

AUTHENTIC AND ABUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN CHINA: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF FOLLOWERSHIP AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF POWER DISTANCE*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to: (1) to examine the impact of true leadership and abuse of supervisory behavior on leadership performance in Chinese organizations (2)At the same time, leader identification and employee subordinate behavior are used as mediating mechanisms, and power distance orientation is used as a moderating variable(3) From the perspective of employees' follow-up behavior, the influence of leadership style on leadership performance is explored to carry out research between these variables. Anchored in social exchange theory and culturally contextualised perspectives, the research draws on data from 714 employees across diverse sectors, which are analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) and hierarchical regression.

The findings theoretically integrate contrasting leadership styles into a relational framework emphasising followership as a core process and show

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cultural conditioning in non-Western settings. The research result was found that: 1. Leadership style has a significant impact on leadership performance, with authentic leadership having a positive impact and abusive leadership having a negative impact. 2. Leader identification plays a mediating role between leadership style and employee following behavior. 3. Power distance orientation has a moderating effect on the relationship between leadership style and employee follower behavior.

Keywords: authentic leadership, abusive supervision, followership behaviour, leader identification, power distance, leadership performance

Introduction

In the field of organizational behavior research, studies on leadership have always held a significant position. The factors influencing leadership performance (or leadership effectiveness) and how to improve it have not only been a focus of this research but are also enduring topics in management practice. Among the many antecedent variables affecting leadership performance, the leader's leadership style has consistently attracted the attention of this study. In Chinese corporate organizations, power distance is generally high, and employees largely accept a hierarchical difference of "superior to inferior" among leaders, which provides a basis for the existence of abusive leadership. Leadership is the social influence process by which leaders achieve group goals by gaining and mobilizing the power of employees; influence is the most essential characteristic of leadership. Therefore, the effectiveness of a leader largely depends on whether those being led accept their leadership or influence, making it particularly necessary and important to pay attention to employees' follower behavior. This study empirically examines the direct effects of authentic and abusive leadership on employee follower behavior and leadership performance. It uses leader identification as a mediating variable

between leadership style and employee follower behavior, follower behavior as a mediating variable between leadership style and leadership performance, and power distance orientation as a moderating variable between leadership style and employee follower behavior to explore the internal mechanisms by which leadership behavior exerts its influence. The aim is to provide a valuable theoretical framework and practical suggestions for the effective management of employee follower behavior and leadership performance in the field of management practice.

Objectives

1. This study examines the specific effects of authentic leadership and abusive leadership on employee followership behavior and leadership performance within the context of Chinese culture.

2. Leader endorsement has been proven to be an important explanatory variable for employee attitudes and behaviors, but empirical research on its impact on employee follower behavior is still relatively lacking

3. This study introduces employees' power distance orientation as a moderating variable to examine its mediating mechanism in the relationship between two leadership styles—authentic leadership and abusive supervision—and employee follower behavior within the context of Chinese culture.

Literature Review

In the field of organizational behavior research, leadership studies have always occupied a central position. Leadership performance (or leadership effectiveness) is influenced by numerous factors, and how to improve leadership performance has been a recurring theme in theoretical research and management practice (Northouse, 2025). Among these, leadership style, as a key

factor influencing leadership performance, has consistently been a focus of research.

Compared with the traditional perspective of leadership "talent", authentic leadership theory focuses more on the leader's "virtue" and character, emphasizing the authenticity, transparency and moral qualities shown by the leader (Wong & Laschinger, 2013).

The core idea of this theory coincides with the concept of "prioritizing virtue" in traditional Chinese culture, emphasizing the profound impact of leaders' character on employee behavior and organizational climate (Leroy et al., 2015). However, although authentic leadership has been extensively studied in the West, attention to authentic leadership in China started relatively late, with preliminary discussions only beginning in 2009, and the number of studies is limited. Research on the mechanisms and effects of authentic leadership, especially its applicability in China's high power distance culture, is still relatively scarce (Chua et al., 2018).

Chinese corporate culture generally exhibits a high power distance, with a clear hierarchical difference between employees and leaders. This cultural background provides fertile ground for abusive leadership, where many employees may tolerate or even submit to unhealthy leadership behaviors out of respect or obedience (Chen & Hung., 2012). Therefore, identifying and effectively addressing different leadership styles in Chinese organizations with high power distance has become an important topic in current leadership research.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected from August to September 2024 via an online questionnaire platform. All data was hosted on university servers to ensure data security. A stratified sampling method was employed to ensure

representativeness of the sample across industries (e.g., manufacturing, finance, IT, education) and job levels (junior to senior management). Data collection was conducted in two phases: the first phase collected 320 valid questionnaires via email and the online platform, and the second phase supplemented this to 714 valid questionnaires. All participants signed informed consent forms, and the data was anonymized.

In the sample, women accounted for 58% and men for 42%. In terms of age distribution, 39.9% were between 26 and 30 years old, and 23.4% were 25 years old or younger; 53.8% were married, and 46.2% were unmarried. Regarding job level, 41.3% were mid-level employees, and 22.5% were junior employees. In terms of work experience, 37% had 5 years or less of work experience. The sample covers diverse groups and is highly representative.

This study used validation scales from existing literature with appropriate adjustments. All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The initial steps of data analysis included handling missing values, testing for normality, and testing for bias in similarity methods. For missing values, questionnaires with more than 50% missing key variables were removed; for partially missing values, the mean was used for imputation. After data cleaning, 714 valid questionnaires were retained.

The normality test was performed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, which showed that most variables conformed to a normal distribution. Logarithmic and square root transformations were applied to the skewed data to ensure normality. To avoid common method bias, anonymity and confidentiality measures were implemented, and Harman's one-way test was used. The results showed that the explanatory power of the first factor was well

below the 40% critical value, confirming that there was no significant common method bias and ensuring the validity and reliability of the data.

Research Framework

The relationship between the five variables studied in this paper is shown in the Figure1.

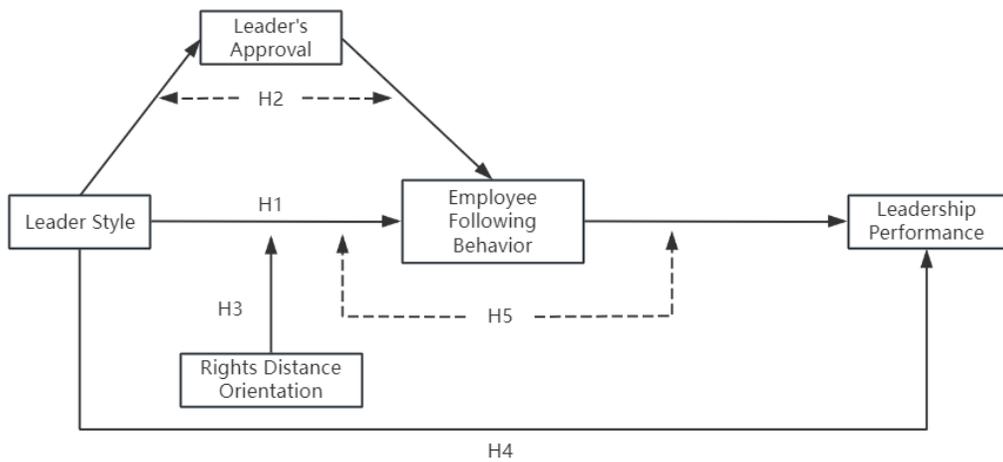


Figure 1 Research model (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table1 Descriptive statistical analysis

Research Variables	M	SD	ICC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Authentic Leadership	0.971	-	0.7								
Abusive Leadership	0.929	-	0.7	-							
		0.133	5	0.151							
		0.173	3	**							

Follower Behavior	1.187	-0.02	0.72	0.734**	-0.136**					
Leader Identification	1.171	-0.147	0.76	0.650**	0.080*	0.674**				
Power Distance Orientation	0.878	-0.897	0.74	0.215**	0.265**	0.284**	0.262*			
Leadership Performance	2.524	1.214	0.86	0.613**	0.134**	0.716**	0.59*	0.34*		
Task Performance	0.926	-0.316	0.77	0.554**	0.141**	0.641**	0.66*	0.02*	0.04*	
Affective Commitment	0.931	-0.088	0.73	0.540**	0.102**	0.653**	0.01*	0.30*	0.35*	0.47*

Note(s): *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Correlations below the diagonal are between-person (N = 129), correlations above the diagonal are within-person (N=714)

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistical analysis of each research variable, including the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), within-group correlation coefficient (ICC), and correlations between variables. First, the mean for authentic leadership was 0.971, the standard deviation was -0.133, and the ICC was 0.75, showing high within-group consistency, indicating that employees' evaluations of leadership styles were relatively consistent. The ICC for abusive leadership was 0.73, similar to authentic leadership, indicating that employees' perceptions of abusive leadership were also highly consistent. The ICC for following behavior

was 0.72, indicating that changes in following behavior among employees were relatively consistent. In the correlation analysis, authentic leadership was significantly positively correlated with following behavior ($r = 0.734$) and leader identification ($r = 0.650$), indicating that authentic leadership has a strong positive impact on employees' following behavior and sense of identification. Abusive leadership was negatively correlated with following behavior ($r = -0.136$) and leader identification ($r = -0.080$), indicating that abusive leadership reduces employees' following behavior and sense of identification with the leader. Furthermore, power distance orientation was positively correlated with all variables, especially with leadership performance ($r = 0.134$) and task performance ($r = 0.102$).

2. Hypothesis testing

In this study, hypothesis H1 proposed that leadership style has a significant impact on employee following behavior, specifically indicating that authentic leadership has a positive effect, while abusive leadership has a negative effect. Through analysis using multiple linear regression models, we verified this hypothesis. The specific results are as follows: Models 1 and 2 show that authentic leadership has a significant positive impact on employee following behavior ($\beta = 0.625$, 95% confidence interval 0.532 to 0.718), while abusive leadership has a significant negative impact ($\beta = -0.25$, 95% confidence interval -0.36 to -0.12). This indicates that leadership style does indeed have a significant impact on employee following behavior. Authentic leadership enhances employee participation by building trust and support relationships, while abusive leadership suppresses employee initiative and willingness to participate through its authority and negative emotions. Further regression analyses (Models 3 and 4) showed that leadership style still significantly influenced employee following behavior, even after controlling for other variables such as gender, years of service, and job level. Authentic leadership continued to show a positive effect

($\beta = 0.714$, 95% confidence interval 0.075 to 0.134), while the negative effect of abusive leadership ($\beta = -0.159$, 95% confidence interval -0.236 to -0.086) remained valid.

Hypothesis H2 further proposes that leader identification plays a mediating role between leadership style and employee following behavior. Based on this, the regression results of Models 5 and 6 support this hypothesis. Model 5 shows that leader identification has a significant impact on employee following behavior ($\beta = 0.218$, 95% confidence interval 0.160–0.276), while Model 6 indicates that leader identification has a significant impact not only on authentic leadership ($\beta = 0.373$, 95% confidence interval 0.311–0.434) but also on abusive leadership ($\beta = 0.373$, 95% confidence interval 0.314–0.432). These results suggest that employees' identification with their leaders, to some extent, explains how leadership style influences leadership performance through employee following behavior. In particular, when employees identify with their leaders, the influence path of leadership style on employee behavior is more significant, further promoting improved leadership performance.

Assuming both H1 and H2 are validated, the study demonstrates that leadership style does indeed have a significant impact on employee following behavior, and that leader identification plays a crucial mediating role in this relationship. These findings provide new perspectives for the development of leadership theory and offer valuable strategic guidance for businesses in practical management, particularly in employee motivation and enhancing leadership effectiveness.

Table 2 The coefficients of a multiple linear regression model were used to explore the impact of leadership style on employee following behavior, with leader identification as the mediating variable and other variables controlled for

Model	variable	β	95% confidence interval lower limit	Upper limit of 95% confidence interval
Model 1	Authentic Leader	0.625**	0.532	0.571
Model 2	Abusive Leader	-0.25***	-0.36	-0.12
Model 3	Authentic Leader	0.714**	0.075	0.134
	Sex	0.097**	0.052	0.146
	Years of Service	-0.051*	-0.09	-0.015
	Job Rank	0.012	-0.018	0.042
Model 4	Abusive Leader	-	-0.236	-0.086
	Sex	0.076*	0.01	0.136
	Years of Service	-0.118*	-0.154	-0.078
	Job Rank	0.015*	-0.002	0.036
	Leader Identification	0.218**	0.16	0.276
Model 5	Sex	0.097**	0.045	0.149
	Years of Service	-0.051*	-0.09	-0.016
	Job Rank	0.012	-0.014	0.042
	Authentic Leader	0.539**	0.465	0.614
	Sex	0.086**	0.045	0.127
Model 6	Years of Service	-0.107**	-0.143	-0.074
	Job Rank	0.015*	-0.004	0.034
	Leader Identification	0.373**	0.311	0.434
	Abusive Leader	-0.08***	-0.116	-0.044
	Sex	-0.021**	-0.057	0.015
Model 7	Years of Service	-0.103*	-0.138	-0.068
	Job Rank	0.004	-0.027	0.035
	Leader Identification	0.373**	0.314	0.432

Notes: Dependent variable: employee following behavior; Independent variables: authentic leadership, abusive leadership. Control variables: gender, years of service, job level. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In this study, hypothesis H3 proposes that power distance orientation plays a moderating role in the relationship between leadership style and employee following behavior. To test this hypothesis, we introduced power distance orientation as a moderating variable and examined its impact on the relationship between leadership style and employee following behavior using multiple linear regression analysis. The regression analysis results in Table 3 provide strong support for verifying this hypothesis. Specifically, Models 5 and 6 include the interaction effect term of power distance orientation, verifying its moderating role in the influence of authentic leadership and abusive leadership. In Model 5, the interaction effect between power distance orientation and authentic leadership ($\beta = 0.077$, 95% confidence interval 0.041 to 0.109) indicates that power distance orientation enhances the positive influence of authentic leadership on employee following behavior. Specifically, in high power distance situations, the influence of authentic leadership increases significantly, indicating that employees are more likely to be positively guided and motivated by authentic leadership in high power distance environments. Similarly, in Model 6, the interaction effect between power distance orientation and abusive leadership ($\beta = 0.061$, 95% confidence interval 0.021 to 0.108) was also significant, indicating that in high power distance environments, the negative impact of abusive leadership on employee following behavior is amplified. This result suggests that in environments with greater power distance, abusive leadership further exacerbates the decline in leadership performance by suppressing employee initiative and willingness to participate.

Table 3 Multiple linear regression model coefficients were used to explore the impact of leadership style on employee following behavior, with power distance orientation as a moderating variable and other variables controlled for

Model	variable	β	95% confidence interval lower limit	Upper limit of 95% confidence interval
Model 1	Authentic Leader	0.625**	0.532	0.571
Model 2	Abusive Leader	-0.25***	-0.36	-0.12
	Authentic Leader	0.714**	0.075	0.134
Model 3	Sex	0.097**	0.052	0.146
	Years of Service	-0.051*	-0.09	-0.015
	Job Rank	0.012	-0.018	0.042
	Abusive Leader	-0.159***	-0.236	-0.086
Model 4	Sex	0.076*	0.01	0.136
	Years of Service	-0.118*	-0.154	-0.078
	Job Rank	0.015*	-0.002	0.036
	Authentic Leader	0.04**	0.015	0.063
	Sex	-0.05***	-0.075	-0.029
	Years of Service	0.03	-0.004	0.068
	Job Rank	0.579***	0.501	0.657
Model 5	Power Distance Orientation	0.056**	0.032	0.077
	Power Distance Orientation *	0.077**	0.041	0.109
	Authentic Leadership			
	Abusive Leader	4.073	3.92	4.186
Model 6	Sex	0.084**	0.031	0.137
	Years of Service	-0.111**	-0.152	-0.074
	Job Rank	-0.126	-0.193	-0.059

Power Distance	0.195**	0.17	0.28
Power Distance *Abusive Leader	0.061*	0.021	0.108

Notes: Dependent variable: employee following behavior; Independent variables: authentic leadership, abusive leadership. Control variables: gender, years of service, job level. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Power distance orientation does indeed moderate the relationship between leadership style and employee follower behavior. Particularly in cultural contexts with high power distance, such as China, power distance orientation significantly moderates the influence path of leadership style. In high power distance situations, the positive effects of authentic leadership are amplified, while the negative effects of abusive leadership are further amplified. These findings not only support the H3 hypothesis but also provide a new perspective on leadership theory, particularly regarding the dynamic relationship between leadership style and employee behavior in high power distance cultures.

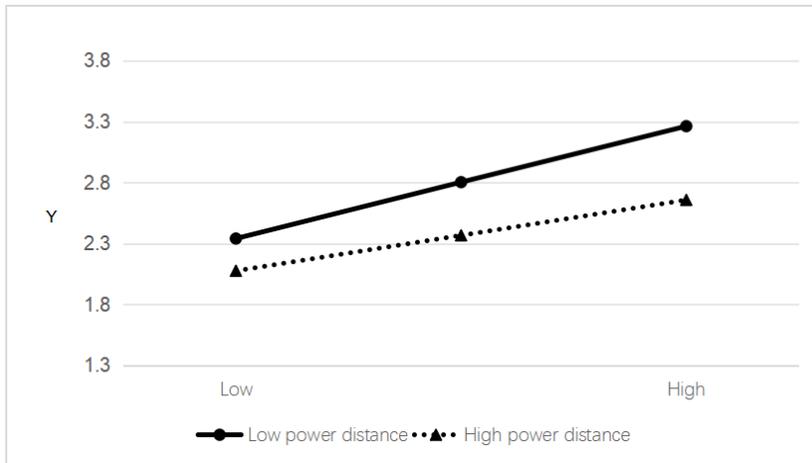


Figure 2 The moderating effect of power distance orientation on the relationship between authentic leadership and follower behavior (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

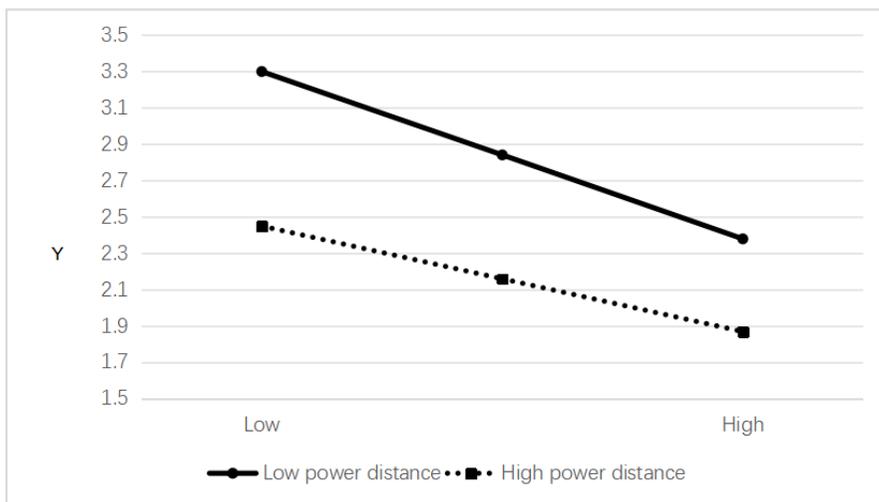


Figure 3 The moderating effect of power distance orientation on the relationship between abusive leadership and follower behavior (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Hypothesis H4 proposes that leadership style has a significant impact on leadership performance, with authentic leadership having a positive effect and abusive leadership having a negative effect. The regression analysis results in Table 4 validate this hypothesis. In Models 1 and 2, the regression coefficient for authentic leadership is 0.625** (95% confidence interval: 0.532 to 0.718), showing a significant positive impact on leadership performance. This indicates that authentic leadership improves employee work performance and overall leadership effectiveness by building trust, support, and open communication. In contrast, the regression coefficient for abusive leadership is -0.25* (95% confidence interval: -0.36 to -0.12), indicating a negative impact on leadership performance. This may be due to excessive control and neglect of employees' emotional needs, leading to decreased employee motivation and thus affecting leadership performance. Further analysis in Models 6 and 7 supports this hypothesis. Model 6 shows that the impact of abusive leadership is -0.255** (95% confidence interval: -0.312 to -0.198), while the regression coefficient for authentic leadership is 0.218 (95% confidence interval: 0.116 to 0.312)** , which further demonstrates the positive impact of authentic leadership and the negative impact of abusive leadership.

Hypothesis H5 proposes that employee following behavior mediates the relationship between leadership style and leadership performance. The results from Models 5, 6, and 7 significantly support this hypothesis. In Model 5, the regression coefficient for employee following behavior is 0.289** (95% confidence interval: 0.214 to 0.363), indicating that employee following behavior plays a significant role in the influence of leadership style on leadership performance. Specifically, leadership style (such as authentic leadership or abusive leadership) affects the improvement or decline of leadership performance by influencing employee following behavior. Furthermore, in Model 6, the regression coefficient

for employee following behavior is 0.401* (95% confidence interval: 0.358 to 0.443), and in Model 7, it is 0.392 (95% confidence interval: 0.351 to 0.433)**, both indicating that employee following behavior plays a significant mediating role in the influence of authentic and abusive leadership on leadership performance.

Hypotheses H4 and H5 were both verified. Authentic leadership improves leadership performance by influencing employee follower behavior through a positive leadership style, while abusive leadership negatively impacts employee follower behavior, leading to decreased leadership performance. Furthermore, employee follower behavior plays a significant mediating role between leadership style and leadership performance. These results provide important theoretical support for leadership practice and emphasize the importance of cultivating positive leadership styles and motivating employee engagement.

Table 4 The coefficients of a multiple linear regression model were used to explore the impact of leadership style on leadership performance, with employee following behavior as a mediating variable and other variables controlled for

Model	variable	β	95% confidence interval lower limit	Upper limit of 95% confidence interval
Model 1	Authentic Leader	0.625**	0.532	0.571
Model 2	Abusive Leader	-0.25***	-0.36	-0.12
	Authentic Leader	0.714**	0.075	0.134
Model 3	Sex	0.097**	0.052	0.146
	Years of Service	-0.051*	-0.09	-0.015
	Job Rank	0.012	-0.018	0.042
Model 4	Abusive Leader	-0.159***	-0.236	-0.086
	Sex	0.076*	0.01	0.136

	Years of Service	-0.118*	-0.154	-0.078
	Job Rank	0.015*	-0.002	0.036
	Employee following behavior	0.289**	0.214	0.363
Model 5	Sex	0.066	-0.002	0.139
	Years of Service	-0.016	-0.051	0.019
	Job Rank	-0.046	-0.096	0.004
	Abusive Leader	-0.255**	-0.312	-0.198
	Sex	0.027	-0.015	0.069
Model 6	Years of Service	-0.02	-0.052	0.016
	Job Rank	0.029	-0.011	0.069
	Employee following behavior	0.401***	0.358	0.443
	Authentic Leader	0.218**	0.116	0.312
	Sex	0.031	-0.015	0.077
Model 7	Years of Service	-0.033	-0.078	0.018
	Job Rank	0.239**	0.186	0.295
	Employee following behavior	0.392**	0.351	0.433

Notes: Dependent variable: leadership performance; Independent variables: authentic leadership, abusive leadership. Control variables: gender, years of service, job level. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

This study explores the impacts of authentic and abusive leadership styles on employee following behavior, leader identification, and task performance, and verifies the moderating effect of power distance orientation. This study is the first to compare authentic and abusive leadership styles within the same framework, revealing the different impacts of these two distinct leadership styles on employee behavior and performance.

The mediating role of leadership identification was also verified in this study, a finding that supports the view in Western literature that leadership style improves employee behavior by enhancing employee identification.

Regarding the moderating effect of power distance orientation, this study found that power distance orientation played a significant positive moderating role in the relationship between authentic leadership and employee behavior, a result particularly prominent in the Chinese cultural context. According to Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001), China belongs to a high power distance culture, where employees tend to respond more actively to leadership behavior when faced with authentic leadership. In the West, especially in low power distance cultures, employees' responses to leadership behavior may be more autonomous and independent, and the leader's influence is not as significant as in high power distance cultures (Mester et al., 2003).

In conclusion, although the results of this study are largely consistent with relevant Western research, they also reflect the moderating effect of cultural background on the effectiveness of leadership styles. In particular, the high power distance characteristic of Chinese culture may amplify the influence of leadership styles, making the positive effects of authentic leadership more pronounced, while the negative effects of abusive leadership are more significant.

This research confirms that leadership style acts as a primary determinant of leadership performance through the mechanism of employee followership. Authentic leadership fosters a positive cycle of identification and active followership, whereas abusive supervision precipitates a decline in performance through follower withdrawal. Crucially, the cultural value of power distance acts as a catalyst, strengthening these dynamics. Organisations aiming for high performance must therefore cultivate authentic leadership behaviours and recognise the active role of followers in the leadership process.

Recommendation

1. The suggestions from the research

establishing a Comprehensive Leader Assessment and Development Mechanism: This study also indicates that leadership style has a long-term and multi-dimensional impact on employee performance and behavior. Leadership style not only directly affects employees' work attitudes and behaviors, but its persistence and diversity also have a profound impact on the long-term development of the organization.

Strengthening Leaders' Care and Support to Enhance Employee Following Behavior: This study demonstrates that authentic leadership significantly enhances employee following behavior, thereby improving task performance and affective commitment. This finding has important implications for management practice. Authentic leadership enhances employee loyalty and motivation by demonstrating care, support, and motivation, ultimately improving employee performance. In today's highly competitive business environment, companies need to focus not only on leaders' decision-making abilities and performance but also on their role in interpersonal relationship management.

This study focuses on the impact of cultural differences on leadership style effectiveness, highlighting the moderating role of power distance orientation in the relationship between leadership style and employee behavior, particularly the significant influence of power distance on leadership style adaptability across different cultural contexts. The cultural dimension of power distance orientation reflects employees' acceptance of unequal power distribution between superiors and subordinates within an organization. Differences in perceived power distance across different cultural contexts directly influence employees' reactions to leaders' behavior, decision-making, and leadership styles.

2. The suggestions for future research

Future research could explore the causal relationship between different leadership styles and employee performance by introducing longitudinal data or experimental designs, further verifying the changing patterns and stability of these relationships across different time periods, thus providing more solid evidence for the refinement of theoretical models.

The global applicability of the conclusions of this study may be limited. To enhance the generalizability of the conclusions, future research should expand the geographical scope of the sample to include companies from different countries and regions, comparing the impact of leadership styles on employee behavior and performance under different cultural backgrounds. This will help verify the mechanisms of leadership style action in different cultural contexts and promote the development of cross-cultural research.

Future research can incorporate comparative analyses of various leadership styles to more comprehensively reveal the diverse impacts of different leadership styles on employee behavior and organizational performance. This will not only enrich leadership style theory but also provide organizations with diversified management strategies, helping leaders choose appropriate leadership styles based on specific situations.

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