

Authentic Leadership and the Dimensions of Thriving at Work: The Roles of Insecure Attachment Styles

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Abstract

Authentic leaders are dedicated to achieving their goals with integrity, honesty, a strong sense of responsibility, and awareness, which builds trusting relationships with their employees. This trust boils down to numerous positive outcomes such as higher levels of thriving at work. Drawing on attachment theory, this study mainly investigates how authentic leadership can decrease attachment insecurity through which authentic leadership can impact their employees' learning and vitality (i.e. two dimensions of thriving at work). This quantitative research has a deductive approach with a descriptive and correlational nature and employs a descriptive-survey methodology for data collection. Using A-priori sample size calculator for Structural Equation Models, the minimum statistical sample of the research was estimated to be 321 people. The data were collected from 330 employees of public service organizations in Kerman and Yazd through an online survey encompassing five scales with five-point Likert scales. The content and structure validities of the questionnaire were verified, and the reliability of all the scales was above the threshold of 0.7. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS, AMOS, and PROCESS Module. The results revealed that authentic leadership was negatively associated with both employees' attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Meanwhile, these two attachment styles play mediating roles in determining how authentic leadership can affect employees' learning and vitality. Notably, a leader's authenticity, which features self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing, is more likely to reduce attachment insecurity and thus influence their thriving at work. This research extends our understanding of authentic leadership, attachment styles at work, and thriving at work. Practical implications and limitations are also discussed.

Keywords: *Authentic Leadership; Attachment Anxiety; Attachment Avoidance; Learning; Vitality.*

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Introduction

Public sector organizations in Iran face significant challenges that hinder their ability to maintain high levels of employee engagement and overall well-being. Factors such as bureaucratic structures and employee incompetence (Aghaz et al., 2017; Javadian & Y. Addae, 2013) are alarmingly prevalent in this context, where delivering vital services to the public is essential. Thriving at work, which is characterized by both vitality and a continuous learning process, is crucial for fostering sustainable organizational performance. It not only promotes higher job satisfaction and better performance outcomes but also reduces employee burnout (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). Recognizing the importance of thriving, this research aims to explore the interplay between leadership styles and employee well-being, focusing on authentic leadership as a pivotal factor in enhancing employee thriving.

Authentic leadership, defined by traits such as self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing, has gained prominence in discussions regarding employee engagement and performance (Walumbwa et al., 2007). Despite evidence that authentic leaders can diminish attachment insecurities and bolster employee well-being, the mediating mechanisms at play between authentic leadership and thriving remain underexplored. Particularly, the intricate connections between attachment insecurities and various dimensions of thriving at work are still relatively unexamined. Given that thriving is associated with personal growth, knowledge acquisition, and positive relational dynamics (Kanfer, 1990; Paterson et al., 2014; Frazier et al., 2016), understanding how authentic leadership can facilitate these outcomes is critical.

At the heart of authentic leadership lies the concept of safety, which stems from trust and realness in leader-follower relationships. This research proposes that attachment insecurity may serve as the mediating mechanism by which authentic leadership fosters thriving at work. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1982) offers a foundational perspective on this relationship, positing that humans are inherently driven to seek closeness to significant others, including leaders, for protection against adverse situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In workplace dynamics, leaders play a crucial role in shaping the psychological environment, and like parent-child interactions, leader-employee relationships are influenced by attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Yip et al., 2018).

This study aims to illuminate the relationships between authentic leadership and the two key dimensions of thriving—learning and vitality—while investigating the mediating effects of attachment anxiety and avoidance. The implications of this research are dual-faceted. Firstly, it enriches the literature on authentic leadership by deepening the understanding of its impact on employee learning and vitality, particularly in public sector organizations. While existing studies have hinted at the

connection between authentic leadership and thriving, there remains a lack of focus on the distinct dimensions of learning and vitality in the workplace. Secondly, it contributes to the understanding of attachment styles in work contexts (Yip et al., 2018) by considering both attachment anxiety and avoidance, aspects often neglected in earlier studies (Duan et al., 2023; Hinojosa et al., 2014; Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015). By simultaneously investigating these attachment dichotomies and dimensions of thriving, this research aspires to provide nuanced insights into the mediating processes that link authentic leadership to employee thriving in the challenging environment of Iranian public service organizations.

Recent research highlights that public sector organizations in Iran encounter considerable difficulties such as bureaucratic structures and employee incompetence in sustaining high levels of employee engagement and overall well-being (Aghaz et al., 2017; Javadian & Y. Addae, 2013). This situation is particularly alarming due to the vital services these organizations provide to the public. Thriving at work, characterized by vitality and learning, is crucial for sustainable organizational performance, leading to better overall performance, less burnout, and higher job satisfaction (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). Aligned with the research done by Kleine et al. (2019), this research focuses on leadership as an important predictor of employee thriving and investigates the mediating mechanism that interlinks these two factors.

Literature review and research background

Authentic leadership and thriving at work

Authentic leadership emerged in scholarly discourse during the 1960s and nurtured under the support of positive psychology (Gardiner, 2017). The development of the authentic leadership concept emanates from three factors: self-awareness, ethical reasoning, and balanced cognitive processing (Johnson, 2019). Authentic leadership acquires its prowess through the three key factors of moral reasoning, significant life experiences, and positive psychological attributes (Covelli & Mason, 2017). Moral reasoning is related to the cognitive processes involved in navigating ethical dilemmas, while critical life events encompass adversities that can enhance personal growth. The interplay of positive psychological traits infused with moral reasoning and impactful life experiences fosters the essential characteristics of authentic leaders (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Moreover, balanced cognitive reasoning and resilience can equip leaders to confront challenges, devise solutions, and consider diverse viewpoints during tough decision-making processes (Hinojosa et al., 2014).

Authentic leadership theory is closely linked to social cognitive theory (SCT), which is extensively utilized in health behavior (Bandura, 2001). This theory posits that behavior is shaped by a dynamic and reciprocal relationship among the

individual, their environment, and their actions (Bandura, 2001). SCT emphasizes that social learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling. A fundamental requirement for social learning is the authentic modeling of behavior. This process highlights the characteristics and traits that leaders exhibit, which influence their perceived trustworthiness and the connections they establish with their followers (Northouse, 1997). The behaviors of these leaders align with their core beliefs and values, which have been cultivated over time (Banks & Mhunpiew, 2012).

Authentic leadership is characterized as a leadership approach that fosters and enhances the positive emotional and mental capacities of employees while cultivating an ideal moral atmosphere. It encourages greater self-awareness, an internal moral perspective, balanced information processing, and relational transparency—key elements that differentiate authentic leadership from other supervisory styles (Chaudhary & Panda, 2018). Self-awareness pertains to an individual's understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and their impact on others. An internalized moral perspective reflects how a person's values and ethical standards influence their actions, while relational transparency indicates the extent to which an individual openly shares information and expresses emotions. Additionally, balanced processing refers to the leader's ability to consider all relevant information before making decisions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). These dimensions of authentic leadership are crucial in fostering trust and positive internal relationships among the followers of genuine leaders (Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011).

Authentic leadership is fundamentally rooted in the attitudes, principles, and ethical standards that positively influence employees' performance and conduct in the workplace (Alshammari et al., 2015). Spreitzer et al. (2005) suggest that authentic leadership behaviors related to self-awareness emerge through leaders' interactions with others, allowing them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and understand how they are perceived. This interaction fosters a thriving work environment that encourages effective work behaviors, particularly exploration and communication, as outlined in the model of social cohesion for thriving at work. This environment increases opportunities for experimentation and learning new methods to achieve exceptional performance (G. Spreitzer et al., 2005b). Alsubaey (2022) verified that promoting self-awareness boosts vitality and learning within the work environment, leading to a flourishing workplace.

Based on these studies, we anticipate that the perceived level of managers' authentic leadership will significantly impact their employees' ability to thrive (vitality and learning). Empathy has been identified as a crucial predictor and potential precursor of authentic leadership (Kotzé & Nel, 2015; Singh et al., 2016). Empathetic leaders forge emotional connections, understand the needs of their teams

and customers, and cultivate a culture of trust and collaboration (Tzouramani, 2017). Mortier et al. (2016) showed that authentic leadership enhances nurses' thriving at work, with empathy mediating the relationship between authentic leadership and vitality.

Authentic leaders foster transparency in their relationships, which leads to openness and cultivates a climate of trust that facilitates the sharing of ideas, emotions, and information. This environment contributes to a thriving workplace that encourages individuals to engage actively and promotes effective work behaviors (Fredrickson, 2003). It also enhances employees' ability to acquire the knowledge necessary for making informed decisions, thereby improving their efficiency and vitality (Spreitzer, 1996; Stuart Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002). A study by Morsi (2010) indicated that relationship transparency could predict employees' quality of work life and influence the organization's learning climate and information sharing (Okmen et al., 2018). Transparency encourages employees to voice their opinions and exchange information, creating an atmosphere of trust and respect between leaders and subordinates, which enhances positive relationships and collaboration, ultimately leading to a thriving work environment (Alsubaey, 2022).

Walumbwa et al. (2008) assert that authentic leadership behaviors grounded in a moral perspective are driven by internal values and standards rather than external pressures, fostering a work environment characterized by autonomy and a sense of independence. This motivates individuals to act effectively and proactively, utilizing their skills and learning in the workplace (Wood & Bandura, 1989) and generating the desire and positive energy to explore new methods and build new skills that enhance their risk-taking abilities and encourage further learning (Amabile, 1993). Aljuhani (2019) found that authentic leadership behaviors related to moral perspectives significantly influence organizational health and affect knowledge acquisition and information sharing (Okmen et al., 2018). Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Authentic leaders have a positive impact on employees' learning.

Hypothesis 2: Authentic leaders have a positive impact on employees' vitality.

The mediation of attachment styles

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) asserts that during repeated interactions with early caregivers, caretakers form cognitive structures of self and others. Those attachment figures who show responsibility, warmth, and care in interactions develop positive working models of the self as lovable and others as dependable and trustworthy. In contrast, when the attachment figure is perceived as cold, inconsistent, unloving, and non-supportive, the conjured picture of self and others is negative, causing problems with self-worth and self-efficacy, thereby causing difficulty trusting and depending on others (McDermott et al., 2015). Seminal research has revealed that the two main dimensions of attachment anxiety and

attachment avoidance give the best picture of adult attachment (Brennan et al., 1998).

Authentic leadership influences followers' attitudes and behaviors by increasing hope, trust, and positive emotions through personal and social identification with the leader (Avolio et al., 2004), all of which reduce attachment insecurity (McDermott et al., 2015). Utterly open communication, follower engagement, and sharing of one's feelings and perceptions about others with whom they work escalate trust (Hsieh & Wang, 2015). As authentic leaders grow trust, attachment insecurity declines and high quality of relationship brings about job satisfaction, well-being (Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013), and affective commitment (Scrima et al., 2015).

Drawing on a broaden-and-build framework, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) postulated that when attachment figures are appraised as responsive and available, a cascade of processes is triggered leading to personal growth and emotional stability. Feeney and Collins (2015) propose a framework that capitalizes on attachment theory and emphasizes social support processes. Attachment theory researchers believe that when people feel scared, uncertain, or stressed, they turn to their attachment figure for safe-haven functions including support, comfort, and assistance. Such supportive figures provide relational catalyst (RC) support for thriving by helping them use life opportunities, seek self-defined goals and positive energy, and encourage them to face challenges and strengthen their caretakers' desire to grow and self-develop (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Fraley, 2019). Authentic leader induces relational transparency and inject support and trust in interactions with followers, which ultimately lead to lower levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance.

Insecure attachment styles, particularly those characterized by anxiety and avoidance, significantly impede exploration and learning in adults (Green & Campbell, 2000; Rentzios & Karagiannopoulou, 2021). Individuals with avoidant attachment often minimize the importance of intimacy and social needs, while those with anxious attachment experience a desire for social interaction coupled with a fear of its potential repercussions (Bartholomew, 1990). These attachment styles profoundly influence how adults engage with novel situations and educational challenges, with academic emotions acting as mediators in this dynamic, thereby suggesting that attachment functions as an innate emotion regulation mechanism (Fleming, 2008).

The implications of attachment theory are particularly salient in the context of adult education, as secure attachment can facilitate transformative learning processes (Fleming, 2008). The pervasive sense of loneliness experienced by individuals with insecure attachment styles may further exacerbate psychological difficulties, underscoring the trauma associated with perceived emotional unavailability during periods of stress (Johnson, 2019). This highlights the critical need to address

attachment styles to enhance adult learning and personal development. According to the above-mentioned points regarding the impact of authentic leadership on attachment insecurity and the effects of attachment insecurity dimensions on learning and vitality, therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Employees' attachment anxiety mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' learning.

Hypothesis 4: Employees' attachment anxiety mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' vitality.

Hypothesis 5: Employees' attachment avoidance mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' learning.

Hypothesis 6: Employees' attachment avoidance mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' vitality.

The conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 1.

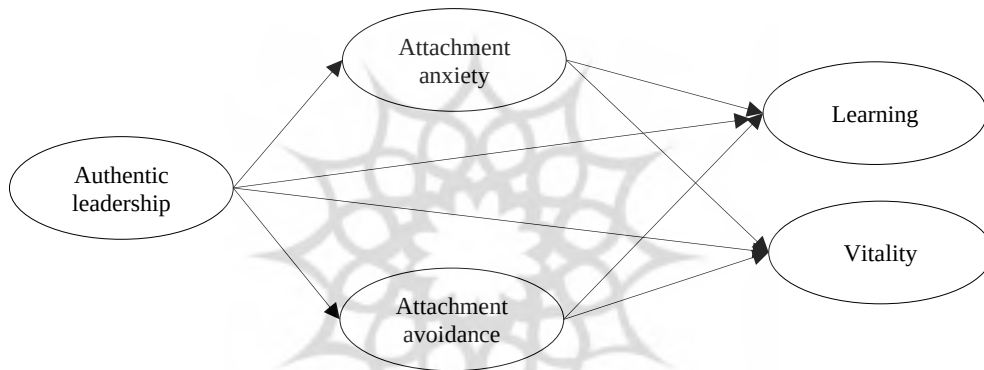


Figure 1. The conceptual model of this study

Material and Methods

Sample and procedure

This quantitative research has a deductive approach with a descriptive and correlational nature and employs a descriptive survey methodology to collect data. The data were collected via sending a questionnaire online to the employees of public service organizations in Yazd and Kerman. Using an A-priori sample size calculator for structural equation models (Soper, 2024), after considering the anticipated effect size of 0.3 with the desired statistical power level of 0.98 and the probability level of 0.01, the determined minimum sample size was 321 for this study. After sending the online questionnaires to 450 individuals and contacting the participants several times via messages, 330 complete responses were collected (73% response rate). The

scales' reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha. The construct validity was assessed and verified by investigating factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). According to the initial analysis of the demographics of the sample, the average age was 29.96 years old (SD = 6.69). A total of 225 (68.2%) of the employees were male, and 255 (69.7%) had a bachelor's degree or below. The average tenure was 7.50 years (SD = 4.83).

Measures

All answers were scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). To accentuate the quality of the translated questionnaire, Brislin's (1980) translation-back-translation procedure was used to translate English scales into Persian versions.

Authentic Leadership

The 8-item scale developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008) was used to measure authentic leadership. A sample item includes "My immediate supervisor tries to treat people positively even if he is upset". In this study, Cronbach's alpha for this instrument was .90.

Attachment Style

The scale developed by Leiter et al. (2015), which encompasses the two dimensions of attachment anxiety (five items) and attachment avoidance (five items) at work, was used. A sample item for attachment anxiety is "I'm afraid to reveal too much about myself to people at work." The reverse coded sample item for attachment avoidance is "A close friendship is a necessary part of a good working relationship." In this study, Cronbach's alpha for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were 0.78 and 0.96, respectively.

Thriving at work

To measure thriving at work, the 10-item scale developed by Porath et al. (2012) was used. This measure encompasses two sub-constructs of learning and vitality. Two sample items are: "At work, I see myself continually improving" and "At work, I feel alert and awake." In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for learning and vitality were 0.89 and 0.92, respectively.

Results

Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of the focal variables. Results show that authentic

leadership was negatively associated with attachment anxiety ($r = -.59, p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($r = -.18, p < .001$). Meanwhile attachment anxiety was negatively associated with both learning ($r = -.44, p < .001$) and vitality ($r = -.40, p < .001$); and attachment avoidance was negatively associated with both learning ($r = -.28, p < .001$) and vitality ($r = -.26, p < .001$). These provided preliminary support for the hypotheses.

Table 1 Table 1. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.32	.47	-								
2. Age	29.96	6.69	-.02	-							
3. Education level	1.49	.83	.07	.14**	-						
4. Tenure	7.50	4.83	-.05	.85**	.14**	-					
5. Authentic leadership	2.70	.91	.02	-.16**	.16**	-.13**	.90				
6. Attachment anxiety	2.65	.74	-.02	.10	-.20**	-.07	-.63**	.78			
7. Attachment avoidance	3.63	.83	.05	-.05	-.08	-.09	-.22**	.20**	.96		
8. Learning	2.71	.95	-.08	-.14**	.01	-.12*	.57**	-.47**	-.30**	.89	
9. Vitality	2.70	.99	-.10	-.15**	.04	-.14*	.57**	-.43**	-.26**	.89**	.92

Preliminary analyses

To test the convergent and discriminant validity of measures, the model was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) utilizing AMOS 22 which significant factor loadings exceeding 0.5 were investigated (Hair et al., 2010), and the average variance extracted (AVE) measure was mandated to be higher than .5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To examine the empirical distinctiveness of the measures of the focal variables which included authentic leadership, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance and thriving at work, we conducted CFA with all items as indicators. Table 2 shows that the hypothesized four-factor model had sufficient fit with modifications ($\chi^2(292) = 631.29, p < .001$; NFI = .94, TLI = .96, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .056). This model also provides a significant enhancement in the chi-square value compared with all the alternative models. Thus, the focal variables were empirically distinct.

Table 2. Results of CFA

Models	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Four-factor model							
The hypothesized model	631.293***	292	—	.94	.96	.96	.059
Three-factor model							
Combine attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance	1146.992***	295	515.699	.88	.90	.91	.094
Combine authentic leadership and thriving at work	1647.220***	296	1015.927	.83	.85	.86	.118
Two-factor model							
Combine authentic leadership and thriving at work, and combine attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance	2136.543***	299	1505.25	.36	.32	.37	.137
One-factor model							
Combine all	6313.059***	300	5681.766	.19	.38	.47	.247

N= 330; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation. Note. $\Delta\chi^2$ was compared with the hypothesized five-factor model (hypothesized model).

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The fit indices of the hypothesized measurement model were acceptable; therefore, we proceeded to compute the means of variables by averaging the corresponding items, and we used these figures in testing hypotheses.

Hypotheses testing

We conducted path analysis to test our hypotheses. All the regressions were conducted after controlling for the variables of employee gender, age, educational level, and tenure.

Tests of main effects

Hypotheses 1 and 2 propose that authentic leadership is negatively related to learning (Hypothesis 1) and vitality (Hypothesis 2). The results displayed in Table 3 showed that authentic leadership was positively associated with employees' learning ($\beta = .45$, standard errors [SE] = .23, $p < .001$) and employees' vitality ($\beta = .50$, SE = .06, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were both supported (See Figure 3).

Table 3. Path analysis results

Variables	Attachment anxiety		Attachment avoidance		Learning		Vitality	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	1.93***	.25	4.15***	.35	3.40***	.47	2.87***	.50
Controls								
Gender	.009	.07	.09	.10	-.17	-.09	-.23*	.12
Age	-.003	.01	.01	.01	-.00	-.03	.00	.01
Education	.095	-.00	-.04	.06	-.10	-.09	-.06	.06
Tenure	.002	.00	0.03	.02	.00	-.03	-.02	.02
Independent variable								
Authentic leadership	-.50***	.04	-0.21***	.05	.45***	.23	.50***	.06
Mediator								
Attachment anxiety					-.23**	-.18	-.16*	.08
Attachment avoidance					-.20***	-.17	-.17***	.04
R ²	.41		.07		.39		.37	

Note. N = 330. Statistics reported are unstandardized regression coefficients and SE.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Tests of mediation effects

Hypotheses 3, 4, 5, and 6 propose the mediation effects of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance in the relationships between authentic leadership and their two factors of thriving at work. With 3,000 times bootstrap for construct 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs), and controlling for demographic variables, Table 4 demonstrates that employee's attachment anxiety significantly mediates the positive association between authentic leadership and (a) employee's learning (indirect effect = .28, SE = .04, 95% CI = [.21, .35]) and (b) employees' vitality (indirect effect = .27, SE = .04, 95% CI = [.19, .34]). Moreover, attachment avoidance significantly mediates the positive association between authentic leadership and (a) employee's learning (indirect effect = .08, SE = .02, 95% CI = [.05, .09]) and (b) employee's vitality (indirect effect = .06, SE = .02, 95% CI = [.01, .04]). Thus, hypotheses 3, 4, 5, and 6 were all bolstered.

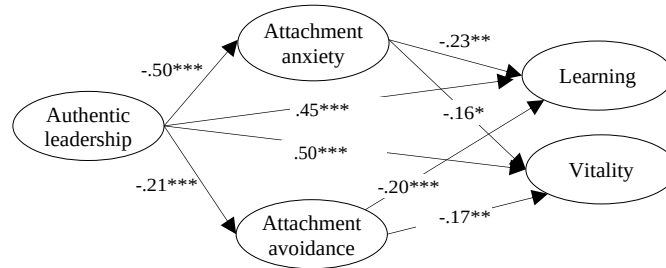


Figure 3. Standardized path coefficients of the final model (N = 330).

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Path analysis results for mediation with bootstrap method (3,000 times)

Variables	Effect	SE	95% Lower-level CI	95% Upper-level CI
Mediations				
Mediation A: Authentic Leadership → Attachment Anxiety → Learning	.28	.04	.21	.35
Mediation B: Authentic Leadership → Attachment Anxiety → Vitality	.27	.04	.19	.34
Mediation C: Authentic Leadership → Attachment Avoidance → Learning	.05	.02	.02	.10
Mediation D: Authentic Leadership → Attachment Anxiety → Vitality	.04	.02	.01	.09

Note. N = 330.

Discussion

This paper endeavors to answer two main questions. First, does authentic leadership impact two dimensions of thriving at work (i.e., learning and vitality) positively and significantly? Moreover, do two types of attachment insecurity types (i.e., attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance) mediate this relationship? According to the literature and the collected data, all hypotheses were supported. This study found that authentic leadership positively affects both dimensions of thriving at work. Hence, AL can play a crucial and effective role in promoting employee prosperity by providing opportunities for growth and advancement; therefore, this may cause them to feel educated, knowledgeable, and energized (Wallace et al., 2016). These results are aligned with the findings of research by Mortier et al. (2016), which shows that authentic leadership is essential for employees' thriving at work and increases their vitality and ability to learn. The

results of this research also accentuate the research done by Durrah et al. (2024), which considered the dichotomy of learning and vitality, showed that authentic leadership behaviors can enhance learning and vitality.

Despite the essence of considering interaction variables in the relationship between authentic leadership and individual outcomes, minimal research has studied attachment styles in research and has primarily focused on individuals' emotions and perceptions (e.g., Mortier et al., 2016). Moreover, in retrospect, attachment styles give a perception of interaction quality with the leader which can impact job outcomes significantly. This important point is largely underexplored in the available literature on thriving and authentic leadership. Last but not least, according to the broad investigation of the literature, it was concluded that the simultaneous dichotomies of attachment style and thriving at work are not included in any conceptual models. This approach in this paper can contribute more to the available literature on these important variables.

Theoretical implications

First, this paper is among the first studies that have explored the role of authentic leadership in learning and vitality as two dimensions of thriving at work in public service organizations. In terms of learning, our findings are in accord with the arguments that leadership style can determine the level of learning among employees (Kirby et al., 2003; Sluis et al., 2002). Authentic leadership has the important feature of support which increases employee motivation to learn. Our findings emphasize that high-quality interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers contribute to psychological safety, promoting learning behaviors in organizations (Carmeli et al., 2009), with both linear and nonlinear relationships with exploitative and exploratory learning, respectively (Kostopoulos et al., 2015). These findings reinforce the established notion that authentic leadership positively influences work outcomes, such as thriving (Avolio et al., 2004a; Carmeli et al., 2009). This aligns with previous research highlighting the impact of leadership on employees' learning behaviors and their motivation to learn (Loon et al., 2012). Additionally, our results validate the positive correlation between leadership and vitality (Hamilton & Schriesheim, 2001). On the whole, the direct link between authentic leadership and learning can have roots in high-quality relationships between leaders and followers.

Second, the findings showed that authentic leadership can also increase employees' vitality. This finding is aligned with the findings of the meta-synthesis by Niazi & Zolfaghari (2023), demonstrating that leadership style is one of the important antecedents of vitality at work. Authentic leaders' relational transparency bolsters cooperative behaviors in followers (Ayça, 2023), which is a crucial factor in vitality at work (Niazi & Zolfaghari, 2023). Moreover, authentic leadership has some features of inclusive leadership such as openness, accessibility, and willingness

to interact with subordinates (Carmeli et al., 2010). The support of the positive relationship between authentic leadership and vitality is aligned with the recent finding that inclusive leadership enhances happiness at work (Jha et al., 2023).

Third, attachment is a pivotal sub-field in the area of parenting and parent-child relationship research (Fearon & Roisman, 2017). This study introduced an attachment orientation mechanism linking authentic leadership to two dimensions of employee thriving at work (i.e., learning and vitality in which the positive value of authentic leadership on job outcomes has been considered more thoroughly. This study focuses on two social cognitive structures of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance both of which have roots in childhood. These mediators, hitherto, are sparsely researched in the leadership literature. It accentuates that authentic leadership increases trust and, as a result, decreases attachment insecurity (Avolio et al., 2004)

Fourth, the findings accentuated that two attachment insecurity types — attachment and avoidance — can partially mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and thriving at work dimensions. This is aligned with the justifications for the significant relationships between authentic leadership and thriving at work (Durrain et al., 2024). They have highlighted balanced processing and internalized moral perspective as the two most associated with learning and vitality. In this regard, they justified that “employees feel less fearful of the changes that employees may be involved in...” (p.1929). This implies that reducing attachment insecurity can be an appropriate mediator that contributes to the reduction of fear of change. Moreover, this paper highlighted attachment insecurity reduction as an important predictor of learning and happiness at work. This reduction should be directed towards reducing both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance.

Practical implications

This research has several practical implications. First, our findings accentuated that authentic leadership decreases attachment insecurity in followers, which is an essential ingredient for the thriving of followers at work. This highlights that a growth-seeking organization should boost authentic leadership in the organization. This entails training organizational leaders about the dimensions of authentic leadership and emphasizing transparency in relationships to build trust and decrease attachment insecurity. Moreover, in recruitment, posing some questions to recognize the type of attachment in individuals can help the organization prioritize having authentic leaders for some departments to increase learning and vitality. This is especially important for those departments that are undergoing changes and learning and vitality play more important roles. Notably, leaders can move towards authenticity if they express their mistakes and try to increase the climate of psychological safety in the organizations. This can help promote the ambiance of

learning and vitality by curtailing the fear of making mistakes which can lower fear and stress and increase engagement.

Limitations and future research

Despite all the strengths of this study, there are some inherent limitations. First, due to using regression, all the variables were computed and the errors emanating from each question were ignored. Future research may use some software such as Amos and Mplus to overcome this limitation. Second, although the variables of this study were appropriate for self-report measurement; however, the issue of common method variance (CMV) might erroneously attenuate or inflate the relationships between variables; hence, future research can also use multi-source and multi-wave research design to minimize CMV. Furthermore, because of data collection at one time and using cross-sectional research, it was not possible to examine causality between the variables in the model; therefore, using longitudinal and especially experimental research can be of enormous help in this regard. The data were meticulously collected from public service organizations; future research can collect data from different industries and sectors to help substantiate the results and help generalizability. This study introduced attachment insecurity as the mediating function in the conceptual model, future research can consider other patterns of attachment (e.g., Schmidt, 2004) to investigate the mediating relationship between authentic leadership and job attitudes. Additionally, future research can consider attachment theory in organizational research from various perspectives, including dynamic, dyadic, and group-level analysis (Yip et al., 2018). A temporal study of insecurely attached individuals at work in the presence of high and low organizational politics can be an interesting research venue to contribute to leadership and performance literature. Finally, in this study, a positive leadership style (i.e., authentic leadership) was included, future research may use other positive leadership styles (e.g., ethical leadership and spiritual leadership) or negative styles (e.g., authoritarian leadership and despotic leadership) to cast light on how and when attachment theory predict followers' behaviors.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that authentic leadership (AL) plays a vital role in enhancing employee thriving at work, specifically through the dimensions of learning and vitality. The findings indicate that AL positively affects both dimensions, fostering supportive environments that promote psychological safety and motivate employees to engage in learning while enhancing their overall vitality. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that authentic leaders create high-quality interpersonal relationships, which not only boost employee growth and knowledge but also energize them in their roles. The support provided

by authentic leaders enhances cooperation among team members, a crucial factor for increasing vitality at work.

Additionally, the research highlights the significant mediating role of attachment insecurity—both anxiety and avoidance—in the relationship between AL and thriving at work. Reducing attachment insecurity is shown to facilitate greater trust among employees and decrease fear of change, which in turn promotes learning and overall workplace happiness. These findings underscore the importance of cultivating authentic leadership within organizations, especially in public service sectors, to foster employee growth and well-being. Future research should explore these dynamics further, considering the influence of various leadership styles and their impact on attachment theory within different organizational contexts, thereby enriching the understanding of how leadership affects employee outcomes.



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