employees from engaging in deviant workplace behaviors. This result is consistent with previous studies (Liu et al., 2018; Mahyarni, 2019; Qureshi & Hassan, 2019; Jun et al., 2025). Previous research has examined the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior across different contexts. In this study, AI is adopted as the contextual background to re-examine this relationship, thereby extending the boundaries of existing research. Although other leadership styles, such as ethical leadership and inclusive leadership, emphasize morality and openness, authentic leadership is also particularly important in AI–driven environments (Sha et al., 2025b). This is because it not only emphasizes ethical behavior and transparency but also regards trust as the core of leader–subordinate relationships. AI–induced transformation often intensifies employees' sense of insecurity and triggers concerns about organizational fairness and trust. Authentic leadership maintains managerial transparency by establishing trust-based relationships with employees, thereby alleviating the negative effects of stressors arising from AI-driven change.

Second, the mediating effect of positive psychological capital between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior was not significant, which partially differs from previous findings (Sri Ramalu &

Table 3. Regression analysis results

Result variables	Predictor variables	R^2	F	β	SE	t
Model 1						
WDB	AL	0.062	40.484	−0.328	0.052	−6.363***
Model 2						
PPC	AL	0.335	311.144	0.667	0.038	17.639***
Model 3						
OI	AL	0.159	58.022	0.428	0.067	6.396***
	PPC			0.196	0.058	3.364***
Model 4						
WDB	AL	0.138	32.741	−0.015	0.063	−2.444*
	PPC			−0.043	0.053	−0.816
	OI			−0.261	0.037	−7.148***

Note. n = 619, *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$, AL = Authentic Leadership, PPC = Positive Psychological Capital, OI = Organizational Identification, WDB = Workplace Deviance Behavior.

Table 4. Bootstrap test results

Hypothesis	Path	Type	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Result
H1	AL->>WDB	Total	−0.328	0.052	−0.429	−0.227	Accept
–	AL ->> WDB	Direct	−0.153	0.063	−0.276	−0.030	–
H2	AL -> PPC -> WDB	Ind1	−0.029	0.036	−0.098	0.041	Reject
H3	AL -> OI -> WDB	Ind2	−0.112	0.022	−0.156	−0.069	Accept
H4	AL -> PPC -> OI -> WDB	Ind3	−0.034	0.014	−0.064	−0.009	Accept

Note. n = 619, AL = Authentic Leadership, PPC = Positive Psychological Capital, OI = Organizational Identification, WDB = Workplace Deviance Behavior.

Janadari, 2022; Wang et al., 2014). Prior studies have primarily focused on the mediating role of positive psychological capital in the relationship between authentic leadership and positive employee outcomes, such as engagement or performance, whereas the present study examines its association with negative behaviors. Although positive psychological capital can help authentic leadership enhance employees' motivation and positivity, its effect on reducing negative behaviors appears limited. Essentially, positive psychological capital represents a psychological resource that promotes proactive motivation (Özgül & Çelenk, 2025). In contrast, workplace deviance behavior often arises from resource depletion and emotional exhaustion (Eissa & Lester, 2018), reflecting a defensive reaction rather than a mere lack of positive resources. Consistent with Conservation of Resources Theory, irrational or deviant actions tend to emerge as self-protective mechanisms when individuals experience resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore, the influence pathway from positive psychological capital to reduced deviant behavior may be weak and possibly mediated by other indirect factors. Furthermore, positive psychological capital is likely to accumulate over time, mediating the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior from psychological states to observable behaviors, rather than operating as an immediate or short-term response (Avey et al., 2010).

Third, organizational identification mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior. Organizational identification reflects the alignment of employees with organizational values, goals, and vision, leading them to perceive organizational success as the outcome of their own efforts (Van Dick et al., 2004). Because workplace deviance behavior hinders the achievement of organizational goals, employees with strong organizational identification are less likely to engage in such behaviors. In East Asian contexts, where collectivist culture prevails, employees often attribute responsibility to leaders as organizational representatives (Zemba et al., 2006) and are influenced by positive leadership styles. Accordingly, the present findings are consistent with previous research (Niu et al., 2018; Sha et al., 2025b; Jun et al., 2025), demonstrating that organizational identification mediates the relationship between positive leadership styles and both positive and negative employee behaviors. Distinct from prior research, the present study positions authentic leadership as the independent variable, thereby extending the conceptual boundaries of the positive leadership literature.

Finally, the results indicate that positive psychological capital and organizational identification sequentially mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior. This finding aligns with the non-significant mediating effect of positive psychological

capital alone and is consistent with previous research (Norman et al., 2010). Although prior studies have confirmed the roles of positive psychological capital and organizational identification in shaping employee behaviors, the influence of external factors, such as leadership, has been less emphasized. According to Conservation of Resources Theory, individual behavioral resources can be replenished through external conditions (Hobfoll, 1989). Authentic Leadership, through ethical and supportive behaviors, enhances employees' positive psychological capital. While this psychological resource alone may not directly reduce workplace deviance behavior, it can amplify employees' perceptions of positive leadership behaviors, thereby strengthening organizational identification and ultimately decreasing the likelihood of deviant workplace behaviors.

Implications for theory and practice

Based on the study's findings, several theoretical contributions and practical implications are proposed.

From a theoretical perspective, first, the present study re-examines the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' workplace deviance behavior within the context of rapid AI development, thereby extending the conceptual boundaries of authentic leadership research. Second, the study responds to prior findings that leadership support can mitigate the impact of AI-related anxiety on employees' deviant workplace behaviors (Sha et al., 2025a). By incorporating positive psychological capital and organizational identification, the study explores the specific mechanisms through which authentic leadership prevents workplace deviance behavior.

From a practical standpoint, organizations are encouraged to prioritize the development and enactment of authentic leadership. First, as AI–related technological changes frequently heighten employees' uncertainty and perceived insecurity (He et al., 2024), authentic leadership serves to mitigate these psychological stressors. Beyond emphasizing leaders' technical or digital competencies, organizations should focus on fostering leaders' authenticity, particularly their capacity for transparent communication regarding AI-related changes, recognition of employees' concerns, and consistency between words and actions. Second, when implementing AI tools or redesigning work processes, leaders are advised to frame AI as a supportive rather than substitutive resource, actively guide employees in enhancing AI literacy, and reinforce shared organizational values and collective goals. Finally, sustained leadership support, rather than short-term interventions, is likely critical for facilitating the translation of positive psychological capital into observable behavioral outcomes.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

First, the data for this study were collected from a specific context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, although data were collected at multiple time points, all measures relied on employee self-reports, which may still introduce potential common method bias and affect the interpretation of results. Future research should incorporate more diverse data sources, such as case studies or observational data. Third, positive psychological capital did not mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior, which may reflect a time-lag in the accumulation of psychological resources. Although a time-lagged design is implemented, the one-month interval may be relatively brief, potentially constraining the accumulation of positive psychological capital and limiting the precision of the findings. Fourth, although this study investigates the specific mechanisms of authentic leadership within the context of AI, it does not incorporate variables such as AI adoption or AI-related anxiety. As a result, the ability to draw causal inferences in the AI-specific context is somewhat constrained. Nevertheless, informed by prior research on the negative consequences of AI, the present findings regarding the mitigating role of authentic leadership on employees' negative behaviors in the AI era remain meaningful and informative. Fifth, due to methodological trade-offs associated with the research model and objectives, the multidimensional structures of authentic leadership, positive psychological capital, and workplace deviance behavior are aggregated in the present study, which may somewhat diminish the precision of result interpretation.

Finally, AI–driven transformation represents a salient stressor in the contemporary workplace, exerting profound effects on employees' well-being and behavioral responses. The present study focuses on the theoretical alignment between authentic leadership and stress mitigation mechanisms. However, this focus does not suggest that alternative leadership approaches lack relevance in AI contexts. Future research is encouraged to investigate the differential effects of ethical, inclusive, and servant leadership in alleviating the impact of technology-driven stressors, thereby further extending the conceptual boundaries of leadership research in the AI era.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the influence of positive leadership on employees' workplace deviance behavior in the era of AI. The results indicate that authentic leadership effectively prevents employees from engaging in deviant workplace behaviors. Although positive psychological capital does not independently mediate the effect of authentic leadership on workplace deviance behavior, it contributes indirectly through organizational identification. In addition, organizational identification alone also mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and workplace deviance behavior. This study not only responds to prior research highlighting leadership support as a key factor in mitigating AI-related anxiety and its effects on deviant behavior but also provides practical guidance for preventing workplace deviance behavior in the context of AI.

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Availability of Data and Materials: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Corresponding Author, upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Guangxi Eco-Engineering Vocational & Technical College (number: GXST20250401). All participants provided informed consent with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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