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The paradoxical effect of empowering leadership on innovative work behavior: roles of power distance and work passion in services

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the relationship between empowering leadership and subordinates' innovative work behavior in the service industries. While this leadership style's influence on innovative work behavior is somewhat known, our research delves deeper into the when and why of this relationship. To address this gap, we propose a conceptual framework building on social exchange theory.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a laboratory study (Study 1) with samples of graduate project management students and a field study (Study 2; time-lagged and dyadic data) with samples of service managers and their subordinates, this research examines how contextual stimuli, i.e. empowering leadership and power distance, interact to influence their innovative work behavior. Study 1 employed ordinary least squares path analysis for statistical analyses, while Study 2 used covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) to test the hypotheses.

Findings – As predicted, we found support for the influence of empowering leadership on innovative work behavior and that work passion, i.e. harmonious passion and obsessive passion, differently mediates this relationship. In both studies, power distance dampens the positive effect of empowering leadership on harmonious passion. Specifically, the otherwise positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion turns negative under the boundary condition of high power distance. This shows the detrimental effect of power distance (Study 1). And, in Study 2, power distance inhibits this positive

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relationship, but not to the extent of turning it negative as in Study 1. On the other hand, the findings in Study 1 did not provide evidence for the inhibiting role of power distance in the relationship between empowering leadership and obsessive passion. However, in Study 2, we did find support for the prediction that the interactive effect of empowering leadership and power distance weakens obsessive passion.

Practical implications – The current study also provides practical implications for enhancing innovative work behavior in service organizations. For instance, our findings suggest that service managers' empowering leadership style can simultaneously foster and impede innovative work behavior by activating their harmonious and obsessive passions. In the same vein, high power distance can have a hindering effect on harmonious and obsessive passion.

Originality/value – This research identifies the nuances of the relationship between empowering leadership and innovative work behavior by answering the why (the mediating role of both dimensions of work passion) and when (the moderating influence of power distance) of this relationship.

Keywords Empowering leadership, Innovative work behavior, Work passion, Harmonious passion, Obsessive passion, Power distance, Paradox

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In today's competitive service environment, innovative work behavior (IWB) has emerged as a crucial factor for competitiveness (Javed *et al.*, 2020), effective service delivery (Bani-Melhem *et al.*, 2023), organizational performance, and sustainable competitive advantage (Karatepe *et al.*, 2022). IWB refers to employees' creative ideas and solutions through creating, promoting, and implementing ideas to increase their role performance in a team or organization (Amabile and Pillemer, 2012; Scott and Bruce, 1994). While there is a growing body of knowledge of leadership styles' influence on IWB (Gerlach *et al.*, 2020; Javed *et al.*, 2019; Kalyar *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2020; Shafique *et al.*, 2019; Yidong and Xinxin, 2013), we don't know much about *when* and *how* empowering leadership drive IWB (For exception, see, e.g. Rao Jada *et al.*, 2019; Vuong and Hieu, 2023; Wihuda *et al.*, 2017). This is astonishing even though the prior literature identifies empowering leadership—a leadership style that involves delegating authority, sharing power, and building employees' confidence—as critical in promoting work-related outcomes, such as psychological empowerment, affective commitment, work passion, work-meaningfulness, task performance, and creative performance (Alvi *et al.*, 2024a, b; Chen *et al.*, 2011; Hao *et al.*, 2018; Qian *et al.*, 2018; Vuong and Hieu, 2023).

Apart from investigating the *enabling effect* of empowering leadership (e.g. Alvi *et al.*, 2024a, b), some evidence also points towards it being a predictor of adverse work-related outcomes, such as stress, job-induced tension, and task performance (Cheong *et al.*, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2017; Sharma and Kirkman, 2015). These inconsistent empirical findings have prompted research to examine the paradoxical nature of empowering leadership (Cheong *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, exploring why empowering leadership is effective in a particular context but has a passive effect in another is pertinent. While the extant research suggests that empowering leadership is essential for enhancing individuals' IWB (Vuong and Hieu, 2023), their link is complicated. For instance, Rao Jada *et al.* (2019) found the mediating role of knowledge sharing in this relationship. This scant attention necessitates the need to untangle this complexity.

To address this concern, current research, using a dualistic model of passion (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003), proposes a conceptual model that indicates that harmonious passion and obsessive passion can differentially but concurrently mediate the link between empowering leadership and IWB. Understanding the differential impact is necessary because recent evidence shows that empowering leadership simultaneously displays positive and negative outcomes (Cheong *et al.*, 2016, 2019). To develop a comprehensive model of empowering leadership and IWB, we further focus on the cultural context since prior literature suggests that the positive effects of empowering leadership might depend on the cultural context (Bharadwaja and Tripathi, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2017; Vuong and Hieu, 2023). Moreover, individual cultural value orientation can influence employees' reactions toward empowering leadership (Fock *et al.*, 2013; Li *et al.*, 2015; Sharma and Kirkman, 2015; Vuong and Hieu, 2023). Notably, the role of power distance,

a critical cultural value orientation, is strongly related to an employee's beliefs toward authority, status, and power in the workplace. Individuals in high power distance situations are likely to be responsive to one-way, top-down directions from their superiors (Javidan *et al.*, 2006), whereas empowering leadership is characterized by delegating authority, sharing power, and building employees' confidence (Alvi *et al.*, 2024a, b; Sharma and Kirkman, 2015; Vuong and Hieu, 2023). Hence, an important question is whether individuals in high power distance contexts, such as China, respond similarly to empowering leadership as those in low power distance environments. In all, the present research proposes the following research question:

RQ. When and how does empowering leadership influence IWB?

To answer this question, we consider power distance as a contingency factor that could influence the relationship between empowering leadership and work passion, particularly within the Chinese context, for several reasons. *Firstly,* traditional Chinese society is deeply rooted in Confucianism, which emphasizes obedience to authority and reinforces high power distance dynamics (Barkema *et al.*, 2015). *Secondly,* consistent with prior research, we regard power distance as a potential moderator and a critical cultural value that may shape the supervisor-subordinate relationship in high power distance contexts like China (Farh *et al.*, 2007; Gu *et al.*, 2018). *Finally,* several scholars have recently called for further research to investigate how empowering leadership interacts with cultural values such as power distance, particularly in shaping subordinates' cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Vuong and Hieu, 2023), such as work passion (Hao *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2017). Thus, drawing from power distance and leadership literature, we propose that power distance moderates the association between empowering leadership and work passion, making examining this relationship within the Chinese cultural context essential.

This research can significantly contribute to the literature on empowering leadership, innovative work behavior, work passion, and power distance within service organizational contexts. *Firstly,* our investigative approach centers on responding to recent scholarly calls for empirical exploration into how empowering leadership and cultural dimensions such as power distance profoundly impact employee outcomes, notably harmonious and obsessive passions (Hao *et al.*, 2018; Qian *et al.*, 2018). More specifically, this study aims to enrich the existing body of knowledge by extending the dualistic model of passion, leveraging it to untangle the underlying motivational mechanisms that delineate the mediating influence of these passion types on the link between empowering leadership and creative contributions in the workplace. *Secondly,* from the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 2017), we propose a novel framework to integrate the mixed findings from prior studies, shedding light on how the behaviors associated with empowering leadership can distinctly influence innovative work behavior through the pathways of harmonious and obsessive passion. *Thirdly,* the exploration of work passion's dualistic nature seeks to uncover its potential as a positive driver and to delineate the conditions under which it may inhibit creativity and innovation. *Lastly,* by delving into the leadership practices deeply rooted in Confucian values within the Chinese context, this research will illuminate the specificities and implications of employing empowering leadership styles in culturally distinct environments. Thereby, it provides a much-needed empirical insight into how cultural contexts interplay with leadership approaches to influence employee behavior and innovation. Hence, our study aspires to offer substantial theoretical advancements by revealing interrelations between leadership, passion, and culture in shaping workplace outcomes.

In the rest of the paper, the theoretical background and hypotheses development section reviews relevant literature and presents key hypotheses. Study 1 covers the lab experiment, followed by Study 2, which details the field study. Separate discussion sections interpret the findings of each study, while the theoretical and practical implications highlight contributions to literature and actionable recommendations. The paper concludes with limitations and future research directions, and a conclusion summarizing key insights.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Empowering leadership and innovative work behavior

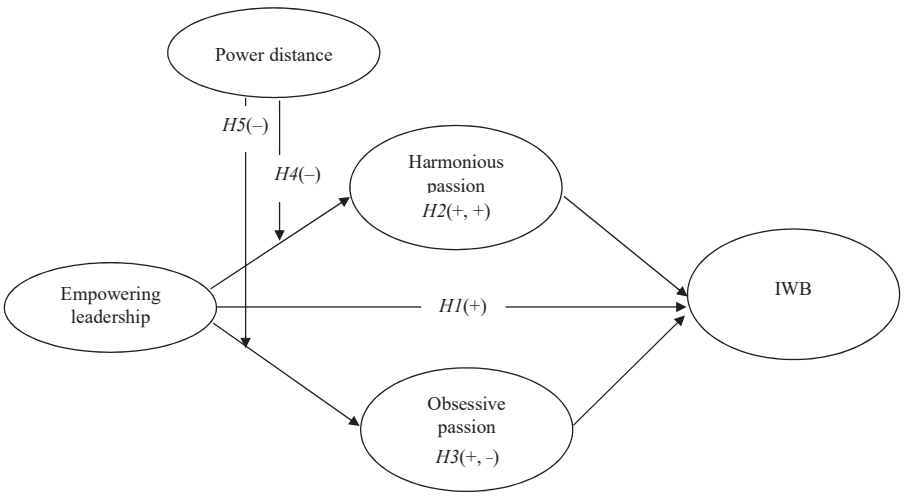
Many studies have shown a positive relationship between widely established leadership styles and IWB (Afsar and Masood, 2018; Gkorezis, 2016; Javed *et al.*, 2020; Rao Jada *et al.*, 2019). The essence of empowering leadership, an essential leadership style, lies in sharing power, raising confidence, and fostering the self-directed behavior of individuals or teams (Sharma and Kirkman, 2015). As such, the central tenet of empowering leadership is based on the idea that leaders must empower subordinates (Alvi *et al.*, 2024a, b). For example, Manz and Sims (1987) characterize empowering leadership as a "shift in the source of control from the leader to the follower" and that an empowering leader's primary role is "to lead others to lead themselves." Along these lines, prior research demonstrates that empowering leadership could indirectly influence creative behavior via psychological empowerment (Chen *et al.*, 2011; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Thus, empowering leadership can also positively influence IWB by empowering subordinates.

The hypothesized conceptual model, Figure 1, draws from the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). This theory indicates that the quality of relationships between supervisors and subordinates specifies the norms of reciprocity. It further suggests that supervisors' fair treatment of subordinates (e.g. empowering leadership) motivates them to act innovatively and independently in the workplace (Blau, 1964). This theoretical argument is also empirically supported by the literature across various industries (Gkorezis, 2016; Slåtten *et al.*, 2011). Based on the literature and the theoretical arguments, we propose this hypothesis,

H1. Empowering leadership is positively related to employees' IWB.

The dualistic model of work passion

Work passion, rooted in self-determination theory, is a strong disposition for meaningful and valued activities that employees love and invest their resources in (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003). This definition conceptualizes passion as a job attitude that includes the elements of affective



Note(s): The parentheses in the mediating hypotheses *H2* and *H3* display the relationships between the two paths. For instance, *H3*(+,–) refers to empowering leadership and the mediator, obsessive passion, having a direct relationship, and the mediator and IWB having an inverse relationship

Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Conceptual model

harmonious passion and cognitive obsessive passion. Considering passion from these two perspectives is called the dualistic model of passion (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Ho *et al.*, 2011; Vallerand *et al.*, 2003). Harmonious passion is an individual's inclination towards an activity due to the meaningfulness of the activity itself. In contrast, obsessive passion, by definition, is a controlled internalization of the activity in one's identity such that the involvement in the activity is due to some external forces, such as feelings of obligation, social pressure, or self-esteem maintenance (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003). In other words, the former is driven by intrinsic motivation, whereas the latter is driven by an extrinsic motivation controlled by the environment. Due to the complexities of work passion, the current study employs its dualistic conceptualization.

The mediating role of harmonious and obsessive passion

Drawing on the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003), we hypothesize that harmonious and obsessive passion differentially link empowering leadership and IWB. In general, leadership can have both affective and cognitive outcomes. Thus, an upbeat leadership style, such as empowering leadership, can have the outcomes reflected in, for example, harmonious and obsessive passion. In addition, the linkage between passion and creative outcomes is sufficiently explored (Hao *et al.*, 2018; Martin *et al.*, 2013; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Thus, leadership can foster creative performance, such as IWB, through nurturing work passion. However, the contention that harmonious and obsessive passion represent distinct ways to internalize work activities (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003) can have differential effects on employees' IWB.

The characteristics of high-empowering leadership are sharing power with subordinates, trusting their capabilities, delegating decision-making authority, and providing additional resources and responsibilities to handle stressful situations effectively (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005b; Alvi *et al.*, 2024a, b; Dahleez *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, low-empowering leadership is characterized by close monitoring, discouraging self-initiative, micromanaging behaviors, and constrained decision-making (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1999). Thus, when individuals feel free from bureaucratic constraints, they are more likely to invest time and energy in meaningful tasks (Alvi *et al.*, 2024a, b), which can lead to work passion (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003). The literature suggests that the social support that a subordinate receives from the supervisors is essential in internalizing activities and ultimately leads to positive outcomes. Building on this, we posit that empowering leadership, owing to its ability to give autonomy to subordinates, enhances IWB through harmonious passion. In addition, the empirical findings also support the positive effect of empowering leadership on psychological empowerment (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2015; Zhang and Bartol, 2010), organizational citizenship behavior and risk-taking behavior (Dahleez *et al.*, 2022), individual autonomy or self-determination (Spreitzer, 1995), creative outcomes (Harris *et al.*, 2014; Zhang and Bartol, 2010), and harmonious passion (Hao *et al.*, 2018). Hence, the supportive environment provided by empowering leadership can enhance harmonious passion in the workplace, increasing IWB.

The lens of social exchange theory suggests that people give back when they receive something valuable (Blau, 2017). When leaders empower their subordinates by giving them autonomy and trusting them, they naturally feel appreciated and motivated. This leads to harmonious passion, where employees are genuinely engaged and enjoy their work. As a result, they become more willing to contribute creative ideas and solutions. In this way, harmonious passion bridges the gap, helping turn empowering leadership into meaningful, innovative actions from employees. Accordingly, we propose,

H2. Harmonious passion positively mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and employee IWB.

The dualistic model of passion (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003) implies that employees' obsessive passion emerges when they realize obligatory external work internalization, i.e. a process through which employees learn and adopt the values, norms, and beliefs of the organization

because they believe that they will be rewarded for that or to avoid punishment (Bandura, 1977). Empowering leadership emphasizes that employees should lead themselves to perform better (Manz and Sims, 1987). Employees can meet this requirement through their obsessive passion by activating controlled (i.e. external) motivation to internalize their work. In the case of empowering leadership, they are urged to accomplish their tasks independently by using the empowering leader's delegated resources and powers (Kim and Beehr, 2021). This delegation leads to higher expectations from employees. Consequently, they must work hard to enhance their self-esteem and achieve a sense of worthiness (Danielewicz-Betz, 2021; Hao *et al.*, 2018). Using this rationale, we propose empowering leadership to increase employees' obsessive passion for work.

For the downstream effect of obsessive passion on IWB, we argue that obsessive passion hurts IWB. Prior studies find controlled motivation reduces creative performance (Benware and Deci, 1984). Similarly, obsessive passion is also related to undesirable outcomes such as work-family conflict (Vallerand, 2010) and negative emotions (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003). Thus, empowering leadership influences subordinates in a way that fosters obsessive passion, which can have negative consequences such as anxiety, burnout, and stress. These outcomes could deplete their resources, leading to decreased IWB.

From the social exchange theory perspective (Blau, 2017), empowering leadership can also lead to obsessive passion when employees feel pressured to perform or as a way of reciprocating the leader's trust. While empowering leadership offers autonomy and support, employees might internalize this as an obligation to prove their worth, leading to an unhealthy, compulsive engagement with their work. This obsessive passion, driven by external pressure, can drain creativity and limit IWB. Instead of fostering flexibility and openness, it pushes employees to focus excessively on results, ultimately hindering their ability to think outside the box. In this way, obsessive passion can mediate the relationship by turning the positive intentions of empowering leadership into reduced innovation. Therefore, based on the above discussion, we propose,

H3. Obsessive passion negatively mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and IWB, such that empowering leadership positively impacts obsessive passion, which negatively affects IWB.

The moderating role of power distance

Through social exchange theory (Blau, 2017), we know that empowering leadership builds trust and offers employees autonomy, which usually leads to harmonious passion—a healthy, enjoyable connection to their work. However, this exchange can feel awkward or even uncomfortable in cultures with high power distance, where people expect clear hierarchical boundaries. Employees in these settings might not embrace empowerment because it clashes with their belief that authority should be centralized. As a result, instead of feeling motivated and passionate about their work, they may resist or hesitate to engage fully, weakening the positive impact of empowering leadership on harmonious passion. As such, the usual give-and-take relationship between empowerment and employee motivation can break down in these cultures.

Thus, we hypothesize that,

H4. Power distance inhibits the positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion.

Similarly, this theory can explain how empowering leadership sometimes leads to obsessive passion, where employees feel pressured to work excessively to "repay" the autonomy they've been given (see the discussion leading to Hypothesis 3). But in high power distance cultures, where employees are used to strict authority structures, empowerment may feel like added pressure rather than a reward. Instead of feeling motivated, they may feel burdened by the extra responsibility, which dampens the development of obsessive passion. In these cultures,

employees might pull back into their expected roles rather than feeling driven to overwork, thus weakening the connection between empowering leadership and obsessive passion. The reciprocal relationship between leaders and employees is again disrupted because empowerment doesn't fit comfortably within the cultural expectations. Thus,

H5. Power distance inhibits the positive relationship between empowering leadership and obsessive passion.

Study 1: the lab experiment

The sample, procedure, and design

The participants of the lab experiment were graduate students from project management classes at three universities in Beijing ($N = 172$). The experiment was conducted after soliciting their consent in a seminar on the latest trends in project management, which was attended by all students from the three classes. They were randomly allocated to four conditions between-subjects design: 2 (high vs. low empowering leadership) $\times$ 2 (high vs. low power distance). They read a cover letter stating the anonymity of the study and the reinforcement that there is no right or wrong answer. A clear guidepost followed this to regard oneself as "I" in the scenario. In all, there were four scenarios corresponding to the 2x2 design. Each scenario provides the information to put the participant in the scenario. The scenario highlighted a situation in a fictitious software development-focused project-based organization. After they read the scenario, they were instructed to respond to items on empowering leadership, harmonious passion, obsessive passion, and IWB.

Manipulations

To manipulate empowering leadership, we followed prior experimental research that has successfully manipulated leadership styles in a laboratory context (Chen *et al*., 2011; Durham *et al*., 1997; Martin *et al*., 2013). Likewise, previous research has effectively manipulated power distance in organizational contexts (Curhan *et al*., 2008; Wang and Guan, 2018).

Empowering leadership. In the high-empowering leadership conditions, the scenarios emphasized leadership behaviors such as improving the meaningfulness of work, encouraging participation in decision-making, showing confidence in high performance, and ensuring autonomy from bureaucratic constraints. In contrast, participants in the low-empowering leadership condition read a scenario that emphasized behaviors of low-empowering supervisors; that is, the supervisors exhibit behaviors such as confusion about the meaningfulness of work, discouraging decision-making without the supervisor, expressing doubts about high performance, and high susceptibility of the bureaucratic constraints.

Power distance. Consistent with the conceptualization of power distance (Hofstede, 2001), participants in high power distance conditions read scenarios emphasizing that the organizational culture does not encourage participative decision-making, provides employees with limited discretion, the leaders always insist on their own opinion, and employees are expected not to disagree with the management decisions. In contrast, in the low power distance conditions, the participants read scenarios emphasizing that leaders involve subordinates in the decision-making, do not impose their opinions over subordinates dictatorially, and subordinates are taken into confidence before assigning any responsibilities.

Measures

To increase the generalizability of the measurement constructs, we adapted scales primarily developed in English. Back translation techniques recommended by Brislin (1980) were employed to create the Chinese versions. Table 1 represents descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients. The variables in the study were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, *ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 7.*

Empowering leadership. To measure empowering leadership, we adapted a 12-item scale developed by Ahearne *et al.* (2005a). A sample item is "My leader allows me to do my job my way." In a previous study, the Chinese version was internally consistent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) among full-time employees from various organizations (Hao *et al.*, 2018). In this study, the Cronbach's α is excellent ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Power distance. We measured the organizational power distance perception at the managerial level as perceived by the employees using a six-item scale initially developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988). A sample item is "Managers should seldom ask for the opinions of their subordinates." In a prior study (Wang and Guan, 2018), the Chinese version was found to be internally consistent among employees (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$). In our study, Cronbach's α is 0.95.

Work passion. We adapted Vallerand *et al.* (2003) 14-item scale to measure work passion. The scale measures two dimensions of passion: harmonious passion and obsessive passion. Each dimension has seven items. A sample item adapted for harmonious passion is "This job allows me to live memorable experiences," and for obsessive passion, "I cannot live without my job." The Chinese version of this scale was internally consistent among employees in China in prior studies ($\alpha_{\text{harmonious passion}} = 0.90$, $\alpha_{\text{obsessive passion}} = 0.91$) (Hao *et al.*, 2018). In the current study, Cronbach's α for harmonious and obsessive passion is 0.77 and 0.79, respectively.

IWB. A 9-item scale developed by Janssen (2004) was used to measure IWB. The scale represents the three stages of innovation, with three items for each stage: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation. The respondents indicated how often they performed innovative activities, including "creating new ideas for difficult issues," "acquiring approval for innovative ideas," and "evaluating the utility of innovative ideas," corresponding to each stage. In a previous study, the Chinese version of this scale was found to be internally consistent, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$ (Wang *et al.*, 2015). This scale was also internally consistent in the present study, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$.

Manipulation checks

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests indicated that the empowering leadership manipulation check measure as outcome had a significant main effect on the empowering leadership manipulation ($M_{\text{high empowering leadership}} = 5.390$; $M_{\text{low empowering leadership}} = 2.724$; $F(1,174) = 812.057$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.824$), but non-significant effect on the manipulation check of power distance ($M_{\text{high empowering leadership}} = 3.736$; $M_{\text{low empowering leadership}} = 3.510$; $F(1,173) < 1$, $p = 0.424$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$). In addition, the empowering leadership manipulation showed a significant main effect on the outcome variable, IWB ($M_{\text{high empowering leadership}} = 4.811$; $M_{\text{low empowering leadership}} = 3.858$; $F(1, 174) = 26.871$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.134$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	22.54	0.84	1							
2. Gender	–	–	−0.134	1						
3. Class seniority	5.06	0.39	−0.003	0.648**	1					
4. Empowering leadership	3.48	2.07	−0.084	0.218**	0.083	*(0.96)*				
5. Power distance	4.06	1.47	0.134	−0.090	−0.122	0.168*	*(0.95)*			
6. Harmonious passion	4.80	1.28	0.116	−0.103	0.006	−0.456**	0.448**	*(0.77)*		
7. Obsessive passion	3.68	0.88	0.025	−0.049	−0.023	−0.390**	0.214**	0.549**	*(0.79)*	
8. IWB	4.33	1.30	0.101	−0.114	0.000	−0.512**	0.424**	0.726**	0.508**	*(0.97)*

Note(s): $N = 172$; Cronbach's α reliability scores are given in italic and parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$
Source(s): Authors' own work

Moreover, ANOVA tests indicated the power distance manipulation check measure as outcome had a significant main effect on the power distance manipulation check ($M_{high\ power\ distance} = 5.296$; $M_{low\ power\ distance} = 1.849$; $F(1,174) = 1052.221$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.859$), but the non-significant effect on the manipulation check of empowering leadership ($M_{high\ power\ distance} = 4.175$; $M_{low\ power\ distance} = 3.930$; $F(1,174) = 1.212$, $p = 0.273$, $\eta^2 = 0.007$). In addition, the power distance manipulation showed a significant main effect on IWB ($M_{high\ power\ distance} = 3.780$; $M_{low\ power\ distance} = 4.928$; $F(1, 174) = 41.852$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.194$).

Control variables

This study used three control demographic variables—age, gender, and education (class seniority)—as previous findings have shown their significant effect on creative behaviors (Amabile *et al.*, 1986; Javed *et al.*, 2020; Zhang and Bartol, 2010).

Results

Correlation analysis. Table 1 indicates the mean, standard deviation, reliability coefficients, and correlation between the variables. All the variables considered in this study were significantly correlated.

Direct effects. To test hypothesis 1, from the parallel mediation model, partialling out the effect of demographics and other variables, we found empowering leadership to be a significant positive predictor of IWB, $\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 2). None of the demographics was significant. The results provide evidence to support hypothesis 1.

Indirect effects. A mediation analysis using ordinary least squares path analysis was performed to test the mediating effect of harmonious and obsessive passion between empowering leadership and IWB, partialling out the effects of demographics. As shown in Table 2, a parallel mediation analysis revealed the indirect effect of harmonious passion between empowering leadership and IWB (indirect effect = 0.17, CI = [0.097, 0.275]). This evidence supports Hypothesis 2. However, from the same analysis, the indirect effect of obsessive passion between empowering leadership and IWB was not significant (indirect effect = 0.032, CI = [−0.002, 0.074]). This evidence does not support Hypothesis 3.

Moderating effects of power distance. The results from Table 3 show that empowering leadership is a positive predictor of harmonious passion ($\beta = 0.438$, $p = 0.048$). The interactive effect of power distance and empowering leadership is also significant, such that

Table 2. Parallel mediation model results for direct and indirect effects

	Paths	Estimate	S.E	*p*
H1	Empowering leadership → IWB (direct effect)	0.12	0.05	0.02
$H2_a$	Empowering leadership → harmonious passion	0.39	0.06	<0.001
$H2_b$	Harmonious passion → IWB	0.58	0.07	<0.001
$H3_a$	Empowering leadership → obsessive passion	0.13	0.05	0.03
$H3_b$	Obsessive passion → IWB	0.25	0.09	<0.01

(95% bias corrected confidence interval method)

		Indirect effect	LL	UL
H2	Empowering leadership → harmonious passion → IWB	0.17	0.10	0.28
H3	Empowering leadership → obsessive passion → IWB	0.03	−0.002	0.07

Note(s): $N = 172$. Hypothesis subscript refers to the direct path of the indirect hypothesis
Source(s): Authors' own work

when power distance is high, the effect of empowering leadership on harmonious passion weakens ($\beta = 0.094$, $p = 0.024$). This contingent effect of power distance is evident in Figure 2, which indicates a positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion. However, the extent of this relationship is dependent on the level of power distance, i.e. the high-power distance retards the positive effect of empowering leadership on harmonious passion. This evidence supports Hypothesis 4.

As predicted, Table 4 shows empowering leadership as a positive predictor of obsessive passion, $\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.001$, while power distance is negative, $\beta = -0.178$, $p < 0.001$. Moreover, the interactive effect of power distance and empowering leadership on obsessive passion does not substantiate, $\beta = 0.036$, $p = 0.114$. This evidence does not support Hypothesis 5.

Table 3. Moderating effect of power distance on the relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion (H4)

	B	SE B	CI
Constant	1.459	2.013	(−2.514, 5.433)
Gender	−0.237	0.151	(−0.534, 0.060)
Age	0.113	0.113	(−0.109, 0.336)
Class seniority	0.231	0.232	(−0.227, 0.688)
Empowering leadership	0.438***	0.047	(0.346, 0.531)
Power distance	−0.387***	0.039	(−0.464, −0.310)
Empowering leadership x power distance	0.094***	0.024	(0.046, 0.142)

Note(s): $R^2 = 0.535$, F (6, 168) = 32.185, $p < 0.001$. CI = 5,000 bootstrap samples confidence interval. Controls: gender, age, and class seniority. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, and ***$p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own work

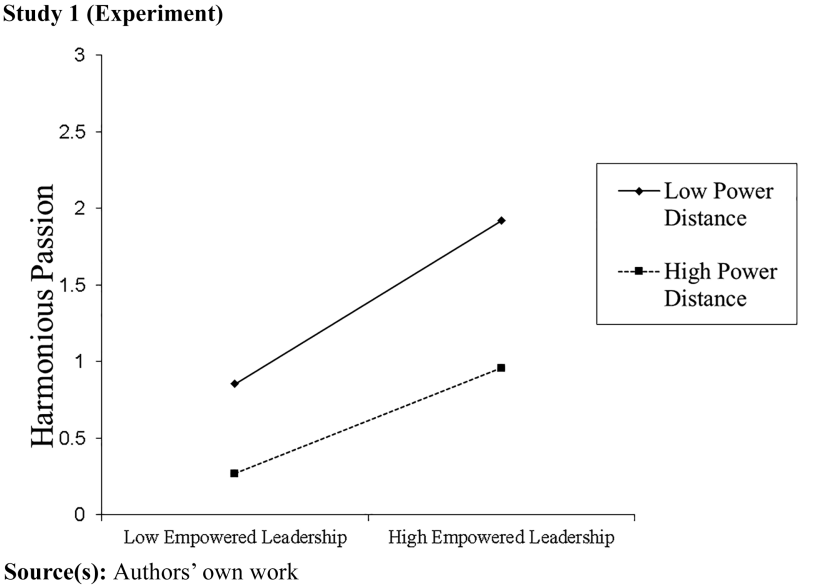


Figure 2. The moderating effect of power distance on the positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion

Table 4. Moderating effect of power distance on the relationship between empowering leadership and obsessive passion (H5)

	B	SE B	CI
Constant	1.929	1.841	(−1.707, 5.564)
Gender	−0.165	0.138	(−0.437, 0.107)
Age	0.101	0.103	(−0.103, 0.304)
Class seniority	−0.048	0.212	(−0.467, 0.371)
Empowering leadership	0.155***	0.043	(0.070, 0.240)
Power distance	−0.178***	0.036	(−0.248, −0.107)
Empowering leadership x power distance	0.036	0.022	(−0.009, 0.080)

Note(s): $R^2 = 0.182$, F (6, 168) = 6.220, $p < 0.001$. CI = 5,000 bootstrap samples confidence interval. Controls: gender, age, and class seniority. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, and $^{***}p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own work

Study 2: a field study

Context, sample, and procedure

The study's context is China's software and information service industry. Globally, this market has a size of US $736.1bn in 2024, which is expected to reach US $1789.14bn with an expected Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 11.74% (Precedence Research, 2024). The Chinese software and information service industry is expected to reach $41.38bn by 2025 and $61.81bn by the end of 2029 (Statista, 2024). Beijing, as the capital of China, is the hub of this industry and, therefore, was chosen as the study's context. Companies in this industry and based in Beijing have experienced rapid growth and thus garnered significant market share and international competitiveness (Hong-xia and Shao-jie, 2019).

Employees working in custom software development are the focus of the study. Its participants include: (1) managers and (2) their subordinates working as software developers. The developers are expected to undertake innovative work behavior as they generate, promote, and realize innovative ideas. To do this, their managers should play a leadership role (Bauwens *et al.*, 2024; Karatepe *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, the organizational context is not less important. In the current study, we measure it using the prevalent power distance in the referent organization. To foster IWB, we consider the role of managers in empowering software developers and the prevalent power distance in the organization as determinants of work passion, which, pushed by these determinants, decides the extent of IWB of the developers. In sum, the context of this study, i.e. custom software development companies in the capital city of Beijing as members of China's software and information service industry, is appropriate for our research objectives.

To establish causality among the variables and to deal with the problem of common method bias (CMB), we collected the data from two different sources and adopted a time-lagged design (3 different points in time). To gather data, we contacted 640 managers working in the domain of custom software development as part of China's software and information service industry in Beijing. Upon the initial contact, 476 managers consented to participate in the survey and gave us details of subordinates working under their supervision. Afterward, we sent them cover letters briefly describing the study's purpose and the confidentiality guarantee. We randomly selected one subordinate from each of the lists given to us. In the first round, at time *t1*, we got 396 employees' responses on their demographics, their managers' empowering leadership, and the organizational power distance. After eight weeks of completion of time *t1*, at the end of the second round (time *t2*), we got 356 employees' replies about their harmonious and obsessive passion. Again, after eight weeks, at time *t3*, we approached 356 managers whose subordinates replied at time *t2*. As a result, we got 325 managers' responses about their subordinates' innovative work behavior. Only 305 responses were kept for further analysis after aligning the data through distinctive codes, checking for missing values, and applying the attention checks.

Measures

We adopted the same measures as mentioned in Study 1 for all the variables by employing a seven-point Likert response format (strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 7) to measure all the items in the study. The only difference between the two studies was the measure of IWB. It was adapted so that a software project manager could rate the IWB of its subordinate developer. In this study, managers indicated how often their subordinates performed innovative activities, while in Study 1, the respondents indicated how likely they would perform innovative activities in the given scenarios. Specifically, the project manager rated how often their subordinate software developer engaged in innovative activities, including "coming up with new ideas for challenging software development problems," "securing approval for proposed software innovations," and "assessing the practicality and usefulness of implemented software solutions," corresponding to each stage: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation.

Confirmatory factor analysis

To find the model fit indices for the 5-factors model containing all study variables, the lower correlation values between the latent variables indicate strong discriminant validity, and the items loading above 0.50 for all the items on their respective factors indicate convergent validity for all five factors. Furthermore, Table 5 presents different competing models compared to the five-factor model. This depicted a better fit for the five-factor model compared to four-, three-, two- and one-factor(s) models, RMSEA = 0.05, TLI = 0.91, IFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.92, χ^2 = 1,272, df = 769 and χ^2/df = 1.65. Hence, the hypothesized five-factor model was the best-fit model.

While the data was collected from multiple sources and a time-lagged design was used, yet, we statistically checked for CMB as it can jeopardize the validity and reliability of the study. Harman's single-factor test, using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), was utilized to examine the potential effect of CMB (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). In this analysis, all observed variables were loaded on a single factor, and the variance captured by the single factor was 28%, which is lower than the threshold of 50% (Williams *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to confirm the fit of the measurement model. The five-factor model demonstrated the best fit (χ^2/df = 1.65, RMSEA = 0.05, IFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91), and compared to other models, the single-factor model demonstrated the worst fit (χ^2/df = 6.21, RMSEA = 0.16, CFI = 0.37, IFI = 0.37, TLI = 0.34), as shown in Table 5. These results indicate the lack of CMB in this study (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

Table 5. Confirmatory factor analysis and alternative models

Model	χ^2	Df	χ^2/df	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Basic model (5 factors)	1,272	769	1.65	0.92	0.92	0.91	0.05
Alternate model 1: combined empowering leadership and power distance (4 factors model)	2,235	773	2.89	0.77	0.77	0.76	0.09
Alternate model 2: combined harmonious and obsessive passion (4 factors model)	2,065	773	2.67	0.80	0.80	0.79	0.09
Alternate model 3: combined empowering leadership and power distance and then combined harmonious and obsessive passion (3-factor model)	3,029	776	3.92	0.65	0.65	0.63	0.12
Alternate model 4: combined innovative work behavior, harmonious passion, obsessive passion, and then combined empowering leadership and power distance (2-factor model)	4,181	778	5.37	0.47	0.48	0.44	0.15
Alternate model 5: all items combined (1-factor model)	4,844	779	6.21	0.37	0.37	0.34	0.16

Source(s): Authors' own work

Correlation analysis

Table 6 shows descriptive statistics, internal reliability coefficients, and correlations of the demographic variables.

Structural equation modeling results

Table 7 shows the results of structural equation modeling for the direct and indirect effects. Empowering leadership was positively related to IWB ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), thus providing support for Hypothesis 1. Moreover, empowering leadership was positively associated with harmonious passion ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$) and obsessive passion ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$). As expected, there was a positive relationship between harmonious passion and IWB ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$) and negative between obsessive passion and IWB ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.001$).

For testing the mediating effect of harmonious and obsessive passion between empowering leadership and IWB, bootstrapping analysis was performed using 5,000 bootstrap samples at a 95% confidence interval (CI). Regarding hypothesis 2, the indirect effect of harmonious passion between empowering leadership and IWB was positive and significant (indirect effect = 0.31, CI = [0.008, 0.060], $p = 0.001$). Likewise, obsessive passion was found to have a negative mediating effect between empowering leadership and IWB (indirect effect = −0.027, CI = [−0.009, −0.06], $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 3. The results suggest

Table 6. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	5.56	4.63	1							
2. Gender	–	–	−0.142*	1						
3. Education	3.35	1.93	−0.096	0.069	1					
4. Empowering leadership	4.27	1.38	−0.043	0.021	0.073	*(0.95)*				
5. Power distance	3.63	1.64	−0.036	−0.080	0.099	−0.232**	*(0.93)*			
6. Harmonious passion	4.52	0.930	−0.012	−0.053	0.091	0.400**	0.109	*(0.89)*		
7. Obsessive passion	3.81	1.81	−0.042	0.093	−0.032	0.171*	−0.399**	0.048	*(0.96)*	
8. Innovative work behavior	4.21	1.05	−0.041	−0.109	0.100	0.485**	0.063	0.393**	−0.295**	*(0.89)*

Note(s): $N = 205$; Cronbach alpha reliability scores are given in italic and parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 7. SEM results for direct and indirect effects

	Paths	Estimate	S.E	C.R	*p*
H1	Empowering leadership → IWB (direct effect)	0.38	0.62	6.13	<0.001
$H2_a$	Empowering leadership → harmonious passion	0.40	0.60	6.70	<0.001
$H2_b$	Harmonious passion → IWB	0.20	0.07	2.90	0.01
$H3_a$	Empowering leadership → obsessive passion	0.30	0.09	3.13	0.01
$H3_b$	Obsessive passion → IWB	−0.24	0.03	−6.19	<0.001

(95% bias-corrected confidence interval method)

		Indirect effect	*p*	LL	UL
H2	Empowering leadership → harmonious passion → IWB	0.31	<0.001	0.60	0.008
H3	Empowering leadership → obsessive passion → IWB	−0.027	<0.001	−0.06	−0.009

Note(s): $N = 205$. Hypothesis subscript refers to the direct path of the indirect hypothesis
Source(s): Authors' own work

empowering leadership was positively related to IWB when harmonious passion mediates this relationship. However, empowering leadership was negatively associated with IWB when obsessive passion mediates this relationship.

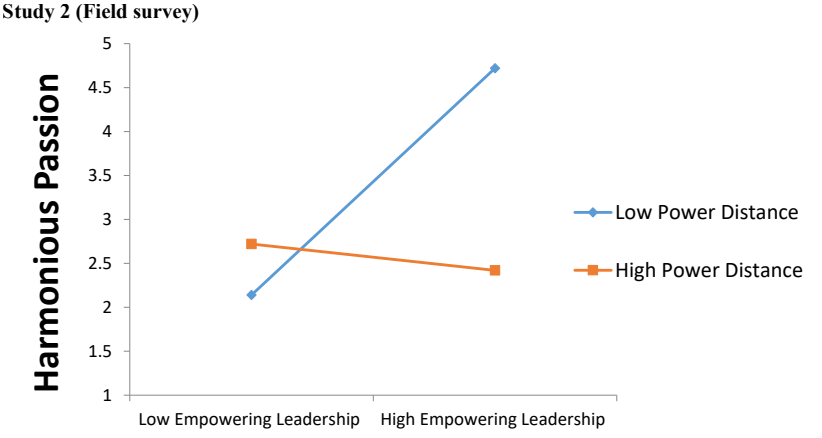
Moderation analysis

Power distance was included in the mediation model to test for the moderating effect. The harmonious and obsessive passions were simultaneously regressed on the interaction term. The interaction term represents the product of standardized mean values of empowering leadership and power distance (Table 8). The interaction term was found to be negatively related to harmonious passion ($\beta = -0.072$, $p < 0.05$), thus supporting Hypothesis 4. That is, the results indicate that the positive influence of empowering leadership on harmonious passion turns negative for employees working in high power distance environments (Figure 3). In the same vein, Table 8 results show that the interaction term of empowering leadership and power distance has a negative influence on obsessive passion ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$), supporting hypothesis 5 (Figure 4).

Table 8. Moderation analysis

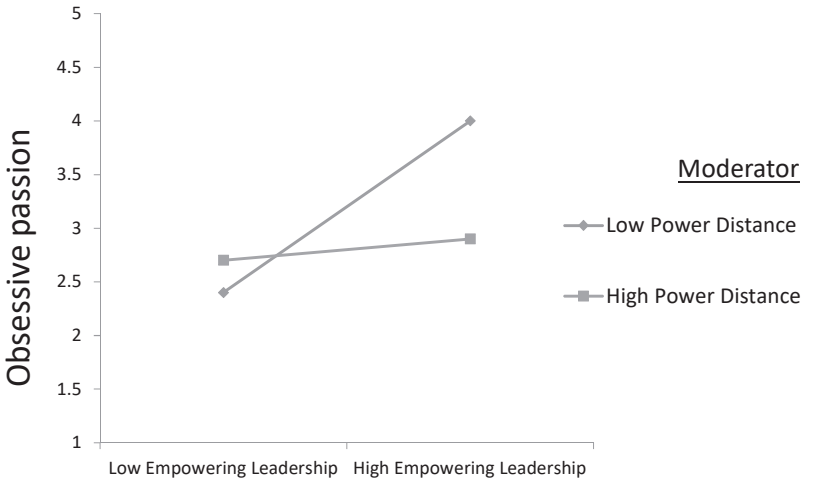
Moderator: power distance, DV: harmonious passion and obsessive passion	B	S.E	C.R	*p*	R^2
Constant	3.00				
Empowering leadership → harmonious passion	0.578	0.122	4.73	0.000	
Empowering leadership → obsessive passion	0.458	0.226	6.457	0.000	
Power distance → harmonious passion	0.436	0.135	3.129	0.001	
Power distance → obsessive passion	0.120	0.250	4.472	0.000	
Empowering leadership x power distance → harmonious passion	−0.072	0.030	−2.416	0.016	0.225
Empowering leadership x power distance → obsessive passion	−0.350	0.045	7.831	0.000	0.305

Note(s): $N = 205$
Source(s): Authors' own work



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 3. The moderating effect of power distance on the positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 4. The moderating effect of power distance on the positive relationship between empowering leadership and obsessive passion

Discussion (Study 1: the lab experiment)

Overall, the results of this study largely agree with prior research. Specifically, the results supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2 align with existing literature, elaborately discussed in Study 2. The findings did not support the mediating Hypothesis 3, which proposed that empowering leadership would positively relate to an obsessive passion, which would, in turn, negatively relate to IWB. This unexpected result, which challenges the conventional understanding, prompts consideration of factors such as the study design or sample characteristics that may have influenced the absence of the hypothesized mediating effect. Thus, further experimental research is warranted to delve deeper into these potential influences and to determine the generalizability of this mediating effect beyond the specific context of this study. In contrast to what we proposed in part of Hypothesis 3 on the relationship between obsessive passion and IWB, findings revealed obsessive passion to be positively related to IWB. This finding is consistent with the research that shows that obsessive passion can have positive outcomes (Ahn, 2020) in contrast to the traditional belief that obsessive passion only has adverse outcomes (Hao *et al.*, 2018; Lalande *et al.*, 2017). A potential reason for this result is that obsessive passion, a controlled motivation, can lead to positive outcomes such as increased effort and performance, autonomy, competence-needs-satisfaction, and relatedness-needs-satisfaction in the service sector (Ahn, 2020).

The results obtained for Hypothesis 4 indicate that in high power distance cultures, empowering leadership positively impacts harmonious passion, even after considering the adverse effects of power distance. These findings suggest that empowering leadership is a *potent* leadership style that can counteract the adverse effects of contextual variables, such as power distance. This agrees with the prior mixed results of the moderating influence of power distance in service research (Rasheed *et al.*, 2024; Vuong and Hieu, 2023). Specifically, Choi *et al.* (2024), for instance, found power distance belief to diminish the effect of employee empathy on customer gratitude but not on customer delight. Similarly, power distance did not influence the relationship between servant leadership and individual creative self-efficacy but attenuated the link between servant leadership and team creative self-efficacy (Yang *et al.*, 2017).

Our study's findings contribute to the literature on empowering leadership, work passion, IWB, and cultural values in service organizations (Bowen, 2024; Dahleez *et al.*, 2022; Vuong and Hieu, 2023), particularly in the context of China, a country with a high power distance

culture (Hofstede, 2001). While high power distance may generally hinder the effectiveness of empowering leadership (Antonakis and House, 2014; Vuong and Hieu, 2023), our study indicates that it might not completely eliminate its positive influence. This finding is particularly relevant for China, where the existing literature on empowering leadership and culture presents mixed findings. For instance, Fock *et al*. (2013), in their cross-cultural study, found a positive interaction effect between psychological empowerment and power distance on employee satisfaction. Their argument suggests that the social norms in high power distance cultures can create a foundation for organizational empowerment, which our study's findings support.

Discussion (Study 2: the field study)

The findings reveal that empowering leadership (1) is positively related to IWB directly and through harmonious passion, and (2) is negatively associated with IWB indirectly through obsessive passion. This way, it unearths both the *enabling* and the *burdening* effects of empowering leadership using both dimensions of work passion as the mediators. By doing so, this study contributes to a better understanding of empowering leadership, work passion, and IWB. Empowering leadership's dualistic nature, found in the current study, aligns with prior research investigating the paradoxical nature of empowering leadership (Cheong *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, the positive effect aligns with the prior studies concluding that empowering leadership positively affects creativity and IWB (Gkorezis, 2016; Hao *et al*., 2018; Rao Jada *et al*., 2019; Vuong and Hieu, 2023). In this way, we confirm the previous findings of empowering leadership as a *creativity enabler*. Not less importantly, on the other hand, the negative mediating effect of obsessive passion highlights the negative side of empowering leadership (Cheong *et al.*, 2016), highlighting its *burdening effect*. *Finally*, the results of power distance inhibiting the positive effect of empowering leadership on work passion also agree with previous studies that high power distance might decrease the positive effects of empowering leadership (Vuong and Hieu, 2023), which are usually more prevalent in low power distance cultures (Hui *et al*., 2004; Robert *et al*., 2000).

Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the literature by examining how empowering leadership, work passion, and the cultural value of power distance interact to shape IWB within service organizations (Bowen, 2024) in several ways. *Firstly*, by responding to research calls to experimentally manipulate empowering leadership and cultural values, i.e. power distance, and identify their influence on employee outcomes, e.g. work passion and IWB (Hao *et al*., 2018; Qian *et al*., 2018), it contributes to the experimental research in organization behavior. *Secondly*, it extends the existing literature, which suggests that future studies should expand the dualistic model of passion and motivation-based underlying mechanisms that can potentially justify the differential mediating effect of harmonious passion and obsessive passion between empowering leadership and creative outcomes (Chen *et al.*, 2015; De Clercq and Pereira, 2022; Hao *et al*., 2018). *Thirdly*, the study employs social exchange theory (Blau, 2017; Dahleez *et al.*, 2022) to explain the hypothesized relationships. Using this theory as a lens, it provides a rationale for the mixed results regarding empowering leadership's enabling and burdening effects. Specifically, it shows that the delegating behaviors of empowering leaders differentially influence IWB through harmonious passion (enabling effect) and obsessive passion (burdening effect). *Finally*, considerable research agrees that default leadership styles in China are paternalistic, directive, authoritarian, or hierarchical, in which the subordinates are dependent on leaders because the culture is deeply rooted in Confucian principles (Chen *et al*., 2011; Gu *et al*., 2018). In this backdrop, the current study adds to relatively nascent research investigating the role of empowering leadership in the Chinese context, especially in the service sector (Lin *et al.*, 2020; Su *et al.*, 2022).

Practical implications

Apart from its theoretical contributions, this study provides practical insights for service managers on leadership dynamics and enhancing innovative behaviors in the workplace by fostering harmonious passion, mitigating obsessive passion, and extenuating the harmful effects of power distance. *Firstly*, the findings demonstrate that harmonious passion positively mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and IWB, while obsessive passion has a negative mediating effect. To leverage this, service managers should empower employees by offering them autonomy, encouraging self-directed decision-making, and involving them in meaningful tasks. This can foster harmonious passion and, in turn, increase IWB. Specifically, top management should create an environment that allows supervisors to actively empower their subordinates, especially in roles where internalizing work is key to driving innovation. *Secondly*, while empowering leadership has many benefits, the study also suggests that it can sometimes lead to obsessive passion, which negatively impacts IWB. Managers should be mindful of this potential downside and balance empowerment with support mechanisms that encourage employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance and avoid becoming overly fixated on their work. Regular feedback and stress-management programs can help mitigate the risk of obsessive passion. *Thirdly*, the research highlights that power distance weakens the positive effects of empowering leadership on both harmonious and obsessive passion. In high power distance contexts, employees may be less receptive to empowerment, which can limit its effectiveness. Therefore, organizations should work towards lowering power distance by fostering a more egalitarian culture where employees feel comfortable voicing their ideas and taking initiative. This can be achieved through leadership training, promoting open communication, and encouraging a more participative decision-making process. *Finally*, this study underscores that an employee's dominant type of passion—harmonious or obsessive—affects their creative performance, including IWB. Contrary to the belief that all forms of work passion are beneficial (Ho *et al.*, 2011), this research shows that only harmonious passion enhances IWB, while obsessive passion can have detrimental effects. Thus, managers should focus on cultivating harmonious passion by aligning employees' work with their intrinsic interests and providing autonomy, allowing creativity and innovation to flourish. To sum up, this research suggests that organizations should strategically implement empowering leadership while being mindful of cultural factors, such as power distance, to maximize its benefits. By lowering power distance and fostering harmonious passion, managers can create a more innovative and engaged workforce.

Limitations and future research

Despite the contributions of the present research, several limitations point to potential avenues for future exploration. *Firstly*, while empowering leadership has significantly affected employee outcomes in various contexts, its effectiveness appears more pronounced in Western cultures characterized by low power distance. This study, conducted in an Eastern context—specifically, China—highlights cultural differences that may impact leadership dynamics. Empowering leadership is less prevalent in Eastern settings, where leaders often exercise authority through power and status, making decisions without consulting subordinates. Therefore, future research should test the proposed conceptual model in cross-cultural contexts to better understand how empowering leadership operates in different cultural environments. Additionally, the differential findings regarding the moderating role of power distance suggest that the relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion is highly contingent on specific levels of power distance. Future studies should aim to identify the precise threshold at which power distance affects the relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion.

Secondly, future research should further explore the boundary conditions that moderate the effects of empowering leadership, offering a clearer understanding of when it leads to positive versus adverse outcomes. A key area for investigation is organizational culture, which could either amplify or diminish the impact of empowering leadership. For example, cultures emphasizing

collaboration and autonomy may enhance its positive effects, whereas hierarchical cultures may hinder these efforts. While this study used power distance as a moderator, future research should explore other cultural elements that might shape the effectiveness of empowering leadership. In addition, the broader leadership context—such as alignment between leadership styles and team dynamics—could influence how employees respond to empowerment. Furthermore, individual differences, including self-efficacy, personality traits, and readiness for autonomy, deserve deeper investigation, as these factors could determine whether empowerment fosters engagement and innovation or, conversely, leads to role ambiguity and stress. Exploring these contextual factors will help to clarify when empowering leadership is most effective and offer practical insights for organizations looking to implement these strategies successfully.

Thirdly, despite similar findings across the two studies, the mediating role of obsessive passion between empowering leadership and IWB (H3) and the moderating role of power distance on the relationship between empowering leadership and obsessive passion (H5) were not substantiated in Study 1. These differences may be explained by the sample used in Study 1, which consisted of graduate students. Participants' limited familiarity with organizational practices—due to their age, inexperience, and lack of direct exposure to workplace behavior—might have impacted the generalizability of the results. Although this research aimed to maximize internal validity in Study 1 and external validity in Study 2, future studies should address these differences in sampling and replicate the measurements to strengthen the robustness of the findings, especially in experimental investigations. *Fourthly*, while the current research focused on a single country, i.e. China, to understand the effect of empowering leadership amid high power distance, we suggest future research to undertake cross-cultural studies so that more variability in the power distance can be gauged.

Finally, while the variables in the conceptual model were theoretically grounded, future research could benefit from incorporating other leadership styles commonly seen in the Chinese context, such as autocratic, transformational, or directive leadership, as control variables. Doing so would help isolate the unique effects of empowering leadership. Moreover, moderating variables such as personality dimensions (e.g. openness to experience) and mediating mechanisms like intrinsic and extrinsic motivation could further enrich our understanding of how empowering leadership affects IWB. By exploring these variables, future research can extend the theoretical framework and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between leadership styles and employee outcomes.

Conclusion

Using social exchange theory, the present research hypothesized the effect of empowering leadership on subordinates' IWB via harmonious passion and obsessive passion. As a result, the current research reveals nuanced pathways through which empowering leadership influences IWB. It also probed the interactive effect of empowering leadership and power distance. The results depict that harmonious passion positively mediates the link between empowering leadership and IWB in both studies, while empowering leadership positively influences obsessive passion, which, in turn, negatively impacts IWB in Study 2 only. The moderating effect of power distance inhibits the positive relationship between empowering leadership across both studies. Specifically, in Study 2, the influence of empowering leadership on harmonious passion turns negative from positive under high power distance conditions. In addition, power distance inhibited the positive relationship between empowering leadership and obsessive passion in Study 2 only.

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