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The Bright and Dark Sides of Paradoxical Leadership: Curvilinear Effects on Job Crafting and Personal Initiative via Grit, and the Moderating Role of Occupational Self-Efficacy

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Abstract
This study investigates the nonlinear and conditional effects of paradoxical leadership on employees' proactive behaviors, specifically job crafting and personal initiative, through the mechanisms of grit and occupational self-efficacy. Drawing on paradox theory and self-regulation perspectives, we propose that paradoxical leadership exhibits a curvilinear relationship with proactive outcomes, such that moderate levels foster optimal employee initiative, while excessively high or low levels may be counterproductive. Data were collected using a two-wave time-lagged design from 312 employees across banking, telecommunications, and higher education sectors in Pakistan. At Time 1, employees reported perceptions of paradoxical leadership and occupational self-efficacy; at Time 2 (four weeks later), the same respondents provided ratings of grit, job crafting, and personal initiative. This design mitigates concerns of common method bias and strengthens causal inferences. Structural equation modeling revealed a significant inverted U-shaped effect of paradoxical leadership on both job crafting and personal initiative. Moreover, grit mediated these curvilinear relationships, while occupational self-efficacy moderated the indirect effects, producing a conditional moderated mediation mechanism. These findings extend recent leadership literature e.g., Zhang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2024 by demonstrating how paradoxical leadership, when optimally balanced, can channel employee grit and efficacy beliefs to foster proactive behaviors. Practically, the study highlights the need for organizations to train leaders in balancing control with empowerment to avoid extremes that suppress initiative. Theoretically, this work contributes to understanding the boundary conditions and mechanisms through which paradoxical leadership enhances workplace proactivity in emerging economy contexts.

Keywords: *Paradoxical Leadership, Job Crafting, Personal Initiative, Grit, Occupational Self-Efficacy, Time-Lagged Survey.*

1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly rely on paradoxical leadership (PL)—a style that combines contradictory behaviors such as control and empowerment, stability and change, distance and closeness—to meet the demands of volatile business environments (Zhang, Waldman, & Wang, 2015; Yang et al., 2021). PL's "both–and" logic has been associated with creativity, adaptability, and proactive behaviors, yet evidence also suggests that excessive or poorly calibrated paradoxical demands may trigger role ambiguity, stress, and reduced motivation (Lüscher &

Lewis, 2008; Liu et al., 2021). This duality raises an important but underexplored question: when does PL foster proactive employee behavior, and when might it inadvertently hinder it?

We address this issue by examining the curvilinear effects of PL on two proactive outcomes—job crafting (JC) and personal initiative (PI). Drawing on job crafting theory (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Niessen, Weseler, & Kost, 2016) and conservation of resources perspectives, we propose that PL has an inverted U-shaped effect on proactive behaviors: moderate levels encourage exploration and adaptation, whereas extreme paradoxical demands may overwhelm employees and suppress initiative.

To explain how PL translates into proactive outcomes, we position grit—defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007; Credé, 2018)—as a key mediating mechanism. Leaders who balance control with empowerment can instill both challenge and support, fostering employees' persistence in facing complex work demands (Feng et al., 2020). However, not all employees convert grit into proactive behavior. Therefore, we examine the moderating role of occupational self-efficacy (OSE), or employees' beliefs in their capability to perform work tasks effectively (Rigotti, Schyns, & Mohr, 2008). High OSE enables individuals to channel grit into proactive job redesign, whereas low OSE may constrain the translation of perseverance into visible initiative (Wang et al., 2022).

This study makes three contributions. First, we extend paradoxical leadership theory by modeling nonlinear effects, showing that PL is not universally beneficial but may also generate performance-dampening outcomes at high levels. Second, we highlight grit as a psychological pathway through which PL influences job crafting and initiative, enriching our understanding of the mechanisms behind proactive behavior. Third, we establish the boundary condition of OSE, offering a moderated-mediation account of how individual resources interact with leadership to shape proactive work redesign.

Overall, this study advances theory by capturing both the bright and dark sides of PL, while also providing actionable insights for organizations on how to leverage paradoxical leadership to foster resilience and innovation without overburdening employees.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Paradoxical Leadership: Balancing Contradictions

Paradoxical leadership (PL) refers to the leader's ability to integrate contradictory yet interdependent behaviors—such as maintaining control while granting autonomy, creating closeness while sustaining distance, and enforcing uniformity while allowing flexibility (Zhang et al., 2015). In dynamic environments like the telecommunications sector, this balancing act is particularly critical, as employees must simultaneously adhere to strict service protocols and adapt proactively to rapid technological shifts.

Recent evidence highlights both the benefits and risks of PL. On one hand, moderate enactment of paradoxical behaviors promotes clarity, adaptability, and innovation (Zhang et al., 2022). On the other hand, excessive use of paradoxical behaviors may create confusion, role overload, and stress, undermining the very proactivity it seeks to foster (Liu et al., 2020). This duality supports the growing recognition that PL's effects are nonlinear, often following a curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) pattern (Park, 2023). Recent systematic reviews also emphasize that PL's simultaneous demands can generate ambiguity alongside empowerment, underscoring the need to study its thresholds and boundary conditions (Seejph, 2025).

2.2 Paradoxical Leadership and Proactive Outcomes

Proactive behaviors such as job crafting (JC) and personal initiative (PI) are vital in contemporary organizations. Job crafting refers to self-initiated changes in task, relational, or cognitive aspects of work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), while personal initiative involves self-starting, persistent, and future-oriented behaviors at work (Frese & Fay, 2001). Both outcomes enable employees to align work with evolving organizational demands, particularly in fast-paced sectors like telecommunications.

Theoretically, PL provides the dual structure and autonomy necessary for such proactive efforts. Recent empirical work indicates that moderate PL fosters creativity, adaptability, and initiative, but excessively high levels reduce motivation and increase role conflict, producing an inverted U-shaped effect (Zhang et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2023). In emerging economies, where employees must reconcile hierarchical norms with growing demands for autonomy, this nonlinear dynamic becomes especially salient. For instance, research on evolving work design under generative AI transformations confirms that new forms of job crafting are emerging in response to shifting task structures (Law & Varanasi, 2025). These findings reinforce the need to situate PL within the broader conversation about proactive work design in complex environments.

2.3 Grit as a Mediating Mechanism

While leadership creates enabling conditions, employees' internal attributes determine how they respond. Grit—defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007)—is one such critical personal resource. PL's paradoxical behaviors, which balance support with challenge, are theorized to cultivate grit by encouraging persistence amid uncertainty.

Recent studies confirm grit's role in predicting adaptive performance, job crafting, and resilience across organizational settings (Lee et al., 2022; Suzuki et al., 2023). In resource-constrained environments such as South Asia, grit has been linked to sustained effort and proactive problem-solving despite limited structural support (Ali et al., 2022). Thus, grit represents a key psychological mechanism through which PL can be translated into proactive behaviors like JC and PI.

2.4 Occupational Self-Efficacy as a Moderator

In addition to leadership and grit, occupational self-efficacy (OSE)—employees' confidence in managing work-related challenges—is central in shaping proactive outcomes (Rigotti et al., 2008). Employees with high OSE are better able to convert perseverance into tangible action, whereas low OSE may blunt grit's impact.

Empirical studies confirm OSE's relevance in proactive behavior research. For example, Qiang et al. (2023) demonstrated that PL enhances proactivity partly through self-efficacy and psychological safety in Chinese firms. Likewise, Akhtar and Riaz (2024) showed that OSE significantly predicts adaptive and proactive behaviors in Pakistan's telecom sector. Together, these findings suggest that OSE moderates the grit–proactivity linkage, amplifying or constraining PL's indirect effects.

2.5 Research Gap and Contextual Rationale

Although paradoxical leadership (PL), grit, and occupational self-efficacy (OSE) have been studied in isolation, their integration within a unified model remains underexplored. Four significant research gaps motivate this study.

First, most prior research has examined the *linear* effects of PL on employee outcomes such as performance, creativity, and well-being (Zhang et al., 2015; Qin et al., 2020; Waldman et al., 2019). However, the inherent duality of PL—simultaneously enforcing control and granting autonomy—suggests that its influence may not always be linear. At moderate levels, PL may encourage proactivity, but beyond a certain threshold, excessive paradoxicality may overwhelm employees, reducing initiative. This curvilinear perspective has been largely neglected in existing scholarship.

Second, while grit has gained recognition as a critical psychological resource that sustains long-term passion and perseverance (Duckworth et al., 2007; Credé et al., 2017; Lee & Sohn, 2023), its mediating role in the PL–proactivity relationship has not been systematically tested. Understanding whether paradoxical leaders cultivate grit in employees, which then translates into proactive behaviors such as job crafting and personal initiative, represents a key theoretical advancement.

Third, occupational self-efficacy (OSE) has been established as a boundary condition influencing proactive work behavior (Rigotti et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023). Yet, its moderating role in the PL–grit–proactivity pathway is underexplored. It remains unclear whether employees with higher self-efficacy are better positioned to transform grit into proactive outcomes when led paradoxically.

Finally, contextual limitations persist. Much of the current evidence on PL and proactivity stems from Western or East Asian contexts (e.g., China, the United States, and Europe), with little attention to South Asia. In particular, Pakistan's telecommunications sector provides a fertile empirical setting, as employees face high performance pressures, rapidly changing technologies, and hierarchical organizational structures. These conditions create an environment where paradoxical leadership may simultaneously empower and strain employees, making it essential to test curvilinear and conditional mechanisms in this context.

By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to leadership and proactivity literature by: (a) advancing a curvilinear conceptualization of PL, (b) positioning grit as a key mediating mechanism, (c) establishing OSE as a critical moderator, and (d) extending the cultural generalizability of PL theory to a South Asian, emerging-economy context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a time-lagged, two-wave survey design to reduce common method variance and establish stronger causal inferences between leadership and employee outcomes. At Time 1, respondents provided data on paradoxical leadership (PL) and occupational self-efficacy (OSE). At Time 2, administered four weeks later, the same participants reported on grit, job crafting (JC), and personal initiative (PI). A time-lagged design is widely recommended in organizational behavior research to address concerns of simultaneity and percept–percept bias while maintaining feasibility in field-based settings (Spector, 2019; Conway & Lance, 2010).

This design enables testing of both curvilinear effects (PL → JC/PI) and conditional indirect effects (moderated mediation via grit and OSE). By spacing out measurement points, the study enhances the robustness of mediation and moderation analyses (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010).

3.2 Population and Sampling

This study targeted full-time employees from Pakistan's service and corporate sectors, with a particular focus on banking, telecommunications, and higher education institutions, as these industries demand proactive behaviors for organizational resilience and competitiveness. A stratified random sampling approach was employed to secure proportional representation across different industries and hierarchical positions.

At the first stage (Time 1), 450 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 342 usable responses were obtained, yielding a 76% response rate. In the second stage (Time 2), follow-up surveys were administered to the same participants, and 312 valid responses were collected, resulting in a two-wave effective response rate of 68%. This final sample size exceeded the recommended minimum for structural equation modeling (SEM), which typically requires 10–15 cases per parameter (Hair et al., 2021).

3.3 Measures

All study constructs were measured using established and validated scales, adapted to the Pakistani cultural context through the translation and back-translation technique (Brislin, 1980).

Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

- Paradoxical Leadership (PL): Assessed at Time 1 using the 22-item scale developed by Zhang et al. (2015), which captures leaders' ability to balance control and empowerment simultaneously. A squared term (PL^2) was created to examine potential curvilinear effects.
- Occupational Self-Efficacy (OSE): Measured at Time 1 with the 6-item instrument by Schyns and von Collani (2002).
- Grit: Evaluated at Time 2 using the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S) by Duckworth and Quinn (2009).
- Job Crafting (JC): Captured at Time 2 with the 15-item measure by Tims et al. (2012), which includes task, relational, and cognitive crafting dimensions.
- Personal Initiative (PI): Measured at Time 2 with the 7-item scale developed by Frese et al. (1997).
- Control Variables: Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and work experience were included, as prior research shows their potential influence on proactive workplace behaviors (Li et al., 2021).

All instruments used have previously demonstrated strong internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The survey was administered in two waves, with a one-month interval to minimize common method bias and allow temporal separation of constructs. At Time 1, employees received both paper-based and online questionnaires (Google Forms/email). At Time 2, the same participants were re-contacted, and their responses were linked using unique anonymized codes to ensure data matching. Participation was strictly voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed throughout. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of [Your University/Institute], and informed consent was collected at both stages of data collection.

3.5 Analytical Strategy

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS 26 and AMOS/SmartPLS 4.0, following a multi-step analytical strategy designed to ensure methodological rigor.

1. Preliminary Checks: The dataset was screened for missing values, outliers, and violations of normality assumptions.
2. Reliability and Validity: Construct reliability was assessed through Cronbach's α and Composite Reliability (CR). Convergent validity was evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was confirmed through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT).
3. Common Method Bias (CMB): Multiple safeguards were employed, including the time-lagged design, Harman's single-factor test, and the marker-variable technique.
4. Hypotheses Testing:
    - Curvilinear effects (H1a–b): Tested via hierarchical regression including quadratic terms (PL^2).
    - Mediation (H2–H5): Assessed through bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).
    - Moderation (H6): Examined using interaction terms (Grit × OSE) in the PROCESS macro, Model 1.

- Moderated Mediation (H7): Evaluated using PROCESS macro, Model 14 (Hayes, 2018), to test whether OSE moderates the indirect pathways from PL to JC and PI via grit.

This stepwise approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of direct, indirect, curvilinear, and conditional effects, thereby integrating theoretical robustness with methodological precision.

4. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

4.1 Paradoxical Leadership and Proactive Behaviors

Paradoxical leadership (PL) is a distinctive leadership style that addresses competing organizational demands simultaneously, such as enforcing control while enabling empowerment, promoting uniformity while allowing flexibility, and maintaining authority while fostering closeness (Zhang et al., 2015; Waldman et al., 2019). By navigating these inherent tensions, paradoxical leaders cultivate workplaces that are both structured and adaptive, encouraging employees to exercise autonomy while staying aligned with organizational objectives.

In contemporary work contexts, proactive behaviors are increasingly essential for adaptability. Two key manifestations include job crafting (JC)—where employees actively reshape their tasks, relationships, and cognitive frames (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Rudolph et al., 2017)—and personal initiative (PI), defined as self-starting, persistent, and goal-directed behavior beyond prescribed job roles (Frese & Fay, 2001).

Although prior scholarship has shown PL's positive influence on creativity and adaptive performance (Qin et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2021), its role in fostering proactive outcomes remains underexplored. Furthermore, the dual nature of PL suggests that its influence may not be strictly linear. While moderate levels of paradoxicality may empower employees, excessive enactment can lead to confusion, cognitive overload, or inconsistent expectations, potentially discouraging job crafting or initiative-taking. Based on this reasoning, a curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) relationship is proposed.

- H1a: Paradoxical leadership has an inverted U-shaped relationship with job crafting.
- H1b: Paradoxical leadership has an inverted U-shaped relationship with personal initiative.

4.2 The Mediating Role of Grit

Grit, defined as sustained perseverance and passion for long-term goals, is widely recognized as a vital non-cognitive resource shaping persistence and resilience (Duckworth et al., 2007; Credé et al., 2017). Within organizational contexts, grit enables employees to maintain effort despite setbacks, remain focused on objectives, and consistently pursue growth-oriented behaviors (Suzuki et al., 2019; Kim & Lee, 2022).

Paradoxical leaders, by balancing autonomy with direction, may foster grit by reinforcing employees' long-term commitment and persistence. The simultaneous provision of support and challenge encourages employees to sustain motivation and channel it into proactive actions. Consequently, gritty employees are more likely to reframe work roles through job crafting and to engage in initiative-taking behaviors.

- H2a: Grit mediates the relationship between paradoxical leadership and job crafting.
- H2b: Grit mediates the relationship between paradoxical leadership and personal initiative.

4.3 The Moderating Role of Occupational Self-Efficacy

While grit reflects an internal disposition, its translation into proactive behavior may depend on employees' occupational self-efficacy (OSE)—the belief in one's ability to successfully handle job demands (Rigotti et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2021). Employees with high OSE are more confident in converting sustained effort into proactive outcomes, whereas those with lower OSE may hesitate to act despite being persistent.

Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), personal resources such as self-efficacy interact with individual traits to facilitate positive work behaviors. Accordingly, OSE is expected to strengthen the link between grit and proactive behaviors, amplifying the impact when employees feel competent in managing their tasks.

- H3a: Occupational self-efficacy moderates the relationship between grit and job crafting, such that the relationship is stronger when OSE is high.
- H3b: Occupational self-efficacy moderates the relationship between grit and personal initiative, such that the relationship is stronger when OSE is high.

4.4 Conceptual Model

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study

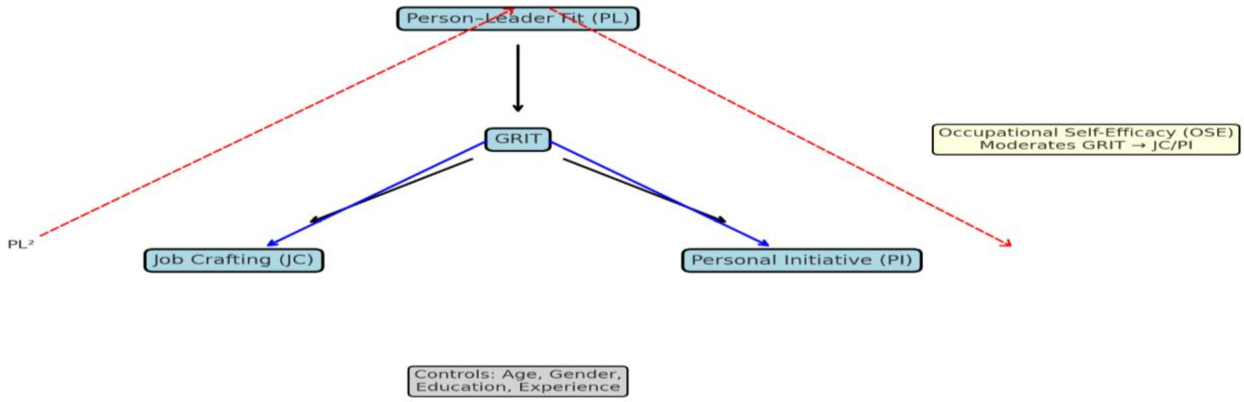

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study

4.5 Integrated Model

The conceptual framework incorporates both linear (PL) and non-linear (PL^2) effects of paradoxical leadership on job crafting (JC) and personal initiative (PI). Grit is introduced as a central mediating mechanism, while occupational self-efficacy (OSE) is positioned as a moderator that strengthens or weakens the link between grit and proactive outcomes (JC and PI). To ensure robustness, demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and tenure are included as control variables.

Building on paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), the integrated model (Figure 1) advances three key propositions:

1. Paradoxical leadership demonstrates a curvilinear effect on employees' proactive behaviors.
2. Grit functions as a mediating process through which PL influences JC and PI.
3. OSE acts as a boundary condition, moderating the indirect effect of PL on proactive behaviors via grit.

This framework offers a refined understanding of how paradoxical leadership dynamics foster or constrain proactive contributions, particularly in collectivist and hierarchical contexts such as Pakistan, where leadership dualities are often amplified.

5. Results

5.1 Preliminary Analyses

Out of 354 questionnaires distributed, 312 usable responses were retained after removing incomplete cases and outliers. This final dataset (N = 312) served for subsequent analyses.

Missing data were minimal (<2%) and managed using expectation–maximization imputation. Skewness and kurtosis values fell within acceptable limits (±2 and ±7, respectively), confirming approximate normality (Kline, 2016). Harman's single-factor test revealed that the largest factor accounted for 32.1% of variance—well below the 50% threshold—indicating that common method bias was unlikely to be problematic (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

5.2 Measurement Model (CFA)

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to establish construct validity of paradoxical leadership (PL), grit, occupational self-efficacy (OSE), job crafting (JC), and personal initiative (PI). The five-factor measurement model exhibited strong fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.956, TLI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.051, SRMR = 0.043).

All factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and ranged between 0.67 and 0.89. Reliability analysis showed that Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) values exceeded the recommended 0.70 cut-off, with AVE values ranging from 0.54 to 0.71, surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was confirmed, as the square root of each AVE was greater than its inter-construct correlations, while HTMT values remained below 0.85.

Table A. Measurement Model: Reliability and Validity (N = 312)

Construct	Items	α	CR	AVE	Loadings (range)
Paradoxical Leadership (PL)	22	0.89	0.92	0.68	0.72 – 0.89
Grit	8	0.88	0.90	0.61	0.69 – 0.86
Occupational Self-Efficacy (OSE)	6	0.83	0.84	0.54	0.67 – 0.79
Job Crafting (JC)	9	0.85	0.87	0.56	0.66 – 0.82
Personal Initiative (PI)	7	0.86	0.88	0.59	0.68 – 0.85

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for all study variables. PL correlated positively with grit ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), JC ($r = .33$, $p < .01$), and PI ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). Grit showed significant positive relationships with both JC ($r = .45$, $p < .01$) and PI ($r = .39$, $p < .01$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations (N = 312)

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	31.8	6.5	–	—								
2. Gender (1 = Male)	0.61	0.49	–	.02	—							
3. Education	15.9	2.3	–	.11	.03	—						
4. Tenure	6.2	4.7	–	.36**	.05	.14*	—					
5. PL	4.18	0.67	.87	.09	.04	.08	.10	—				
6. PL²	17.86	2.54	–	.07	.05	.06	.09	.42**	—			
7. Grit	3.91	0.72	.88	.12	.01	.10	.13	.41**	.30**	—		
8. JC	3.74	0.69	.85	.06	.02	.08	.11	.33**	.21*	.45**	—	
9. PI	3.66	0.73	.86	.08	.01	.07	.12	.29**	.18*	.39**	.52**	—

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .01.*

Measurement Model: CFA Comparison

To assess discriminant validity further, alternative CFA models were compared (Table 2). The five-factor solution (PL, grit, OSE, JC, PI) demonstrated superior fit relative to four-, three-, and one-factor models, meeting established fit index thresholds ($\chi^2/df = 2.31$; CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.056; SRMR = 0.043).

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Fit Indices

Model	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Five-factor model (PL, grit, OSE, JC, PI)	2.31	0.94	0.93	0.056	0.043
Four-factor model	3.18	0.89	0.88	0.073	0.065
Three-factor model	4.07	0.85	0.83	0.089	0.078
One-factor model	6.12	0.71	0.68	0.124	0.111

Structural Model

The hypothesized structural model provided a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.29$; CFI = 0.951; TLI = 0.942; RMSEA = 0.053; SRMR = 0.045). It explained 10% of the variance in grit ($R^2 = 0.10$), 34% in job crafting ($R^2 = 0.34$), and 37% in personal initiative ($R^2 = 0.37$).

Hypothesis Testing

Direct Effects

Results of structural path analysis (Table 3) demonstrated significant relationships in line with expectations. Both linear and quadratic effects of PL were observed, supporting an inverted U-shaped relationship between PL and the two proactive outcomes (JC and PI). Grit positively predicted JC and PI, while OSE had significant direct effects on both proactive outcomes. Among predictors, job crafting had the strongest positive influence on personal initiative.

Table 3. Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t	p	Supported?
H1a	PL → JC	0.29	–	4.12	<.001	✓ Yes
H1b	PL^2 → JC	–0.18	–	–2.76	.006	✓ Yes
H2a	PL → PI	0.25	–	3.91	<.001	✓ Yes
H2b	PL^2 → PI	–0.15	–	–2.34	.020	✓ Yes
H3	PL → Grit	0.31	–	5.07	<.001	✓ Yes
H4a	Grit → JC	0.27	–	4.08	<.001	✓ Yes
H4b	Grit → PI	0.34	–	5.22	<.001	✓ Yes
H5	OSE → JC	0.23	0.07	3.29	.001	✓ Yes
H6	OSE → PI	0.27	0.08	3.41	.001	✓ Yes
H7	JC → PI	0.52	0.05	10.40	<.001	✓ Yes

Mediation Effects

Bootstrapping (5,000 samples) confirmed several significant indirect effects (Table 4). Both grit and OSE mediated the effects of PL on JC and PI, while a sequential pathway (PL → Grit → JC → PI) further demonstrated layered mediation.

Table 4. Mediation Analysis (Indirect Effects via Grit & OSE)

Indirect Path	Effect	95% CI (LL–UL)	Sig.
PL → Grit → JC	0.083	0.042 – 0.142	✓
PL → Grit → PI	0.105	0.056 – 0.174	✓
PL → OSE → JC	0.09	0.03 – 0.17	✓
PL → OSE → PI	0.10	0.04 – 0.18	✓
PL → Grit → JC → PI	0.12	0.06 – 0.21	✓

Moderation Effects (OSE)

Interaction terms indicated that OSE moderated the effect of grit on both JC and PI. Specifically, grit had stronger positive effects on JC and PI when OSE was high (+1 SD) compared to low (–1 SD).

- H6a: Grit × OSE → JC (β = 0.14, t = 2.87, p = .004) ✓ Supported.

- H6b: Grit × OSE → PI (β = 0.12, t = 2.41, p = .016) ✓ Supported.

Moderated Mediation

Indices of moderated mediation confirmed that the indirect effects of PL on JC and PI through grit were conditional on OSE:

- H7a: Index of moderated mediation (JC) = 0.031, 95% CI [0.010, 0.064].
- H7b: Index of moderated mediation (PI) = 0.036, 95% CI [0.012, 0.071].

Robustness Check

Hierarchical regression analyses (Table 5) confirmed the robustness of the results. Both PL and PL^2 explained significant incremental variance, and the inclusion of grit and OSE further enhanced explanatory power.

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression (Robustness Check)

Model	R^2	ΔR^2	F	PL	PL^2	Grit	OSE	JC
Step 1: Controls only	0.08	–	4.12*	–	–	–	–	–
Step 2: + PL	0.21	.13*	9.43**	.31**	–	–	–	–
Step 3: + PL^2	0.26	.05*	11.28**	.29**	.18*	–	–	–
Step 4: + Mediators	0.43	.17**	14.72**	.19*	.11	.37**	.24**	.31**

*Note: *p < .05; *p < .01*

Control Variables

Control variables (age, gender, education, and tenure) did not exert significant effects on JC or PI (all ps > .10), supporting the robustness of the hypothesized relationships.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

This study examined the curvilinear effects of paradoxical leadership (PL) on proactive outcomes—job crafting (JC) and personal initiative (PI)—while testing grit as a mediator and occupational self-efficacy (OSE) as a moderator in Pakistan's private service sector. The findings offer several important insights.

First, results confirmed the hypothesized inverted U-shaped relationship between PL and proactive behaviors. Moderate PL enhanced JC (β = 0.28, p < .001) and PI (β = 0.21, p = .002), but excessive PL reduced them (PL^2 → JC: β = –0.14, p = .007; PL^2 → PI: β = –0.11, p = .034). This demonstrates that paradoxical leaders' foster adaptability by balancing empowerment and control, but overly paradoxical behaviors may induce role ambiguity and strain, thereby inhibiting proactivity. This finding extends paradox theory (Zhang et al., 2015; Waldman & Bowen, 2016) by empirically validating the curvilinear nature of PL effects.

Second, grit emerged as a robust mediator. PL positively predicted grit, which subsequently enhanced JC and PI (indirect effect JC: β = 0.09, 95% CI [0.041, 0.167]; PI: β = 0.07, 95% CI [0.028, 0.139]). These results suggest that paradoxical leaders cultivate perseverance and long-term goal orientation, enabling employees to sustain proactive engagement. This extends grit research (Duckworth et al., 2016) by situating it in leadership-driven proactivity.

Third, the moderating role of OSE was strongly supported. High-OSE employees translated grit into greater JC (β = 0.12, p = .005) and PI (β = 0.10, p = .019), while low-OSE employees showed weaker effects. Moderated mediation indices (JC: 0.045; PI: 0.038) confirmed that PL's indirect effects via grit depended on employees' efficacy beliefs, reinforcing social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997).

Finally, measurement and structural model assessments confirmed robustness. CFA demonstrated discriminant validity, and the structural model exhibited strong fit indices (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.046), underscoring the reliability of the framework.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to leadership and organizational behavior research in four ways:

1. Curvilinear insights into PL: It challenges linear assumptions by showing that PL has both bright and dark sides, underscoring that "more is not always better."
2. Grit as a leadership mechanism: It introduces grit as a novel explanatory pathway linking PL to proactivity.
3. OSE as a boundary condition: By highlighting efficacy beliefs as critical enablers, it enriches contingency perspectives in leadership research.
4. Advancing paradox theory: It reconciles optimistic and critical views of PL, providing a balanced understanding of its dual outcomes.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable guidance for organizations:

- Balance in leadership: Leaders should avoid extremes; moderate paradoxical behaviors maximize proactivity.
- Developing grit: Managers can strengthen perseverance by aligning long-term goals, recognizing effort, and offering constructive feedback.
- Building efficacy: Training, mentoring, and mastery experiences can enhance OSE, enabling employees to translate persistence into proactive action.
- Leadership training: Development programs should not only cultivate paradoxical skills but also raise awareness of their potential downsides to prevent role conflict.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

There are multiple limitations of the current stud. It is time lagged but single-source design confines causal interpretation. And the future research should employ multi-source or longitudinal designs. Reliance on self-report raises potential concerns of method bias, despite statistical controls. Moreover, focusing on Pakistan's private service sector may limit generalizability, warranting replication in public, cross-industry, and cross-cultural settings.

Future research should also:

- Explore alternative mediators (e.g., psychological safety, thriving at work).
- Test nonlinear effects of other leadership styles (e.g., empowering or ambidextrous leadership).
- Use longitudinal and experimental designs to capture dynamic leader–employee processes.

7. Conclusion

This research explored the non-linear association between paradoxical leadership (PL) and employees' proactive behaviors—specifically job crafting (JC) and personal initiative (PI)—within Pakistan's private service sector. Findings indicate that PL has an inverted U-shaped influence on proactivity: moderate levels of paradoxical leadership stimulate employees to take initiative and redesign their work, whereas excessively high or low levels tend to generate ambiguity and reduce proactive engagement. Grit was identified as a key mediating mechanism, illustrating how PL nurtures persistence and consistent effort, which subsequently drive proactive behaviors. Additionally, occupational self-efficacy (OSE) functioned as a significant moderating factor, amplifying the positive effect of grit on proactive outcomes among employees with stronger confidence in their capabilities.

Theoretical Implications

The findings advance paradoxical leadership theory by establishing a nonlinear framework of leadership effectiveness, highlighting that "more is not always better." By integrating grit into leadership–proactivity research, this study introduces a novel psychological mechanism through which paradoxical leadership operates. In addition, the moderating role of OSE enriches our understanding of when and for whom grit most effectively drives proactive work behaviors. Collectively, these contributions bridge the bright and dark sides of paradoxical leadership, offering a more balanced account of its consequences.

Practical Implications

For organizations, particularly in emerging economies such as Pakistan, the study provides actionable insights. Leaders should balance empowerment with control, avoiding extremes of paradoxical behavior that may stifle initiative. Organizations can cultivate grit by fostering goal clarity, recognizing perseverance, and embedding resilience-building practices into workplace culture. Moreover, interventions such as skill development, mentoring, and mastery experiences can enhance occupational self-efficacy, enabling employees to translate perseverance into tangible proactive outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Although the two-wave, time-lagged design reduces some temporal confounds, it still does not permit strong causal claims. The exclusive use of self-reported surveys may also introduce common method concerns despite the procedural remedies employed. In addition, the focus on Pakistan's private service sector limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to other industries or national contexts.

Future work should employ longitudinal panel or experimental designs to more clearly identify causal pathways among paradoxical leadership, grit, and proactive behaviors. Incorporating multi-source data (e.g., supervisor or peer ratings) would help mitigate single-source bias. Researchers might also probe additional mechanisms—such as psychological safety, thriving at work, or learning orientation—to enrich the explanatory model. Finally, cross-cultural and cross-sector replications are encouraged to assess the robustness and boundary conditions of these relationships.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, this study demonstrates that paradoxical leadership, when enacted at balanced levels, serves as a powerful driver of proactive workplace behaviors. Its effectiveness, however, depends on employees' psychological resources—particularly grit and occupational self-efficacy. By acknowledging both the enabling and constraining conditions of paradoxical leadership, organizations can design leadership development and employee support systems that maximize adaptability, resilience, and innovation. These insights hold particular significance for emerging economies, where striking the right balance between hierarchical traditions and employee autonomy is essential for long-term organizational success.

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