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Harnessing Humility and Empowerment to Build Innovative Work Behavior in Tourism Employees

Bo Tan^{1*}, Yet Mee Lim², Lee Yen Chaw³

¹Nanchong Vocational College of Culture and Tourism, Nanchong, Sichuan, China

^{2,3}UCSI Graduate Business School, UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Leader humility, Empowering leadership, Harmonious passion, Innovative work behavior

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*Correspondence:

277757316@qq.com

Innovative work behavior is the key to the sustainable competitiveness of the tourism industry. This study aims to investigate ways to enhance innovative work behavior among tourism employees. The data were collected from 452 employees across various tourism enterprises in the Chongqing region of China. Multi-level structural equation modeling was employed to analyze the data. A significant positive relationship was found between leader humility and empowering leadership. In addition, harmonious passion and self-efficacy positively mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and innovative work behavior. Tourism organizations should realize that leader humility can effectively promote empowering leadership. Managers should be humble and observe employees' harmonious passion at work. They should also focus on creating a quality job environment that fosters work engagement and self-efficacy to enhance innovative work behavior among tourism employees. This study examines how to enhance tourism employees' innovative work behavior by developing and testing a research model that incorporates perceived empowering leadership and explores the mediating effects of harmonious passion and self-efficacy. This paper demonstrates the value of humble leader behavior in fostering innovative behavior within the tourism industry in China.

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In the era of the information economy, the global division of labor and industrial structure is changing rapidly. The competition situation is extremely fierce, the product life cycle is continuously shortened, and the convergence of technology is becoming increasingly common. Relying on innovations at all levels of the firm to achieve long-term survival and sustainable development has become the focus of current attention in both practice and

academia (Liu et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2024). At the individual level, employees' innovative behaviors are crucial for continuous improvement, transformation, and success for the organization (Khan, 2022). Employee Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) is a major determinant of organizational competitiveness, which refers to individuals' discretionary behaviors to explore, generate, promote, and apply new ideas for new product and service development (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Studies have shown that empowering leadership plays a crucial role in promoting employee creativity and IWB. Effective empowering leadership enables employees to identify with the objectives and values of the organization, to be more willing to bear the responsibility for the organization's future development, and to be more willing to engage in IWB (Madaan & Sharma, 2024; Yadav et al., 2023). Therefore, examining the relationships between empowering leadership and IWB is of the utmost importance. However, what leads to empowering leadership? Although empowering leadership has been widely studied by researchers, relatively few studies focus on the antecedents of empowering leadership in relation to work outcome variables (Tang et al., 2020). According to Tang et al. (2020), both leader traits and situational factors would predict empowering leadership. Ou et al. (2014) argued for the importance of humility in top managers and conducted a qualitative study to examine its association with empowerment. Hence, the present study attempts to investigate whether humble leaders tend to exercise empowerment. This study examines their association based on quantitative data.

In addition, IWB is a complex behavior, and the process leading to such a behavior needs to be examined adequately for a deeper understanding. Indeed, a number of scholars have called for the exploration of its internal mechanisms (Cheng, 2024; Du & Zhang, 2018; Madaan & Sharma, 2024). Zhang et al. (2018) stated that more studies are needed to examine the mechanisms that explain how empowering leadership leads to IWB, especially employee's self-evaluation such as self-efficacy. In the innovation process, employees require cognitive resources to generate and develop ideas in the early stage. At a later stage, employees need motivational strength to promote and implement the ideas (Madaan & Sharma, 2024). Hence, researchers such as Cheng (2024) and Madaan and Sharma (2024) call for further investigation of both cognitive and motivational mechanisms that lead to IWB. The present study further examines the role of cognitive and motivational mechanisms, including harmonious passion, work engagement, and self-efficacy, in the empowering leadership-employee innovation process.

The importance of work passion in the hospitality and tourism industry has been highlighted by Luu (2021). Harmonious passion will instill confidence and personal endorsement among employees, steering them towards the development of improved and new product offerings that meet the diverse needs of both domestic and international tourists. However, research has seldom explored the role of harmonious passion in explaining individual innovation in hospitality management (Luu, 2021). The significance of work engagement in the hospitality and tourism industry is also widely recognized by scholars. As stated by Li et al. (2023), employees exhibiting strong work engagement are more disposed to learn new knowledge and skills to advance their innovation capabilities. Recent studies on the mediating role of work engagement in explaining IWB were done in various research settings—IT firms in China (Li et al., 2023), manufacturing sector in Pakistan (Ghani et al., 2023), higher education institutes in Egypt (Hassan et al., 2024), luxury hospitality industry in

India (Nazir & Islam, 2020), firms in diverse industries in Latin America (Contreras, 2020), and hospitality and tourism industry in Pakistan (Barkat et al., 2024). However, the roles of harmonious passion and work engagement in the relationships with IWB are hardly studied in the context of China, where tourism is a huge industry.

Indeed, innovation in tourism is encouraged by the Chinese government. According to the Research Report on China's Cultural and Tourism Industries (2024), China's tourism industry is undergoing digital transformation and innovative development. The tourism industry requires innovation to provide diverse and personalized products and services to tourists from around the world. China has launched numerous distinctive tourism products, such as inter-provincial tours and rural tours, for foreign tourists to visit, take pictures, and explore local cultures. Innovative products and services include: (1) Nanjing Museum's "View the World," a virtual large-space immersive exhibition (Nanjing Museum's, 2025); (2) Zhangjiajie Scenic Area's unique performance products in three languages (Chinese, English, and Korean) which incorporate technology into traditional folk dances and customs (China.org.cn, 2025); and (3) Shanghai Yilong Hotel's bilingual guidance and signage (Chinese and English), Western style dining and Shanghai style snacks, and courier services for inbound tourists (Chinese Tourism Boosts Chinese Purchases, 2025). These products can meet the individualized needs of tourists from various countries, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of tourism in China and competing with neighboring Asian countries, such as Thailand, South Korea, and Japan (Transforming from a Tourism Giant, 2024). Innovation will give China's tourism industry a competitive advantage in the international market.

The number of travel agencies in China and the number of people employed in the tourism industry are expected to experience an increasing trend. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China reported that there were 16,541 A-level tourist attractions in China, with 1.653 million direct employees in year 2024 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025). In the first quarter of 2025, the number of foreign tourists entering China reached 9.215 million, an increase of 40.2% compared to the previous year (The 240-hour Visa Free Transit Policy, 2025). With a relatively large workforce and market in China's tourism industry, and the advancement of AI (artificial intelligence) technology, the traditional approach to tourism will no longer be sufficient to provide tourists with a sense of novelty. Innovation is a must. Studying IWB helps tourism enterprises cope with challenges and promote industrial upgrading and transformation. Since people are the source of innovation, and leadership plays a crucial role in influencing employee behaviors, a perceptual approach to examining the factors explaining IWB is just right.

In their systematic literature review on innovative work behavior concepts and contributions, AlEsa and Durugbo (2022) found that East Asia accounted for only 29% of the geographical region investigated, while hospitality made up only 6% of the industry sectors examined. In addition, the relevant research in this field is mainly concentrated in Western countries; whether the impact process of empowering leadership on employees' innovative behaviors in China is different from those in Western countries is still subject to further exploration and research. The review study done by Kelemen et al. (2022) has addressed this related issue. The authors indicated the importance of contextual conditions in examining the effectiveness of leadership. Some leadership styles and behaviors may be more acceptable to employees in the East than in the West. Humility and empowering leadership can be

examined in the Asian context to determine their influence on employees' behaviors, as humble leadership is more accepted by followers in Eastern cultures (Kelemen et al., 2022). The overall contribution of the present study to the extant literature would be the inclusion of leader traits (leader humility) in association with certain leadership and culture in examining employee innovation.

As discussed previously, most studies examine the mediating effects of work engagement and self-efficacy in the relationship between empowering leadership and IWB (Li et al., 2023; Madaan & Sharma, 2024), while ignoring the antecedents of empowering leadership (Tang et al., 2020). Hence, the present study claims that employees perceive a connection between humble leaders and empowering leadership, which should create a passion for work; this positive work passion would lead to work engagement and a sense of self-efficacy and both would lead to IWB. The present research study explores the correlation between leader humility, empowering leadership, harmonious passion, work engagement, self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior through the lens of social cognitive theory and social exchange theory.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Theoretical Basis: Social Cognitive Theory and Social Exchange Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was developed by Albert Bandura in conjunction with a modified version of social learning theory (Bandura, 2001). SCT consists of personal factors, environmental factors, and behavioral factors. Personal factors determine the ability of employees to perform a specific behavior such as innovative work behavior. Environmental factors refer to how the environment affects an individual's self-efficacy, such as the effect of leadership on self-efficacy. Behavioral factors refer to the actions taken by an individual. SCT suggests that internal factors do not solely determine individual behaviors; rather, individual behaviors result from a complex interplay between personal cognitive factors and environmental factors. By recognizing the complex interplay between these factors, we can develop more effective interventions that promote positive behavioral change. Indeed, various researchers have used SCT as the theoretical basis in studying innovative behavior (Madaan & Sharma, 2024; Su et al., 2024).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that human relationships are based on the exchange of resources between individuals. SET has important implications for understanding interpersonal relationships. By applying this theory, researchers can explain why people form relationships, what motivates them to maintain them, and what causes them to dissolve (Ahmad et al., 2023). Based on this theory, this study argues that when leaders show confidence in employees, give them responsibility, lead them to lead themselves, and allow autonomy among employees, employees will be more likely to react to the leaders in some way, such as developing positive work passion.

The Relationship between Leader Humility and Empowering Leadership

Humble leaders play a driving role in cultivating an atmosphere of both learning and growth within the organization. Chen et al. (2017) found that humble leaders avoid narcissism and complacency, stay away from flattery, are eager to learn, and can encourage employees to express their views; all these leader qualities are conducive to the formation of empowering

organizations. Ou et al. (2014) found that humble leadership promotes the organization to form an empowering atmosphere in Chinese enterprises. They suggested that CEO humility can (1) promote the formation of an empowering climate within the organization, (2) contribute to the unity of the senior management team, and then (3) improve organizational performance.

Empowering leadership and leader humility are two important but distinct concepts in the leadership literature. Empowering leadership is when leaders provide their followers autonomy, resources, and support to facilitate their growth and development (Yulianti & Usman, 2019). On the other hand, leader humility refers to the personal trait of leaders who are willing to acknowledge their limitations, admit their mistakes, and listen to and learn from others (Kelemen et al., 2022). Humble leaders are more likely to adopt empowering behaviors because they are not threatened by the development and success of their followers. Leaders who exhibit humility tend to engage in supportive relationships with their followers and lead through participation, collaboration, and empowerment resulting in psychological freedom (Morris et al., 2005; Owens & Hekman, 2012).

However, leader humility can have a dark side, making it a double-edged sword. If employees think a leader is being humble for selfish reasons, they may feel overly entitled, and this style of leadership may fail to promote empowering behaviors. Conversely, if employees believe that leader's humility is genuine, it can foster trust and empowerment in the leader (Qin et al., 2020). In the present study, we hypothesized that superiors with humility are genuine empowered leaders. Therefore, the following hypothesis was posited:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between leader humility and empowering leadership.

The Relationship between Empowering Leadership and Harmonious Passion

Harmonious work passion occurs when employees have a strong internal desire to do their work activities. They find that these activities are important and have a sense of willingness to invest time and energy to complete them (Hao et al., 2018; Vallerand et al., 2003). Gul et al. (2025) in their 2-study approach affirmed that (1) empowering leadership positively impacted harmonious passion among Chinese graduate students and (2) leaders who provide autonomy to their subordinates result in more motivated and passionate workers. Peethambaran and Naim (2023) proposed that empowering leadership is a bottom-up approach to decision-making where leaders who delegate power to their subordinates will bring about greater motivation and increased employees' work passion. Elsaied (2021) found that there was a significantly positive relationship between empowering leadership and employees' work passion for hotel workers in Egypt. Madaan and Sharma (2024) established in their study the direct and positive correlation between empowering leadership and harmonious passion within the hospitality sector.

However, a Study by Gul et al. (2025), which was a laboratory experiment conducted with graduate students, found that the typically positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion can turn negative when the boundary condition of high-power distance is present. Hence, the relationship between empowering leadership and

harmonious passion deserves further examination. It can be inferred from the existing literature that empowering leadership positively impacts harmonious passion at work, especially for workers in hospitality and tourism-related service-oriented sectors. Therefore, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between empowering leadership and harmonious passion.

The Relationship between Harmonious Passion and Innovative Work Behavior

Research suggests that employees who have a harmonious passion for their work are more likely to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs, resulting in innovative work behavior (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Additionally, harmonious work passion can often bring positive effects to the organization. For example, a harmonious work passion can encourage employees to invest more time and energy, as well as exhibit more innovative work behaviors (Lin & Zhou, 2024). It has been found that workers with a high level of harmonious work passion exhibit greater creativity within the organization and make more efforts beneficial to the organization (Hao et al., 2018). In addition, a team with high harmonious work passion can bring better performance, higher innovation power, and vitality to the organization (Lin & Zhou, 2024). Harmonious passion also allows employees to feel a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. Employees who feel empowered and supported are more likely to be passionate and engaged in their work, resulting in increased work performance (Ho et al., 2018).

On the other hand, Wu and Shen's (2024) study demonstrated that supervisors who only care for the bottom-line outcome will reduce employees' harmonious passion, thus creating an indirect negative effect on IWB. Since most studies argue for a positive relationship between positive work passion and IWB, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between harmonious passion and innovative work behavior.

The Relationship between Harmonious Passion, Work Engagement and Innovative Work Behavior

Employee work engagement can be explained via a trifold approach where a member of an organization is present physically, mentally, and behaviorally exhibiting a positive attitude toward their job. The member is aligned with the organization's objectives, resulting in a deep immersion in their duties while at work (Ghani et al., 2023). Nazir and Islam's (2020) study concluded that motivated employees were strongly linked to employee work engagement. Motivated employees have a strong desire and passion for work, and they tend to identify well with their jobs. It can then imply that employees who are passionate about their job tend to be more engaged in their work. This is supported by the rationale provided by Vallerand et al. (2003), who argue that passion for work (characterized by a liking for the task and high energy expenditure) is strongly associated with engagement in invested activities.

Nevertheless, some studies have shown mixed or weak results regarding this relationship. They do not find a strong or consistent link between harmonious passion and work engagement across different situations (Ho & Astakhova, 2018). Therefore, such a relationship is not always positive, but it is not clearly negative either. In the context of this study, we hypothesized a positive association between harmonious passion and work engagement.

Hypothesis 4a. There is a positive relationship between harmonious passion and work engagement.

Various studies have supported a positive relationship between work engagement and IWB. Hassan et al. (2024) found a positive and direct impact of work engagement on IWB of the academic staff in the higher education sector especially when they are motivated and engaged at work. Contreras et al. (2020) concluded that through different types of leadership, work engagement is a key component in promoting IWB among the employees of diverse companies across seven countries in Latin America. In the Indian luxury hospitality industry, Nazir and Islam (2020) found that employees tend to exhibit more IWB when they are more engaged at work. Nguyen and Petchsawang (2024) also found that employees' work engagement positively influences the IWB of Gen Zs in Vietnam when these employees are able to think more independently, are more flexible, and are more inventive when they are actively involved at work. Ghani et al. (2023) concluded that engaged employees tend to display more IWB in the manufacturing sector in Pakistan, even across different generational cohorts. Therefore, it can be seen from past studies that employee engagement significantly impacts the IWB of employees across different sectors, age groups, countries, and regions.

Hypothesis 4b. There is a positive relationship between work engagement and innovative work behavior.

The mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between leadership and IWB has been acknowledged by the researchers (Li et al., 2023; Madaan & Sharma, 2024). It has also been acknowledged that employees who have a passion for their work tend to be more engaged by investing time and effort in targeted activities, as discussed in Hypothesis 4a above. Hence, employees are able to exhibit IWB through their deep involvement and engagement in innovative activities. By merging hypotheses 4a and 4b, it can be inferred that employee work engagement mediates the relationship between harmonious passion and IWB.

Hypothesis 4c. Work engagement mediates the relationship between harmonious passion and innovative work behavior.

The Relationship between Harmonious Passion, Self-Efficacy and Innovative Work Behavior

Self-efficacy is a psychological concept introduced by Bandura (1978), denoting a person's confidence in their ability to perform a specific task or succeed in a particular situation. Self-efficacy is related to one's sense of competence, influencing motivation, behavior, and performance. Factors influencing self-efficacy include personal performance or experience,

role models, persuasion and encouragement from others, and emotional and physiological states (Bandura, 1978). Studies show that harmonious passion is a positive emotional arousal that enhances people's belief in their own capabilities. Harmonious passion consists of both affective and cognitive elements, whereby employees not only enjoy doing their work but also voluntarily internalize it (Hao et al., 2018; Luu, 2021; Vallerand et al., 2003). When employees gain more resources (empowerment) and have more control over their job, it instills their passion and subsequently enhances their self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 5a. There is a positive relationship between harmonious passion and self-efficacy.

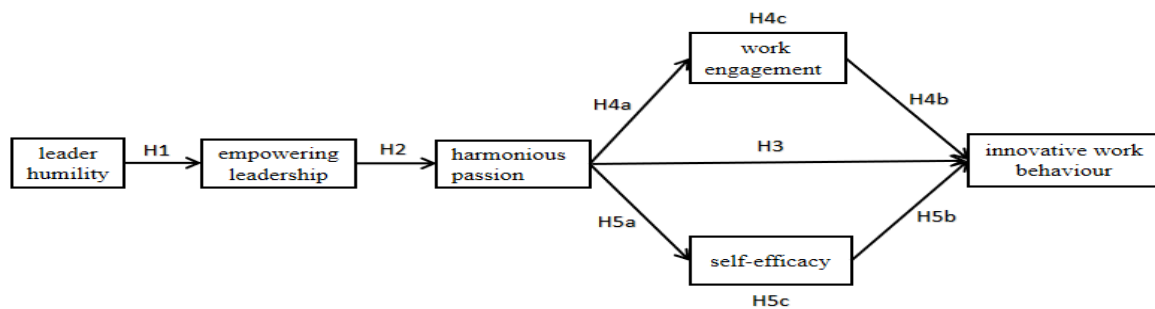
Rooted in social cognitive theory, self-efficacy has been widely acknowledged as a critical factor influencing creative processes and individual innovation (Yulianti & Usman, 2019). Self-efficacy is an individual's trust in themselves that nurtures intrinsic motivation by enhancing feelings of self-competence, which leads to creative work behavior; hence, it is a critical predictor of IWB (Ahmed et al., 2019; Bavik & Kuo, 2022). Indeed, Namono et al. (2024) found that self-efficacy directly impacted IWB in exploring ideas, generating ideas, championing ideas, and implementing ideas among the public university employees. A higher level of self-efficacy enables individuals to engage in more creative activities and seek out unique and useful ideas to achieve the objectives of their organizations. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5b. There is a positive relationship between self-efficacy and innovative work behavior.

The role of self-efficacy in the relationship between harmonious passion and IWB is hardly studied. Jan et al. (2021), in their study of hospitality employees in Pakistan, examined the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between harmonious passion and service innovative work, and they found that this relationship is strengthened by those who exhibited greater self-efficacy. However, we argue that self-efficacy will have a mediating effect on the relationship between harmonious passion and IWB. It has been acknowledged that employees with a passion for their work will increase their self-efficacy in the targeted activities, as discussed in Hypothesis 5a above. Hence, employees are able to exhibit IWB through their perceived ability in innovative work activities. By merging hypotheses 5a and 5b, it can be inferred that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between harmonious passion and IWB. Thus,

Hypothesis 5c. Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between harmonious passion and innovative work behavior.

The framework depicting the hypotheses of the present research study is shown in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1*Research Model of the Study*

Method

Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

The target respondents of this research were full-time employees working in various tourism enterprises in the Chongqing region of China. They were tour guides, waiters, marketers, supervisors, operators, designers, and trainers who represented the main professions in the tourism industry. In this study, data collection was conducted through a self-reported web-based survey instrument using convenience sampling. The original questionnaire in English was translated into Chinese using the procedure described by Brislin (1980).

Respondents were first approached by the researchers to participate in this online survey. Respondents' consent was obtained prior to their participation in this research, and their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The researcher then input each question into the Questionnaire Star Website (<https://www.wjx.cn/>) to generate a link to the online questionnaire, which was subsequently distributed to the target respondents. Most of the respondents were graduate students majoring in tourism and were working full-time in the tourism industry at the time of data collection. The researchers managed to collect data from 452 individuals—a sample size large enough for this study. Hair et al. (2017) recommend a sample size ranging from 150 to 400 observations for structural equation modeling to ensure adequate statistical power and model stability. Additionally, according to G*Power software, the required minimum sample size for this study was 153.

Measurement Scales

The research instrument consisted of two distinct sections: Section A collected demographic data, including age, gender, marital status, employment classification, organizational tenure, and industry-specific work experience within the tourism sector. Section B measured respondents' perceptions of the constructs. The measurement scales employed in this research were adapted from established instruments in the literature to ensure contextual appropriateness. Leader humility was measured using nine items from Owens et al. (2013). Sample item is "My supervisor admits it when he/she doesn't know how to do something." Empowering leadership was measured using four items from Vecchio et al. (2010). Sample item is "My supervisor encourages me to find solutions to problems without his/her direct inputs." Harmonious passion was measured using six items from Vallerand (2003). Sample item is "My work activities allow me to live a variety of experiences." Work engagement was measured using six items from Panthee et al. (2014). Sample item is "I am immersed in my work." Self-efficacy was measured using eight items from Chen et al. (2001). Sample item is

“I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks.” Lastly, IWB was measured using four items from Radaelli et al. (2014). Sample item is ‘I usually introduce small innovations into my work practices.’ These items were measured on a 6-point scale ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree.

Characteristics of the Respondents

About two-thirds of the respondents were female (72.3%), and one-third were male (27.7%). Majority of them were below 30 years old (84.5%) and were single (74.8%). In terms of working experience, 67.1% of the respondents had been working in their respective organizations for two years or less. Similarly, 84.3% of them were involved in the tourism industry for two years or less.

The sample characteristic was representative of the industry characteristic, where females were the dominant group of employees in the tourism sector in China. The statistics in a report by Ctrip Group (2023) show that female employees in the travel industry account for more than 60% of the workforce, with women representing over 30% of senior management roles, exceeding the proportion found in the Internet and technology sectors. Again, the 2024 Travel Industry Women's Employment Research Report, conducted by Ctrip Group and 10 other leading travel companies in China, has indicated that the travel industry is one of the industries that absorbs the most women in employment.

Statistical Analysis

The research employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) for data analysis. Common method bias, model fitness, the research model's capacity for prediction and effect size, and the mediating effects were examined accordingly. Common method variance was assessed using Harman's single-factor test. The results showed that the shared variance was less than 50% and that the average of substantive variance (Ra2) is substantially greater than their method variance (Rb2) with a ratio of 213: 1. Hence, the diagnostic tests indicated the absence of common method variance concerns in this investigation.

Analysis of the Measurement Model

Both reliability and validity must be met when examining a measurement model. Reliability is considered established when the composite reliability index is more than .70 (Hair et al., 2020). Regarding validity checks, discriminant and convergent validity are the two types of validity that must be established in SEM. If the indicator loadings are greater than .70 and the average variance for each construct is greater than .50, convergent validity is achieved. To fulfill discriminant validity, Heterotriat-Monotrait (HTMT) values must be lower than .85 (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 1 shows that the composite reliability ranged from .90 to .93, the indicator loadings ranged from .70 to .87 (greater than .70), and the average variance ranged from .60 to .70 (greater than .50). Convergent validity and reliability were established. Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT ratio. HTMT values must be lower than .85 to achieve discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 2 shows that HTMT values ranged from .41 to .78 (all below .85); hence, discriminant validity was also established.

Table 1*Convergent Validity and Reliability*

Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Leader Humility	LH1	.84	.92	.93	.60
	LH2	.79			
	LH3	.79			
	LH4	.76			
	LH5	.83			
	LH6	.70			
	LH7	.75			
	LH8	.77			
	LH9	.74			
Empowering Leadership	EL1	.85	.86	.90	.70
	EL2	.82			
	EL3	.84			
	EL4	.85			
Harmonious Passion	HP1	.85	.88	.91	.62
	HP2	.78			
	HP3	.79			
	HP4	.79			
	HP5	.75			
	HP6	.78			
Work Engagement	WE1	.83	.88	.91	.63
	WE2	.78			
	WE3	.76			
	WE4	.77			
	WE5	.80			
	WE6	.82			
Self-Efficacy	SE1	.83	.92	.93	.63
	SE2	.76			
	SE3	.86			
	SE4	.86			
	SE5	.74			
	SE6	.76			
	SE7	.76			
	SE8	.77			
Innovative Work Behavior	IWB1	.81	.86	.91	.71
	IWB2	.83			
	IWB3	.87			
	IWB4	.85			

Note. LH=Leader Humility; EL=Empowering Leadership; HP=Harmonious Passion; WE=Work Engagement; SE=Self-Efficacy; IWB=Innovative Work Behavior.

Table 2*Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*

	WE	EL	HP	IWB	LH	SE
WE						
EL	.45					
HP	.41	.72				
IWB	.59	.77	.71			
LH	.45	.67	.54	.62		
SE	.48	.75	.52	.78	.55	

Note. LH=Leader Humility; EL=Empowering Leadership; HP=Harmonious Passion; WE=Work Engagement; SE=Self-Efficacy; IWB=Innovative Work Behavior.

Analysis of the Structural Model

Table 3 presents the findings of path coefficient testing. To establish t-statistics, this study employed a bootstrapping method with 5,000 subsamples. Structural relationships among variables were analyzed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) methodology. The results reported

in Table 1 indicate that the t-statistics for all paths exceed 1.96, indicating significance. These results show H1, H2, H3, H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b are all significant. According to Hair et al. (2017), the contribution of an external variable to the R^2 value of an endogenous variable is indicated by the impact size f^2 , with values of .02, .15, and .35 representing weak, medium, and strong effects, respectively. Table 3 shows that H1, H2, and H6 have a strong effect, H3, H4a, and H5a have a medium effect, and H4b has a weak effect.

Table 3
The Hypothesis Results

Path	Original	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Supported	f^2	Effect size
LH→EL (H1)	.60	.04	16.11	0	Yes	.56	Strong
EL→HP (H2)	.63	.03	21.17	0	Yes	.65	Strong
HP→IWB (H3)	.34	.04	8.30	0	Yes	.24	Medium
HP→WE (H4a)	.36	.05	7.96	0	Yes	.15	Medium
WE→IWB (H4b)	.19	.04	5.22	0	Yes	.08	Weak
HP→SE (H5a)	.47	.04	11.92	0	Yes	.29	Medium
SE→IWB (H5b)	.45	.04	12.13	0	Yes	.37	Strong

Note. LH=Leader Humility; EL=Empowering Leadership; HP=Harmonious Passion; WE=Work Engagement; SE=Self-Efficacy; IWB=Innovative Work Behavior.

According to Hair et al. (2017), a model has predictive validity for an endogenous variable if its Q^2 is greater than 0 and $0 < R^2 < 1$. Table 4 shows that the model has predictive validity ($Q^2 > 0$, $0 < R^2 < 1$). The SRMR value should be below .08 and the NFI value above .90 to confirm a good model fit (Hair et al., 2017). Table 4 shows that the model fit is acceptable (SRMR = .04 and NFI = .89, close to .9).

Table 4
The Model Evaluation

Variable	R^2	R^2 adjusted	Q^2	SRMR	NFI
WE	.13	.13	.08	.04	.89
EL	.36	.36	.25		
HP	.39	.39	.24		
IWB	.62	.62	.43		
SE	.22	.22	.14		

Note. EL=Empowering Leadership; HP=Harmonious Passion; WE=Work Engagement; SE=Self-Efficacy; IWB=Innovative Work Behavior.

The investigation of mediating effects was carried out in the current study. The aim of mediating effects analysis is to determine the indirect relationships between variables through path coefficients. As shown in Table 5, the testing for mediating effects showed that work engagement mediates the relationship between harmonious passion and innovative work behavior, and self-efficacy mediates this relationship. Therefore, hypothesis 4c (HP → EE → IWB) and hypothesis 5c (HP → SE → IWB) are also significant.

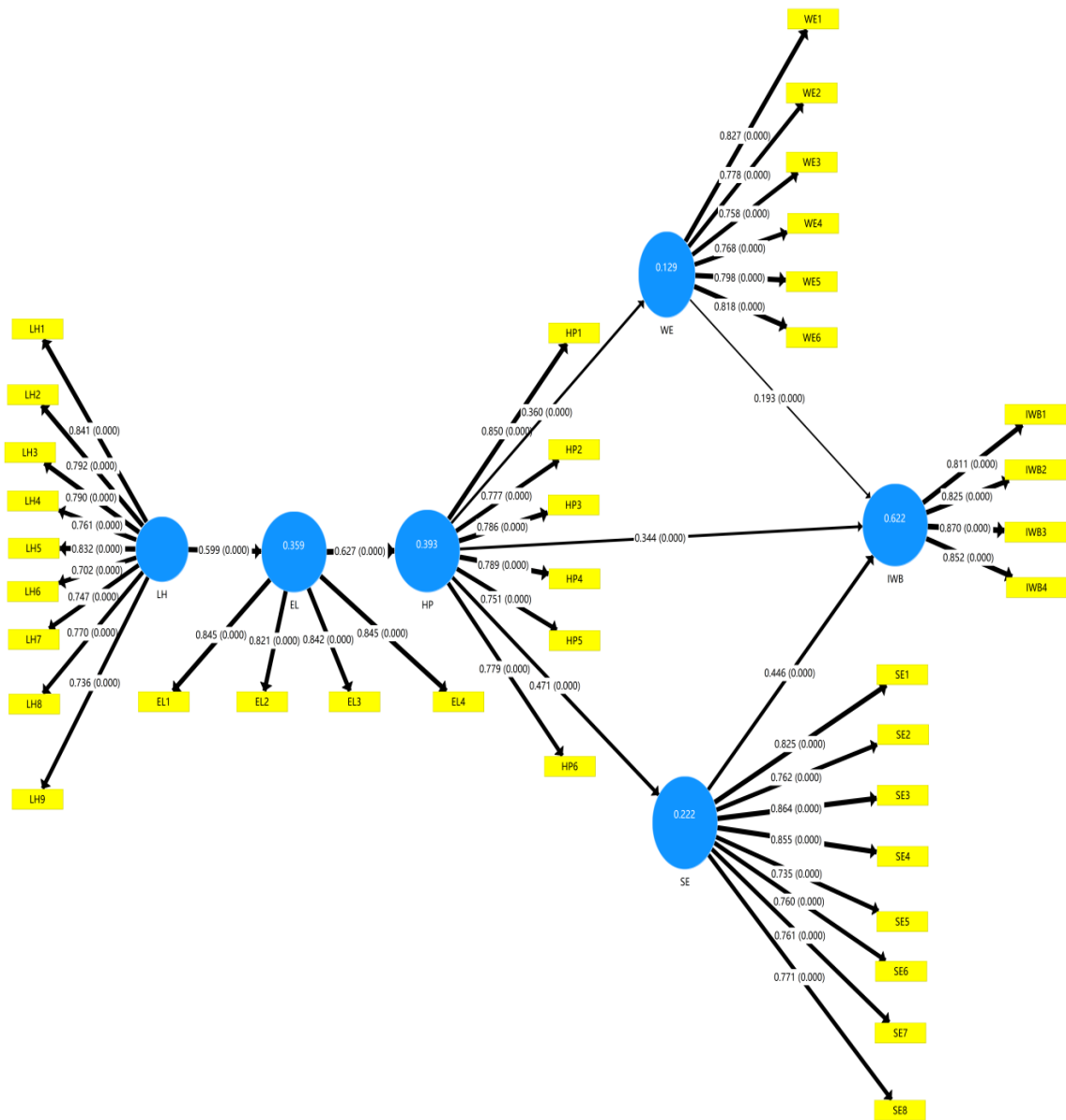
Table 5
The Mediating Effects Verification Table

Hypotheses	Path	Original sample (O)	SD	t	p	Bias corrected confidence intervals	Supported
H4c	HP → WE → IWB	.07	.02	4.19	.00	.04	YES
H5c	HP → SE → IWB	.21	.03	8.15	.00	.16	YES

Note. *significant at $p < 0.05$ based on 5000 bootstraps; LH=Leader Humility; EL=Empowering Leadership; HP=Harmonious Passion; WE=Work Engagement; SE=Self-Efficacy; IWB=Innovative Work Behavior.

The assessment of the structural model primarily aims to test the significance of the path coefficient, the explanatory power, and the model fit. [Figure 2](#) shows the SmartPLS output of the structural model in this study.

Figure 2
Structural model with path coefficients, indicator loadings, and R-squares (N=452)



Discussion

This study yields three key theoretical insights with empirical support. First, cultural differences affect leadership. Leader humility is regarded as virtue in Chinese culture; it not only strengthens leadership but also helps leaders better cope with complex situations. Our findings support H1, which posits a positive association between leader humility and empowering leadership. This result is partially consistent with a few prior studies such as the structure and measurement of humble leadership in the Chinese cultural context (Chen et al., 2017). Humility in leadership involves being willing to acknowledge one's limitations, seek feedback from others' opinions and suggestions, and learn from their experiences and ideas. This leadership style fosters innovation, growth, and success in an organization (Kelemen et al., 2022). Therefore, in the Chinese tourism industry, humble leadership is a highly beneficial style for leadership, as it fosters an open, transparent, and collaborative culture that effectively empowers and motivates team members, ultimately helping organizations achieve better results.

Second, empowering leadership can promote employee growth. The H2 has shown that empowering leadership promotes employees' harmonious passion for their work. This result is partially consistent with previous findings, such as the activation of harmonious passion by empowering leadership, which fosters the cognitive and affective growth of employees (Hao et al., 2018). H3 discovered a positive relationship between harmonious passion and innovative work behavior. It has also been partially confirmed that the influence of harmonious passion on the relationship between human resource flexibility and innovative work behavior (Luu, 2021). By earning sincerity, trust, and respect, employees of tourism companies working under empowering leadership experience more harmonious passion in their work. They are compelled by the harmonious passion to feel good about their work and come up with various original ideas (Lin & Zhou, 2024). These workers then exhibit more inventive work behaviors to contribute to their businesses' sustainable growth. Employees themselves have also experienced growth.

Third, this study reveals a dual-channel psychological mechanism influencing innovative work behavior. Employees become more innovative in doing their jobs through their work engagement and self-efficacy. The results also partially align with prior studies, such as the potential of promotion focus in strengthening the indirect impact of job control on employee creativity through creative self-efficacy (Du et al., 2018). As Hypotheses 4a-4c propose, harmonious passion promotes work engagement, which in turn stimulates innovative work behavior. When employees are passionately involved in their work, they are more focused, energetic, and committed. This high-level engagement allows them to allocate more cognitive resources to exploring new ideas, ultimately fostering innovation (Liu et al., 2024). Validated by Hypotheses 5a-5c, this indicates that harmonious passion enhances self-efficacy, which then positively impacts innovative work behavior. Passionate employees are more confident in their abilities, believing they can handle complex tasks and overcome obstacles during the innovation process (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). This self-belief encourages them to pursue innovative projects. These studies have found that the mediating effects of self-efficacy and work engagement in the relationship between leadership and employee innovation include those of Contreras (2020), Li et al. (2023), and Madaan and Sharma (2024).

Theoretical Implications

First, this study proves that employees' innovative work behavior is caused by the complex interaction between individual cognitive factors (psychological mechanisms) and environmental factors (cultural background and leadership influence). The research findings support Social Cognitive Theory, whereby perceived empowerment provided by leaders (a contextual factor) in conjunction with a passion for work (an individual factor) leads to self-efficacy (a cognitive factor), which subsequently has a positive impact on employees' innovative behavior. Second, this study demonstrates that leader humility and empowering leadership are indicators of respect and trust towards employees, and employees are more likely to provide behavioral feedback. The research findings also support Social Exchange Theory, whereby employees reciprocate with their work engagement and innovative behaviors in response to perceived kindness, support, freedom, and opportunities for self-control from their superiors. Third, this study has highlighted the importance of including leader traits as antecedents of leadership in examining the process of building employee innovation behaviors. Research model development may also include other antecedents, such as personality types, attitudes, and leader competencies. For example, conscientiousness is associated with transactional leadership, while agreeableness is linked to humble leadership and empowering leadership (Maldonado et al., 2022; Zadok & Benoliel, 2023). Additionally, the exercise of certain leadership roles may be influenced by individual willingness and capabilities, as well as age and experience.

Lastly, the present study supports the identification of boundary conditions in studying the effectiveness of leadership as discussed by Kelemen et al. (2022). Leadership may be more influential in certain cultures when leadership-culture fit is achieved; i.e., when the type of leadership is socially acceptable. In addition, the type of followers can be a boundary condition. Digital leadership may be effective in this AI (artificial intelligence) era, depending on the willingness and acceptability of the followers.

Managerial Implications

First, maintaining a “humble” management team is a prerequisite to instilling empowering leadership in the organization, especially in the Chinese cultural setting (Chen et al., 2017). Managers should be trained to engage in humble behaviors in their leadership process, thereby fostering employees' positive psychological states. Humility should be emphasized as a desirable work value and incorporated as a selection criterion in the recruitment and placement of managers in the organization.

Second, humble leaders are more likely to exhibit empowering leadership, which enhances autonomy among employees by narrowing the power distance gap and delegating tasks, responsibilities, and decision-making (Ali et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018). This study has shown that empowerment is associated with positive psychological states, including harmonious passion, work engagement, and self-efficacy; these affective, motivational, and cognitive mechanisms further enhance innovative work behavior in tourism services. Hence, organizational leaders should cultivate an enabling work environment that fosters harmonious passion, work engagement, and self-efficacy. Managers can provide employees with autonomy, resources, training, and support to foster a sense of fit and belonging, as well as build their confidence and belief in their abilities to succeed. Specifically, leaders can enhance

innovative behaviors, such as idea generation and problem-solving, by boosting their self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy is crucial in promoting innovative behavior among employees, as it directly influences their confidence, persistence, and willingness to take risks (Madaan & Sharma, 2024).

Third, tourism encompasses a diverse range of sectors, including travel, hospitality, transportation, communication, marketing, tourist destinations, eateries, and shopping, offering both intangible and tangible products to both domestic and international tourists (Duong et al., 2023). Innovations should occur throughout the entire supply chain, involving various service and retail providers, which requires effective partnerships and collaboration among these providers. Organizations in the tourism industry must continually improve and update their product offerings to meet the evolving demands of tourists. The research findings of the present study are applicable to all employees of this supply chain, as long as they serve tourists of all kinds.

Fourth, customer experience is a key factor in driving word-of-mouth and retention (Lin et al., 2025). If tourists receive more than what they bargain for and are treated well beyond their expectations, they will be delighted and come back for more. Hence, innovative work behaviors are crucial among front-line employees in the process of serving tourists. The innovativeness of these tourism professionals is needed to generate creative packages and services and implement them effectively to achieve “above-the-expectation” experience among the tourists.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study still has its share of shortcomings, despite the contributions mentioned above. First, the causality of relationships among the variables cannot be deduced from the results as only cross-sectional data were gathered. Future studies, conducted in a longitudinal manner, may be conducted to further understand the impacts of leader humility on employee innovation. Second, the generalizability of the research is a drawback of this study. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents were young females, and the sample for the current study consisted solely of tourism professionals in China's Chongqing region. Future research should investigate the impacts of leader humility and empowering leadership on innovative behaviors in different cultures and industries with more diverse respondents demographically. Third, this study examines only one leader trait (humility) in relation to empowering leadership. Future studies may investigate other leader personalities, attitudes, and competencies in relation to empowering leadership and employee innovative behaviors. Fourth, there may be variations in the impacts on innovative work behavior among employees of different nationalities, genders, races, ages, years of employment, and positions within a particular industry. In-depth studies are needed in the future to explore these group differences in relation to employee creativity and innovation. Fifth, additional research may incorporate other mediating variables, such as achievement motivation and flexibility, to examine the relationship between empowered leadership and innovative work behavior in the tourism industry. Employees in the tourism sector must be flexible in their service creation and delivery while adhering to industry protocols (Gjerald et al., 2021). Lastly, further studies may also incorporate moderating effects into the mediated relationship. For instance, job demands may moderate the relationship between self-efficacy and innovative work behaviors. The relationship between an individual's

belief in his or her ability and innovative performance may be negatively moderated by heavy job demands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in leadership research in several ways. It empirically validates leader humility as a critical antecedent of empowering leadership in China's high-power-distance cultural context. Unlike Western studies that focus primarily on leadership outcomes, this study demonstrates how a humble leader with empowering behaviors leads to positive psychological states, facilitating innovative work behavior.

This study also unveils a dual-mediation mechanism by integrating affective and cognitive pathways to explain employee innovative behaviors. This addresses prior oversights in the leadership and innovative work behavior literature, which have treated these mechanisms in isolation. Finally, this study offers tourism-specific insights by testing the model with frontline employees, a gap that is currently lacking in research on innovative work behavior in the tourism industry. This study has shown that effective leadership is crucial for enhancing employee innovation within the Chinese cultural context.

Declarations

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Approval

Ethics committee approval was first obtained for the study before data collection.

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