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Exploring Mianzi consciousness congruence and its impact on unethical pro-organizational behavior

Bing Zhou¹ and Suchuan Zhang^{1*}

Abstract

Background In Chinese culture, the concept of Mianzi holds significant importance in interpersonal interactions. Mianzi represents one's social standing, dignity, and reputation, influencing behaviors and decisions within various contexts. Mianzi consciousness manifests in two primary forms: proactive and defensive. Proactive Mianzi consciousness involves efforts to enhance one's social image, while defensive Mianzi consciousness focuses on protecting one's existing reputation. Analyzing the impact of the two Mianzi consciousness dimensions on individuals' attitudes and behaviors is effective for understanding interpersonal dynamics in China. This study specifically examined the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). UPB refers to actions taken by employees that are intended to benefit their organization but are unethical or morally questionable. By investigating how congruence in proactive and defensive Mianzi consciousness influences the likelihood of engaging in UPB, this research aimed to uncover the underlying social and psychological mechanisms driving such behavior.

Methods Employing polynomial regression and response surface analysis method, this study developed a model that combines the proactive Mianzi consciousness and the defensive Mianzi consciousness into different Mianzi management strategies and tested the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and UPB.

Results Sample data collected at two time points one month apart supported all hypotheses. Specifically, the findings revealed that high levels of Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e., all-around type in Mianzi management strategies) positively relate to UPB, and verified the mediation effect of external work locus of control and the moderation effect of relational psychological contract.

Conclusion This research advanced a novel, synergistic perspective on the role of social Mianzi and contributed to the localized UPB research, thus helping to find a path to prevent UPB from occurring in the Chinese sociocultural context.

Keywords Mianzi management strategy, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, External work locus of control, Response surface analysis

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Introduction

Mianzi, or “面子” in Chinese, is a dominant cultural concept in China. It refers to credit or reputation based on social evaluations from others [1]. Chinese culture places great importance on Mianzi, regarding it as the most subtle standard in social interactions. This concept invisibly regulates people’s attitudes and behaviors in everyday life. As an important social currency, a person’s Mianzi may be gained, lost, or maintained through specific social events. Researchers generally define Mianzi consciousness as an individual’s motivation to acquire, preserve, and prevent the loss of Mianzi in order to present themselves better to others within their social network [2]. Mianzi consciousness is deeply ingrained in Chinese social interactions and extends its influence into organizational settings, where the desire to maintain Mianzi drives employees to engage in behaviors aimed at preserving or enhancing their reputation. There has been a surge of interest among researchers in the attitudes and behaviors of employees with high Mianzi consciousness in the workplace [3]. Based on the known literature, these employees may excessively prioritize their own Mianzi, potentially leading to neglect of other aspects within the organization. For example, some researchers have found that the pressure to maintain Mianzi can sometimes lead to unethical actions, as employees may prioritize Mianzi over ethical considerations [3, 4].

Additionally, the concept of Mianzi in the workplace is defined not only by how much employees value it but also by their behavioral tendencies in maintaining it. For employees who wish to maintain their Mianzi, their potential choices include actively gaining it (i.e., positive Mianzi consciousness) or protecting it from damage (i.e., defensive face consciousness). Proactive Mianzi consciousness refers specifically to people’s wish to obtain Mianzi, while defensive Mianzi consciousness reflects the apprehension about losing Mianzi [5, 6]. Research

on dyadic Mianzi consciousness reveals that proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness may exert distinct effects on individual behaviors [7, 8]. Researchers have proposed various explanations for this difference, from the specificity of behavioral consequences to the different sociocultural contexts in which Mianzi consciousness is applied. Regardless of these explanations, it is evident that the prevalent two-dimensional moderated regression and comparative study fail to adequately explain individuals’ attitudes and behaviors influenced by dyadic Mianzi consciousness.

We contend that there exists an overlooked possibility regarding the subject, which is that individual attitudes and behaviors may follow a regular pattern under different combinations of proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the dyadic fit of proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness to further analyze the impact of Mianzi consciousness. To address this gap in the literature, we first conceptualize the combination of proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness as Mianzi management strategies based on polynomial regression and response surface analysis. As shown in Fig. 1, Mianzi management strategy preferences are divided into four categories: all-around type, proactive type, defensive type, and indifferent type. Each preference reflects his/ her general motivations about their own Mianzi. This division not only aligns with Mianzi theory, but also mirrors the approach-avoidance framework, where individuals are motivated by both the pursuit of positive outcomes and the avoidance of negative ones [9]. Practically, this categorization reflects the reality of organizational dynamics, where employees may strive for recognition or fear reputational damage, thereby influencing their behavior in nuanced ways.

Utilizing the Mianzi management strategy model as our framework, this research explores the impact of high

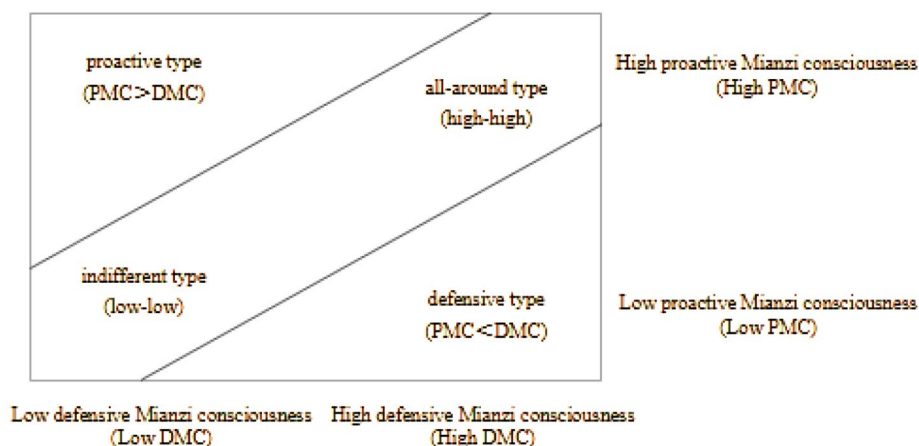


Fig. 1 Mianzi management strategies

Mianzi consciousness congruence on unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). UPB refers to “actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct” [10]. As a personality trait that is more prevalent in collectivist cultures, Mianzi may make employees come up with the idea of “Bao” (i.e., 报 in the Chinese language, which is similar to repay) when driving them to engage in unethical behaviors, that is, generate pro-organizational motivation. Following this logic, Zhang and Zhou (2024) conducted a study and confirmed a significant positive correlation between Chinese employees’ Mianzi consciousness and UPB [11]. However, do employees who are concerned about their Mianzi always exhibit a higher tendency towards UPB? Our research concludes that the answer to the question is negative. Actually, an employee with the same level of proactive Mianzi consciousness may exhibit varying degrees of UPB intentions because of the different levels of defensive Mianzi consciousness, and vice versa. Following the theoretical analysis outlined above, this research employs polynomial regression and response surface analysis to delve deeper into the potential interplay between proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness in influencing employee UPB. By analyzing the dynamics of employee UPB under various combinations of dyadic Mianzi consciousness, this three-dimensional observation presents a more nuanced and holistic picture of the relationships among proactive Mianzi consciousness, defensive Mianzi consciousness, and UPB.

We speculate that compared to the other three types of employees, all-around type employees are more likely to engage in UPB. This tendency can be better understood by examining the role of work locus of control (WLOC), which is a critical factor influencing employee behavior. WLOC refers to an employee’s perception of the factors that determine their work outcomes. Specifically, external WLOC implies that these employees perceive their work outcomes as largely influenced by external factors, such as luck, fate, or other people’s actions, rather than their own efforts [12]. Frequent Mianzi exchanges with other individuals in the workplace may make them believe more in the power of external factors, thereby enhancing their external WLOC. Such change can lead to a sense of reduced personal accountability, making them more likely to justify engaging in UPB to achieve desired outcomes and maintain their Mianzi. By understanding the mediating role of external WLOC, we can gain deeper insight into why all-around type employees may be more inclined to engage in UPB, thereby clarifying the link between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and UPB.

Furthermore, the relationship between employees and their organization plays a crucial role in the aforementioned influence. Relational psychological contract (relational contract) is characterized by long-term employment relationships with mutual trust, emotional support, and loyalty [13, 14]. When employees perceive a strong relational contract with their organization, they may feel a deeper obligation to engage in behaviors that benefit the long-term development of organizations. This sense of obligation conflicts with Mianzi exchange driven by self-interest in all-around type employees, who are predisposed to maintain their Mianzi. Altogether, we propose that the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence is indirect, mediated by external WLOC, and moderated by relational contract with organizations.

This research makes three contributions to the field of Mianzi consciousness and UPB. First, this research has implications for researchers focusing on dyadic Mianzi consciousness. Specifically, we propose and apply a brand-new framework for Mianzi research, and find that with different combinations of the two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness, probabilities of UPB present coherent dynamics. More importantly, the Mianzi management strategy model can be applied to the research on other organizational behaviors, thus providing a solid foundation for advancing the organizational behavior literature. Second, this research uncovers the mediating role of external WLOC, illustrating how frequent Mianzi exchanges can lead employees to attribute their work outcomes to external factors. Based on a longitudinal research design, this study captures the progression and cumulative impact of Mianzi consciousness over time, providing a more robust understanding of its effects on UPB. This shift in perception increases the likelihood of engaging in UPB, thereby revealing a critical psychological mechanism underpinning the influence of high Mianzi consciousness congruence on unethical behavior. Third, we examine the moderating effect of relational contract on the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and UPB. This research demonstrates that a strong relational contract negatively moderates the propensity for UPB among all-around type employees. This finding confirms the self-interest attribute of UPB driven by Mianzi consciousness. By highlighting this moderating effect, the study provides valuable insights into how relationships with their organization can mitigate the adverse effects of Mianzi-driven behaviors, offering practical implications for fostering ethical conduct within the Chinese organizational context.

Literature review and hypotheses

While the extant literature has been fruitful in understanding the outcomes of two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness, the findings of extant research appear to be incompatible. For example, researchers found a positive relationship between proactive Mianzi consciousness and entrepreneurial intentions but a negative relationship between defensive Mianzi consciousness between entrepreneurial intentions [7]. Similarly, Wang et al. (2020) also found that proactive Mianzi consciousness is positively associated with fashion consumption, and defensive Mianzi consciousness is negatively associated with fashion consumption [8]. However, these findings are inconsistent with some existing research, where researchers adapted the items of proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness together as the scale for Mianzi consciousness [11, 15]. Some researchers also found that proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness have similar effects on individual behaviors [16].

Such inconsistency of different research findings may imply that the current methodology and theoretical framework are not thoroughgoing enough to adequately explain the impact of the dyadic Mianzi consciousness on individual attitudes and behaviors. To overcome this limitation, the present research, taking UPB as an example, employs polynomial regression and response surface analysis to examine the influence of the congruence between proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness. That is to say, different combinations of the two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness will lead to different possibilities that employees engage in UPB. This idea is in keeping with earlier suggestions that due to the complexity of Mianzi-related activities, the two aspects of Mianzi consciousness should not be simply opposite but complementary [5, 6].

Specifically, we speculate that the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and UPB is positive and indirect, mediated by external WLOC, and moderated by relational contract with organizations. This research employs social exchange theory and social learning theory to provide the theoretical framework for investigating this relationship. Social exchange theory is a foundational framework that examines the interactive dynamics between two social actors within economic or social relationships. It posits that social actors reinforce each other's actions based on the principle of reciprocity: when one party makes a move, the other reciprocates, initiating a new round of exchange [17]. Self-interest is a common and not entirely negative concept in the process [18]. In this research, we argue that employees with high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e. all-around type) may engage in UPB primarily to preserve the organization's reputation (i.e., Mianzi) and thereby gain their own

Mianzi, such as by concealing negative information about their organizations. Employees may see UPB as an effective means to proactively exchange and gain Mianzi. This deduction aligns with social learning theory, which suggests that individuals learn new behaviors through interaction with their environment within a collective context, developing beliefs about their degree of control over outcomes [19, 20]. Specifically, all-around type employees' external WLOC strengthens after frequent Mianzi exchanges within the organization. These employees believe that their success depends on contextual factors such as privileges, amenities, and supervisory support. Consequently, they often engage in UPB to maintain a reciprocal relationship with their organization.

Congruence versus incongruence in Mianzi consciousness

Mianzi management strategy reflects the general preference of individuals for adopting proactive Mianzi consciousness or defensive Mianzi consciousness when maintaining their Mianzi. Proactive Mianzi consciousness will lead to a "net increase" in Mianzi, and defensive Mianzi consciousness will make Mianzi "not lost". In this regard, gaining Mianzi and not losing Mianzi are both effective means of maintaining Mianzi for individuals. In this research, we will investigate the effect of high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e. all-around type) on UPB. The significant relationship between overall Mianzi consciousness and UPB has been fully analyzed in Zhang and Zhou's (2024) research [11]. This relationship can be attributed to the deduction that employees with high Mianzi consciousness may regard UPB as an opportunity to exchange Mianzi and then gain Mianzi in their organizations.

We argue that all-around type employees value their own Mianzi more and are better able to maintain their Mianzi, compare to those unilaterally attaching importance to gaining Mianzi (i.e., proactive type) or not losing Mianzi (i.e., defensive type), as high levels of congruence represent more behavioral choices [5, 6]. According to social exchange theory, these employees are more likely to engage in UPB to gain Mianzi through Mianzi exchange. This reciprocity reinforces their commitment to the organization's reputation, making them more likely to engage in behaviors that protect and promote it. For such employees, to maintain their high levels of Mianzi, they are not only willing to engage in proactive Mianzi management behavior (e.g., getting fellow recognition for proactive work performance) but also accept defensive Mianzi management plans (e.g., whitewashing the flawed work of themselves or colleagues). For employees who are of a proactive type or defensive type, however, they often tend to engage in one type of Mianzi management

behavior at most, which may reduce their chance of engaging in UPB.

Thus, compared to employees who are of proactive type and defensive type, all-around type employees are more likely to put their own Mianzi first, thus engaging in UPB to gain Mianzi. This leads us to:

H1a Compared to proactive type and defensive type, all-around type, or the high congruence in Mianzi consciousness between proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness will be positively related to UPB.

Congruence in high versus low Mianzi consciousness

As stated earlier, we predict that all-around type employees, compared to those of proactive type and defensive type, are more likely to engage in UPB. This view is consistent with previous polynomial regression and response surface analysis research, which concluded that the congruence between two different variables may lead to stronger behavioral motivation of individuals [21–23]. Nevertheless, the view may obscure some important nuances. To further clarify the effect of the all-around type on UPB, it is necessary to further compare it with the indifferent type (i.e., low Mianzi consciousness congruence).

Specifically, we propose that congruence in which both two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness are of high-quality results in a stronger willingness to engage in UPB. Based on social exchange theory, this higher engagement in UPB can be seen as a reciprocal action where employees aim to protect and enhance the organization's Mianzi, expecting similar reciprocation to bolster their own Mianzi [11]. This reciprocal relationship emphasizes the interplay between organizational and personal reputation management, driving all-around type employees to engage more in UPB. Compared to those of indifferent type, all-around type employees may have a stronger desire for highly positive social appraisal and making a deeper impression [6]. These employees will be more inclined to get a positive appraisal within the organization by engaging in UPB, when UPB doesn't merely concern the reputation of the organization, but also their own Mianzi [24]. In contrast, when employees' Mianzi consciousness is at a low level congruent (i.e., indifferent type), although they attach importance to gaining Mianzi and not losing Mianzi equally, they may lack the motivation to maintain Mianzi due to their disregard for it. Consequently, congruence at low levels of Mianzi consciousness will not increase employees' willingness to engage in UPB that should be aroused by the self-representation and belief that typically characterize high-high dyads (i.e., all-around type).

We thus present the following hypothesis:

H1b UPB will be higher when proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness are congruent at higher (rather than lower) levels, or among all-around type employees, compared to indifferent type employees.

Linking high Mianzi consciousness congruence, external WLOC, and UPB

Having established the relationship between all-around type preference and UPB, we further propose that external WLOC will mediate the above-mentioned relationship. All-around type employees, who engage extensively in various Mianzi-related activities, are more likely to develop an external WLOC due to their reliance on external validation and rewards such as the support of supervisors, promotions, and favorable circumstances. This increased external WLOC makes them more inclined to engage in UPB to maintain and enhance these rewards.

External WLOC in the workplace refers to employees' perceptions that their work outcomes are predominantly influenced by external factors rather than their own efforts. This concept, rooted in locus of control [12, 25], highlights how individuals' beliefs about control over their environment can shape their behaviors. Rotter (1966) expanded upon his earlier work in social learning theory to develop the fundamental concept of locus of control [25, 26]. In his research, people with an internal locus of control are usually referred to as "internals", while those with an external locus of control are called "externals". The mediating effect of external WLOC adheres to Rotter's (1966) conceptualization of it that locus of control is not immutable, but fluid [25]. The fluidity of locus of control can be supported by social learning theory, which posits that an individual's cognitions and behaviors are reinforced through interaction with the environment within a collective context. Accordingly, Kormanik & Rocco (2009) found in their research that an individual's locus of control can change based on their experiences [20]. However, very few researchers have analyzed the cause of an external locus of control. One of them, Brickson (2000), proposed that individuals' social identity is usually related to an external locus of control, while individuals' personal identity is likely related an internal locus of control [27]. Similarly, in the conceptualization of locus of control, Rotter (1966) depicted the feelings of externals within a collective context as that they feel they are "a small cog in a big machine" [25]. In addition, some scholars suggested through their research that externals have greater compliance than internals [28]. Specifically, these employees with an external WLOC are more compliant with the authority of supervisors as well as with the demands of colleagues. External WLOC was

also found to be negatively related to work ethics [29]. From this basic logic, we predict that employees' external WLOC will be strengthened with frequent social interactions in the organization, which in turn will motivate them to engage in UPB. Specifically, all-around type employees are more likely to adapt to all-sorts of Mianzi-related activities, which help to build and maintain harmonious workplace relationships. With more and more positive feedback from Mianzi exchanges, these employees will put more emphasis on those external forces in the organization (i.e., the support of supervisors, promotions, salary increases, and favorable circumstances). At this time a positive spiral emerges, where these employees' external WLOC gradually strengthens [30], which may in turn increase their engagement in the UPB. For those employees who are of proactive, defensive, or indifferent type, however, they generally participate in a type of Mianzi-related activities at most (i.e., proactive or defensive Mianzi-related activities). Such employees are not as deeply engaged with social interactions as those of the all-around type due to their insufficient Mianzi exchanges in comparison. In this condition, they get fewer benefits from their social network in the organization, which may hinder the strengthening of their external WLOC, thereby reducing the likelihood of UPB.

Besides the above inference, previous UPB research has provided support for the positive relationship between external WLOC and UPB [31, 32]. This correlation can be elucidated by the tendency of employees with an external WLOC to actively pursue privileges, amenities, perks, and supervisory support to content themselves within the workplace. According to social exchange theory, these employees often sustain a reciprocal relationship with organizations by way of repaying their organizations. In addition, external WLOC will lead to a diminished sense of personality responsibility among employees, and they become more susceptible to conformity pressures and social influence. In this condition, if these employees tacitly acknowledge that unethical behaviors are prevalent and accepted in the workplace, moral decoupling will play a part in decision-making, then resulting in UPB. Altogether, we thus position external WLOC as a work belief condition that mediates the influence of all-around type preference on UPB.

As such, we predict the following:

H2 External WLOC will mediate the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e., all-around type preference) and UPB.

The moderating role of relational contract

In essence, the psychological processes underlying employee UPB that is primarily driven by self-interest are involved with choices. When the idea of engaging in

this type of UPB strikes employees, an ethical dilemma emerges that they have to choose between the long-term development of the organization and their own short-term interests [33]. This study analyzes the mental activity of all-around type employees when their Mianzi conflicts with organizational long-term goals to understand how they balance organizational interests against personal gains. This lends support to the choosing interest mechanism of employees when engaging in UPB, which describes their attempts to choose between organizational interests and personal interests. In a large number of studies of antecedents of UPB, the choosing mechanism has been well recognized [33, 34], where it was considered a common process for employees when reacting to ethical dilemmas in the organization. Research has indicated that when employees prioritize their short-term interests over the organization's long-term reputation, they are more likely to engage in UPB [35].

This is particularly relevant to the current study because, as noted earlier, all-around type employees are more likely to engage in UPB primarily for their own self-interest (i.e., their Mianzi). In these circumstances, their emotional connection to the organization may affect how much they value the long-term interests or reputation of the organization. In this study, the factor we expect to moderate the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e. all-around type) and UPB is relational contract. Research on psychological contract suggests that relational contract and transactional contract join together to form the psychological contract, which refers to employees' perception of the performance of organizational responsibilities and obligations [36]. Psychological contract provides a key clue for analyzing behavioral choices in organizational contexts [37]. Wherein, relational contract refers specifically to the perception of long-term employment relations with mutual trust, emotional support, and loyalty, often involving socio-emotional terms [13, 14].

For employees who perceive that they have a bad relational contract with their organizations, they tend to think that the organizations do not fulfill their obligations and responsibilities well, which leads to a lack of trust and loyalty towards the organization. Thus, these employees tend to focus on their own affairs rather than the long-term development of the organization [38, 39]. As mentioned earlier, all-around type employees are more likely to engage in UPB due to their compatibility with different Mianzi consciousnesses. Employees who perceive that they have a bad relationship with the organizations tend to focus on their own Mianzi rather than the long-term prospects for the organizations. Therefore, they feel more motivated to engage in UPB.

On the other hand, employees who perceive that they have a good relational contract with the organizations tend to think about the organization's ultimate gains and losses carefully before making a decision [38]. In addition, these employees are more likely to value the long-term interests of organizations over their own Mianzi, and thus realize the hazard of UPB. At this time, when employees' concern for organizational interests is significantly higher than their self-interest, their motivation to engage in UPB for their Mianzi is relatively low. To sum up, we thus posit the following moderation hypothesis:

H3 Relational contract will moderate the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e., all-around type) and UPB such that the relationship will be stronger for employees who perceive that they have a bad relational contract with their organizations.

Figure 2 presents the theoretical model of our study.

Method

Sample and procedure

In this study, all the participants were Chinese workers in mainland China. To control for common method bias procedurally, our sample data were collected at two separate points in time, spaced one month apart. In Time 1, 689 workers were recruited to complete the survey. Of the 689, 670 participants completed the questionnaire online, which represented a response rate of 97.24%. In Time 2, we contacted the 670 employees who completed the questionnaire in Time 1 and invited them to complete the questionnaire. As a result, 414 workers completed the survey in the second wave with a response rate of 61.79%. Our research sample thus comprised $N=414$ responses, for a 60.09% response rate overall. In our questionnaire design, we intentionally concealed the connection between the research variables within the theme to mask our research focus and create a psychological separation.

Additionally, at the beginning of the questionnaire, we clearly informed participants about the academic purpose of the study and assured them of the anonymity of their responses. The above approaches have been proven effective in reducing common method bias [40].

Measures

Except for the relational contract measure, all measures utilized in this study were originally developed in English. To adapt them for use in a Mandarin Chinese context, we followed a standard "back-translation" procedure [41]. These translated measures have been widely employed in Chinese settings and have demonstrated robust psychometric properties and validity, as evidenced by previous studies [42–44].

Dyadic Mianzi consciousness

Proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness were assessed using the scale developed by Zhang et al. (2011) [6]. Sample items included statements such as, "I hope people think that I can do better than most others," and "I try to avoid letting others think that I am ignorant, even if I really am." Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Cronbach's alpha for the scale were 0.92 and 0.90.

External work locus of control

External work locus of control was assessed using Spector's (1988) work locus of control scale [12]. The scale consists of 16 items that measure internal WLOC and external WLOC dimensions using 8 items respectively. Sample items included statements such as, "Getting the job you want is mostly a matter of luck," and "Making money is primarily a matter of good fortune." Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging

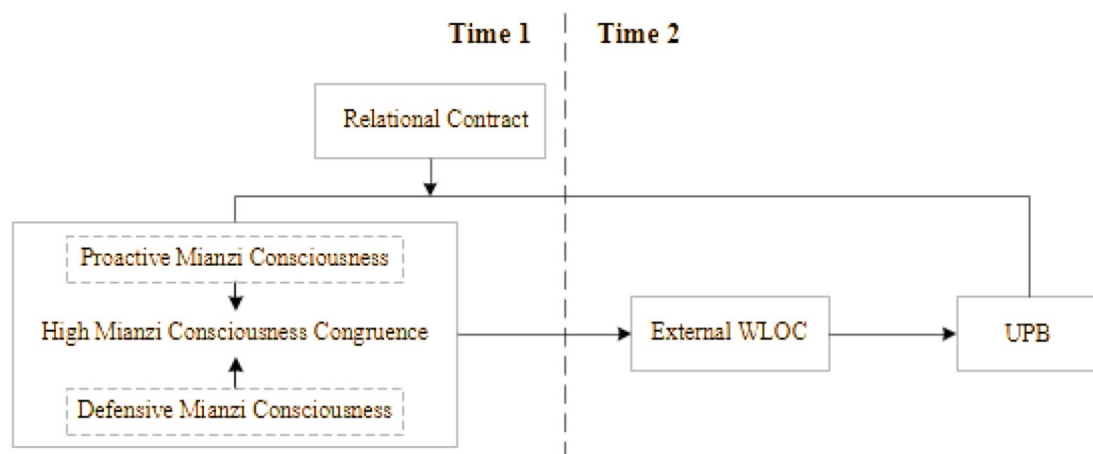


Fig. 2 The theoretical model

from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.94.

Relational psychological contract

Relational psychological contract was assessed using the 5-item Wang’s (2011) perception of psychological contract scale, which was a well-developed version based on existing research [45–47]. The scale was used to measure the perception of transactional contract, perception of growth contract, and perception of relational contract. Sample items included statements such as, “I communicated well with my superior,” and “My superior fully respected and trusted me.” Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.92.

Unethical pro-organizational behavior

Unethical pro-organizational behavior was assessed using the 6-item Umphress et al.’s (2010) scale [10]. Sample items included statements such as, “It would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good,” and “It would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company’s products or services to customers and clients.” Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.94.

Control variables

In current research, we controlled for participants’ gender, age, marital status, education, position, and tenure to account for any demographic differences in our research. Therein, gender (1=male; 2=female) and marital status (1=married; 2=unmarried) were coded as nominal-level variables. Education (1=junior college diploma or lower; 2=bachelor’s degree; 3=master’s degree or higher) and position (1=average employee; 2=first-line manager; 3=middle manager; 4=top manager) were coded as ordinal-level variables. Age and tenure were both reported in years.

Analytical approach

To test the research model, we utilized polynomial regression and response surface analysis method outlined by Edwards (2002) [48]. Following his suggestion to scale-center variables, we regressed UPB on proactive Mianzi consciousness (PMC), defensive Mianzi consciousness (DMC), PMC squared (PMC^2), the interaction between PMC and DMC ($PMC \times DMC$), DMC squared (DMC^2). Then, We constructed the following polynomial regression equation:

$$UPB = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PMC + \beta_2 DMC + \beta_3 PMC^2 + \beta_4 PMC \times DMC + \beta_5 DMC^2 + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

To determine whether the sample data is suitable for response surface analysis, we calculated the significance of ΔF by running two polynomial regressions. In the first regression equation, we regressed UPB on control variables and two scale-centered first-order terms (PMC and DMC). The second regression equation added the three other higher-order items (PMC^2 , $PMC \times DMC$, DMC^2), as depicted in Eq. (1). If the addition of higher-order terms significantly improved the prediction of polynomial regression (ΔF is significant), our research model was considered as the adequate representation of associations [48]. Under the circumstances, we generated a response surface plot using the coefficients from Eq. (1) in MATLAB (version R2023b). This three-dimensional response surface graphically depicted the predicted level of UPB (Z axis) for any combination of PMC (X axis) and DMC (Y axis). Along with the graph, we further calculated surface test values and their significance according to the formula from Edwards (2002) [48].

To support hypothesis 1a, we evaluated the slope and curvature of the incongruence line. This hypothesis was supported when the curvature was negatively significant as well as the slope was non-significant, which means the surface was negatively curved along the incongruence line. For hypothesis 1b, we evaluated the slope and curvature of the congruence line. This hypothesis was supported if there was a significant and positive slope but non-significant curvature along the congruence line. At this time, the congruence line was approximately a straight line with a positive slope in the three-dimensional.

To test hypothesis 2, we applied the block variable method [49], with a block variable as the independent variable. Five terms (PMC, DMC, PMC^2 , $PMC \times DMC$, DMC^2) of the polynomial regression equation were combined into one block variable weighted by respective regression coefficient. Specifically, the block variable associated with Eq. (2), in which PMC and DMC predict the mediating variable external WLOC (abbreviated to “EWLOC”), equals $\beta_1 \times PMC + \beta_2 \times DMC + \beta_3 \times PMC^2 + \beta_4 \times PMC \times DMC + \beta_5 \times DMC^2$. The existence of the block variable didn’t affect the total explained variance in our research. We then conducted the mediation analysis with the block variable as the independent variable. After 5000 resamplings in a bias-corrected bootstrap model, the proposed mediation hypothesis was supported when the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero.

$$EWLOC = \beta_0 + \beta_1PMC + \beta_2DMC + \beta_3PMC^2 + \beta_4PMC \times DMC + \beta_5DMC^2 + \varepsilon \tag{2}$$

To test the moderating effect of relational contract (hypothesis 3), we conducted Edwards’s (2002) moderated polynomial regression approach [48]. We introduced the moderator variable (i.e., relational contract, abbreviated to “RC”) and the interaction of the moderated variable with each of the original polynomial terms into Eq. (1) accordingly. The general expression of the revised equation was:

$$UPB = \beta_0 + \beta_1PMC + \beta_2DMC + \beta_3PMC^2 + \beta_4PMC \times DMC + \beta_5DMC^2 + \beta_6RC + \beta_7RC \times PMC + \beta_8RC \times DMC + \beta_9RC \times PMC^2 + \beta_{10}RC \times PMC \times DMC + \beta_{11}RC \times DMC^2 + \varepsilon \tag{3}$$

For the analysis, the moderation that hypothesis 3 suggested was supported if ΔF values associated with the β_7 – β_{11} terms were statistically significant. The above analyses were conducted using Mplus software (version 8.5) and SPSS software (version 23).

Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations (SD), and zero-order correlations of all study variables. Among the participants, 55.7% were female. 73.4% were married. 54.8% had a bachelor’s degree. 63.8% were average employees. On average, their age was 34.05 (SD=8.14), and they had worked in their organizations for 5.18 years (SD=5.08). Similar to Zhang and Zhou’s research (2024) results, both proactive Mianzi consciousness ($r=.72, p<.001$) and defensive Mianzi consciousness ($r=.80, p<.001$) were highly positively related to UPB [11].

To ensure the absence of multicollinearity, we reviewed the tolerance values and the variance inflation factor (VIF) values. Our analysis indicated that multicollinearity was not an issue, as the tolerance values ranged from 0.21 to 0.96, all above the threshold of 0.10. Additionally, the VIF values ranged from 1.05 to 4.69, which are well below the threshold of 10 [50].

In addition, according to the suggestion of Shanock et al. (2010), we analyzed the statistical sample proportion: the proportion of Mianzi consciousness incongruence was 23.68% (5.92% for defensive type, 17.76% for proactive type) [51]. When two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness were consistent, the sample proportions of all-around type and indifferent type were 48.68% and 27.64% respectively. The sample proportion indicated that there is a sufficient percentage of discrepant ratings for the comparisons that this study focuses on (i.e., congruence versus incongruence, and all-around type versus indifferent type), which met the requirements of response surface analysis.

Table 1 Descriptive statistic

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	1.55	0.50	1										
2. Age	34.05	8.14	-0.08	1									
3. Marital status	1.27	0.44	0.19***	-0.38***	1								
4. Education	1.71	0.61	-0.01	-0.10*	0.10*	1							
5. Position	1.58	0.89	0.07	-0.06	0.13*	0.18***	1						
6. Tenure	5.18	5.08	0.05	0.32***	-0.10*	-0.02	0.23***	1					
7. RC	3.74	1.04	-0.01	-0.02	0.11*	0.10*	0.14**	0.08	1				
8. PMC	0.68	1.00	-0.03	-0.05	0.11*	0.11*	0.10*	0.03	0.87***	1			
9. DMC	0.54	1.04	0.01	0.00	0.07	0.12*	0.06	-0.00	0.75***	0.84**	1		
10. EWLOC	3.54	1.05	0.00	-0.01	0.07	0.12*	0.03	-0.04	0.75***	0.83**	0.86***	1	
11. UPB	3.39	1.16	0.04	0.05	0.01	0.16**	0.05	-0.01	0.61***	0.72**	0.80***	0.83***	1

Notice. N=414

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

Table 2 Comparison of measurement models

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA	TLI	SRMR
1. Hypothesized five-factor model	728.05	395	1.84	0.97	0.05	0.97	0.04
2. Four-factor model ^a	818.61	399	2.05	0.96	0.05	0.96	0.04
3. Four-factor model ^b	868.73	399	2.18	0.96	0.05	0.96	0.04
4. Three-factor model ^c	924.31	402	2.30	0.95	0.06	0.95	0.04
5. Three-factor model ^d	1092.83	402	2.72	0.94	0.07	0.93	0.05
6. Two-factor model ^e	1601.15	404	3.96	0.89	0.09	0.89	0.06
7. Single-factor model	2014.16	405	4.97	0.86	0.10	0.85	0.06

Notice

Abbreviations CFI=comparative fit index; RMSEA=root mean square error of approximation; TLI=Tucker-Lewis index; SRMR=standardized root mean square residual

a This model combines DMC and external WLOC into one factor

b This model combines PMC and DMC into one factor

c This model combines PMC and relational contract into one factor and DMC and external WLOC into one factor

d This model combines PMC, DMC, and external WLOC into one factor

e This model combines PMC, DMC, external WLOC, and UPB into one factor

Table 3 Polynomial regression analyses results

	External WLOC		UPB	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	2.94	3.10	2.38	2.51
Gender	0.04	0.02	0.13	0.11
Age	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
Marital Status	-0.03	-0.04	-0.15	-0.15
Education	0.03	0.03	0.15**	0.14*
Position	-0.04	-0.06	-0.01	-0.02
Tenure	-0.01	-0.01*	-0.01	-0.01
Proactive Mianzi consciousness (PMC)	0.40***	0.53***	0.20**	0.42***
Defensive Mianzi consciousness (DMC)	0.55***	0.44***	0.73***	0.52***
PMC ²		-0.15*		-0.22**
PMC×DMC		0.16*		0.33**
DMC ²		-0.07		-0.14*
ΔF		2.74*		3.62*
Congruence line (PMC = DMC)				
Slope	0.97***		0.94***	
Curvature	-0.06		-0.02	
Incongruence line (PMC = -DMC)				
Slope	0.09		-0.11	
Curvature	-0.38*		-0.68**	

Notice. N=414. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. The items reported are estimates of fixed effects

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

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimations to confirm the distinctiveness between the research variables. The results from a series of CFAs supported that the hypothesized five-factor model showed a good fit with the sample data: $\chi^2(N=414)=728.05$ ($p<.001$), $\chi^2/df=1.84$, CFI=0.97, RMSEA=0.05, TLI=0.97, SRMR=0.04. It was consistent with the threshold recommended by Schumacker and Lomax (2010): the CFI and the TLI exceed 0.90, the normed

chi-square measure (χ^2/df) falls in the range between 1 and 3, the SRMR is less than 0.05, and the RMSEA is less than 0.08 [52]. It was also better than various other alternative factor models. Table 2 reports the model fit statistics for study measures.

Table 3 presents the results of polynomial regression analyses.

Results of the polynomial regressions analysis used to test hypothesis 1a and hypothesis 1b were shown in Model 3 and Model 4. Reflecting on our analytical approach, we first examined whether the three additional high-order polynomial terms explained a significant amount of variance in UPB when entered into the equation in Model 4. Compared with Model 3, 3-s-order polynomial terms explained a significant amount of variance ($\Delta F=3.62$, $p<.05$). For hypothesis 1a, we predicted that employees will engage in more UPB when their two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness are congruent rather than incongruent. As shown in Table 3, the curvature of the incongruence line was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.68$, $p<.01$) whereas the slope of the incongruence line was not significant ($\beta = -0.11$, ns). Figure 3 (section B) also illustrated that the incongruence line followed an inverted U-shape form such that UPB was higher when proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness was congruent, as opposed to when they were incongruent (at the left and right sides of the surface plot). Taken together, hypothesis 1a was supported.

Hypothesis 1b stated that UPB will be higher when proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness were congruent at higher levels (rather than lower). Consistent with the hypothesis, Table 3 further revealed a positive and significant slope ($\beta=0.94$, $p<.001$) and a non-significant curvature ($\beta = -0.02$, ns) along the congruence line. As shown in Fig. 3 (section B), UPB increased when moving from low-low levels to high-high levels (from the front corner to the rear corner of the surface plot). Hence, hypothesis 1b was also supported.

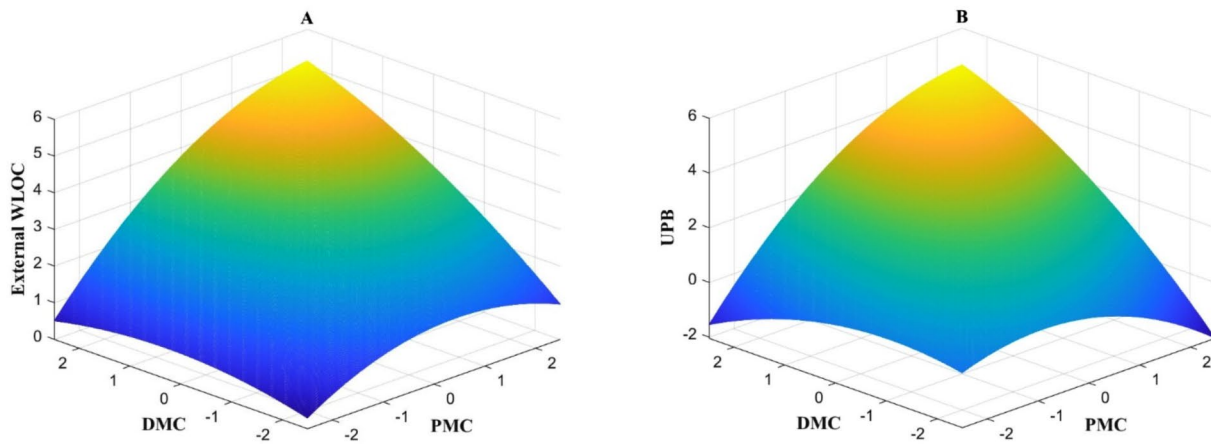


Fig. 3 Response surface analyses for Mianzi consciousness congruence predicting external WLOC and UPB

Table 4 Indirect path analyses results

Effects	Estimate	95% boot-strap confidence interval
Effects of Mianzi consciousness congruence on external WLOC (γ_1)	0.99***	[0.94, 1.04]
Effects of external WLOC on UPB (γ_2)	0.62***	[0.44, 0.78]
Effects of Mianzi consciousness congruence on UPB (γ_3)	0.38***	[0.19, 0.57]
Indirect effect of Mianzi consciousness congruence on UPB ($\gamma_1 \times \gamma_2$)	0.61***	[0.44, 0.79]
Total effect of Mianzi consciousness congruence on UPB ($\gamma_1 \times \gamma_2 + \gamma_3$)	0.99***	[0.93, 1.05]

Notice. $N=414$. Unstandardized regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals are reported

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

To test the indirect effect of high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e., all-around type preference) on UPB via external WLOC (hypothesis 2), we conducted the block variable approach [49]. Specifically, the block variable was computed based on the results of polynomial regression predicting the external WLOC (Model 2). As can be seen in Table 4, the significance of the indirect effect was supported based on 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples ($\gamma_1 \times \gamma_2 = 0.61$, $p < .001$). The 95% confidence interval did not contain 0 (CI = [0.44, 0.79]), thereby supporting hypothesis 2.

Before testing the mediation effect proposed in hypothesis 2, we needed to examine the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and the mediator - to be precise, and external WLOC. As shown in Table 3, Model 2 indicated that the 3-s-order polynomial terms were jointly significant ($\Delta F = 2.74$, $p < .05$). In line with the results that we found for UPB, the surface along the incongruence line curved downward (curvature = -0.38 , $p < .05$; slope = 0.09 , ns), and the congruence line was

Table 5 Moderation analysis results

	UPB	
	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	2.87	1.79
Gender	0.11	0.11
Age	0.01	0.01
Marital Status	-0.15	-0.12
Education	0.14*	0.13*
Position	-0.02	-0.02
Tenure	-0.01	-0.01
Proactive Mianzi consciousness (PMC)	0.48***	0.56*
Defensive Mianzi consciousness (DMC)	0.55***	0.68***
PMC ²	-0.21**	-0.11
PMC×DMC	0.29**	0.15
DMC ²	-0.12*	-0.13
Relational Contract (RC)	-0.10	0.17
RC×PMC		-0.13
RC×DMC		0.18
RC×PMC ²		-0.13
RC×PMC×DMC		-0.08
RC×DMC ²		-0.04
ΔF		5.06***

Notice. $N=414$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

positively sloped from low-low to high-high (curvature = -0.06 , ns; slope = 0.97 , $p < .001$), see Fig. 3 (section A).

Hypothesis 3 posited that the relationship between high Mianzi consciousness congruence and UPB will be stronger for employees who perceive that they have a bad relational contract with their organizations. As shown in Table 5, results indicated the inclusion of the moderation interaction terms significantly improved the model ($\Delta F = 5.06$, $p < .001$), providing support for the moderation effect [48]. To further determine that the moderation effect was consistent with our hypothesis, we

computed the compound coefficients of moderated quadratic regression equation for high values and low values of relational contract (one standard deviation below or above the mean of relational contract). Furthermore, we graphically depicted the moderation effect, as we showed in Fig. 4. Specifically, when employees perceived that they have a bad relational contract with their organizations (i.e., low RC group), UPB will be higher if both proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness moved from low-low to high-high. Accordingly, Fig. 4 showed that the congruence line of the low RC group (blue surface) situated above the congruence line of the high RC group (red surface) from the front corner to the rear corner of the surface plot. Similarly, Fig. 4 indicated that the incongruence line of the low RC group was more horizontally symmetrical, which means UPB will be higher when two dimensions of social Mianzi consciousness are congruent (rather than incongruent) for the low RC group. Our calculation of their axes of symmetry confirmed it also ($X_{low RC} = 0.32$; $X_{high RC} = -0.45$). Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

The polynomial regression equation for the low RC group was as follows:

$$UPB = 1.62 + 0.69 \times PMC + 0.50 \times DMC + 0.02 \times PMC^2 + 0.23 \times PMC \times DMC - 0.09 \times DMC^2 + \varepsilon$$

The polynomial regression equation for the high RC group was as follows:

$$UPB = 1.69 + 0.43 \times PMC + 0.86 \times DMC - 0.24 \times PMC^2 + 0.07 \times PMC \times DMC - 0.17 \times DMC^2 + \varepsilon$$

General discussion

In this research, we developed and tested an interactive Mianzi consciousness model that combines proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness into different Mianzi management strategies. Our analysis primarily focused on the effects of Mianzi consciousness congruence versus Mianzi consciousness incongruence, as well as high level congruence versus low level congruence within congruence effects. Therefore, we believed that any interpretations regarding the likelihood of engaging in UPB among employees with high Mianzi consciousness should be viewed within this specific comparative framework. Research findings indicated that employees with high Mianzi consciousness congruence (i.e., all-round type) are more likely to engage in UPB. In addition, we also confirmed the mediation effect of external WLOC and the moderation effect of relational contract.

Theoretical contribution

The findings of this paper suggest a number of important theoretical implications. First, it is a central viewpoint in Mianzi research that the two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness should not be viewed separately [6]. Despite numerous appeals for a thorough examination

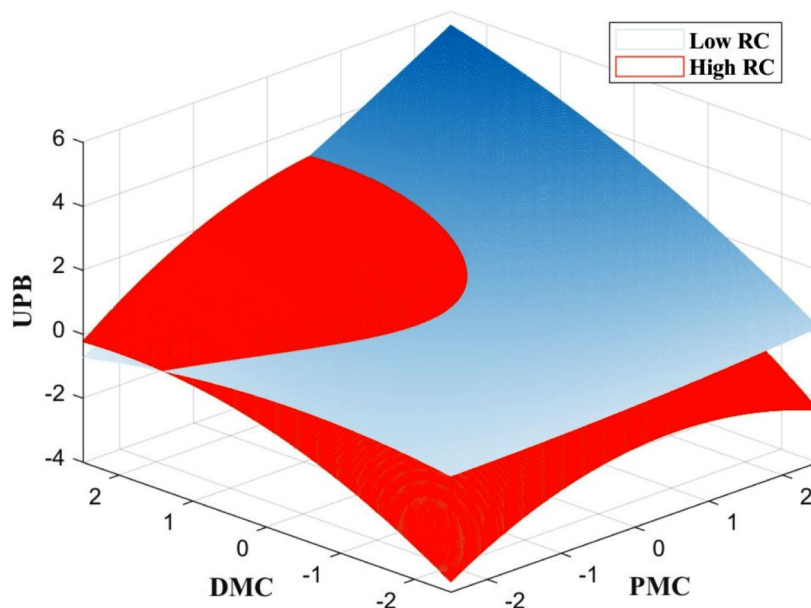


Fig. 4 Moderating effect of relation contract showing in the three-dimensional space
Notice

of the impacts of dyadic Mianzi consciousness, this area remains largely unexplored in practice. Our research analyzes how high Mianzi consciousness congruence affects UPB by introducing a Mianzi management strategy model. To our knowledge, this research is the first to investigate the impact of different combinations of proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness, thus fulfilling a critical gap in Mianzi research. Based on our findings, we suspect that the previous conclusions about the incompatible effects of dyadic Mianzi consciousness are due to the incongruence between proactive Mianzi consciousness and defensive Mianzi consciousness. Actually, although two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness are highly correlated, an individual with high proactive Mianzi consciousness may still be accompanied by low defensive Mianzi consciousness. Thus, this is a promising research direction, especially for the field of consumer behavior, where many studies have indicated that two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness can have different effects on consumer behavior [8]. We believe that this novel research design may help explain the incompatibility effects of two dimensions of Mianzi consciousness found in the past.

Second, we built on social learning theory and found the mediating role of external WLOC. Our study thus goes beyond Zhang and Zhou's (2024) research, suggesting that changes in external WLOC may also be a potential explanation for the influence of Mianzi consciousness on UPB [11]. By doing so, this research offers a meaningful extension to one of the most obscure byways of locus of control research (i.e., the antecedents of locus of control). According to our findings, employees' external WLOC will be strengthened after frequent Mianzi exchanges, then promoting UPB. This follows the existing argument in locus of control research that individuals' external locus of control is usually related to a social identity [27]. To our knowledge, the area has never been explored before. Given the quasi-personality nature of locus of control, it is no surprise. Individuals develop their personalities through social experiences, indicating that internals or externals are not inherently ingrained. Thus, this study adds to the literature on the antecedents of locus of control by analyzing the effect of high Mianzi consciousness congruence on external WLOC.

Third, this paper further reveals the psychological process of UPB under the influence of Mianzi by introducing relational contract as a moderator variable. Considering employees' relational contracts, which describe socio-emotional exchanges, the nature of social exchange (i.e., Mianzi exchange) behind the impact of Mianzi consciousness on UPB is once again confirmed, supporting the central argument made by Zhang and Zhou (2024) in their research [11]. More precisely, there is a substitution effect between relational contract and Mianzi

consciousness, such that relational contract that is positively related to UPB actually negatively moderates the impact of high Mianzi consciousness congruence on UPB. Future researchers could analyze the substitution effect in more detail to provide evidence on this issue.

Limitations and future research directions

Our research also has some limitations. First, although we collected data for research variables at two time points, the data were from single source, so there may be a CMB in the research. Future studies can benefit by using data from different sources. One way to do this would be assessing employees' Mianzi consciousness by their colleagues, as the self-report of Mianzi consciousness is likely to lead to social-desirability bias. Second, while we proved all the hypotheses, participants in this research were Chinese workers. In other words, as this research was conducted in China, we have no idea what extent the findings generalize to non-Chinese societies. We believe that conducting cross-cultural research with samples from different cultures can bolster the generalizability of our findings. Third, the proportion statistics of the four types in this article indicated that one type has a proportion below 10% (i.e., defensive type). This low proportion precluded the potential meaningful comparison between proactive type and defensive type. As noted by an anonymous reviewer, future researchers should consider comparing these two types, when the sample meets the criteria for such comparisons. To address the high correlation between proactive and defensive Mianzi consciousness and the resulting sample proportion problem, future researchers can also consider measuring the proactive and defensive Mianzi consciousness at different time points or through different sources, or developing new scales. In particular, we believe that a more discriminative scale would contribute to the application of the Mianzi management strategy model and comparative studies on the impact of proactive and defensive Mianzi consciousness. We encourage researchers to refine this scale to facilitate more precise measurements and enhance the robustness of future studies.

Conclusion

As more and more researchers are beginning to notice the influence of Mianzi in the organizational context, this brand-new research design foreshadows the importance of reconceptualizing employees' Mianzi consciousness. Employing polynomial regression and response surface analysis, we demonstrate the link between all-around type of Mianzi management strategies and UPB. We hope this paper can now emerge as a fresh start, and all researchers interested in Chinese Mianzi culture can benefit from it.

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Author contributions

S.Z. conceived the basic research idea, provided funding for the research, and critically revised the manuscript. B.Z. conducted specific data collection, performed analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data availability

Restrictions apply to the availability of the raw data that support the findings, because of the data privacy commitment. The processed data sets are available from S.Z., the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval

Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the School of Economics and Management, Shanxi University. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this research.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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