Enhancing Employee Innovative Behavior in China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) SMEs: Investigating the Impact Authentic Leadership, Psychological Empowerment, and Psychological Resilience

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Abstract:

Focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) sector, this study investigates how authentic leaders (AL) can enhance employees' psychological empowerment (PE) levels by building high-quality leader-employee relationships, which, in turn, promotes innovative behaviors (IB) within the framework of leader-member exchange (LMX). The study also examines the moderating role of psychological resilience (PR). This theoretical framework highlights the importance of leadership styles in impacting employees' psychological states and behaviors, especially in promoting organizational innovation. Through this study, organizations can understand and implement leadership development programs more effectively, promoting employee innovation and improving overall organizational performance. Additionally, this study contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding, aimed at supporting industry innovation, sustainable growth, and enhancing the international competitiveness of SMEs in China's ICH industry. The findings also provide empirical insights for policy makers to help nurture the industry and ensure the effective protection and development of China's intangible cultural heritage.

Key words: China's (ICH) SMEs, Leader-member Exchange (LMX), Authentic Leadership (AL), Innovative Behaviors (IB), Psychological Empowerment (PE), Psychological Resilience (PR)

Introduction:

China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) cultural and creative industries are currently in a critical period of development (Xu et al., 2022; Dang et al., 2021), facing a series of challenges and opportunities. Although the ICH cultural and creative industry is gradually gaining nationwide attention, this attention comes somewhat later than the attention ICH has received among the public. China's deep cultural heritage and rich experience in creative design provide valuable resources for the industry's development, encompassing a variety of tangible and intangible cultural heritages (Yang & Zeng, 2023). However, despite the support from national policies, the ICH cultural and creative industry still faces numerous challenges, including insufficient innovation, product homogenization, uneven quality, lack of uniqueness, a single sales channel, and inadequate marketing (Zhan, 2022; Tan et al., 2020).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a central role in this industry, being closely linked to flexible innovation (Müller, 2019). Employees in these companies often focus on improving craftsmanship and product quality, making designs more practical and applicable, but they sometimes neglect to innovate by utilizing modern technology and market rules. True innovation is not just about pursuing superficial novelty but should be effectively combined with the in-depth exploration and heritage of cultural essence (Yan & Chiou, 2021).

As an emerging field driven by creativity, the ICH cultural and creative industry is playing an increasingly important role in promoting national economic development (Tan et al., 2020). In this process, the creative activities of SME employees are particularly critical. Given that changes in the external environment are challenging to achieve quickly, the core strategy lies in how to implement internal reforms: fostering a culture of innovation within SMEs, timely adjusting leadership and management styles, and then stimulating employees' innovative behavior (Ye et al., 2022). This approach can effectively promote the healthy development of the ICH cultural and creative industry. The process requires not only flexible corporate management but also an effective combination of policy support and market orientation to jointly build an open, inclusive, and vibrant innovation environment. This environment will help unleash and utilize the potential of the ICH cultural and creative industries, promoting the overall development of China's culture and economy.

Theoretical Foundations:

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) is a concept that describes the quality of the overall exchange relationship between leaders and employees(Martin et al., 2016). The concept was first introduced by Graen and Uhl-Bien in 1995 and has since received extensive attention from practitioners and scholars, as noted by Arici et al. in 2021. Currently, scholars focus on leader-member exchange at the individual level. Originally derived from Role Theory (Graen & Scandura, 1987), it is now largely explained by social exchange theory, as evidenced in works by Afota et al.(2021)and Liao et al. (2010).

Leader-member exchange theory posits that due to limited resources, the exchange relationships established between leaders and employees with different characteristics and performance are not uniform, but rather vary in closeness and quality (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Vidyarthi et al., 2014). Specifically, in high-quality leader-member exchanges, social exchange forms the basis of the relationship between the leader and the employee, characterized by high levels of mutual respect, trust, affection, and support. In such relationships, employees are considered "insiders"(Liao et al., 2010). Employees who are "insiders" typically receive more resource support from their leaders and are expected to take on more challenging tasks and make greater contributions (Garg& Dhar,2017). In contrast, in low-quality leader-member exchanges, the leader-employee relationship is based on economic exchange, where the exchange is limited to a formal contract and the fulfillment of established duties and tasks, with the employee being seen as an 'outsider' (Yang, 2020). Working relationships based on social exchange are characterized by higher levels of loyalty, commitment, support, and trust than those based on economic exchange (Shanka & Buvik, 2019; Kingshott, 2006).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory effectively integrates authentic leadership (independent variable), psychological empowerment (mediating variable), and employee innovative behavior (dependent variable). This theoretical framework highlights the impact of leadership styles on employee behavior and psychological states, particularly in promoting organizational innovation. Authentic leadership emphasizes the leader's authenticity, transparency, and integrity (Covelli & Mason, 2017). This style involves open and honest communication between the leader and the employee, where the leader influences the employee through their authenticity, consistency, and ethical behavior. Such leadership behaviors and attitudes build trust in employees and promote more positive leader-employee relationships (Bryant & Merritt, 2021). Under the influence of authentic leadership, employees feel greater autonomy, trust, and support. Psychological empowerment is manifested when employees feel more in control of their work, valued for their efforts, and believe they can significantly impact work outcomes (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). This sense of empowerment enhances their autonomy and responsibility, key in promoting innovative behavior (Lee et al., 2021). With increased psychological empowerment, employees are more willing to take on challenges and explore new approaches and solutions, thus fostering innovation. In environments where employees feel empowered and are treated with respect and trust, they are more likely to demonstrate innovative behaviors, such as generating new ideas, improving processes, or developing new products (Li et al., 2019; Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2013).

The definition of Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership, a concept grounded in positive psychology, organizational behavior, and ethics, posits that an organization's authenticity reflects its leaders' personal authenticity (Brumbaugh, 1971). This form of leadership is characterized by a congruence between leaders' external appearance and their internal structure, defining authenticity as a social condition marked by minimal discrepancies between these aspects (Erickson, 1995). According to Henderson and Brookhart (1996), organizational authenticity is significantly influenced by the openness of the organizational climate. This openness pertains to the extent to which individuals resist personal change when taking on professional and leadership roles. They suggest that an open organizational climate is indicative of leaders who are cognitively open and grounded. Evans (2000) further highlights that authentic leaders are not only cognizant of their organization's values but also keenly aware of their own and others' values. In such open environments, authenticity influences individuals, their interactions, and their self-regulated behaviors (Novicevic et al., 2006). Ford and Harding (2011) support this notion by asserting that leaders achieve authenticity by minimizing ambivalence regarding their leadership roles.

In recent years, leadership researchers have increasingly directed their focus toward a developmental perspective of authentic leadership (Williams et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2011; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This perspective underscores a process that utilizes positive organizational contexts and competencies to foster the development of self-awareness and self-determination in both leaders and followers. It highlights the significance of leaders' self-awareness and self-regulation in influencing subordinates' attitudes and behaviors (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018). Core characteristics of authentic leadership encompass authenticity, intentionality, recommitment to spirituality, and sensitivity.

Further research, exemplified by the work of Hannah, Lester, and Vogelgesang in 2005, sheds light on the composite nature of authentic leadership. They observed that this form of leadership not only encompasses the traits, states, behaviors, and situations of the leader but also involves the interactions between the leader and subordinates. Kiersch and Peters in 2017 developed a four-dimensional model of authentic leadership, offering a crucial framework for research in this domain. The model proposes that authentic leadership comprises internalized ethics, balanced information processing, relational transparency, and self-awareness. This leadership style positively influences subordinates' perceptions and behaviors, partly due to the leader's utilization of positive psychological competencies and the establishment of an ethical organizational climate.

Authentic leaders are depicted as highly self-aware, capable of being open and transparent about themselves, consistently acting in alignment with their personal values, beliefs, motivations, and emotions, and presenting their genuine selves (Thacker, 2016). Many scholars refined these traits by categorizing them into two core components: self-awareness and self-regulation. Self-regulation encompasses balanced information processing, relational transparency, and internalized ethics, while self-awareness centers on a leader's values, identity, emotions, motivations, and goals (Steiner, 2016; Chon & Sitkin, 2021; Lumpkin & Achen, 2018).

In this study, we posited that in the Chinese context, authentic leaders consistently exhibit constitutive dimensions, including relational transparency, self-awareness, internalized morality, and balanced information processing (subordinate orientation). This conclusion is drawn from a combination of a comprehensive review of national and international research and structured interviews conducted in the corporate field. Authentic leadership exerts a significant influence on subordinates. Numerous studies have integrated literature related to identity and empowerment to clarify how leader authenticity impacts subordinate (follower) behavior (Gardner et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018; Sosik et al., 2014). These studies suggest that empowerment serves as a crucial motivational mechanism. Authentic leaders empower subordinates to perceive their authenticity, leading to enhanced work outcomes. This type of leader fosters enduring relationships with subordinates by leveraging their abilities, acknowledging, and rectifying their shortcomings, implementing goals, imbuing meaning and values, maintaining consistency, and persevering in the face of challenges.

The Definition of employee innovative behavior

Creativity and innovative behavior, though closely related in concept, focus on distinct aspects. Academics commonly perceive creativity as the process of conceiving original and novel ideas. Amabile et al. (1996) described creativity as the generation of ideas that are both novel and useful. Oldham and Cummings (1996) conceptualize creativity as the creation of products, ideas, or processes that are original, novel, and significant. Meanwhile, Zhou and George (2001) contend that employee creativity is evident through the introduction of new and valuable ideas concerning products or services, production techniques, and management practices.

Although innovation and creativity bear structural similarities, a detailed examination highlights their distinct differences. Scott et al. (1994) observed that innovation encompasses a more intricate process and carries a wider scope than creativity. According to Woodman (1993), employee innovative behavior extends beyond merely goal-oriented work to include innovative thinking. Fundamentally, creativity is about concocting new ideas, whereas innovative behavior involves implementing these ideas, effectively translating innovative thoughts into enhanced work performance and productivity (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2008). As such, innovative behavior is an extension of creativity, manifesting itself in subsequent workplace practices.

The scholarly understanding of innovation and creativity has seen an increasing convergence over time. Mumford and Gustafson (1988) delineated creativity as the process of individuals proposing novel and useful ideas. Expanding this concept, Van de Ven (1986) and Kanter (1988) posited that innovation encompasses not only the proposition of novel and useful ideas but also the execution of actions to materialize these ideas. Kanter further elucidated that innovation encompasses both the generation of ideas and their practical application, positioning creativity as the initial phase of the innovation process. The topic of employee innovative behavior has garnered significant attention from both researchers and managers. Choi (2004) underscored the importance of innovation for organizational effectiveness, noting that individual innovation is instrumental in driving organizational success. In today's globalized era, fostering employee innovation to secure sustained competitive advantages has become imperative for businesses (Waqas, et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2014; Steiner,2009; Paulus, 2000).

This study focuses on individual-level employee innovative behavior rather than organizational innovation. According to Scott et al. (1994), innovation is the result of employees' innovative intentions and ideas generated based on existing knowledge and skills, applied in practice after comprehensive analysis of these concepts or solutions. Several renowned scholars have defined employee innovative behavior from process or outcome perspectives. For instance, Van de Ven (1986) sees innovation as a product of individual innovation motives, including idea generation, modification, and practical implementation. Kleysen and Street (2001) found that innovation is a synthesis of innovative thinking and behavior, and any employee within an organization may engage in innovation. Janssen et al. (2004) argue that innovative behavior not only promotes employees' personal growth but also has positive effects on teams and organizations.

The Definition of Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment, originating from social psychology and organizational literature, is widely applied in behavior and social sciences. Joo, Lim, and Kim (2016) note that its definition varies across research domains, but its essence lies in enhancing employees' capabilities, thus improving their performance and attitudes. Hartline and Ferrell (1996) state that empowered employees exhibit more initiative, flexibility, resilience, and perseverance, and are more adaptable due to increased flexibility. Muduli and Pandya (2018) emphasize that empowerment and autonomy in decision-making are crucial for achieving genuine agility in employees.

It's also a critical factor in organizational success.

Spreitzer introduced "psychological empowerment" in 1995, defining it based on four cognitive dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning involves aligning an individual's job role with their personal beliefs and values. Competence entails an individual's belief in their self-efficacy and ability to successfully complete tasks. Self-determination is linked to the autonomy individuals have in choosing their job roles, reflecting their self-control. Impact concerns employees' perceptions of the extent to which their efforts influence task goals, others, or the organization.

Psychological empowerment, a key component of workplace empowerment, represents intrinsic task motivation or rewards behind enhancing the work environment. Joo et al. (2016) and Muduli and Pandya (2018) suggest that employee empowerment in organizations can lead to more meaningful work, self-efficacy, autonomy, and competence, key elements of psychological empowerment. These factors reflect employees' work orientations and are associated with positive outcomes. Psychological empowerment, based on intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, can inspire employees' proactivity, adaptability, and resilience.

The Definition of psychological resilience

Psychological resilience is a multifaceted concept that can be explored through three distinct lenses: capacity, outcome, and process (Bonanno et al., 2015; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Windle, 2011). Each of these perspectives contributes unique insights into the diverse aspects of psychological resilience, collectively offering a holistic understanding. By synthesizing these viewpoints, a more profound and nuanced comprehension of psychological resilience can be attained.

From the capacity perspective, psychological resilience is seen as an individual's ability to maintain healthy functioning in the face of stress or adversity (Sisto et al., 2019; Kadner, 1989). This view posits that psychological resilience consists of one or more innate positive psychological qualities, manifesting as the ability to cope positively with trauma. Some scholars suggest that this capacity is linked to stable personality traits, such as self-resilience, a sense of psychological coherence, resilience, optimism, and positive emotionality (Škodová & Bánovčinová, 2018).

In terms of developmental outcomes, psychological resilience is defined as "the ability of an individual to demonstrate resilience or developmental outcomes despite severe adversity" (Vella & Pai, 2019). In this framework, it is referred to as state resilience. While this perspective aligns closely with the phenomenological meaning of psychological resilience, distinguishing the function and role of psychological resilience from protective factors like social support and parenting styles can be challenging.

This study, however, adopts a process perspective, viewing psychological resilience as "a dynamic developmental process wherein individuals achieve positive adaptations in the face of difficult life circumstances " (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Rather than a static state, psychological resilience is considered a dynamic process of successful coping following specific dilemmas. Most scholars recognize the process-based definition, which incorporates elements of both quality-based and outcome-based definitions (Hiebel et al., 2021; IJntema et al., 2019). The American Psychological Association describes psychological resilience as a well-adapted process exhibited by individuals in response to life's dilemmas, threats, or significant stressors (Fikretoglu & McCreary, 2012), emphasizing positive adaptation in adversity (Oleś, 2015). This definition implies two aspects: first, the individual is facing adversity; second, the individual is adapting well to this adversity (Oleś, 2015).

The Relationship between Authentic Leadership and Employee Innovative Behavior

The relationship between authentic leadership and employee innovative behavior is crucial for understanding how corporate innovation is influenced by leadership. Snow (2019) found that contemporary business leaders should have a big-picture perspective and create conditions fostering employee innovation, thus improving the organization's competitiveness and talent attractiveness. This finding is supported by studies from Hynes and Mickahail (2019) and Lindebaum (2023).

Leadership style is a key factor influencing employee innovative behavior. Tierney et al.'s (1999) empirical study revealed that employees' intrinsic motivation, closely related to innovative performance, is influenced by leadership style. Grošelj et al. (2021) emphasized the positive role of authentic leaders in stimulating innovation awareness and encouraging innovation among employees. They support employees by providing organizational resources, ensuring the realization of innovative ideas. Numerous studies have explored the relationship between leadership styles and employees' innovative behaviors. Lv et al.'s (2022) study found that the authentic leadership style is closely related to employees and provides essential support for their innovation. Leaders' own behaviors, such as introducing new methods, ideas, and solutions, significantly contribute to creating an innovative atmosphere and influencing employees.

Authentic leaders are characterized by strong self-awareness, an understanding of their impact on the environment, and qualities like truthfulness and honesty (Gardner et al., 2005). They are highly adaptable and able to exert subjective initiative. Through self-awareness, internalized ethics, relational transparency, and balanced information processing, authentic leaders foster positive and stable development for themselves, their employees, and their teams (Raso, 2019). Specifically, the self-awareness of authentic leaders helps establish consistent values in teams, promoting team performance and fostering innovative synergy. They support and guide subordinates in expressing their authentic selves and encourage innovative ideas, thereby enhancing their creative abilities. Authentic leaders create a modeling effect in employee communication through positive self-awareness, ethical standards, and objective views, bringing positive energy and improving performance. By maintaining good relationships with employees, forming a cooperative atmosphere, and enhancing organizational identity and motivation, authentic leaders encourage employees to make greater contributions (Ertürk, 2010). They maintain transparent relationships with employees, share truthful information, and ensure high-quality information exchange, providing a fair and open work environment that stimulates employees' enthusiasm and innovative behavior. Authentic leaders also encourage innovation by reducing the fear of innovation failure, actively sharing information, helping employees master their work, discovering channels for innovation implementation, and promoting personal innovation.

The literature generally affirms the positive impact of authentic leadership in stimulating employees' innovative behaviors. Joo et al. (2016) suggested that authentic leaders can shape positive organizational contexts and increase employee motivation by building positive psychological capabilities. Chen and Sriphon (2022) found that authentic leadership can promote positive team behaviors, enhance team member competencies, and drive innovation. Duarte et al. (2021) highlighted that authentic leaders excel in analyzing and balancing information, delivering accurate feedback to employees, fostering internal motivation, and enhancing innovative behavior.

The Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment between Authentic Leadership and Employee Innovative Behavior

Psychological empowerment plays a pivotal mediating role between authentic leadership and employee innovative behavior. Authentic leaders effectively transmit influence by focusing on personal development in conjunction with positive psychological traits and the organizational context. Such leaders display high self-awareness, act in harmony with their words, and adhere to a strong ethical code to guide their subordinates (Wang et al., 2014). Psychological empowerment, as perceived by individuals, refers to the state and process of empowerment imparted by superiors, which, when strongly felt, fosters a positive psychological state towards work or activities.

Studies indicate that authentic leaders foster a sense of support and trust in subordinates through consistent actions and words, stimulating their positive psychological development (Maximo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2014; Alexander & Wilson, 2005). Further research suggests that employees' perceived level of empowerment is influenced by the exchange behaviors between leaders and employees. High-quality exchange relationships between leaders and employees enhance employees' initiative in work and their capacity for autonomous decision-making (Dhar, 2016; Boudrias et al., 2009; Wat & Shaffer, 2005).

Wang et al. (2021) found that authentic leadership significantly boosts employees' psychological empowerment levels. Authentic leaders enhance employees' mental states and self-efficacy by attending to their inner feelings and encouraging freedom of expression. The study by Tak, Seo, and Roh (2019) also confirmed that authentic leadership significantly improves employees' positive psychological states, with an optimal organizational environment playing a mediating role in this process.

Psychologically empowered employees exhibit more commitment and resilience, exerting greater effort and intrinsic motivation in their tasks (Muduli, 2017). They contribute significantly to organizational success and customer satisfaction, displaying independence and innovation. Employee innovative behavior involves developing, communicating, and implementing new concepts, techniques, or technologies in the workplace, thus enhancing the effectiveness of individuals, teams, or organizations (Jong, 2007). Understanding the impact of their work makes employees feel its importance, serving as a crucial motivator for innovation. Empowered employees perform more effectively and contribute significantly to achieving organizational productivity goals. Their enhanced autonomy and control over their work intensify their innovative behavior (Garg & Dhar, 2017; Özaralli, 2015).

In summary, authentic leaders, through psychological empowerment, directly or indirectly foster employees' work enthusiasm and innovative behavior. They enhance employees' innovative capabilities and behaviors by stimulating intrinsic motivation, mobilizing work enthusiasm (Jung et al., 2021), boosting self-efficacy, and providing growth and development opportunities in an optimized work environment (Fallatah et al., 2017). This underscores the crucial mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between authentic leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Psychological Resilience moderates the Relationship Between Psychological Empowerment and Employee Innovative Behavior

Innovative behavior is a key driver of firm survival and growth, with employees being the primary agents of firm innovation. Farrukh et al. (2022) assert that, essentially, firm innovation is synonymous with employee innovation. Many scholars define employee innovation behavior as the conscious introduction of new and useful ideas, products, or processes into their work roles (Tucker, 2002; Hausman & Johnston, 2014). Therefore, exploring and fostering innovative behavior in employees is a critical task for companies. Given the inherent high uncertainty and risk of innovation, those who dare to innovate require strong willpower and perseverance (Collins & Hansen, 2011; Branscomb & Auerswald, 2003). While everyone may aspire to have innovative ideas, thinking, and product implementation, not everyone is motivated to demonstrate innovative behavior, especially under organizational impetus. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may face higher risks of failure in innovation (Snieška et al. 2020), leading to frustration from multiple trials and errors, and consequently burnout in employees willing to innovate (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022).

However, psychological resilience plays a crucial and extremely positive role in combating job frustration and burnout and is particularly important for maintaining emotional stability and adapting to stress in adversity (Herbert, 2011; Alessandri et al., 2019). Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) emphasized the significance of psychological resilience for an individual's emotional state and stress adaptation in adverse situations. Studies indicate that employees with higher levels of psychological resilience are more likely to experience a stronger sense of empowerment, which positively impacts their job performance and helps reduce work-related frustration and burnout symptoms, thereby fostering innovative work behaviors (Bani-Melhem et al., 2021).

Good self-determination promotes the development of psychological resilience (Köksoy & Kutluer, 2023; Mahoney et al., 2014). Employees' cognition, dynamic actions, and behaviors are influenced by self-perceptions and psychological expectation constructs, including the belief in their own ability to produce creative outcomes. Psychological resilience, essentially the capacity to cope with stress and adversity, manifests as a proactive attitude and the achievement of positive adaptations to unfavorable environments and stimuli through self-regulation and control (De la Fuente et al., 2021). Research shows that individuals with higher psychological resilience can maintain a more positive mood during stressful events or adversity (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). The stronger a person's psychological resilience, the better their ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions. Employees with greater resilience are better equipped to self-regulate their emotions and positively cope with life and work stresses. Psychological resilience serves as an internal protective factor, counteracting the negative effects of psychological stress and assisting employees in positive coping. This modulation of psychological states and coping styles plays a moderating role between psychological empowerment and innovative behaviors in employees (Simione & Gnagnarella, 2023). Therefore, managers can implement effective strategies to enhance employees' psychological resilience, thereby fostering innovative behavior.

Conceptual Framework

In the context of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), this study focuses on exploring the relationship between authentic leadership (AL) and employee innovative behavior (EIB), with EIB serving as the dependent variable. It aims to examine the role of psychological empowerment (PE) as a mediator in this relationship, while also considering the moderating effects of psychological resilience (PR) within the overall mechanism model. The conceptual framework of this research, illustrating these relationships and roles, is depicted in Figure 1.
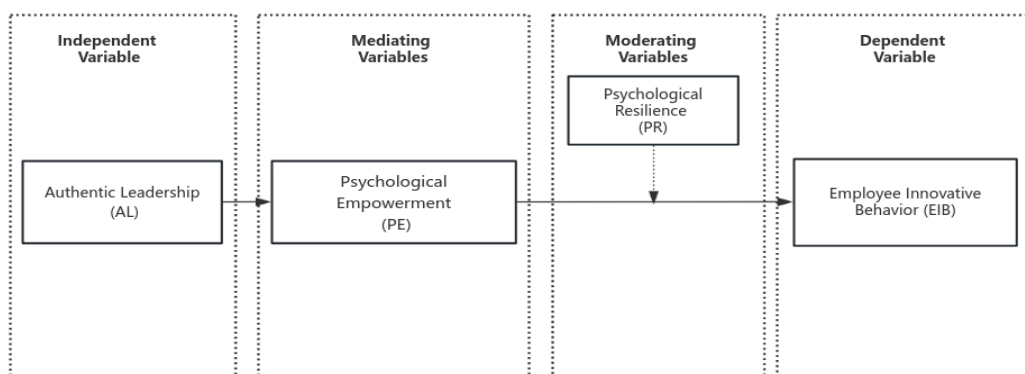

Figure 1. The Conceptual Research Framework

Significance of the study

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of authentic leadership styles on employee innovation behavior in China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) cultural and creative industries, filling a gap in both the theoretical and empirical literature. Previous research has seldom addressed the mechanisms through which authentic leadership influences employees' innovative behaviors, particularly with regard to individual psychological factors. Thus, this study examines how authentic leaders promote innovative behaviors among employees in organizations, focusing on the perspective of individual psychological states. The aim is to elucidate this process and to develop and refine the existing theoretical framework.

The paper adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to systematically explore the impact of authentic leadership on employees' innovative behaviors within organizations. It pays special attention to the specific context of China's ICH cultural and creative industries and addresses the process by which authentic leadership influences employees' innovative behaviors in real corporate settings. The study selects employees from SMEs in China's cultural and creative industries as a representative sample, collecting qualitative data through interviews and systematically conducting coding, generalization, and summarization. Additionally, the study employs hypothesis testing with data models to explore how authentic leadership influences employees' innovative behaviors through psychological empowerment and resilience.

The paper fully leverages the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods. It refines the theoretical framework from practice through qualitative research and proposes a rigorous, integrated theoretical model with testable research hypotheses based on relevant literature. The study collects data through small-sample surveys and formal study questionnaires, applying various quantitative data analysis methods to test the hypotheses. In summary, this study not only provides an in-depth, comprehensive, and meticulous analysis of the social phenomenon, explaining the complex issue of how authentic leadership affects employees' innovative behaviors in the context of Chinese ICH cultural and creative SMEs, but also supports the research hypotheses through literature. It establishes a dialogue between practice and theory and quantitatively tests the theory with extensive data, thereby enhancing the scientific validity and rigor of the research.

Conclusion

Under the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) framework, authentic leadership is posited to enhance employees' psychological empowerment by establishing high-quality leader-employee relationships, thereby stimulating innovative behaviors in employees. Consequently, authentic leadership affects employees' innovative behaviors not only directly but also indirectly through the mediating role of psychological empowerment. This theoretical framework underscores the significance of leadership style in shaping employees' psychological states and behaviors, particularly in fostering organizational innovation. A clear understanding of this framework enables organizations to implement more effective leadership development programs, thereby promoting employee innovation and enhancing overall organizational performance.

Many studies fall short in elucidating the specific mechanisms through which authentic leadership behavior impacts employee innovation behavior. This study endeavors to methodically investigate the process and mechanisms by which authentic leadership influences employees' innovative behavior, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Employing a hybrid research method that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches, this study leverages the strengths of both methods (Salah et al., 2017). Hybrid methods are particularly effective in addressing complex issues, overcoming the limitations typically associated with using either quantitative or qualitative approaches in isolation (Fröhlich & Von Terzi, 2008). This approach facilitates the extraction of theories from real-world phenomena and their validation through extensive data analysis (Ridder, 2017).

A comprehensive understanding of authentic leadership is essential for the scientific recruitment and development of individuals who exhibit such leadership qualities. This study reinforces the importance of authentic leadership, suggesting that organizations should actively seek out leaders or employees who either exhibit or have the potential to develop authentic leadership traits and behaviors. Prioritizing the development and training of these individuals is crucial. Encouraging them to proactively build their competencies and display behaviors that align with the fundamental characteristics of authentic leadership is instrumental. Doing so nurtures their authentic leadership abilities and, in turn, amplifies the innovative behaviors of their subordinates.

Future Directions

In this study, we focused on employees and leaders of Chinese cultural and creative SMEs that are not part of the heritage sector. While the cultural and creative industries hold a unique place in the Chinese economy, and this study fills an existing research gap, it remains uncertain whether our findings are applicable to other industries or to countries outside of China. A key question for future research is whether the manifestation of authentic leadership and its impact on employees' innovative behavior through moral identity is more pronounced in Chinese society, which is influenced by Confucian culture.

Conducting comparative studies across different industries and countries could more comprehensively explore the relationships between the core constructs of interest in this paper and uncover new possibilities.

This paper, which examines the impact of authentic leadership on employees' innovative behaviors, draws several meaningful conclusions but remains limited to an individual level analysis. Even when considering "organizational psychological empowerment," the study primarily relies on individual employees' subjective perceptions and does not integrate the experiences of all subordinates under the same leader or all employees within the same organization. It also fails to differentiate between explanations at the team and organizational levels and those at the individual level. Future research could benefit from cross-level studies that examine the processes of leaders influencing subordinates, using specific leaders, teams, or organizations as stratification variables in a theoretical model that incorporates a cross-level perspective.

Starting from the conceptual core of authentic leadership, this paper argues that the role of authentic leadership is especially valuable in today's turbulent external social environment. However, the study did not empirically measure the severity of the external environment, nor did it use objective macroeconomic indicators to reflect this aspect. Future research could investigate the influence of external environmental factors on the effectiveness of authentic leadership. This approach would not only expand the understanding of the role of authentic leadership but also provide a direction for interdisciplinary research, potentially enhancing expertise across various fields. In the current context of increasing uncertainty in the external environment, unpredictable international relations, and significant shifts in geopolitical dynamics, this approach holds significant theoretical and practical relevance.

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