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# Exploring the impacts of transformational supervision on supermarket store managers' creativity: evidence from Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT



The current article is one of the rare studies to specifically focus on the contextual conditions under which the learning-related actions of transformational supervisors' help retailing supermarkets' store managers to learn and engage in behaviors that produce creative outcomes. We use a qualitative research approach with the data based on in-depth semi structured interviews with 40 retailing supermarkets' store managers in Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. Our findings show that transformational supervision significantly boosts store managers' creativity, facilitated by fostering store managers' learning orientation, creative role identity (CRI) and creative self-efficacy (CSE), in all three contexts. From our findings, we have developed a model that symbolize the role of transformational supervisors in fostering store managers' creativity, which provides a baseline for supermarkets in (re)evaluating the significance of their leadership styles on lower creativity.

## KEYWORDS

Creative role identity; creative self-efficacy; creativity; learning orientation; supermarket store managers; transformational supervision

## Introduction

This study examines how transformational supervisors (TSs) facilitate store managers' (SMs') creativity, facilitated by fostering SMs' learning orientation, creative role identity (CRI) and creative self-efficacy (CSE). Transformational supervision—a mentoring-infused supervisory relationship where a supervisor and supervisee are engaged in a connected and collaborative developmental relationship (Johnson 2007)—fosters a strong sense of collegiality and a wider range of career and developmental prospects (Johnson, Skinner, and Kaslow 2014). Although transformational supervision is not an entirely new concept, empirical data examining the role of TSs in different kind of organizations, is, at best, limited. Yet, by encouraging critical reflection (Carroll 2009) and dialectical thinking (Han and Bai 2020), TSs foster different perspectives which are crucial when the supervisee is stuck or confused, or the pair are becoming complacent (Churchill 2013), and thus helps the supervisee discover their blind spots (Carroll 2010; Churchill 2013). Therefore, transformational supervision has been linked to self-efficacy (Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Tse, To, and Chiu 2018), improved employees' well-being (Perko, Kinnunen, and Feldt 2014), employee

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voice (Morrison 2014; Wang et al. 2019), constructive change-oriented communications (LePine and Van Dyne 2001), and thus an enhanced subordinate's performance in hard times (Phillips et al. 2020). Transformational supervision has also been linked to reduced *illegitimate absenteeism*—staying away from work when well (Frooman, Mendelson, and Murphy 2012)—which is high in jobs with high levels of autonomy, such as the store managers. Therefore, adopting the transformational style of supervision [in supermarkets] may help to reduce costs (Frooman, Mendelson, and Murphy 2012).

Shoppers have become pickier (Benoit, Evanschitzky, and Teller 2019; McTaggart 2006; Mitchell 2011). Consequently, a more complex and competitive supermarket environment has emerged (McTaggart 2006; Mitchell 2011). Although SMs are key to supermarket success (e.g., Bartels, Reinders, and Van Haaster-De Winter 2015), there is a paucity of empirical data that examines how supervisors can boost the creativity and problem-solving skills of the SMs, and which these authors suggest is a significant omission in the retail supermarkets literature.

Although the retail environment has been evolving (Olsson et al. 2019), the 21st century retail environment is even more complex and competitive due to unprecedented challenges caused by digitalization and globalization (Burt 2010; Dawson 2001). Despite its dynamic and highly competitive nature, creativity in this sector is still relatively under investigated (Olsson et al. 2019). Yet, due to shortening product life cycles (Gumusluoglu and Ilsev 2009), supermarkets need to be more creative than before to survive (Jung, Chow, and Wu 2003). These aspects highlight the need for research that investigates the organizational environment for creativity in the supermarkets. Research that examines how TSs encourage SMs to devise novel ideas (Amabile 1983, 1988) on new products, services, and processes (Wang, Tsai, and Tsai 2014), is also crucial for the theoretical development of the creativity literature.

The creativity literature (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic 2006; see also Gilson 2008 for a review) focus more on the academic environment. Therefore, we know relatively little about how the transformational behaviors of supervisors impact their subordinates' creativity in a non-academic environment (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009), e.g., the supermarkets. Given the significance of transformational leadership behavior on follower creativity (e.g., Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Wang, Tsai, and Tsai 2014) it is surprising that such an impact has been largely overlooked in the non-academic setting. One of the few relevant studies was undertaken by Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009), who (used employee learning orientation and transformational leadership as mediating variables to) examine how employee creativity can impact performance. Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009) omitted employee performance orientation, and their sample was drawn from insurance agents who had relatively low education, and from Taiwan alone. Therefore, the authors call for replications of their findings in other organizations, in different job categories, and with a relatively more educated samples that are drawn from diverse cultural settings. The present article meets such criteria. Unlike some prior studies that drew from manipulated or experimental confederates (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009), participants in the current study are actual store managers from top supermarkets in Nigeria, South Africa, and the UK. Although we are aware that the economies of each of these three countries are unique, we have chosen the British supermarkets for a reason. Due to their colonial legacies (Barnes-Dabban, Van Koppen, and Mol 2017), the British system of education has been the driving force for the socio-economic development of many African states (Archibong 2019), including Nigeria and South Africa.

Therefore, to help us understand the supervisor-supervisee relationships in these African retailing markets, we need to follow similar developments and trends in the British retailing. Also, selecting cases with same focal phenomenon and from three culturally distinct countries is consistent with Bingham and Eisenhardt (2011) study on Singapore, United States, and Finland. Such a study enhances generalizability (i.e., transferability) of the emergent theory across settings (Eisenhardt 2021). Our article offers three important contributions to the extant literature streams on leadership and creativity in organizations. Firstly, it is one of the pioneering studies to

highlight the specificities of transformational supervision in retailing sector in African context, while comparing its dynamics at the same time with British retailers. Secondly, the current article is one of the rare studies to theorize and qualitatively assess SM learning orientation, CRI and CSE in fostering creativity linked to transformational supervision. Our findings contribute to the understanding of this complex inter-relationship at sectoral and contextual levels. Finally, rather similar findings from all three countries highlight the significant role of historical ties and educational systems on leadership (including transformational supervision) styles in organizations even though they are physically located in distant and different contexts.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. Section two reviews the relevant literature. Section three presents the method and justifies the choices made. Section four presents and analyses the findings. Section five discusses the result in relation to the extant literature, while section six offers practical implications. The article concludes with presentation of study limitations and future research directions.

## Literature review

### *Theorizing learning orientation*

Learning orientation—the personal interest and commitment toward developing competence (Bunderson and Sutcliffe 2003) as against demonstrating competence (Dweck 1986, 2000; Dweck and Leggett 1988)—is the foundation for competitive advantage (Harvey et al. 2019). Learning oriented individuals are intrinsically motivated (Hirst, Van Knippenberg, and Zhou 2009) and self-regulated (Bouffard et al. 1995) to acquiring new knowledge while unlearning obsolete skills (Matsuo 2020). By this means, they seek incessant self-improvement (Jha and Bhattacharyya 2013). Since highly learning-oriented employees are believed to have high challenge seeking behaviors and competency development attributes (Porter, Webb, and Gogus 2010), learning oriented behavior is linked to employee creativity (Redmond, Mumford, and Teach 1993). In their study of learning-oriented behavior in a marketing agency, Swart and Kinnie (2007) also found learning oriented behavior as key to value creation in a marketing environment. Therefore, highly learning-oriented SMs could be key to sustained competitive advantage in a dynamic environment, such as the supermarket sector studied here.

Although the transformational leadership style has been linked to learning-oriented employees (e.g., Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009), followers' explorative behaviors and followers' creativity (e.g., Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015), empirical data linking transformational leadership, employee learning orientation and creativity is still relatively lacking (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009). The current article contributes to filling such a research gap. Building on Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009), this study seeks to examine whether, and how, TSs influence SMs' creativity, facilitated by fostering SM's learning orientation, CSE and CRI.

Due to the link between creative workplace and attaining a competitive advantage (e.g., Fahy 1996; George and Zhou 2002; Oldham and Cummings 1996), studies, such as Adil, Hamid, and Waqas (2020), Afsar and Masood (2018), Cai et al. (2021), Han and Bai (2020), Mielniczuk and Laguna (2020) and Mittal and Dhar (2015) have stressed the need for supervisors to support employee creativity, by nurturing their CSE. Based on Bandura's theorizing on self-efficacy, i.e., a person's belief in his or her own capacity to "organize and execute the courses of action required to produce a given attainment" (Bandura 1997, 3), CSE rests on individual's ability to produce creative outcomes (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Ma et al. 2021). As a conviction that an individual has the necessary competence to generate creative results (Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Tse, To, and Chiu 2018), CSE, is, thus, a key to high performance in a wide range of tasks (Bandura

1986, 1997). Yet, there is still a lack of empirical data that examines the role of the TSs in nurturing the SMs' learning orientation, CRI, CSE and creativity.

### ***Transformational supervisor (TS) and employee creativity***

Building a creative workplace requires a culture of autonomy, innovation and trial and error (Elkins and Keller 2003)—an ethos which epitomizes the transformational leadership style (Mittal and Dhar 2015). By devising a vision for their teams (Bass 1985), by fostering employees' ability to finding creative solutions to problems (Bass 1985; Boerner, Eisenbeiss, and Griesser 2007), and by invoking additional discretionary effort in employees (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020), transformational supervisors facilitate employee creativity (Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015). Moreover, through delegation of authority and fostering of autonomy (Bass 1985), the transformational leadership style not only facilitates better skill acquisition and mastery development (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020), but higher follower creativity (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015). Due to their tendency to generate novel solutions to tasks at hand (Amabile 1983, 1996, 1988), creative employees have a high drive for tackling organizational challenges (Bandura 1986; Royston and Reiter-Palmon 2019), and in a lean and efficient manner (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009) that meet customers' products and service needs (Zhou 1998; Zhou and Shalley 2003, 2008). Therefore, they are highly rated by their supervisors (Oldham and Cummings 1996). Yet, empirical data examining the role of transformational supervisors in fostering subordinates' creativity is still needed, especially, in a more complex and competitive environment like the retail supermarkets.

Although the literature on the antecedents of employee creativity has burgeoned (Wang, Tsai, and Tsai 2014), there is still a lack of consensus on both the antecedents and consequences of employee creativity (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009). The influence of transformational leadership on employee creativity has been highlighted (e.g., Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015). However, at the same time, scholars argue that it could take quite a while for such an influence to be evidenced (e.g., Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009, 766). This is due to the gap between when knowledge is acquired and nurtured, and when creative solutions to problems are established (Weisberg 1999). Yet, the transformational leadership outcomes of commitment (e.g., Keskes et al. 2018), performance (e.g., Ng 2017), visioning and innovation (Bass 1985) and effective leadership (Grant 2012; Vera and Crossan 2004) link transformational supervision to follower creativity (e.g., Koh, Lee, and Joshi 2019; Mittal and Dhar 2015).

### ***Transformational supervisor (TS), creative self-efficacy (CSE), and creative role identity (CRI)***

While CSE demonstrates the degree a person believes (s)he can bring resources to bear to yield innovative results (Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Orth and Volmer 2017), CRI shows whether an individual thinks himself/herself a creative person (Farmer, Tierney, and Kung-McIntyre 2003; Wang, Liu, and Shalley 2018). Drawing on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, Christensen-Salem et al. (2020) have linked both CRI and CSE to employee creativity. Farmer, Tierney, and Kung-McIntyre (2003) also view CRI as facilitating employee's ability to devise innovative solutions to work based problems. Although factors that enhance CRI are vast, TS is key. For instance, by stimulating their intellectual curiosity (Bass, Avolio, and Goodheim 1987; Bass and Steidlmeier 1999; Cai et al. 2019; Grosser, Venkataramani, and Labianca 2017), TS can encourage SMs to devise innovative products and service standards that meet customers' expectations (Hu, Kandampully, and Juwaheer 2009). This facilitates SMs' self-identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), and which is particularly crucial in complex and challenging job roles like the supermarket store managers',

where identity, high autonomy, feedback, skill-variety, skill-significance, and intrinsic motivation are key to success (Amabile 1988; Oldham and Cummings 1996; Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham 2004).

### ***Transformational supervisor (TS) and employee creativity: the roles of learning orientation, creative self-efficacy (CSE), and creative role identity (CRI)***

The link between employee creativity and leadership style has been emphasized sufficiently (e.g., Shalley and Gilson 2004; Amabile et al. 2005). Specifically, employee creativity is linked to the transformational leadership style (e.g., Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009). Follower high self-confidence (Afsar and Masood 2018) and high CSE levels (Mittal and Dhar 2015) have also been found to depend on transformational leadership capability. For instance, by encouraging knowledge sharing (Mittal and Dhar 2015), learning and inspiring vision (Grant 2012; Vera and Crossan 2004), independent thinking (Gumusluoglu and Ilsev 2009), collective and challenging tasks (Rubin, Munz, and Bommer 2005), transformational leadership can boost subordinates' self-confidence at work (Afsar and Masood 2018; Mittal and Dhar 2015). By helping subordinates attain such high levels of CSE (Walumbwa and Hartnell 2011), transformational leadership, is, thus, a precursor of employee creativity (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Mittal and Dhar 2015, 896).

Bass and Avolio (1994) have also identified four dimensions to illustrate how the learning-related actions of TSs can influence SM's learning orientation and creativity. By using behavioral role modeling (Matsuo 2020), through idealized influence (Afsar and Masood 2018; Bass and Avolio 1994), TS can encourage SM to unlearn bad behavior while learning acceptable behavior. Thereby, helping supermarkets adopt appropriate behaviors that suit the fluctuating customers' preferences. Through inspirational motivation (Bass and Avolio 1994), TSs can increase SMs' self-confidence (Bandura 1997; Royston and Reiter-Palmon 2019) and CSE levels (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020). Thereby, fostering SMs' problem-solving skills (e.g., Han and Bai 2020), as SMs can then devise new products, services and processes that meet customers' expectations, and which typifies high creativity (e.g., Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015). Through intellectual stimulation (Bass and Avolio 1994), TSs can stimulate SMs ability to rethink previous problems in novel ways. Thereby, encouraging SMs to challenge the *status quo* (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009), and which indicates enhanced creativity (Amabile et al. 2004). Through individualized consideration (Bass and Avolio 1994), TSs can encourage SMs to personally listen to individual staff/customers' need, and, therefore, providing tailored support for individual circumstances. These learning-related behaviors of the TSs are crucial for providing better quality services (Mohsin and Lockyer 2010; Ogaard, Marnburg, and Larsen 2008). They are also consistent with the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), which is the foundation for creative behavior and high-level self-efficacy (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Royston and Reiter-Palmon 2019). From these viewpoints, TSs can stimulate SMs' learning orientation, creative thinking, and their ability to generate novel solutions to problems, and which are key to building and maintaining a competitive advantage in a dynamic environment (like the supermarkets') (Amabile et al. 2005; George 2007). Yet, there are lack of empirical evidence that link TSs and subordinates' learning orientation and creativity in non-academic settings. To contribute to addressing this research gap, this study addresses the following research question.

*How does transformational supervision impact SM's learning orientation and creativity?*

### **Research methodology**

Given the subjective nature of the above constructs, the uniqueness of the themes and contexts, and the theoretical argument required to address the above research question, an

exploratory study through qualitative approach is required. When generating a relationship between complex constructs (e.g., supervisory relationships, learning orientation, CRI, CSE, and creativity), it is recommended that each participant be allowed ample time to elaborate freely on their views without being interrupted (Liu and Rong 2015). Therefore, this study has adopted a qualitative method, with an interpretivist philosophy. The qualitative research literature (e.g., Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010) emphasizes the standard of rigor required in qualitative studies. Although the standard of rigor (e.g., reliability, internal and external validity, and construct validity) embedded in the positivist approach might be lacking in qualitative studies, qualitative researchers can still prove a strong degree of rigor through a thorough analysis of the actual research actions undertaken (Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010). Lee (1999) has used methodological rigor, high degree of transparency, thorough analysis, and good outcome with a long-term validity and reliability, but, most importantly, one that contributes to the existing body of management knowledge, to qualify standard qualitative research. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability are the criteria for assessing the validity and reliability of a qualitative research. Following these authors' recommendations, this section provides a thorough explanation of the genuine research activities (including the methods and processes) undertaken during the data collection and analyses processes, and, therefore, enhances the validity and reliability of this study (Creswell 2007; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; O'Reilly, Paper, and Marx 2012).

To enhance validity in the selection of the participating supermarkets, the criteria adopted include (a) the top 10 supermarkets in their respective countries, and which thus implies they are (b) of international standard and are (c) highly competitive. These criteria have allowed the researchers to choose only the best performing supermarkets in these countries.

The purposive sampling method was adopted in choosing the participating SMs. Notwithstanding the contradictions in the theorizing of the purposive sampling method, there is a consensus—the researcher is sampling with a purpose (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2012)—and in this case, to select 40 SMs from top supermarkets in Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. The purposive sampling approach is also appropriate when the target participants are discrete (White et al. 2018), e.g., the SMs from the best performing supermarkets in these countries. The criteria adopted to enhance validity in the selection of the participating SMs include: (a) a well-defined managerial hierarchy in each participating supermarket to prove clearly (b) that the participant is not a senior/top manager, rather can easily be identified as a SM in control of a store, and (c) is thus answerable to a supervisor/line-manager. These selection criteria also suit the research questions, i.e., by allowing the study to examine how the learning related actions of the supervisors facilitate each participant's learning orientation, and how these could be linked to the participant's creativity. Given many willing participants from the UK, the selection of the UK participants was limited to the UK's BIG four—Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, and Morrison's—and where 10 participants were selected. 16 participants were selected from three branches of South Africa's big chain, and a total of 14 participants from eight different supermarkets in Nigeria. The selection of the African supermarkets was based on the ranking by Chambers of Commerce in both Nigeria and South Africa. The criteria for ranking supermarkets in these three countries are the same—store appearance, queueing time, staff availability, range of products, quality of own-label products, quality of fresh produce, value for money, and customer score.

### **Data collection**

The raw data was collected during store visits between September 2014 and June 2015, via in-depth semi structured interviews. The 40 interviews took (roughly) 88 h to complete, meaning, on average, it took (approximately) 2 h and 20 min to complete each. To solicit their consent and to inform participants about the purpose of the study, each participant received an average of two

**Table 1.** Data collection and analysis process.

Case study steps	Activities
Step 1	Establish the focus and scope of the research
Step 2	Develop the research questions.
Step 3	Decide the individual supermarkets to include in the ‘multi-site case studies’
Step 4	Decide the appropriate research instruments and protocols, e.g. the appropriate qualitative data gathering techniques, in this case, the semi-structured interviews.
Step 5	Determine the ‘suitable’ participants: a vertical and horizontal slice of the case studies to establish whether each prospective participant is a store manager, and not an owner manager.
Step 6	Data collection period—UK Supermarkets (September 2014–December 2014)
Step 7	Data collection period—Nigerian Supermarkets (January 2015–March 2015)
Step 8	Data collection period—South African Supermarkets (March 2015–June 2015)
Step 9	Data analysis commences (See below for the steps involved)
Step 10	Dissemination: report and article development

emails prior to the interview. Originally, 50 participants (i.e., 18 from Nigeria, 18 from South, and 14 participants from the UK) were targeted. Due to such enough communication, willingness to participate were high from both continents, but not without some stipulations. First, participants demanded that the conversations occur during their businesses’ quieter periods. Second, that the conversations be paused midway (at the interviewees’ discretions) to allow them attend to their businesses’ needs. In line with Liu and Rong (2015) recommendations, participants were allowed sufficient time (with minimal interruptions from the interviewer) to discuss extensively how their supervisors support their learning orientation, and if, and how, such support results in the development of new products, services, and processes/procedures in their stores. Table 1 below illustrates the data collection and data analysis process.

### **Data analysis**

The role of theoretical argument in building theories that hook the readers’ attention in case study research has been emphasized (e.g., Eisenhardt 1989a, 2021). Given the theoretical argument required to explain how transformational supervision impacts subordinate’s learning orientation and creativity in these supermarkets, insights from the “Eisenhardt Method” were too compelling to ignore. Yin’s (1984) work on cases (and replication logic) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) iterative process of constant comparison of data and theory (as well as theoretical sampling and saturation) were also drawn upon.

### **Justifications for adopting the “Eisenhardt method”**

This study adopts the “Eisenhardt Method” for the following reasons. First, the chosen method should address a research question for which there is a limited or contradictory prior theory and/or empirical evidence (Eisenhardt 2021). Our research question which explores how transformational supervision impacts store managers learning orientation and creativity lacks prior empirical evidence (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009), and is thus very likely to yield fertile opportunities for theory building (Eisenhardt 2021).

By linking transformational supervision with subordinate’s creativity, our research question is also investigating an under-represented theory in a well-researched literature (Eisenhardt 2021; Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009), which Eisenhardt (1989b) refer as a “cool” yet under-studied phenomenon. Our broad question can also be perceived as an attempt to look inside the “black box” of a process (Bingham and Eisenhardt 2011). Indeed, an attempt to answer the research question extends into the vast learning literature that links experience to outcomes, but specifically explores how the learning phenomena has evolved over time (Eisenhardt 2021). For instance, the



present study is probing—how the learning-related actions of the transformational supervisors help store managers learn and engage in behaviors that produce creative outcomes. This phenomenon is also embedded in our interview questions (Eisenhardt 2021).

Our research question is also exploring a unique setting (Eisenhardt 2021)—top supermarkets in Nigeria, South Africa, and the UK. Through a careful case selection (i.e., theoretical sampling), this method not only eliminates supermarkets that are not of theoretical interest (e.g., lacking the requisite qualities of the top 10 in their respective countries), but enhances generalizability (Eisenhardt 2021). Selecting cases with same focal phenomenon and from three culturally distinct countries is also consistent with Bingham and Eisenhardt (2011) study on Singapore, United States, and Finland, which Eisenhardt (2021) believe to enhance generalizability (i.e., transferability) of the emergent theory across settings. Similarities and differences across such cases not only present unexpected theoretical opportunities that enrich theory building (Eisenhardt 2021) but sharpens the empirical focus (Eisenhardt 2021; Hallen and Eisenhardt 2012; Kirtley and O'Mahony 2020). Our samples also share some characteristics (e.g., store appearance, queueing time, staff availability, range of products, quality of own-label products, quality of fresh produce, value for money, and customer score) that have previously predicted successful outcomes from prior research (Davis and Eisenhardt 2011).

Researchers using the grounded theorizing have utilized different phrases, such as first- and second-order themes (e.g., Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) or staying closer to the original wording of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Regardless of the terminology, the aim of the analysis is to achieve a fit between the data and the dominant theory (Eisenhardt 2021) through an iterative organization, grouping, and regrouping of the raw data (Braun and Clarke 2006), repetition of logic (Yin 1984), continuous comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967), and formation of more abstract conceptualization (Walsh et al. 2015). Such a persistent and creative iteration process provides a fit between the theory and cases, surprisingly well (Eisenhardt 2021, 1989a). To achieve a high level of fit through explicit theoretical arguments that support why particular emergent relationships between constructs are likely to hold (Eisenhardt 2021), similar sets of data from multiple cases are combined (e.g., Bechky and Okhuysen 2011). This facilitates theoretical arguments that are based on data and logic, and thus addresses the internal validity, which is at the heart of theory building (Eisenhardt 2021). To ensure a persistent and creative iteration process that meets the above requirements, the data analysis has drawn on Braun and Clarke (2006) suggestions on the six-stage process of the qualitative data analysis.

## ***The six-stage data analysis process***

### ***Data familiarization***

The researcher commenced the data analysis process by first listening to the recorded audio interviews several times, until familiarity with the raw data was achieved. This was then followed by transcription of all the audio files into written ones. To ensure a thorough transcription of the data, the researcher crosschecked all the written texts (i.e., the transcripts) against the oral interviews (i.e., the recorded audio) data. Although no significant differences were found, for ease of display, a few amendments (to the interview quotes) were made.

### ***Generating the initial codes***

With all the interview data transcribed at this stage, the coding of the interview transcripts began. The coding process involved classifying and segmenting the transcribed data (based on their similarities in meaning) into various units of more meaningful, cohesive categories, and attaching conceptual labels to each data group for ease of identification, and thus enhances

their validity. However, the coding process was incessant until enough distinguishing categories emerged between the various data groups (Eisenhardt 1989a; Strauss and Corbin 2008). This exhaustive coding process has helped the researcher align the relevant raw interview data with their conforming themes during the data analysis (Goulding 2002; Strauss and Corbin 2008), and thus enhances validity (Eisenhardt 2021). Although each group/subgroup of data was coded separately, confusion still emerged on a few occasions, necessitating the raw interview data were revisited for modifications and recoding, before realigning them with their corresponding content-themes.

### ***Searching for themes***

At this stage, the researcher needed to create a more meaningful and memorable expression of the data sets. Therefore, based on corresponding theories, four distinctive statements (i.e., the four main themes) were deduced to show how TSs can influence SMS' creativity. Based on the similarities in meanings (of the data sets) and coupled with their relationship with the corresponding literature and the key issues addressed in this study, the researcher grouped these data sets under the themes. To enhance validity (Alo 2020), the data sets and their corresponding themes should be scrutinized. This required using a team of experienced qualitative researchers to vet the data analysis process at this stage.

### ***Reviewing the themes***

Accordingly, the expertise of a team of three experienced qualitative researchers were involved for expert checks. Following each peer debriefing meetings with the researcher, acting as both critical friends (Kember et al. 1997) and research auditors (Filho and Rettig 2016), these well-trained qualitative researchers delivered constructive feedback (to the author) and which often showed a high degree of inter-rater reliability. In a handful of cases, a few data units had to be recoded and regrouped, until consensus was reached between the researcher and the team of three experienced qualitative researchers.

### ***Re-definition and re-naming of themes***

To ensure that the names for each regrouped and refined theme were well-defined and clarified (as suggested by the experienced qualitative researchers), the fifth step in the data analysis process involved redefining and renaming the themes. This process has helped this study to maximize each identified theme (Alo 2020). This will also help the readers understand the important relationship among these various constructs in study, and thus enhance the validity of the study.

### ***Report writing***

With validity reached, a good report writing was needed to ensure a further interpretation of the results. With the painstaking report writing (and coupled with the scrutiny by the team of three experienced qualitative researchers), this study has clarified the connections between the interview responses and the corresponding literature. This was done by moving forward and backward amidst the empirical data and the literature. Liu and Rong (2015) recommend doing so to ensure an exhaustive and reliable data analyses and comparison between the findings and the dominant theory. An exhaustive report writing effort is also evidenced in a very strong literature review section, a relevant discussion section and a robust and quite insightful contributions of this research study.

## Study findings

This section uses the raw interview data to examine if, and how, the learning-related actions of transformational supervisors impact store managers' learning orientation and creativity in top supermarkets in Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. The findings and analysis offer fresh insight into the link between transformational supervision and new products/services development in the retail supermarket environment. Participants tended to focus on (1) how their supervisors support their personal interest and commitment toward developing competence (i.e., their learning orientation), (2) how their supervisors help them identify themselves as creative individuals (i.e., CRI), (3) and how their supervisors help them believe they possess the requisite capacity to “organize and execute the courses of action required to produce a given attainment” (i.e., CSE) (Bandura 1997, 3; Royston and Reiter-Palmon 2019). Based on this evidence, (4) the article constructs a very rich and highly nuanced understanding of the link between transformational supervision, new knowledge, and innovative approaches to problem-solving (Bass, Avolio, and Goodheim 1987; Bass and Steidlmeier 1999) and high-quality service and product standards that meet customers' expectations (Hu, Kandampully, and Juwaheer 2009). To help make sense of the data, four themes relating to the data were simply deduced from the literature review section and termed *transformational supervision and learning orientation*; *transformational supervision and creative role identity*; *transformational supervision and creative self-efficacy*; and *transformational supervision and creativity*. Evidence from the data (as can be seen below) were found to match these themes. For clarity, the supervisors are the senior managers, while the store managers equate to an employee/subordinate/research participant.

### **Transformational supervision and learning orientation**

As no intrinsic differences were identified while comparing participants' responses from these three countries, we believe that combining the responses/samples would make more sense. Although the supermarkets are drawn from different countries (and which might imply different objectives, staffing compositions and operational strategies), participants commonly described how their supervisors utilize regular one to one dialogue, coaching sessions, and a range of skill acquisition opportunities to stimulate their personal interest and commitment toward developing competence. The quotes below also show that participants are very grateful about the level of developmental opportunities offered:

*“I have been opportune to have many responsibilities and authorities delegated to me by my supervisor... I have also developed through mentoring and in-house coaching by my supervisor”* (South African participant 5).

*“I learn on the job, ... and also through regular meeting and dialogue with the company's board of directors”* (Nigerian participant 3).

Although the development of learning-oriented individuals is dependent on a person's drive to learn from important role models (Matsuo 2020, 6), specific behaviors of the manager has been linked with stronger leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship with individual subordinates (Duan et al. 2017; O'Donnell, Yukl, and Taber 2012). For instance, participants implicitly described their supervisors as important role models that encourage them to explore and acquire new knowledge and innovative approaches to problem-solving (at work) (Bass, Avolio, and Goodheim 1987; Bass and Steidlmeier 1999). This fosters creativity (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015):

*“... For example, during his [i.e., his supervisor's] visit earlier today we decided that we are going to introduce more Polish brands to suit the locals in the area that is covered by my store, as this area is quite ethnic...”* (UK participant 2).

“... just last week my boss coached me on how to deal with unruly employees, difficult customers, and on other issues such as refunds, complaints, and enquiries, recording transactions and preventing losses on sales...” (South African participant 12).

Hu, Kandampully, and Juwaheer (2009) also noted the crucial link between TS and subordinates' ability to explore and deliver innovative results that meet customers' expectations. This helps subordinates build confidence to perform beyond expectations:

“... during his monthly visits I normally walk around [the store] with my operations manager to identify things that need changing in the store (UK participant 2).

“I learn on the job and through personal coaching and mentoring by my senior manager ...” (UK participant 1).

Jha and Bhattacharyya (2013) had linked highly learning oriented individuals' ability to go beyond the acceptable standard required for a day-to-day performance to their strong perseverance for continuous and long-term learning. One of the UK's BIG four encourages such perseverance for continuous and long-term learning through their virtual community:

“... every store manager in this supermarket belongs to an online network of other store managers who have various experiences to contribute to the group's learning... this is an initiative of our top management... and that is why everybody has to be a part of it” (UK participant 7).

This perhaps is not surprising as TSs encourage knowledge sharing (Mittal and Dhar 2015), collective and challenging (as against individual and routine) tasks (Rubin, Munz, and Bommer 2005), and which boosts subordinates' self-confidence at work (Afsar and Masood 2018). However, this UK's top supermarket also emphasizes performance orientation, through their options programme. The options programme is an inhouse leadership development programme that identifies and rewards highly talented employees through a blend of on-the-job and off-the-job learning opportunities and development programmes to Fastrack their career progressions:

“... as employees are doing what they are assigned as their tasks, managers identify the strongest members of their team [i.e., in terms of individual performance] and recommend such employee for partaking in the options programme so they could be trained to become store managers” (i.e., individualized consideration) (UK participant 8).

Still referring to the options programme, another participant adds:

“In the Options Programme, the participants are first taken to an assessment centre where they spend a full day doing group activities and interviews... Then if they are selected to continue the programme, they would spend the next six months to undergo leadership development sessions, and which include both on-the-job and off-the-job learning” (UK participant 9).

Previous studies also found that highly learning oriented individuals are encouraged and empowered to develop (Gray 2005), are offered the freedom and autonomy to learn from their jobs (Dalakoura 2010), and are rated highly by their supervisors during performance appraisals (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Wang, Tsai, and Tsai 2014). Through vicarious reinforcement (Bandura 1997), such a high level of support can foster creativity.

### **Transformational supervision and creative role identity (CRI)**

Our analysis also illustrates how transformational supervision helps participants identify and analyze the required changes in their businesses, to device plans, and to control resources to implement such required changes:

“On a weekly basis, I do have meetings with our top management ... it involves sitting down to do some evaluations and analysis of previous performances and results and looking into the foreseeable future to forecast future performances and results” (South Africa participant 9).

*“I have now realised that delegating some of my responsibilities and authorities to my subordinates allows the business to grow, as it creates some time for me to concentrate on more pressing issues”* (South African participant 7). Research links TS’s influence on follower’s work-life management to job autonomy, job enrichment, improved work-family balance, and thus a reduced work-family conflict (Hammond et al. 2015) due to a reduced work-to-family spill over (Isenhour, Stone, and Lien 2012).

*“...the moment I discovered that there are many Asians in the area that is covered by my store I discussed with my team how we should change the store to suit the needs of this special group of customers...”* (UK participant 3).

These quotes above typify the role of TS in nurturing subordinates’ CRI. Adil, Hamid, and Waqas (2020), Afsar and Masood (2018), Han and Bai (2020), Mielniczuk and Laguna (2020) and Mittal and Dhar (2015) also emphasize the crucial role of TS in nurturing subordinates’ ingenuity, and thus, helping them deliver creative outcomes. Participants were also prone to comparing their present capabilities with their previous, and which makes them identify and appreciate the degree they believe they have been transformed:

*“...I have learnt that in every new environment a manager needs to first identify who their customers are and what their needs are...”* (UK participant 3).

*“In the Options programme we were taught that each store is unique, so you have to treat each differently depending on the major ethnic setting served by the store...”* (UK participant 9).

*“...I am now more capable of guiding my staff on the right paths, even when we are dealing with complex problems”* (South African participant 4).

The above quotes have revealed that, by stimulating subordinates’ intellectual curiosity and encouraging them to devise innovative approaches to problem-solving, TS facilitates subordinates’ ability to device high quality product and service that meet customers’ expectations (Hu, Kandampully, and Juwaheer 2009), and which is particularly crucial in complex and challenging job roles, such as the supermarkets store managers.

### **Transformational supervision and creative self-efficacy (CSE)**

Although participants now identify themselves as creative individuals, regular and supportive supervision is crucial in boosting their confidence to generate creative results. The quotes below reveal how regular dialogue with their supervisors has evoked the self believe (in participants) that they are creative, and which epitomizes the role of TS in boosting subordinates’ CSE:

*“... I often identify where and when necessary actions such as expansion or relocation are needed, or areas that will bring development to the staff or satisfaction to the customers... I also brief the top management on areas that need improvement”* (South African participant 7).

*“I regularly review the skill set of my team... each time I identify a skill gap I don’t hesitate to advise the top management...”* (Nigerian participant 5).

Transformational supervision is crucial in boosting subordinates’ confidence to generate creative results (e.g., Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020), and which echoes Bandura (1997) theorizing on helping subordinates belief in their own capacity to “organize and execute the courses of action required to produce a given attainment” (p. 3). Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009) also found highly learning-oriented individuals as having higher CSE when under the influence of TSs. Specifically, TSs have been linked with subordinate’s personal control, creative personality, and thus creativity (Tse, To, and Chiu 2018). Evidence from the interview responses below also shows participants must regularly brief their supervisors on each problem or opportunity identified. Although the impact of such a learning culture on creativity might go unnoticed, it can be a powerful stimulus for CSE, as SMs will be intellectually stimulated to think about each issue in a novel way prior to briefing their supervisors. Thereby, resulting in high problem solving (Han and Bai 2020) and high creativity (e.g., Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020;

Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015):

*“... I try to figure out our business’s key strengths (i.e., whether it is in our brand, price, etc.) so we can build and capitalize on such assets while facing stronger rivalry... I therefore translated such vision into a plan that I shared with my staff and management team during our monthly meeting...”* (South African Participant 10).

*“... I visit similar stores to learn from them ... in turn I convert the result of such visits into a plan which I share with my top management and staff...”* (Nigeria participant 4).

*“... I anticipate the future needs of the store on daily basis, and I translate the results of such forecasting into an agenda which I share with staff and management ...”* (Nigerian participant 1).

As the quotes illustrate, by making followers believe they possess the requisite capability to generate creative results at work, TS can enhance subordinates’ self-confidence at work (Afsar and Masood 2018). By helping followers attain such high CSE levels (Walumbwa and Hartnell 2011), TS, is thus a precursor of high creativity (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Mittal and Dhar 2015, 896).

### **Transformational supervision and employee creativity**

Participants link a wide range of skills—team-leading, performance management, visioning, and interpersonal relationships developed—to high quality supervision received. This epitomizes TS as key to employee creativity. The below quotes also illustrate how these skill sets are impacting on organizational performance:

*“... ever since I rediscovered some aspects of my personal life such as my temperament and I have received support ... my subordinates have been sharing their views freely with me without fear of being reprimanded, unlike before”* (Nigerian participant 7).

*“... unlike before I am now able to forecast sales and if any changes are noticed I will prepare my team in readiness for such change”* (South African participant 7).

*“... I have learnt to always make sure that my stores are up to the standard and everything are at their right places ...”* (UK participant 5).

*..., I try to figure out our business’s key strengths i.e., whether it is in our brand, price, etc. so we can build and capitalize on such assets while facing stronger rivalry...”* (South African Participant 10).

Some also attributed positive personal changes—particularly self-awareness, self-efficacy (Bandura 1997; Royston and Reiter-Palmon 2019), locus of control (Afsar and Masood 2018) and adaptability—to high level of support and regular interactions with their supervisors. The below quotes also illustrate how such new values have resulted in a new culture of a more collaborative working approach. Thereby, a resultant improvement in team performance:

*“... unlike before, now I think deeper before taking actions ... I always go back and ask myself, what are my doing that can move this business forward, are my carrying the team along with me to be able to do that with me?”* (UK participant 6).

*“Through the options programme I have learnt that every new environment requires a manager to adapt by thinking deeper in order to provide the stores that will satisfy the major ethnic setting that dominates such environment so you can move the business forward”* (UK participant 8).

*“... I have been able to identify the quickest growth areas, the shrinkage areas and the stagnated areas in my store and as a result the team goes into further brainstorming...”* (UK participant 7).

Although the creativity literature posit that learning-oriented individuals are driven by self-regulation (Wang, Tsai, and Tsai 2014), our analysis has shown that effective supervisory support and role-modeling can boost their creativity level (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015).

This is also consistent with the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), which is the foundation for creative behavior and high-level self-efficacy (Gong, Huang, and Farh 2009; Tse, To, and Chiu 2018), and which can have long-term impact on business's performance:

*"...I have realised that shoppers are now making very cute choices regarding their shopping...they have become very sensitive about where, when and what they shop unlike in five years ago...and they are now generally not seen carrying big baskets about, because they are shopping more often...and I need to be evolving with them so we would be heading in the same direction"* (UK participant 9).

*"... the first time I realised that customers are now shopping more often today than they used to do in the past 5 years or so, I translated such knowledge into a plan which I shared with my team... in order to change with the customers shopping habit..."* (UK participant 5).

*"... I have been able to identify the quickest growth areas, the shrinkage areas and the stagnated areas in my store and as a result the team goes into further brainstorming, and at times, colleagues undergo further training and development sessions such as, on-the-job coaching, or booking someone on a course to do, or simply briefing the whole team as a result of that"* (UK participant 7).

From these empirical viewpoints, we have seen how TSs can stimulate SMs' creative thinking and their ability to generate novel solutions to problems, and which are key to building and maintaining a competitive advantage in a dynamic environment (like the supermarkets') (Amabile et al. 2005; George 2007).

## Discussion

This study sought to enhance our understanding of how the learning-related actions of TSs influence subordinates' learning orientation and creativity. The study found that transformational supervision fosters supermarket SMs' learning orientation, creative role identity (CRI) and creative self-efficacy (CSE), and thus helps SMs develop novel products, processes, procedures, and services that meet customers' expectations. This aspect links transformational supervision to employee creativity (Cai et al. 2021, 2019), and from our findings we can infer a logical sequence of how such a relationship develops.

First, as important role models (Matsuo 2020, 6) TSs utilize regular one to one dialogue and a wide range of learning and development interventions to stimulate SMs' personal interest and commitment to learn and explore. Such quality of support epitomizes the role of TSs in developing subordinates' learning orientation (Hu, Kandampully, and Juwaheer 2009). Moreover, participants from one of the British supermarkets that participated in the study reveal that their supervisors utilize performance orientation. This is done by identifying highly learning oriented individuals and rewarding them through a blend of on-the-job and off-the-job learning and development opportunities to Fastrack their career progressions. Through vicarious reinforcement (Bandura 1997), such a high level of support can foster creativity.

Secondly, as participants frequently compared their present capabilities with their previous, they were quick to identify how creative they now are. For instance, they revealed they can now analyze the required changes in their businesses, devise plans, and control resources to implement such required changes, and in a manner that meets customers' expectations (Hu, Kandampully, and Juwaheer 2009). This typifies the role of TSs in nurturing subordinates' CRI (Tierney and Farmer 2002).

Thirdly, participants must brief their supervisors regularly on the situations in their stores. Such a learning culture not only challenges current established ways of knowing but opens a creative space for radical learning to take place (Bosma, Chia, and Fouweather 2016), as participants are challenged to think about each issue in a novel way, and thus results in high problem solving (Han and Bai 2020), high creativity (e.g., Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015), self-efficacy (Christensen-Salem et al. 2020) and locus of control (Bandura 1997; Royston and

Reiter-Palmon 2019; Tse, To, and Chiu 2018). This demonstrates how TSs can help subordinates' belief in their own capacity to “organize and execute the courses of action required to produce a given attainment” (Bandura 1997, 3), and which epitomizes the role of TS as key to subordinates' CSE (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Afsar and Masood 2018; Cai et al. 2021; Han and Bai 2020; Mielniczuk and Laguna 2020; Mittal and Dhar 2015).

Finally, participants revealed a wide range of skills developed—team-leading, performance management, visioning, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, and adaptability—and which they linked to the quality of supervision received. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

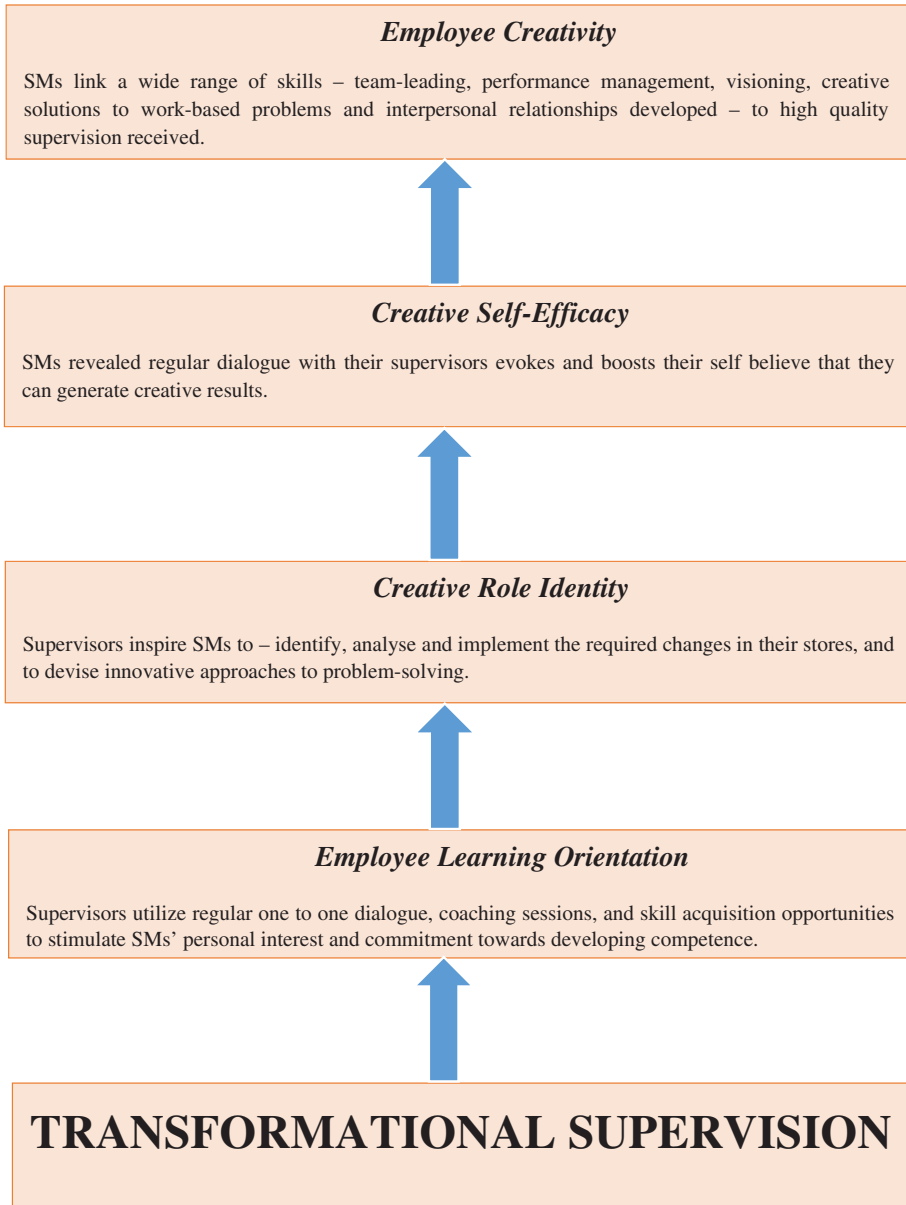
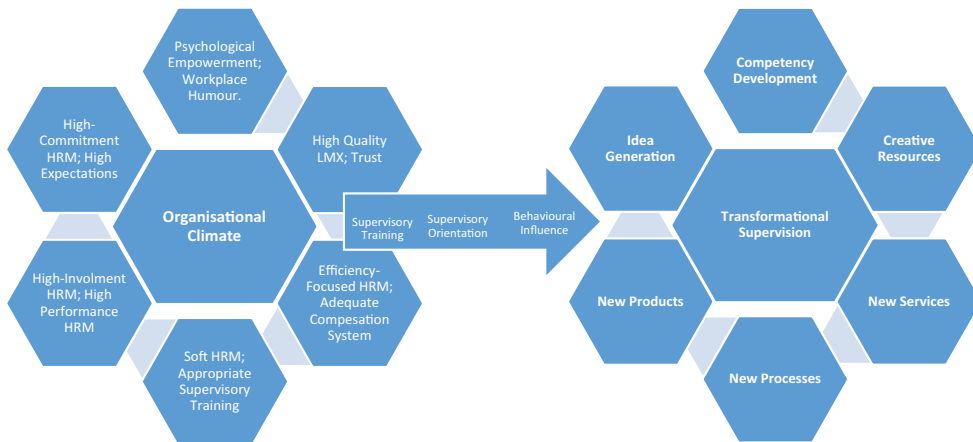


Figure 1. Linking transformational supervision with employee creativity.





**Figure 2.** Linking transformational supervision with subordinates' creativity.

These findings symbolize the role of TSs in fostering SMs' creativity (Cai et al. 2019; Tse, To, and Chiu 2018), and which are key to building and maintaining a competitive advantage in a dynamic environment (like the supermarkets') (Amabile et al. 2005; George 2007).

## Conclusions and implications

The present study was motivated by Gong, Huang, and Farh (2009, 774–775) call for research that explores how the learning-related actions of the transformational supervisors impact subordinates' learning orientation and creativity. Using five theoretical lenses—transformational supervision, learning orientation, CRI, CSE and creativity—the study has shown that transformational supervision impacts subordinates' ability to devise creative solutions to work-based problems. The study found that, by fostering SMs learning orientation, by helping them identify themselves as creative persons (i.e., CRI), and by helping them believe they can bring resources to bear to produce innovative results (i.e., CSE) (Adil, Hamid, and Waqas 2020; Christensen-Salem et al. 2020), TSs are helping SMs develop novel products and services that meet customers' expectations in these supermarkets that participated in this study from both continents. With these empirical results, this study provides a baseline for supermarkets in (re)evaluating the significance of their leadership styles on follower creativity. Since the transformational leadership style can result in better ways of meeting customers' expectations, it is key to a sustained competitive advantage (Bass and Avolio 1990, 1994). Therefore, the need for supervisors to be trained to build good working relationship with each subordinate, as this is the foundation for effective and transformational supervision, hence employee creativity and organizational performance.

By enlightening the process through which transformational supervision could have such a significant impact on subordinate creativity, these findings have implications for leadership/management behavior, as well as leadership/management development, and more generally how HR can build organizational climate for creativity in supermarkets. By encouraging workplace humor (e.g., Lang and Lee 2010), conducive physical work environment (e.g., Hoff and Öberg 2015), knowledge transfer (e.g., Zhang and Begley 2011), high-involvement HRM practices (e.g., Shin, Jeong, and Bae 2018) and high-performance human resource practices (e.g., van Esch, Wei, and Chiang 2018), HR can foster employee creativity. The HR literature also suggests individual initiative, skill variety, knowledge specificity and creative resources (e.g., Chen, Shih, and Yeh 2011). Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham (2004) link these characteristics to idea generation, and which results in new products, services, and processes, and which are key to sustained competitive advantage in a dynamic environment, such as the supermarket sector studied here.

Furthermore, by fostering appropriate HRM cultures, practices, and key behaviors (Smith et al. 2012), such as psychological empowerment (Gumusluoglu and Ilsev 2009), and by liberating (rather than controlling) humor (Lang and Lee 2010), supervisors can build trust and boost the perceived relationship with subordinates (Bennis 2007). Embedding trust and empowerment in a supervisory relationship (e.g., Schuler and Jackson 1987), through behaviors that promote good interpersonal relationships (e.g., Qu, Janssen, and Shi 2017) is also at the heart of high quality LMX relationship. The creativity literature (e.g., Chen, Shih, and Yeh 2011; Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham 2004) also links high quality LMX relationship to creative resources, idea generation, new products, services, and processes, and which are key to sustained competitive advantage in a dynamic environment, such as the supermarket sector studied here. HR also needs to encourage supervisors to be setting high (rather than low) expectations (Qu, Janssen, and Shi 2017), as this creates challenge (rather than hindrance) stressors, and which Ren and Zhang (2015) found as antecedents of employees' idea generation.

Other HRM practices relevant to employee learning orientation and creativity include high-commitment HRM practices (McClellan and Collins 2011) with adequate compensation system that encourages and rewards creative behaviors (Yoon and Chae 2012). Through vicarious reinforcement (Bandura 1997), such high-commitment HRM system can be crucial in nurturing employee learning orientation and creativity. Other HR practices found to foster idea generation include investing in efficiency focused HRM (Huang and Kim 2013), and which is evidenced through sophistication in their use of training (Simsek et al. 2009). This can be crucial in nurturing the appropriate capabilities (Ahammad et al. 2015) and cognitive abilities (Huang and Kim 2013), which are key to new products, services, and processes development, and which are key to sustained competitive advantage in a dynamic environment, such as the supermarket sector studied here.

Although Chakrabarti et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between soft HRM approach, supportive supervision, and employee creativity, drawing on the path-goal theory, earlier studies (e.g., House and Dessler 1974) found that a supervisor's effect on employee creativity depends on the characteristics of the individual employee. Similarly, Kohli (1989) also suggests that more experienced employees might be less responsive to supervisory intervention than the relatively inexperienced ones. This suggests a varying level of supervisory behavioral influence on employee creativity, based on employees' experience level. Further research is therefore needed to establish if, how, and when to vary/tailor supervisory orientation to match individual employee's experience level, to enhance creative outcome. Deduced from the discussions above, Figure 2 illustrates transformational supervision at the very heart of employee learning orientation and employee creativity.

### **Limitations of the study and future research directions**

Our article does have limitations like in any academic study. Firstly, our research did not unpack how supervisors can be prepared and encouraged to take active interest in the personal (in addition to the professional) development of the employees. Therefore, future research should examine how mentoring functions can be embedded in the supervisory training, such that supervisors are aware that professional and personal developmental needs of their protégé can conjoin. Despite the significance of supervisors who mentor, their presence should be complemented with formal mentoring programmes in organizations. Hence, the future studies can explore the inter-linkage between these aspects. Furthermore, our research has not examined the crucial roles of the supervisor's warmth, humility, emotional intelligence, communication skills, capacity for intimacy, cognitive complexity, competencies (e.g., awareness of the protégé's developmental stage, self-awareness, cross race and cross-gender skills) and diligence in safeguarding the supervisee's best interests (Johnson 2007). Therefore, future research should explore how to improve

supervisory training and supervisee matching, as this will minimize constant nervousness on the part of the protégé, and thus enhance subordinate's creativity. Finally, the future research can also explore how the pair in a supervisor-supervisee relationship are made aware of when, and how to seek consultation when professional and/or personal boundaries are poorly defined or are becoming porous. Hence, there is a need for more research in different contexts on relationship styles in supervisor-supervisee relationship.

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