

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19401493

AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW ENTREPRENEURS' FEAR OF BEING EXPLOITED AND THEIR AUTHORITARIAN MANAGEMENT STYLE AFFECT EMPLOYEES' INITIATIVE-TAKING BEHAVIOR

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*Received: 20/02/2026
Accepted: 30/03/2026*

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine the impact of entrepreneurs' fear of being exploited on their management style and on employees' tendency to engage in proactive behaviors. This study is based on 14 in-depth interviews conducted with 7 entrepreneurs and 7 managers from 7 different organizations. The study employs thematic analysis to interpret the data and identify core themes. Our findings show that entrepreneurs' fear of being exploited results in authoritarian management style. The study further highlights the role of digitalization in reducing entrepreneurial anxiety and boosting employees' autonomy. The results also highlight the significance of fostering trust as a key factor in mitigating entrepreneurial anxieties and promoting initiative among employees. Our study is novel in that it addresses the interplay between entrepreneurial anxiety, authoritarian management styles, and digitalization, in small enterprises and family-owned firms.

KEYWORDS: Entrepreneur, Entrepreneurial Anxiety, Authoritarian Management Style, Digitalization, Trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship operates in a dynamic and chaotic environment, creating a continuous tension between risk and opportunity affecting management styles and business strategies (Kuratko & Frederick, 2016). One of the major psychological setbacks of entrepreneurs in this volatile atmosphere is the fear of being exploited which emerges from a perceived lack of trust and the uncertainty leading to the adoption of a more authoritarian management style (Murnieks, Haynie, & Wilitbank, 2014). In this study, we have been inspired by Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), which advocates that in organizations, the relationship between owners (principals) and employees (agents) are inherently asymmetrical and inclined to create disagreements, creating heightened risk of opportunistic behaviors. Authoritarian management style can thus be interpreted as a defense mechanism to perceived agency problems, but it may also undermine trust and employee initiative, ultimately reinforcing the very dependency and disengagement the entrepreneurs fear.

This fear both affects the entrepreneur's own decision-making processes and shapes the behavior of employees, inhibiting employees' proactive behaviors (Xue, 2024). Moreover, the defensive behaviors of entrepreneurs can unintentionally undermine psychological safety in the organization (Edmondson, 1999). When employees feel low levels of psychological safety, they hold back their ideas and do not prefer engaging in proactive behavior. This cycle leads entrepreneurs to attempt to prevent deception through strict controls (Marlow, Lacerenza, and Salas, 2024). To strengthen the theoretical grounding, the introductory section now integrates seminal works on organizational transparency and trust, including Bernstein (2017), Edmondson (1999), and Mayer et al. (1995). These studies attempt to explain the way transparency and psychological safety act as mechanisms that can reduce uncertainty and build trust.

In this study, *Perceived exploitation threat* is considered as one of the core concepts that are central to understanding the dynamics between entrepreneurs and employees in small and family-owned firms. From a broader socio-cultural perspective, long-term organizational sustainability and legitimacy depend on building trust-based relationships among employees, customers, and wider stakeholder groups (Singha et al., 2025). It refers to entrepreneurs' subjective sense of vulnerability to opportunistic or unfair behavior. *Proactive behavior* explains employees' proactive

engagement in decision-making and autonomous action. Finally, *trust-enhancing strategies* refer to managerial and technological mechanisms that increase mutual confidence, reduce uncertainty, and create a psychologically safe climate. *Digitalization refers* to adopting technologies that increase information flow and supports decision-making processes. (Türkyılmaz, 2024).

In this study, we have been inspired by The Threat-Rigidity Hypothesis, developed by Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton (1981), which suggests that individuals prefer more rigid and authoritarian styles when they face threats with the goal of reducing uncertainty and reassert control. From the entrepreneur's standpoint, past experiences of betrayal or exploitation may be perceived as psychological threats.

The main goal of this study is to investigate how entrepreneurs' fear of being exploited influences their authoritarian management styles and employees' proactive behaviors. It also attempts to understand the potential mitigating effect of digitalization in reducing perceived exploitation threat and promoting autonomy of employees. This research not only examines the relationship between perceived exploitation threat and employee independence but also investigates how such anxiety constrains employees' decision-making abilities.

Moreover, highlighting the significance of trust-building and digitalization, the findings contribute to building healthier family businesses and offer guidance for greater employee autonomy.

1.1. Research Gap and Contribution

Although previous studies have profoundly examined entrepreneurial anxiety, organizational trust, control, and autonomy as separate constructs, especially in the context of small and family-owned firms the interaction among these constructs have not been examined. Moreover, it's the first study explaining digitalization's dual role – as both a buffer and an amplifier of control dynamics.

This study contributes to the extant literature by (a) integrating threat-rigidity theory with trust and psychological safety constructs, (b) linking threat perceptions, control behaviors, and proactive behavior, and (c) exploring the role of digitalization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship is a domain operating in a chaotic setting. Entrepreneurs have to make decisions considering a wide variety of stakeholders (Murnieks, Haynie, & Wilitbank, 2014). Among the most significant factors affecting entrepreneurial

decisions is the fear of being exploited (Liao & Hu, 2022) that lead them to adopt a more authoritarian management style (Russo et al., 2020). This fear mostly stems from concerns regarding the possibility of being unsuccessful, experiencing financial instability, and ambiguity regarding the future of the enterprise.

2.1. Entrepreneurs' Fear of Being Exploited

The fear of being exploited poses a threat to overall business success and directly influences managerial styles and decision-making processes (Murnieks et al., 2014). Especially, in small organizations, the personal attachment of business owners to their enterprises may boost their fear of exploitation. For instance, in family businesses, the involvement of family members in daily operations and strategic decisions often turns business matters into deeply personal concerns, thereby intensifying the anxiety.

Murnieks et al. (2014) emphasized that these anxieties are not limited to financial concerns but also involve psychological and organizational ramifications. Their research shows that entrepreneurial anxiety often leads to micromanagement and excessively controlling practices reducing employee motivation by restricting autonomy (Çetin and Yılmaz, 2022) These dynamics also undermine employee trust and organizational commitment. Psychological safety also decreases in anxious, controlled entrepreneurial environments. Empirical research revealed that leaders that can create a psychological safety environment contributes to employee trust, resilience, and performance (Newman et al. 2020; Frazier et al. 2023; Mogård et al., 2023; Selander et al., 2023).

On the one hand, as Leong (2021) suggests, perceived exploitation threat can result in a lack of trust, which then drives entrepreneurs to impose excessive monitoring and control. The inability to effectively manage anxiety may result in strategic errors and the loss of employee motivation. Perceived exploitation threat often stems from personal investment and the ambiguity of business outcomes. These concerns deepen emotional involvement, and the fear of being exploited makes organizational management more difficult. Previous studies revealed that when entrepreneurs perceive environmental risks, their decision-making styles tend to become more centralized and focused on control. As an empirical example, Talukdar et al. (2025) demonstrated that among migrant entrepreneurs, the need for control has the potential

to reinforce inclinations towards authoritarian management practices.

2.2. Distrust And Controlling Approaches

Entrepreneurs' fear of being exploited is not confined to the threat of financial loss; it also encompasses a broader sense of distrust, driving entrepreneurs to adopt more authoritarian management styles and boosts tighter monitoring and closer supervision. In the literature, it is widely acknowledged that such anxiety directly influences how entrepreneurs manage business processes (Murnieks, Haynie, & Wilitbank, 2014).

Leong (2021) suggests that entrepreneurs often attempt to mitigate their anxiety-induced distrust using digital tools and technologies, which in turn results in rigid control and in the long-term effects on employee commitment and can ultimately result in strategic missteps (Kou, 2021). Tahar (2022) also emphasizes that perceived exploitation threat in family businesses often limits employees' autonomy. Family leaders often prefer cautious strategies since they value continuity and control. This means that non-owner managers have less autonomy (Schweiger, et al., 2024). Dannheim, Buyken, and Kroke (2023) also showed how leaders' attitude towards risk affects make them more controlling, cautious, or micromanaging. Several further studies supported the existence of the significant relationship between lack of trust and authoritarian management styles like Yang and Li (2022), Mücevher (2023) and Huang et al. (2017). Leong (2021) further claims that lack of trust may cause entrepreneurs to adopt overly authoritarian management styles that undermine flexibility over time.

Digitalization offers a potential remedy for trust-building thereby reducing perceived exploitation threat of managers. As to Kou (2021) by increasing transparency, digitalization enables greater independence and accountability, which in turn lowers anxiety.

In the extant literature, there is a scarcity of studies that explicitly examine how such threat perceptions affect *micro-managerial practices* in small and family firms. By bringing digitalization, control and monitoring strands together, this study offers a more integrated, multi-layered framework.

2.3. The Impact of Authoritarian Management Styles on Employees

The authoritarian management style—used by managers as a coping mechanism to manage perceived exploitation threat, limits employees'

autonomy (Huang et al., 2017), adversely affecting employees' motivation. As Hatipoğlu and Evci Hacizade (2024) suggests entrepreneurs with an intense need for control tend to suppress employees' ability to take initiative, thereby hindering employees' active participation in decision-making processes. Entrepreneurial control is a reaction to low level of perceived trustworthiness in the principal-agent relationship between the entrepreneur and employees, that is why organizations use rebuilding trust as a strategy for changing authoritarian methods into empowering management methods (Li et al., 2023). While such control may seem beneficial in the short term, it diminishes the development of employee autonomy over time. Alshamary (2025) also empirically confirmed how organizational trust leads to a positive organizational result. At settings where trust is established, employees are more likely to participate in decision-making processes, which, in turn, helps reduce entrepreneurs' need for excessive control.

2.4. Lack of Trust and the Role of Digitalization

In this paper we used the term digitalization as a way of creating digital transparency. In this context, digital transparency refers to the degree to which organizational processes and data are made visible and accessible to relevant actors. This transparency can both reduce or intensify perceived threat depending on the way it is enacted.

Digital job tracking tools make employees easily understand the way their data is being used (Hummel et al., 2023). Open data access and traceable performance scorecards empower employees to make them feel safer and more equitable (Lachmann et al., 2024). Empirical studies like Li and Zhang (2025) empirically revealed that digitalization leads more decentralized management control modes and Marinescu, Oncioiu and Ghibanu (2025) revealed that **transparency and control of algorithms** significantly enhance trust in digital systems, which in turn supports greater autonomy. Digital tools also increase clarity and integrity of organizational workflows, creating trust in organization and reducing entrepreneurs' anxieties (Bilal, Sharif, Shahzad, Shafique, & Chaudhry, 2022).

However, the effect of digitalization on employees has double-edged effects on trust and autonomy; transparency can enable accountability, but it can also heighten entrepreneurial anxieties. For instance; in Amoah and Mehta (2025)'s study it is revealed that while digitalization can create a kind of transparency fostering trust, it can also lead to

increased anxiety and in another example Chappidi et al., (2025) investigated the same topic but figured out that transparency and accountability ensured by digitalization can inadvertently increase surveillance and employee stress.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

In this study, given the exploratory goal and focus on lived managerial experiences, a qualitative design has been preferred (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010). This study employed in-depth interviews to gather data aimed at understanding the mechanisms through which entrepreneurs' fear of being exploited influences their management styles and employees' proactive behaviors.

3.2. Data Collection Method

In this study, data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted using open-ended questions. A total of 14 individuals participated in the study, including seven entrepreneurs and seven managers. A semi-structured interview format was employed to ensure consistency across participants while allowing flexibility, thereby enabling both structured coverage of key constructs and openness to emergent insights (Kallio et al., 2016; Patton, 2015).

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. To ensure translation accuracy and conceptual fidelity, a bilingual adjudication procedure was applied (van Nes et al., 2010).

3.3. Sample

The empirical setting of this study is Turkey, a context characterized by a strong prevalence of family-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), relational management norms, and relatively high-power distance cultural tendencies. In Turkish family firms, ownership, control, and identity are often intertwined, making issues of trust, loyalty, and perceived exploitation particularly salient. The automotive dealership sector selected for this study represents a mature yet highly competitive industry where intergenerational continuity, relational governance, and informal control mechanisms are common. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this socio-cultural and institutional context, which may shape both entrepreneurial threat perceptions and managerial control behaviors.

In this study, we had 14 participants, including 7 entrepreneurs and 7 managers. Each participant was categorized into two groups: either as an

entrepreneur or a manager. In this study, purposive sampling method has been adopted. According to our inclusion criteria participants should possess an active managerial or ownership position in small or

family-owned automotive enterprises, have a minimum of three years of experience, and be directly engaged in employee supervision.

Table 1a: Demographic And Professional Background of Participants.

	Role	Field of Activity	Codes
1	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G1
2	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G2
3	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G3
4	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G4
5	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G5
6	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G6
7	Entrepreneur	Automotive (Sales & Service)	G7
8	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y1
9	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y2
10	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y3
11	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y4
12	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y5
13	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y6
14	Manager	Automotive (Sales & Service)	Y7

The participants in this study were categorized into two groups: entrepreneurs and managers.

Each participant was assigned a unique identifier for anonymity and reference purposes:

- Codes for entrepreneurs: G1, G2, G3, G4, G5, G6, G7.
- Codes for managers: Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y5, Y6, Y7.

In the thematic analysis, we used inductive method to create themes directly from the interviews rather than relying on existing frameworks. During the analysis we adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. First, the transcripts of all the interviews were read several times. Then, initial codes were created to record significant statements about entrepreneurs' fears, management styles, and how employees behave. After that, these codes were re-examined and grouped. Then a second coder coded the transcripts. The lead researcher did the first coding, and a second researcher looked over the transcripts. Coders came to an agreement, and the coding framework was created as needed.

3.4. Data Analysis

We adopted thematic analysis since it allows effectiveness in capturing nuanced perceptions and uncovering complex relationships. To enhance analytic reliability, 3 out of 14 interview transcripts (approximately 21%) were independently double-coded by a second researcher. These transcripts were purposively selected to represent both entrepreneur (G) and manager (Y) perspectives. Initial intercoder agreement across first-cycle codes was 82% before consensus meetings.

Anonymous identification was given to each participant for privacy and analytic traceability. G1-

G7 are entrepreneurs, Y1-Y7 managers. Entrepreneur-manager dyads showed a temporal and logical relationship between sensed threat, distrust, control intensity, and limited autonomy. Figure 1 shows our working process model after abduction. This was demonstrated by following one G2-Y1 entrepreneur-manager dyad. G2's initial financial exploitation concerns prompted tougher daily reporting and more routine options. Y1 said, "after a while, I only did what I was asked, nothing more." Mistrust impeded progress and increased worry. Basic financial dashboards and weekly planning changed collaboration. G2 said "seeing the numbers together helped me breathe" (G2), while Y1 said "when everything became visible on the screen, I sometimes felt watched rather than trusted" (Y1). Transparency enhanced surveillance and decreased uncertainty. Process model interactions include threat perceptions, control escalation, digital mediation, and trust recalibration.

4. FINDINGS

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed through thematic coding, and the results are presented based on the main themes and codes identified during the analysis process. Each finding is supported by direct quotations from participants, using the assigned participant codes to ensure consistency and anonymity. To enhance evidentiary depth and ensure analytical clarity, the Findings section was refined to ground each interpretive claim in direct quotations drawn from both entrepreneurs (G#) and managers (Y#). Additionally, counter-examples were incorporated to highlight variations within the data, such as cases where delegation and

clearly defined roles alleviated anxiety (Y3), or where digital dashboards fostered feelings of surveillance and diminished initiative (G5, Y4). All quotations are presented with anonymized identifiers to preserve confidentiality while enabling traceability.

Building on this foundation, the presentation of results was further strengthened by improving how analytical decisions are documented and made accessible to the reader. Table 2 was therefore restructured to function not only as a thematic overview but as a detailed codebook—specifying definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and illustrative excerpts—so that the pathway from raw data to thematic conclusions can be followed transparently.

In addition, we introduced a new figure

illustrating the proposed process model, which depicts the sequential pattern linking perceived exploitation fear, distrust, control intensification, employee autonomy suppression, and the moderating role of digital transparency. This figure serves as a visual synthesis of the thematic relationships identified during analysis.

Furthermore, Table 1a presents the demographic and professional background of participants, including their roles and functional units. Additional contextual characteristics such as firm size, tenure, family-firm status, and digital system maturity were taken into account in the analysis to support the evaluation of transferability and contextual relevance.

Table 1b: Firm Characteristics and Contextual Attributes.

Firm (Anonymized)	Firm Size	Automotive Employees	Annual Vehicle Sales (approx.)	Digital Maturity Level	Generational Involvement	Entrepreneur Tenure	Manager Tenure	Sector/Activity	Other Business Areas
Firm A	Large	300	3,000	Medium	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	None
Firm B	Small-Medium	75	400	Medium	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	None
Firm C	Medium	90	1,000	Medium	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	None
Firm D	Large	350	5,000	Medium	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	Present (construction-related)
Firm E	Large	400	20,000	Medium	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	Present (fleet management, logistics)

Firm F	Small-Medium	60	2,000	High	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	Present (energy & construction)
Firm G	Medium	100	4,000	Medium	2 generations	≥20 years	≥20 years	Automotive dealership (sales, service, spare parts, used vehicles)	Present (real estate & rental services)

A stratified comparison among the participating firms revealed contextual variations shaping control and initiative dynamics. All companies operate within the same automotive dealership ecosystem, ensuring comparability while allowing size and digital maturity to emerge as differentiating factors. Smaller and medium-sized dealerships, characterized by limited digital infrastructure, demonstrated more centralized and owner-driven control routines, whereas larger firms distributed decision-making through semi-formalized digital

dashboards and weekly meetings. These contrasts suggest that digital maturity – not merely firm size – moderates how control and initiative are balanced, with higher integration corresponding to reduced micromanagement and greater transparency

Finally, we standardized the formatting of all participant quotes and ensured that each interpretive claim in the Findings section can be traced to at least one representative quotation in the codebook or in-text excerpts.

Table 2: Codebook: Themes, Codes, Definitions, Inclusion/Exclusion Rules, And Representative Quotes.

Theme	Code	Definition	Inclusion / Exclusion Rules	Representative Quotes
Perceived Exploitation Threat	SUK-1: Fear of exploitation	Entrepreneurs' fear of being taken advantage of, triggering defensive or control-oriented behavior.	Include: statements describing anxiety, fear of loss, or mistrust toward employees or outsiders. Exclude: general business or market risks.	"The fear of financial loss is a major factor. I always feel the need to step back and examine every detail carefully." (G3) Counter-pattern: "I've learned to delegate financial decisions; trusting the process reduced my fear over time." (Y3)
	SUK-2: Distrust and vigilance	Heightened alertness and lack of confidence in employees' intentions or abilities, leading to continuous monitoring.	Include: explicit mentions of suspicion or double-checking others' work. Exclude: formal audits or compliance checks.	"I always try to increase control to ensure my employees' trust. Unfortunately, some people always approach with bad intentions." (G1) Counter-pattern: "After several projects without issues, I stopped checking every step; mutual trust became easier." (Y5)
Control Intensification	KYT-1: Restriction of autonomy	Limiting employees' ability to make decisions through tight managerial control and centralized authority.	Include: descriptions of decision restrictions, approvals, or rigid supervision. Exclude: technical or safety-driven control systems.	"We frequently tell our employees what they need to do. Sometimes it becomes difficult for them to make decisions on their own." (G2) Dyadic contrast: "Once I received clear boundaries, I felt safer to decide within them." (Y2)

	KYT-2: Micromanagement	Persistent, detailed monitoring and intervention in employee work tasks.	Include: frequent checking, correcting, or over-supervision. Exclude: mentoring or developmental feedback.	"My employees often struggle to act on their own. I have to micromanage and keep everything under control." (Y4) Counter-pattern: "Letting them plan the workflow reduced my own stress and improved outcomes." (G5)
	KYT-3: Rapid unilateral decisions	Entrepreneurs making quick, top-down decisions to maintain control and reduce perceived uncertainty.	Include: instances of non-consultative decisions taken "for speed." Exclude: routine or delegated approvals.	"Because we can openly discuss what's right or wrong about the job, we make decisions quickly – if it makes sense to us." (G4) Boundary condition: In high-trust teams, unilateral decisions were perceived as efficiency; in low-trust teams, as dominance.
Employee Initiative & Autonomy	CIK-1: Limited participation	Employees being excluded from or hesitant to join strategic or operational decision-making.	Include: expressions of limited voice or exclusion. Exclude: purely technical task division.	"Most of the time, employees proceed based on my decisions. They need to be encouraged to express their own ideas." (Y2) Counter-pattern: "We started weekly idea meetings, and participation grew naturally." (G6)
	CIK-2: Reluctance to act	Employees' hesitation or lack of confidence to act autonomously.	Include: statements of fear of mistakes or waiting for approval. Exclude: lack of skill or resources.	"Employees often struggle to work independently, but I try to encourage them more to improve this situation." (Y3) Negative case: "Some younger staff act too freely, making decisions without checking – which also creates tension." (G2)
Trust & Digitalization	GD-1: Trust-enhancing strategies	Deliberate practices that build transparency and reliability, including shared data access and feedback loops.	Include: efforts to use technology or dialogue to foster mutual trust. Exclude: one-way monitoring systems.	"Digitalization has made everything more secure. We now work in a more transparent environment." (Y3) Negative case: "Too much transparency sometimes exposes mistakes and increases anxiety." (G5)
	GD-2: Role of digitalization	Use of digital tools as enablers or constraints in monitoring, reporting, and communication.	Include: statements about dashboards, apps, or systems altering control or trust dynamics. Exclude: generic IT adoption comments.	"Our employees can work more independently on digital platforms. This increases work efficiency." (G7) Counter-pattern: "Digital dashboards made me feel constantly watched; I became less proactive." (Y4)
	GD-3: Transparency and information sharing	Extent to which digital systems foster open access to performance data and communication.	Include: mentions of shared files, dashboards, or open KPIs. Exclude: private or informal sharing.	"We share all project updates through the platform; everyone knows what's going on." (G7) Boundary condition: When transparency was mutual and participatory, initiative grew; when one-sided, it turned into surveillance stress.

4.1. Concern About Being Exploited and Management Style

Entrepreneurs' concern about being exploited is a significant factor shaping their management styles.

This concern may lead entrepreneurs to increase levels of supervision and control. In the interviews, various perspectives emerged regarding how entrepreneurs' anxieties in managing their businesses influence the adoption of a more

authoritarian management style. Table 3 presents representative quotations and summary statements for this theme.

Table 3: Participant Views on Concern About Being Exploited and Its Impact on Management Style.

Participants	Quotations	Codes
G3	"Because we can openly discuss what's right or wrong about the job and what the outcomes might be, we make decisions quickly – if it makes sense to us. But the reason we're able to make decisions this fast is also due to a lack of trust. We constantly live with this concern."	SUK-1: Impact of concern about being exploited on management style
G1	"I always try to increase control to ensure my employees' trust. Unfortunately, some people always approach with bad intentions, and we constantly carry this concern."	SUK-2: Distrust and excessive control
G2	"The fear of financial loss is a major factor. I always feel the need to step back and examine every detail carefully."	SUK-1: Impact of fear of exploitation on management style
G7	"I constantly check everything to make sure my business is running smoothly. I always feel that anxiety."	SUK-2: Distrust and excessive control

The fear of being exploited emerges as one of the primary factors shaping entrepreneurs' authoritarian management styles. During the interviews, entrepreneurs reported feeling the need to increase supervision and control to manage this fear. Anxiety tends to escalate particularly in the presence of trust deficits, which in turn leads to the adoption of a more rigid management approach. These findings reveal how the fear of exploitation is shaped by entrepreneurs' sense of distrust and risk perception. To mitigate the anxiety stemming from a lack of trust, entrepreneurs tend to increase oversight, which results in a fast-paced and control-oriented decision-

making style.

4.2. The Impact of an Authoritarian Management Style

An overly authoritarian management style restricts employee autonomy and often hinders proactive behaviors. This theme particularly explores the effects of micromanagement and excessive oversight on employee motivation. Table 4 summarizes representative quotations and interpretations related to this theme.

Table 4: Participant Views on the Impact of an Authoritarian Management Style.

Participants	Quotations	Codes
G2	"We frequently tell our employees what they need to do. They mostly work based on the instructions we give them, and sometimes it becomes difficult for them to make decisions on their own."	KYT-1: Restriction of employee autonomy
Y3	"My employees often struggle to act on their own. I have to micromanage and keep everything under control."	KYT-2: Micromanagement, KYT-3: Quick decision-making
Y4	"I believe employees should only follow the instructions they are given. This way, we are more efficient."	KYT-1: Restriction of employee autonomy
Y5	"I want to control everything because sometimes things go wrong, and my employees struggle to act independently."	KYT-2: Micromanagement, KYT-3: Quick decision-making

An authoritarian management style restricts employees' autonomy and hinders their participation in decision-making processes. Interview findings revealed that micromanagement and rapid decision-making practices negatively affect employees' self-confidence and their willingness to take the initiative. Excessive control in management tends to suppress autonomy and weaken proactive behaviors. Although managers may adopt this style to maintain tighter control, such an approach can ultimately undermine employee

motivation and job satisfaction over the long term.

4.3. Employee Initiative and Participation

Employees' proactive behavior is directly related to the trust, independence, and open communication provided by managers. This theme addresses the factors that affect employees' ability to make their own decisions and their independence in this process. Table 5 provides representative quotations and summary statements for this theme.

Table 5: Participant Views on Employees' Proactive Behavior.

Participants	Quotations	Codes
G4	"It's challenging to accept a new person. The environment is generally great. But it takes time to trust people. Most of the time, instead of making their own decisions, they act according to what we tell them."	CIK-1: Participation in decision-making processes
Y2	"Most of the time, employees proceed based on my decisions. They need to be encouraged to express their own ideas."	CIK-2: Reluctance to work independently
Y5	"When they want to work independently, I try to allow them to take on more responsibility. However, sometimes they lack the courage to do so."	CIK-1: Employee participation in decision-making processes
G6	"Employees often struggle to work independently, but I try to encourage them more to improve this situation."	CIK-1: Employee participation in decision-making processes

Employees' proactive behavior is generally based on directives from their managers. While employees tend to act in accordance with managerial decisions, they often struggle to make independent decisions. Managers have expressed the need to provide greater encouragement to foster employees' ability to act autonomously. The level of participation in decision-making processes and independence among employees is directly linked to the trust and encouragement offered by managers. Therefore, to promote proactive behavior, managers must provide consistent support and create a sense of

psychological safety.

4.4. Role of Digitalization and Trust in Proactive Behavior

Employees' proactive behavior is directly related to the level of trust, autonomy, and open communication provided by their managers. This theme explores the factors that influence employees' ability to make independent decisions and how these factors shape their level of autonomy in the workplace.

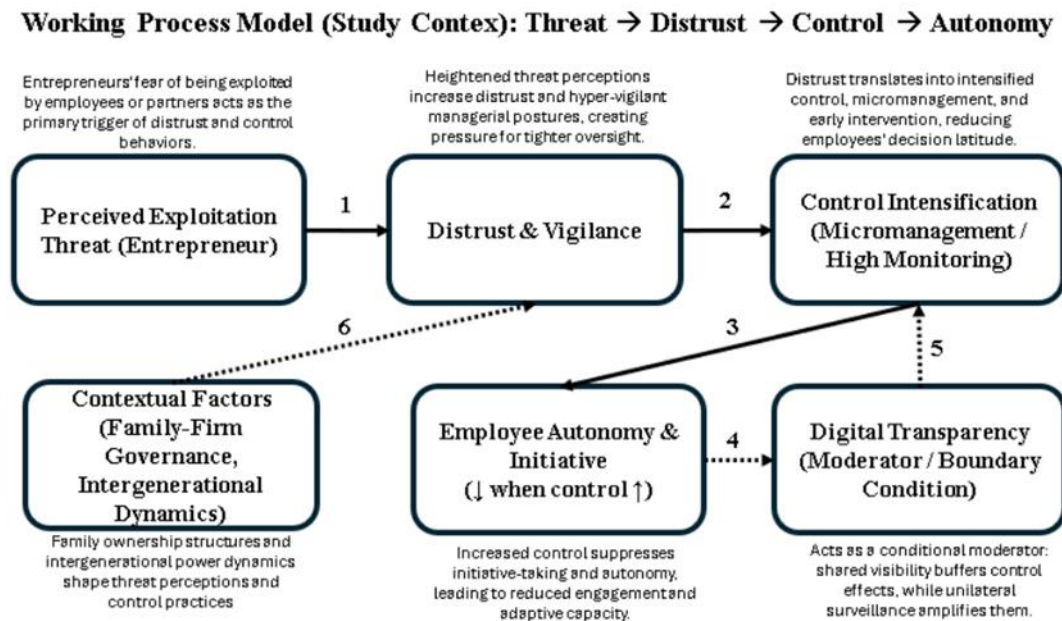
Table 6: Participants' Views on the Anxiety-Reducing Effects of Trust and Digitalization.

Participants	Quotations	Codes
Y6	"Sharing data has become much easier in digital environments. Our employees are now acting more independently. Digitalization has greatly helped us in making processes more transparent."	GD-1: Trust-enhancing strategies, GD-2: Role of digitalization
G5	"Thanks to digitalization, our employees now manage their work more independently. We used to do everything manually, but now things progress much faster and more securely."	GD-3: Transparency and information sharing
Y3	"Digitalization has made everything more secure. We now work in a more transparent environment."	GD-1: Trust-enhancing strategies, GD-2: Role of digitalization
G7	"Our employees can work more independently on digital platforms. This increases work efficiency."	GD-3: Transparency and information sharing

Digitalization and trust-building strategies contribute to increased transparency which accelerates workflows enabling employees to operate more freely. By enhancing both transparency and autonomy, digitalization leads to a climate of trust encouraging employees to take greater initiative. Conversely, for a small subset of participants, the implementation of digital tools intensified monitoring, increased employees' sense of surveillance, and ultimately reduced proactive behavior. These findings reveal that digitalization functions as a conditional moderator: its effects depend on whether it is enacted as shared visibility and participatory governance or as unilateral surveillance and control. The way digitalization is

implemented and experienced by both entrepreneurs and employees critically shapes whether they enable or constrain proactive behavior.

In this study, we propose a context-bounded process in which perceived exploitation threat heightens distrust, which in turn triggers control intensification, suppressing employee autonomy. In our study, digital transparency emerges as a *boundary condition*: when enacted as shared visibility with participatory goal setting, it buffered the control-autonomy trade-off; when enacted as unilateral surveillance, it amplified vigilance and dampened initiative. Figure 1 depicts this working model grounded in our themes and restricted to the studied single-industry, national context.



Solid Arrows Indicate the Core Sequence Derived from Themes (Perceived Threat → Distrust → Control → Autonomy↓).

Dashed Arrows Denote Moderators and Contextual Influences: Digital Transparency Can Buffer or Amplify the Control–Autonomy Link Depending on Enactment; Family-Firm Governance and Intergenerational Dynamics Shape Threat and Distrust Appraisals.

1. Perceived Exploitation Threat → Distrust & Vigilance: Heightened threat perceptions increase distrust and managerial vigilance, creating pressure for tighter oversight.

2. Distrust & Vigilance → Control Intensification (Micromanagement / High Monitoring): Distrust translates into intensified control, micromanagement, and early interventions, narrowing employees' decision latitude.

3. Control Intensification → Employee Autonomy & Initiative: Increased control suppresses proactive behavior and autonomy, undermining trust, engagement, and adaptive capacity.

4. Employee Autonomy & Initiative → Digital Transparency: Employee behaviors and proactive behaviors also shape how digital transparency is enacted and experienced. High levels of autonomy foster shared visibility and participatory use of digital tools, whereas low initiative contexts tend to reinforce surveillance-oriented enactments.

5. Digital Transparency → Control Intensification: Digital transparency acts as a conditional moderator: shared visibility buffers control effects, while unilateral surveillance amplifies them. **6. Contextual Factors → Threat & Control Dynamics:** Family ownership structures and intergenerational power dynamics shape how threats are perceived and how control practices emerge.

5. DISCUSSION

Our study explicitly integrates literature on organizational transparency (Bernstein, 2017; Heald, 2006), trust and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), and governance in family firms (Gedajlovic et al., 2012). These frameworks are directly linked to the study's themes to explain how digitalization moderates the threat–control–autonomy sequence. Our results confirm the assumption mentioned in threat rigidity theory which claims that when environmental threats or uncertainty is perceived, organizations tend to tighten control and centralize decision-making. Supporting this theory, we saw

that digitalization of processes in many of the organizations we have examined was used as a control-oriented response to perceived environmental uncertainty, where digitalization acts as a mechanism to restore predictability and reduce perceived threats. However, in organizations that frame digitalization as an opportunity to increase employee autonomy, digital transformation was leveraged to promote initiative rather than constrain it. For instance, participant Y2 said, *as a rule I try to give participation rights to all my subordinates, and they use digital tools for this*, and Y5 said *We are doing our best to build teams wherein everybody can voice their ideas*

even through online meetings or phone calls. Actually, answers of participants like Y6 that declared *Our employees are now acting more independently. Digitalization has greatly helped us in making processes more transparent and Y3 that declared Digitalization resulted in a managerial style that created more self-confident and autonomous employees..*, made us figure out that digitalization paved the way to more empowering leaders which was also supported in the related literature by studies like Ali, Baig and Ahmet (2023), Huang, Zhang and Fang (2022) and Sabila and Wirawan (2024). However, these opportunities were often limited by hierarchical standards and performance pressure. This interpretation aligns with research on psychological safety and participative governance, where empowering digital practices foster proactive behavior (Edmondson, 1999; Sabila & Wirawan, 2024). Conversely, when transparency becomes one-sided, studies show it heightens surveillance anxiety and undermines initiative (Bernstein, 2017). Therefore, digitalization was seen as a symbolic and practical tool that affected the participants' views of their roles, anxieties, and management practices, instead of serving as a direct driver for psychological shifts. When previous studies are examined, we noticed that in studies like Bai, H., Liu and Qian (2021), Li, Zhao and Zhao, (2024) and Wang et al., (2023), digitalization was considered as a tool for providing more transparent central power and in studies like Maghrifani, Fadli and Mahdavi Ardekani (2022), Nuha and Pahlevi (2024) and Hoang Doan and Tran (2025), digitalization was considered as a tool for boosting employee autonomy.

Participants also identified family business resource and capability obstacles for digitalization. For instance, G6 declared that *We are aware of our financial limit during digitalization process.* and similarly, Y3 told that *we wanted to create a highly digitalized dashboard for performance management, but it was too expensive for our organization...May be in the future...* Previous empirical research has identified comparable issues in family firms, such as Bouncken and Schmitt (2022) and Liu, Zhou and Li (2023).

Furthermore, participants in our study linked the use of digital tools to more general concepts such as technological advancements, organizational transparency, and trustworthiness. For instance, G5 said that *Thanks to digitalization, our employees now manage their work more independently and Y3 said that digitalization led to more transparent performance systems. Our results confirm previous studies in the literature like Wirges, Rossmann and Kersting, (2022) that revealed the positive effect of digitalization on*

employee autonomy and Cosa, Cucari and Esposito (2024) revealing effects of digitalization on transparency. This suggests that digitalization is influenced by social and emotional factors rather than solely determined by technology.

Our study highlighted the dual nature of digital transparency in shaping proactive behaviors within SMEs. On one hand, buffering effect on the threat-control-autonomy chain by increasing shared visibility, reducing uncertainty, and fostering trust between entrepreneurs and employees. This effect enables employees to act with greater confidence and initiative, and reduces entrepreneurs' perceived exploitation threat. For instance, participant Y3 said; *"...through digitalization we created a feedback system making our performance management system more transparent so that now no one is questioning it...a fair atmosphere occurred, both employees and the boss are no more suspicious about fairness..."*. and similarly, Y6 said; *"... owing to digitalization we receive real-time reports and people from all levels can see these reports. This creates an atmosphere of trust that makes everyone comfortable inside..."*. On the other hand, when digital tools are enacted as unilateral surveillance, they can amplify distrust and heighten entrepreneurial vigilance, thereby reinforcing authoritarian management behaviors and further suppressing employee autonomy.

Micro interactions between entrepreneurs and employees are studied using the threat-rigidity paradigm (Staw, Sandelands & Dutton, 1981). The findings demonstrate that perceived exploitation threat increases distrust and control, restricting proactive engagement. Understanding this management sequential mechanism simplifies small, owner-driven business threat-rigidity theory. Digital transparency can either reinforce or relax control dynamics. Clarifying a micro-level analytical theory and showing how trust-based digital practices may reduce risk reactivity in family and entrepreneurial enterprises are conceptual and practical contributions. By combining threat-rigidity theory with trust and psychological safety frameworks, our study showed that entrepreneurs' feelings of potential abuse or deception can create heightened distrust and authoritative control behaviors.

The findings reveal a recursive process in which perceived exploitation threat → distrust and vigilance → control intensification → diminished autonomy, moderated by the form of digital transparency. In this sense, the study specifies a bounded process account: the link between threat and control is not universal but contingent upon the

resource fragility, relational density, and emotional investment typical of family-firm contexts.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the findings of this study reflect the embedded nature of trust, authority, and control within family-business ecosystems. In contexts such as Turkey, where relational ties, hierarchy, and family continuity play a central role in organizational life, perceived exploitation threat may be interpreted not only as an economic risk but also as a relational and identity-based threat. Consequently, authoritarian management practices can be understood as culturally embedded protective mechanisms rather than purely instrumental control strategies. Digital transparency, in this context, represents a socio-technical transformation that reshapes traditional authority relations by redistributing visibility, accountability, and decision rights. Consistent with recent evidence on AI-enabled customer relationship systems, transparent and responsive digital interfaces can strengthen trust, improve perceived service quality, and support sustained relational engagement between organizations and their stakeholders. Prior research also indicates that transparent and well-designed AI-enabled interaction systems can foster trust, enhance perceived service quality, and support long-term relational engagement between organizations and their stakeholders (Alsalamah, 2025). Accordingly, this study extends interdisciplinary scholarship on culture, organizations, and digital transformation by demonstrating how psychological and managerial dynamics are embedded within socio-cultural contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of entrepreneurs' concerns about being exploited on their authoritarian management styles and employees' proactive behaviors. The research was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven entrepreneurs and seven managers, and the findings were derived using thematic analysis.

The study revealed that perceived exploitation threat, particularly within small businesses and family-run enterprises, often leads to the adoption of highly authoritarian management practices. These practices were found to significantly limit

employees' autonomy and decision-making capabilities. In environments where anxiety is high, entrepreneurs tend to impose excessive supervision, which negatively affects employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This was confirmed in the declarations of participants like G1 who told "... I don't like to leave decisions to branch managers when the market is difficult and competitors are aggressive. I try to decide everything myself so that there are no problems..." and Y4 declared that. "... In crisis conditions, I hold the threads tighter. Sometimes too much democracy is unnecessary. The important thing is to achieve the goals. I never let go of control in situations where I think my goals are going to be in trouble ...".

Moreover, digitalization plays a critical role in mitigating perceived exploitation threat and fostering a work environment that supports employee independence. We can find traces of this assumption in participant G5's words who says "... after the digitalization process, many of our processes became more understandable for employees, so they can control their own work from beginning to end and make corrections and adaptations themselves where necessary..." and in participant Y1 who said that "... through online control panels and performance scorecards that managed to build a more empowering system and line managers and their subordinates have gained greater autonomy. Now they can control their own work and fix issues on their own.....". In our study, digital tools were shown to empower employees to act more autonomously. However, although not as strong as the empowering effect of digitalization, there was also some proof that it alleviates entrepreneurs' concerns by increasing transparency, thus soothing managerial anxieties. For instance, participant G6 said that "... after building a performance system supported by digital processes, central control has become much easier, now we can easily see what is happening in each department, to what extent the goals are being achieved, and we can intervene immediately".

These findings should be interpreted within the socio-cultural characteristics of family-owned enterprises in emerging economies, where relational trust, hierarchy, and intergenerational continuity shape managerial behavior. Accordingly, the implications of this study extend beyond organizational behavior to broader cultural and institutional discussions on authority, trust, and digital transformation in family business systems.

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