

MOTIVATING EMPLOYEE AMBIDEXTERITY: FUNCTION AND DYSFUNCTION OF EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP

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Annotation. Drawing on the job demands–resources theory, this study aims to hypothesise and test the competing dual processes through which empowering leadership influences employee ambidexterity. In particular, the moderating role of task uncertainty in shaping the balance of empowering leadership's effectiveness is explored. We used a time-lagged design to collect all variables in two phases. Of 475 employees, 389 usable responses from 83 innovative teams in central China were collected for analysis. The findings reveal that empowering leadership is positively associated with employees' role control and role workload, which, in turn, have differential impacts on exploration activities: role control exerts a significantly positive influence, whereas role workload exerts a significantly negative influence. Conversely, while role control positively affects exploitation activities, role workload does not demonstrate a significant impact on exploitation. Moreover, task uncertainty moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and role control, weakening the positive association. These findings provide novel insights into the nuanced effects of empowering leadership on exploration and exploitation activities, offering practical implications for managers seeking to implement empowerment practices effectively.

Keywords: empowering leadership, job demands-resources theory, exploration activities, exploitation activities, task uncertainty.

JEL classification: M10, M12, O18, D81.

Introduction

To ensure a competitive edge and long-term survival, organisations have to both explore new opportunities to build future competitive advantages and exploit existing certainties to maintain their existing advantages (March, 1991). Numerous studies recognise the essential role of ambidexterity, defined as pursuing both exploration activities (seeking new knowledge & opportunities) and exploitation activities (refining existing skills & processes), in fostering organisational and sustainable innovation capacity (Beger *et al.*, 2023). While organisations can attain ambidexterity through structural separation, maximising its benefits requires integrating exploration and exploitation outcomes, which in turn necessitates individual ambidexterity (Schnellbacher *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have suggested that employees need to dynamically adjust their exploration and exploitation activities in response to environmental demands, based on their own judgment (Havermans *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, autonomy is essential for employees to engage in ambidexterity. Empowering leadership, characterised by sharing power with employees and promoting their decision-making

authority, provides employees with the necessary latitude to exercise a wide range of behaviours. Thus, it is proposed that empowering leadership is a vital antecedent of employee ambidexterity.

Predominantly, current studies on the effects of empowering leadership on employee ambidexterity focus on the positive impact. Nonetheless, an emerging perspective highlights that empowering leadership may not always be constructive (Dennerlein, Kirkman, 2022). This has led certain scholars to uncover the dual-path processes (i.e., enabling and burdening) triggered by empowering leadership (Dennerlein, Kirkman, 2023; Cheong *et al.*, 2016). Despite these foundational contributions and subsequent calls for continued investigation, there remains a paucity of research offering an in-depth framework that elucidates the dual mechanisms through which empowering leadership may produce both positive and negative outcomes for employee ambidexterity.

To address this gap, novel insights into the linkage between empowering leadership and employee ambidexterity are developed through the lens of the job demands–resources (JD–R) theory. In the workplace, leaders are likely to exert their powerful influence by shaping employees' perceptions of job characteristics (Piccolo, Colquitt, 2006). On the one hand, we argue that power sharing, as the central tenet of empowering leadership (Vecchio *et al.*, 2010), offers employees opportunities to take control of their jobs. Such autonomy may create job resources that strengthen an individual's willingness to explore and exploit. On the other hand, employees exposed to empowering leadership may be confronted with supplementary role requirements and responsibilities than those who have not been empowered. Consequently, JD–R theory posits that empowering leadership induces two competing cognitive processes that give rise to role control and employee workload, ultimately affecting their ambidexterity. We also contend that the strength of the above processes may vary depending on the level of task uncertainty. Employees rely more on information cues to shape their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours in complex and uncertain contexts (Salancik, Pfeffer, 1978). Leaders are essential cues of social information. Accordingly, we infer that under uncertain conditions, employees are more inclined to be influenced by social information, such as empowering leadership, shaping their attitudes and behaviours. As a result, this paper identifies task uncertainty as a critical contingency factor moderating the association between empowering leadership and employee ambidexterity.

This study addresses key gaps in the extant literature as follows. Firstly, this research highlights the limitation in current studies that primarily focus on the enabling role of empowering leadership in employee ambidexterity (Assen, 2020). Drawing on JD–R theory, the study theorizes and empirically substantiates opposing mediating mechanisms that explain how empowering leadership, as a core job condition, shapes employees' perceptions of job characteristics, offering a more complete account of its double-edged influence on ambidextrous behaviours. Secondly, the study addresses the lack of research comparing the distinct effects of empowering leadership on employee exploration and exploitation activities. Though extant literature has primarily stressed its overall impact on ambidexterity through leader behaviour (Assen, 2020), past studies have overlooked how these influences may differ across exploitation and exploration behaviours. To bridge this research gap, the mechanisms of employee role control and role workload are introduced to examine the differentiated effects of empowering leadership on these two facets of ambidexterity. Finally, prior studies have seldom examined how to mitigate the impact of empowering leadership while simultaneously augmenting employee ambidexterity. Specifically, previous studies have largely neglected the critical role of work context in shaping the influence of empowering leadership. To address this limitation, this paper examines, from a management-practices perspective, how actual job characteristics moderate the effect of empowering leadership on employee ambidexterity.

From the perspective of JD–R theory, this study aims to empirically validate contradictory mediating mechanisms and explore how empowering leadership shapes employees' perceptions of job characteristics. Furthermore,

this research aims to compare the distinct influences of empowering leadership on employee exploitation and exploration activities by introducing mechanisms of employee role workload and role control to examine the differentiated effects of empowering leadership on these two facets of ambidexterity. Finally, in the context of management practices, this study aims to ascertain how actual job characteristics moderate the impact of empowering leadership on employee ambidexterity.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Job Demands–Resources Theory

JD–R theory classifies two categories of working conditions – job demands and job resources – that consume or enrich self-resources, respectively (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). The theory proposes that job demands refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort” (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017). Conversely, job resources refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals” (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017). These two types of job characteristics will lead to positive motivation and negative health loss, respectively, for the individual. When employees face high job demands, they need to continuously draw on their own energy to complete work tasks or achieve work goals. Therefore, high job demands may lead to the loss of individual physical or psychological resources and, in turn, enhance workload. However, job resources can replenish individual energy, which, in turn, activates employees’ work motivation and promotes subsequent performance (Crawford *et al.*, 2010; Bakker *et al.*, 2004; Bakker, Demerouti, 2007).

1.2 Empowering Leadership and Role Control

Empowering leadership is defined as a set of leader behaviours that involve “the delegation of decision-making prerogatives to employees, along with the discretion to act on one’s own” (Mills, Ungson, 2003). Indeed, many theoretical perspectives, such as self-determination theory and social exchange theory, have been adopted to highlight the function of empowering leadership (Amundsen, Martinsen, 2019; Hassan *et al.*, 2013). Instead of following the same footprints as above, some recent studies have revealed the “double-edged” effects of empowering leadership (Hao *et al.*, 2018; Cheong *et al.*, 2016). We argue that predictions derived from JD–R theory could demonstrate how empowering leader behaviours give rise to enabling and burdening processes that result in employees’ positive and negative outcomes, respectively. Regarding the resource path, we suspect that empowered employees may perceive greater control.

Role control refers to the extent to which employees feel they can exert influence on work situations (Lapierre, Allen, 2013). As noted by van Dijke *et al.* (2012), empowering leadership leads to positive outcomes for employees by giving them influence over their own functioning. Job resources from empowering leadership, such as autonomy, participation, and growth opportunities (i.e., self-management), could heighten individuals’ sense of control. A large body of research has established that an empowering leader enhances employees’ feelings of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Li *et al.*, 2017; Zhang, Bartol, 2010). The increased competence (i.e., perception of self-skills for success), self-determination (i.e., perception of freedom to decide how to get work done), and impact (i.e., perception of the extent to which individuals can influence job outcomes; Spreitzer, 1995) are seen to give employees greater control over their work situations. Meanwhile, employees may also feel controlled in a job situation created by empowering leaders where employees are not constrained by bureaucratic rules and regulations (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005). In such cases, employees’ sense of control is likely to be enhanced as leaders engage in empowering behaviours.

Hypothesis H1: Empowering leadership positively relates to employee role control.

1.3 Role Control, Exploration and Exploitation Activities

Exploration activities and exploitation activities are both essential innovation behaviours in organisations (March, 1991; Mom *et al.*, 2007; Gupta *et al.*, 2006). As proposed by March (1991), exploration activities encompass actions such as “search, variation, risk taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, innovation” (1991, p.71), with the core focus being on trying new possibilities, and exploitation activities encompass actions such as includes “refinement, choice, production, efficiency, selection, implementation, execution” (1991, p.71), with the core focus on optimising existing resources. Beyond an individual’s creative mindset, both activities require additional resource investments. For instance, exploration activities demand an open and inclusive environment with greater freedom, whereas exploitation activities require authority over resource allocation and dedicated resources (Benner, Tushman, 2003). As mentioned, employees’ control over work runs parallel to greater discretion and abundant attentional resources (Bond, Bunce, 2003). Therefore, we posit that role control might improve employee exploration activities and exploitation activities.

Exploration activities focus on generating diverse experiences with challenge and risk (Mom *et al.*, 2007). A sense of role control satisfies the basic psychological need for autonomy, which fosters intrinsic motivation at work (Deci, Ryan, 2008). This autonomy inspires individual enthusiasm, persistent investment in collecting novel information, engaging in diverse explorations beyond existing routines, and generating new ideas (Liu *et al.*, 2016; Tabeau *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, employees with a high level of role control conceive that they can make the environment less threatening (Ganster, Fusilier, 1989). This perception of a secure environment is more likely to encourage employees to take risks for trial and error, which is inevitable for engaging in exploration activities.

Exploitation activities focus on building experience reliability by deepening existing knowledge (Bontis *et al.*, 2002). When employees perceive a high degree of role control, they gain greater autonomy over their work (Lapierre, Allen, 2013), enabling them to allocate resources and tailor workflows to improve efficiency in line with their preferences. Furthermore, scholars have also suggested that employees with greater control over their work can determine their work content and responsibilities, reducing anxiety and minimising external interference that might otherwise drain attentional resources (Bond, Bunce, 2003; Bond, Hayes, 2002). Hence, employees could allocate more attentional and cognitive resources to engage in deeply probing ways to improve and refine existing knowledge and workflow, thereby maximising work efficiency.

A sense of control satisfies the basic psychological need for autonomy, which fosters intrinsic motivation for work (Deci, Ryan, 2008). Such inherent motivation can inspire individual enthusiasm and persistent effort in collecting novel information that creates value for better work (Liu *et al.*, 2016). Although intrinsic motivation appears to activate a wide range of creative impulses, empirical evidence from Nguyen *et al.* (2019) indicates that it has a significant positive effect on the exploration of novel ideas. In contrast, it does not significantly influence refining existing processes. This implies that intrinsic motivation arising from perceived control may ignite a passion for work, unconsciously driving individuals to think “outside of the box” and to enjoy exploring unknown areas. Overall, we propose the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis H2: Employee role control positively relates to: a) exploration activities and b) exploitation activities, while c) role control has a more substantial effect on exploration activities than on exploitation activities.

Hypothesis H3: Employee role control mediates the positive relationship between empowering leadership and a) exploration activities and b) exploitation activities.

1.4 Empowering Leadership and Role Workload

Recently, a growing number of studies have recognised that empowering leadership is also likely to unfold in a passive process (Cheong *et al.*, 2016; Hao *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2018; Wong, Giessner, 2018). These studies agree that participation in decision-making, together with self-direction, creates an underlying tension perceived by employees. Team members with empowering leaders are likely to experience resource scarcity and perceive a high workload, as they must assume more task responsibilities and maintain a higher level of cognitive focus than those with directive leaders (Sharma, Kirkman, 2015). Even though empowered leaders express encouragement and confidence in employees' ability to self-manage (Zhang, Bartol, 2010), empowered employees may feel the need for high performance standards and be troubled by the cognitive burden of multitasking. Wong, Giessner (2018) argued that "too much authority and responsibility handed to the followers may be seen as inappropriate if, for example, the followers believe that they cannot fulfil these expectations or the followers' workload increases above a level that they can handle" (2018, p. 760).

Empowered employees also need to participate in decision-making, which requires the courage to undertake potential risks. When individuals are invited to engage in complex, unwanted decision-making, they may experience increased cognitive interference and switching costs (Cheong *et al.*, 2016). For this reason, researchers have contended that the effect of empowering leadership is detrimental in specific conditions and/or for certain employees. As Birkeland and colleagues (Birkeland *et al.*, 2017) claim, in times of crisis, employees feel vulnerable and would prefer that leaders provide clear direction rather than engage in self-directed decision-making, which is fraught with uncertainty. Employees with insufficient knowledge and experience may not be qualified for the empowered role and may experience a high workload as a result of empowered leadership (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, in terms of the demand path outlined above, we suggest that the dysfunction of empowering leadership can be hypothesised as follows.

Hypothesis H4: Empowering leadership positively relates to employee role workload.

1.5 Role Workload, Exploration and Exploitation Activities

A high workload is characterised by a large amount of work within a given time (Spector, Jex, 1998). Since personal resources (e.g., physical energy) are always finite, role workload, arising from multiple demands that deplete many resources, can undermine both psychological and physical well-being (van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016). Researchers have shown that people strive to sustain, protect, and acquire the resources they value, but resource loss produces stronger shock waves than resource gain (Hobfoll, Shirom, 2000). To relieve pressure from a high workload, employees tend to prioritise among alternative behaviours (Sherf *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, they tend to regulate themselves and allocate attention and time to urgent tasks required by routine rules to achieve basic performance goals and short-term efficiency, rather than to unknown approaches that have not yet been recognised. This is because, under high workload conditions, employees have consumed too many resources for coping, leaving insufficient cognitive resources for risk-taking and long-term innovation, such as exploration activities. Similarly, their ability to invest attentional resources in deep thinking and careful optimisation required for exploitation activities may also be constrained.

While some researchers have claimed that a high workload helps to produce an activated state of the individual employee (Kuijpers *et al.*, 2020), research into the "hard work versus smart work" framework suggests that a heavy workload or high pressure leads employees to engage in hard work rather than brilliant work (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Employees with heavy workloads may narrow their focus to address immediate problems by investing additional labour effort; as a result, hard work yields a tangible impact in reducing their workload. However, the shrunk scope of their attentional span restrains employees from attending to diverse perspectives beyond the current domain and from generating flexible cognition. As exploration activities require more complex

knowledge integration and deeper information processing, they are more susceptible to a lack of cognitive flexibility than exploitation activities. Overall, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis H5: Employee role workload negatively relates to: a) exploration activities and b) exploitation activities, while c) role workload has a more substantial effect on exploration activities than on exploitation activities.

Hypothesis H6: Employee role workload mediates the negative relationship between empowering leadership and a) exploration activities and b) exploitation activities.

1.6 Task Uncertainty as a Boundary Condition

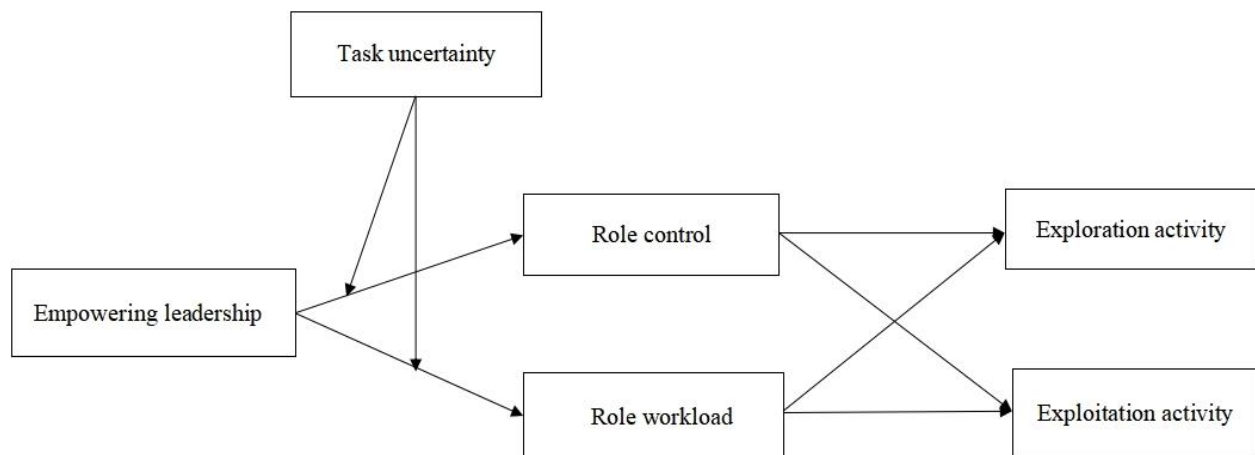
As a fundamental determinant contextual factor in organisations, task uncertainty refers to employees “having incomplete information about the task they are facing” (Gardner *et al.*, 2012). Researchers have identified two characteristics of task uncertainty: task exceptions and search difficulty, which reflect an unpredictable and dynamic working environment (Victor, Blackburn, 1987; Cordery *et al.*, 2010). Scholars have suggested that employees are more likely to rely on social cues to shape their attitudes and behaviours in uncertain or complex situations (Gong *et al.*, 2017; Larson, Callahan, 1990; Salancik, Pfeffer, 1978). As leaders are a crucial source of social information (Yang *et al.*, 2019), we propose that task uncertainty is an essential contextual factor that influences the effect of empowering leadership on employee cognition and behaviours.

As mentioned above, in high-uncertainty tasks, employees are more likely to rely on guidance and support from their leaders, who serve as social sources of essential cues. Nevertheless, during the empowerment process, leaders are likely to focus exclusively on getting out of the way, fostering a decentralised environment, and encouraging employee initiatives. This approach, while well-intentioned, may fail to provide the indispensable support. Accordingly, in that situation, employees may lack key social cues to confront the strain of task exceptions and search difficulties, leading to feelings of helplessness and anxiety rather than autonomy and control. Moreover, high levels of task exceptions might prompt employees to frequently adjust their plans, while high levels of search difficulty might complicate the tasks they have to resolve. In such situations, empowering leadership is likely to be seen as a transfer of responsibility rather than genuine support, thereby weakening employees’ perceptions of leadership’s control. As such, we propose that:

Hypothesis H7: Task uncertainty weakens the positive relationship between empowering leadership and role control.

The core of task uncertainty is having incomplete information about the task, including the necessary knowledge, the steps to fulfil the task, and a clear understanding of work demands (Gardner *et al.*, 2012). In such situations, employees may have to devote more energy to coping with unknown challenges, which can lead to increased stress. Empowering leadership aims to give employees authority and autonomy, requiring them to solve problems and make decisions independently, thereby consuming their energy in the process (Wong, Giessner, 2018; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 1989). As such, under high levels of task uncertainty, the problems associated with nonstandard tasks might become fuzzier, and decisions might become more complex due to the difficulty of searching for solutions. This further increases employees’ energy consumption, ultimately making them exhausted and fatigued. Therefore, we propose the following Hypothesis 8, and the integrated theoretical model is presented in *Figure 1*.

Hypothesis H8: Task uncertainty reinforces the positive relationship between empowering leadership and role workload.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model

2. Research Methods

2.1 Participants and Procedures

Data in this study were collected from members of innovative teams from small and medium enterprises in a city in central China. An email with the questionnaire attached was sent to each participant to confirm their participation and facilitate completion. With the assistance of human resources managers, we obtained a list of individuals willing to participate in our survey. All questionnaires were individually sent by researchers to each employee and their leaders. The survey data were automatically returned to the background once participants had submitted their answers. Only the study researchers were able to download and analyse the data.

To reduce common-method bias, we used a time-lagged design to collect all variables in two phases. During the first phase, questionnaires were completed by team members, who were required to report on their demographic variables, including gender, age, education level, organisational tenure, and dyadic tenure (i.e., time with their current leaders), as well as our focal variables that included empowering leadership and leader support. After eleven weeks, during the second phase, we surveyed all team members and team leaders. Specifically, leaders were asked to report their gender, age, education level, and organisational tenure, and to evaluate the radical and exploitative activities of their employees. Meanwhile, team members were also required to assess their sense of work control and workload.

Of 475 employees from 95 teams who were asked at the beginning of this survey to complete the questionnaires, we obtained 389 usable employee responses from 83 teams after eliminating questionnaires that lacked complete two-phase responses or a precise evaluation of employee creativity by leaders. The mean number of participants per team was 4.68. Among team leaders, females accounted for 47%, indicating a good gender diversity. The participants were well-educated, with an average age of 34.38 years ($SD=6.91$) and an average organisational tenure of 7.33 years ($SD=7.02$). Among the 389 employees, 45% were female and 60% were under 30 years old. Their education level ranged from an associate degree or less (21%) to a university degree or more (79%). They had worked with their leaders for an average of 2.75 years, indicating a high degree of familiarity between leaders and members.

2.2 Measures

Except for the control variables, all items in this study were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The measurement is as follows.

Empowering leadership. Each employee was asked to report the extent to which they perceived leaders' empowering behaviours, with a 12-item scale adopted by Ahearne *et al.* (2005). A sample item was "My leader allows me to do my job my way". Cronbach's alpha was .92.

Role control. For role control, Van Yperen, Hagedoorn's (2003) measure is employed. Employees evaluated their perceptions of work conditions using an 11-item scale. A sample item was "I can decide how to go about getting my job done" ($\alpha = .92$)

Role workload. The measure of role workload that we used was developed by Schaubroeck *et al.* (1989). It contains three items, such as "I have too much work to do everything well" ($\alpha = .81$).

Exploration activities and exploitation activities. The measures of exploration activities and exploitation activities that we used were developed by Mom *et al.* (2007). Exploration activities contain 5 items, such as "Activities requiring you to learn new skills or knowledge" ($\alpha = .88$), and exploitation activities contain 6 items, such as "Activities of which it is clear to you how to conduct them" ($\alpha = .86$)

Task uncertainty. The task uncertainty that we used was developed by Gardner *et al.* (2012). It contains three items, such as "I understand the sequence of steps that I can follow to complete this project" ($\alpha = .89$).

Control variables. We controlled for employee gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age, educational level (1 = junior high school or less; 2 = senior high school; 3 = college degree; 4 = bachelor's degree; 5 = master degree; 6 = doctoral degree) and organizational tenure (in years), as they were suggested to exert influence on employee radical and exploitation activity.

3. Results

3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analyses

In this study, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) was conducted. *Table 1* represents the details of CFA as follows.

The results in *Table 1* indicated that our measurement model with six factors (i.e., empowering leadership, task uncertainty, role control, role workload, exploration activity, and exploitation activity; $\chi^2 [237] = 472$; CFI = .95, TLI = .95; RMSEA = .05) exhibited a significantly better fit than other alternative models, reflecting the distinctiveness of these variables. Specifically, the six-factor model demonstrated excellent fit indices (CFI and TLI both above .90, RMSEA below .06, and SRMR below .05), meeting the widely accepted thresholds for good model fit. In specific, the six-factor model exhibited excellent fit indices (CFI and TLI both above .90, SRMR below .05, and RMSEA below .06). On the contrary, all alternative models, which joined two or more constructs into a single factor, reflected considerably poorer fit statistics, with notably higher RMSEA and SRMR values, and lower CFI and TLI values. These substantial chi-square difference values ($\Delta\chi^2$) further posit that collapsing factors led to a considerable loss of model fit, thereby confirming the discriminant validity of the study's constructs.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	Model	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Measurement Model	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	472.00 (237)	—	.95	.95	.05	.04
Five-factor Model 1	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	1482.60 (242)	1010.60**	.75	.72	.12	.13
Five-factor Model 2	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	1061.50 (242)	589.50**	.84	.82	.09	.08
Four-factor Model	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	2072.09 (246)	1600.09**	.64	.59	.14	.15
Three-factor Model	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	2217.30 (249)	1745.30**	.61	.57	.14	.11
Two-factor Model	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	2581.32 (251)	2109.32**	.54	.49	.16	.12
One-factor Model	EL; TU; RC; RW; ERA; EIA	2968.30 (252)	2496.30**	.46	.41	.17	.13

Notes: EL: Empowering leadership; TU: Task uncertainty; RC: Role control; RW: Role workload; ERA: Exploration activity; EIA: Exploitation activity; **p < 0.01.

Source: created by authors.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 populates the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among the understudied variables, including age, work experience, educational level, dyadic tenure, task uncertainty, empowering leadership, role workload, role control, exploitation activity, and exploration activity.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	30.06	4.79	—									
Educational level	3.98	.71	-.01	—								
Work experience	7.94	5.90	.66*	-.24**	—							
Dyadic tenure	2.75	2.56	.34**	-.18**	.41**	—						
Empowering leadership	5.27	.83	.05	-.04	.00	.01	(.92)					
Task uncertainty	5.45	1.05	.10	.04	.10	.10	.25**	(.82)				
Role control	4.97	.93	.05	.06	-.08	.05	.28**	.04	(.92)			
Role workload	4.66	1.05	.02	-.01	-.03	.03	.24**	.37**	.02	(.81)		
Exploration activity	5.11	.92	-.01	.06	-.02	-.04	.44**	.16**	.39**	-.03	(.88)	
Exploitation activity	5.28	.85	.11*	-.04	.08	.11*	.41**	.30**	.33**	.18**	.46**	(.86)

Notes: N = 389, *p < .05, **p < .01. Internal reliabilities were reported in brackets on the diagonal.

Source: created by authors.

As it was anticipated, empowering leadership was noticeably correlated with both role control ($r = .28, p < .01$) and role workload ($r = .24, p < .01$). Evidently, empowering leadership demonstrated a significant relationship with employee exploration activity ($r = .44, p < .01$), and exploitation activity ($r = .41, p < .05$). Additionally, empowering leadership was also positively related to task uncertainty ($r = .25, p < .01$). This suggests that leaders who encourage decision-making and grant autonomy may also expose employees to less structured and more ambiguous tasks. Meanwhile, task uncertainty showed a substantial positive association with role workload ($r = .37, p < .01$), suggesting that greater task unpredictability may heighten perceived work demands. Likewise, exploration activity was profoundly related to role control ($r = .39, p < .01$) but not with role workload. However, exploitation activity was positively related to both role workload ($r = .18, p < .01$) and role control ($r = .33, p < .01$). This highlights distinct patterns in how such role perceptions relate to diverse forms of employee activity. With Cronbach's alpha values above the suggested threshold of .70, all variables exhibited satisfactory internal reliability, confirming robust measurement consistency.

3.3 Path Analysis and Moderating Effect of Task Uncertainty

A path analysis was conducted in Mplus 8.3 to capture all potential relationships within a complete model. Table 3 presents the results of the path analysis based on the chosen predictors and mediators.

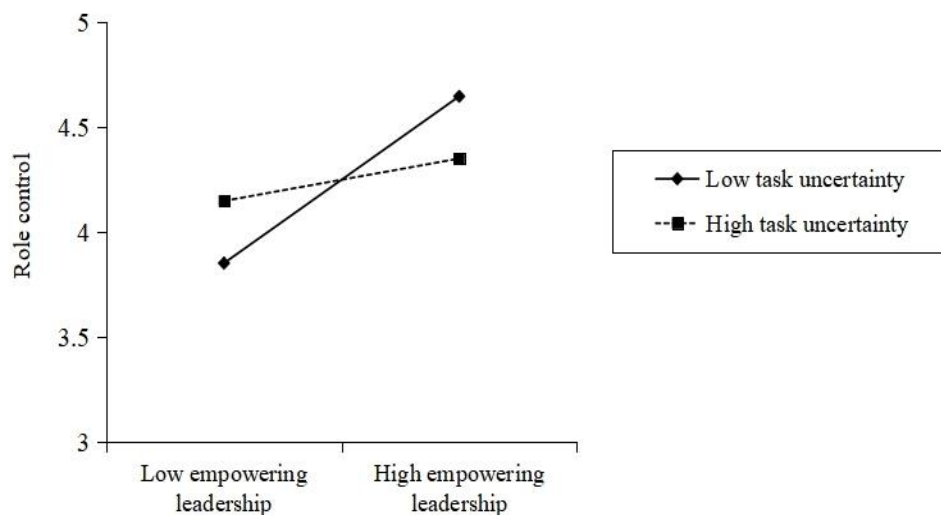
Table 3. Results of Path Analysis

Predictors	Mediators				Outcomes			
	Role control		Role workload		Exploration activity		Exploitation activity	
	Estimate	S.E.	Estimate	S.E.	Estimate	S.E.	Estimate	S.E.
Age	.03	.01	.01	.01	-.01	.01	.00	.01
Educational level	.04	.07	-.05	.07	.07	.06	-.00	.06
Work experience	-.03*	.01	-.02	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01
Dyadic tenure	.03	.02	.01	.02	-.02	.02	.02	.02
Empowering leadership	.30**	.07	.20**	.07	.43**	.07	.33**	.06
Task uncertainty	-.00	.07	.33**	.07				
Empowering leadership * Task uncertainty	-.17*	.08	.04	.07				
Role control					.28**	.07	.23**	.07
Role workload	–				-.12*	.05	.09	.05

Notes: N = 389, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Estimate = Unstandardized coefficients; S.E = Standard Error.

Source: created by authors.

In *Table 3*, the results of path analysis revealed that empowering leadership substantially affected employee role control ($\gamma = .30, p < .01$) and role workload ($\gamma = .20, p < .01$), thus validating Hypotheses 1 and 4. In line with Hypothesis 2a and 2b, role control was found to impact exploitation activity positively ($\gamma = .23, p < .01$) and exploration activity ($\gamma = .28, p < .01$). Nonetheless, the results did not validate Hypothesis 2c (difference = .05, S.E. = .06, $p > .05$). Conversely, role workload negatively influences exploration activity ($\gamma = -.12, p < .05$), whereas the relationship between role workload and exploitation activity was insignificant ($\gamma = -.09, p > .05$). Despite confirming Hypothesis 5a, the derived results could not support Hypothesis 5b. In *Table 3*, we also conducted comparison analyses to determine whether the coefficients for the relationships between the mediators and each type of creativity are statistically significant. As we hypothesised, role workload was more detrimental to employee exploration activity than exploitation activity (difference = $-.21$, S.E. = .06, $p < .05$), thus validating Hypothesis 5c.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Task Uncertainty

Meanwhile, the interaction term (i.e., empowering leadership interacted with task uncertainty) displayed that task uncertainty weakens the impact of empowering leadership on role control ($\gamma = -.17, p < .05$, see *Figure 2*) but did not impact the effect of empowering leadership on role workload ($\gamma = .04, p > .05$). We further conducted a simple slope test. Reportedly, when the task is uncertain, the relationship between empowering leadership and role control was insignificant (simple slope = .12, $p > .05$). In contrast, that relationship was extremely positive on the condition of low task uncertainty (simple slope = .47, $p < .01$). Hence, these results validated Hypothesis 7 yet fell to support Hypothesis 8.

3.4 Analysis of Indirect Effects

To test the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and employee creativity, we employed bootstrap analyses (bootstrap = 10,000) to estimate the confidence intervals of the indirect effect. The results of indirect effects are demonstrated in *Table 4*.

Table 4. Results of Indirect Effects

Path	Estimate	SE	90% CI
Indirect effect (EL-RC-ERA)	0.08	0.03	[0.04, 0.13]
Indirect effect (EL-RC-EIA)	0.07	0.02	[0.03, 0.11]
Indirect effect (EL-RW-ERA)	-0.02	0.01	[-0.05, -0.00]
Indirect effect (EL-RW-EIA)	0.02	0.01	[-0.01, 0.04]
Indirect effects in different conditions of TU (EL-RC-ERA)			
High TU	0.03	0.03	[-0.02, 0.09]
Low TU	0.13	0.04	[0.07, 0.20]
Difference	-0.10	0.05	[-0.19, -0.10]
Indirect effects in different conditions of TU (EL-RC-EIA)			
High TU	0.03	0.03	[-0.02, 0.07]
Low TU	0.11	0.04	[0.04, 0.17]
Difference	-0.08	0.05	[-0.16, 0.00]

Note: EL: Empowering leadership; TU: Task uncertainty; RC: Role control; RW: Role workload; ERA: Exploration activity; EIA: Exploitation activity.

Source: created by authors.

As depicted in *Table 4*, role control mediated the influences of empowering leadership on exploration activity (indirect effect = .08, 90% CI = .04, .13) and exploitation activity (indirect effect = .07, 90% CI = .03, .11), supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3b. Thus, these findings indicate that empowering leaders, by fostering perceived control of employees over their roles, can indirectly bolster both the refinement of existing processes and the pursuit of innovative ideas. Furthermore, we also confirmed Hypothesis 6a that support the mediating role of role workload in impacting the association between empowering leadership and exploration activity (indirect effect = -.02, 90% CI = -.05, -.00). The proposed negative indirect impact implies that though empowering leadership typically augments exploration, the uplift in perceived workload related to such leadership may slightly impede the ability or willingness of employees to engage in innovation-oriented behaviors. Nonetheless, no evidence support Hypothesis 6b, confirming the mediating role of role workload in influencing the linkage between empowering leadership and exploitation activity (indirect effect = .02, 90% CI = -.01, .04). Prominently, the absence of a substantial impact indicates that workload perceptions may not profoundly affect the degree to which empowering leadership drives efficiency-focused activities, since such tasks are perceived essential or routine activities regardless of workload levels.

4. Discussion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of how empowering leadership shapes employees' role perceptions and, ultimately, their engagement in exploitation and exploration activities. The study findings indicate that empowering leadership exerts both potentially constraining and beneficial impacts, illuminating its dual-edged nature. In particular, empowering leadership was reported to optimise role control, thereby positively affecting both exploitation and exploration activities. This reveals that employees are more likely to refine existing processes and seek novel ideas when they feel greater control and autonomy over their roles, consistent with past studies that stress the motivational role of empowerment in innovation and creativity (Harbi *et al.*, 2019; Zhang, Bartol, 2010). Simultaneously, empowering leadership also uplifted the role workload, which was

detrimental to exploration activities. This means that although empowerment augments autonomy, it may also introduce decision-making burdens or additional responsibilities that impede the temporal and cognitive resources needed for innovative thinking. Meanwhile, the absence of a noticeable connection between workload and exploration activities suggests that efficiency-oriented, routine activities may be less sensitive to workload pressures, since they are embedded in routine operational norms.

Moreover, the mediating analyses further accentuate the complex pathways through which empowering leadership operates over the course. Notably, role control emerged as a positive and consistent mediator of both shapes of employee activity, stressing its imperative role in translating empowerment into practical outcomes. On the contrary, workload exerted a minor but significant negative mediating effect on exploration, reinforcing the notion that empowerment activities must be prudently managed to avoid resource depletion. The proposed findings align with the job demands-resources (JD-R) framework, which posits that leadership behaviour can simultaneously act as a job demand (increasing workload and pressure) and a job resource (enhancing control and autonomy) (Dhaneesh *et al.*, 2025; Tummers, Bakker, 2021).

In addition, the moderating role of task uncertainty provides applicable boundary conditions for the nexus of empowering leadership and role control. Reportedly, the positive influence of empowering leadership on role control diminished under high task uncertainty, suggesting that the inherent unpredictability of tasks may overshadow the benefits of empowerment when work is highly ambiguous. Conversely, empowerment profoundly enhanced role control, underscoring the importance of situational factors in determining leadership effectiveness. This implication is consistent with the contingency theories of leadership, which hold that leadership behaviours are not generally effective but interact with contextual characteristics to shape outcomes (Popp, Hadwich, 2018; Fielder, 2015).

To sum up, the study's findings contribute to the literature on leadership and innovation in several ways. Primarily, these results indicate that empowering leadership simultaneously constrains and enables employee innovation, depending on the balance between heightened autonomy and a burdened workload. Besides, the study results illuminate the differentiated influences of role workload and role control on exploration versus exploitation activities, suggesting that leaders seeking to nurture ambidexterity should tailor their approaches to the desired activities. Finally, the study's outcomes indicate the contextual sensitivity of empowerment, showing that task uncertainty can inhibit its positive impact on perceived control, with practical implications for task design and leadership training.

In particular, organisations striving to leverage empowering leadership should employ different strategies to mitigate unwanted workload pressures, particularly when seeking to bolster exploration-focused behaviours. This may involve clarifying role expectations, redistributing responsibilities, and offering supplementary resources to manage amplified demands. In addition, leaders must be attuned to the task uncertainty their subordinates experience, adjusting their empowerment strategies accordingly to ensure autonomy translates into genuine role control rather than decision-making strain.

Thus, this study enriches the understanding of the mechanisms and conditions under which empowering leadership supports or impedes employee ambidexterity. Besides this, this study provides a more balanced and contextually grounded perspective on empowerment by recognising both the constraining role of perceived workload and the enabling role of perceived control, as well as the moderating effect of task uncertainty.

Conclusion

Drawing on the job demands–resources theory, this paper analyses the competing dual processes through which empowering leadership affects employee ambidexterity. Further, this study examines the moderating role of

task uncertainty in shaping the balance of effectiveness of empowering leadership. Based on time-lagged data from 475 employees in Central China, this study establishes that empowering leadership positively affects employees' role control and role workload, which, in turn, differentially affects exploration activities: role workload has a noticeable negative impact, while role control has a substantially positive effect. In contrast, although role control positively influences exploitation, role workload demonstrates an insignificant effect on exploitation activities. Furthermore, task uncertainty is found to moderate the association between empowering leadership and role control, weakening the positive relationship.

This study presents the following implications. Firstly, the polarisation effect of empowering leadership is more pronounced in employee exploration than in exploitation activities. Hence, when the organisation emphasises change and innovation, empowering leadership is more likely to foster employee exploration. Nevertheless, managerial leaders should consider that role workload does not considerably hinder exploration efforts, especially in highly innovative work settings. Secondly, this research contributes to realising a balance between these two activities by identifying how empowering leadership influences employee ambidexterity. Such a balance is crucial for organisations to navigate the tension between innovation and efficiency, which is pivotal to avoiding success and failure traps (Gupta *et al.*, 2006). Lastly, since task uncertainty weakens the positive influence of employee ambidexterity and empowering leadership through role control, leaders should provide supplementary guidance and support to mitigate the weakened empowerment effect in work contexts characterised by high task uncertainty.

The following limitations apply to this study. Firstly, this research was conducted across various organisations, raising concerns about the reliability of the study's findings. In the future, studies may use larger samples to provide more substantial evidence. Secondly, the team-directed, empowering leadership remains undiscussed in this study, as an emphasis is placed on an individual orientation. In this study, the referent of measurement is identified as "me" (i.e., individual-directed empowering leadership) instead of "my work team" (i.e., team-directed empowering leadership; Li *et al.*, 2017). Further, scholars have only exposed the adverse influence of empowering leadership at the individual level (Hao *et al.*, 2018). Future studies may discover whether team-directed empowering leadership is more likely to produce positive individual outcomes. Lastly, we could not eliminate the inherent variations in role control and workload among people due to individual differences (Hsiao *et al.*, 2016). Several factors within individuals, such as general intelligence and negative affectivity, can exert considerable influence on the workload perception (Bowling and Kirkendall, 2012). Therefore, studies can also investigate whether individual differences (such as core self-evaluation) impact the leader empowerment process.

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VISAPUSIŠKAS DARBUOTOJŲ MOTYVAVIMAS: ĮGALINANČIOS LYDERYSTĖS FUNKCIJOS IR DISFUNKCIJOS**Wenjun Yin , Xi Ouyang**

Santrauka. Šio tyrimo tikslas – remiantis darbo reikalavimų ir išteklių teorija suformuluoti hipotezę ir patikrinti konkuruojančius skirtingus procesus, per kuriuos įgalinantis vadovavimas veikia darbuotojų ambivalentiškumą. Tiriamas užduočių neapibrėžtumo moderuojantis vaidmuo formuojant įgalinančios lyderystės efektyvumo balansą. Taikytas laiko atidėjimo tyrimo dizainas, kad visi kintamieji būtų surinkti per du etapus. 475 darbuotojai analizei pateikė 389 tinkamus atsakymus iš 83 inovatyvių komandų vidurinėje Kinijoje. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad įgalinanti lyderystė yra teigiamai susijusi su darbuotojų vaidmens kontrole ir vaidmens darbo krūviu, kurie savo ruožtu skirtingai veikia eksploracijos veiklą: vaidmens kontrolė yra teigiamai reikšminga, o vaidmens darbo krūvis – neigiamai reikšmingas. Priešingai, nors vaidmens kontrolė teigiamai veikia eksploatacijos veiklą, vaidmens darbo krūvis eksploatacijai reikšmingo poveikio neturi. Be to, užduočių neapibrėžtumas moderuoja ryšį tarp įgalinančios lyderystės ir vaidmens kontrolės silpnindamas teigiamą sąsają. Šie rezultatai suteikia naujų įžvalgų apie subtilų įgalinančios lyderystės poveikį eksploracijos ir eksploatacijos veiklai. Straipsnyje siūlomos praktinės rekomendacijos vadovams, siekiantiems veiksmingai taikyti įgalinimo praktiką.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: įgalinanti lyderystė; darbo reikalavimų ir išteklių teorija; eksploracijos veikla; eksploatacijos veikla; užduočių neapibrėžtumas.