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Influence of Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences on Innovation Behavior: An Empirical Analysis in China

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Abstract: The innovation behavior (IB) of followers is vital for individuals and organizations. It is not only an important part of individual performance but also an essential foundation of organizational innovation. In general, understanding the formation mechanism of followers' IB could enhance organizational innovation performance and sustainable competitiveness. The innovation of this study includes the following points. First, in the previous research on the antecedent variables of the IB of followers, the key factor of implicit follow cognitive difference (IFCD) was not examined. We add this key factor to the independent variables of our formation mechanism. Second, in the relationship between IFCD and followers' IB, we investigate the mediating role of psychological empowerment (PE) and the moderating role of person-organization Fit (P-O Fit), further shown as a mediation model with moderating variables. Third, this study adopts a longitudinal research design, and the data were obtained from 1:1 matched leaders and their followers of large and medium-sized enterprises in China. To avoid deviation in the homologous method, this study gathers data at three-month intervals to ensure that leadership's influence on followers is effective. In this study, Amos 24.0 and SPSS 24.0 are used for empirical research. The results show IFCD has a negative effect on the IB of followers; PE has a partial mediating effect on the relationship between IFCD and IB of followers; P-O Fit plays a positive regulatory role in the relationship between IFCD and PE, and P-O Fit moderates the mediating effect of PE on the relationship between IFCD and IB. Based on our empirical research, we put forward some feasible suggestions for company managers to increase sustainability in market competition by promoting the formation of the IB of followers.

Keywords: innovation behavior; implicit follow cognitive difference; psychological empowerment; person-organization fit; formation mechanism; empirical study

1. Introduction

According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory [1,2], the power-distance index of eastern countries such as China is generally higher than those of western countries, and people's acceptance of power inequality is higher. Power distance can effectively explain the influence of leadership on the attitudes and behaviors of followers [3]. In a cultural atmosphere with significant power distance, the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese enterprise leaders toward their followers in the organization determine their career development and impact the entire team's performance [4]. Therefore, exploring "leaders' expectations of followers' traits" has peculiar significance in the case of China. Such an

“individual holds a set of views on the characteristics of a follower’s role”. This is termed implicit followership and is based on implicit followership theories (IFTS) [5]. IFTS is a cognitive structure of the follower archetype. It shows an individual’s perception of a follower’s characteristics. IFTS has positive and negative followership prototypes [6]. Positive followership prototype (PFP) refers to the leader’s positive assumptions about a follower’s characteristics and behaviors [7,8], such as expecting followers to be diligent in and enthusiastic about their work and to be moral citizens [9]. Influenced by positive psychology, this study focuses on positive attributes and, thus, analyzes followers from the PFP. PFP is essentially a subjective performance expectation. In other words, leaders and followers form their own prototypes based on their own knowledge and experience, which includes leaders’ expectations of followers to adhere to the characteristics and followers’ assumptions about their own characteristics.

Although PFP is a new concept, it has attracted much attention. According to the implicit theory, leaders have a preconceived notion regarding followers, form their own judgment, and then influence others on the basis of this cognition [10]. The trait activation theory [11,12] asserts that situations can effectively excite certain traits and transform them into behaviors. Leadership has always been regarded as an important catalyst of positive employee traits and behaviors. According to the social cognitive theory, the PFP of leaders affects the attitude and behavior of both leaders and followers [13]. The difference in a leader’s implicit followership results in a difference in the follower’s behavior [14]. At the same time, followers tend to do what leaders expect [15]. Followers who are PFP perform well in generating, promoting, and implementing ideas [16].

This study analyzes “how leaders and followers perceive, decide, and act” [5,7,8,17]. In general, the research on PFP is still in its infancy, and researchers mainly focus on the discussion of its effects. For example, PFP are found to have a significant impact on followers’ work performance, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, trust in leaders, and leader–member exchange relationship [5,7,18,19]. Epitropaki et al. [8] and Kong Ming et al. [18] proposed that continuing research on other consequences of PFP, such as the innovation behavior (IB) of followers, is necessary to further understand the role of PFP and better guide practice.

Followership prototype has a recognition function, which is a process of automatic matching with the actual characteristics of followers; i.e., positive followership traits (PFT). The purpose of PFT is to distinguish and identify ideal followers [8]. Therefore, when followers’ PFT match the PFP of leaders, it shows that followers’ actual performance meets the role requirements of leaders. Based on the prototype matching process, extant studies found that when the PFT matches the PFP of leaders at any given time, followers show higher Psychological Empowerment (PE) and their behavior is further impacted. Little attention has been paid to PFT in the research of implicit followership. Research on the influence of the matching state of leaders’ and followers’ PFT is warranted [20]. The difference between leaders’ PFP and followers’ PFT is the implicit followership cognitive difference (IFCD). From the perspective of IFCD, this study examines its impact on the IB of followers and its mechanism.

With the acceleration of economic globalization and rapid changes in the market environment, in the face of increasingly fierce competition between enterprises, accelerating innovation is an important strategy for facing this challenge. In the competitive global market, innovation is vital to a firm’s longevity. Innovation is a key factor for enterprises to improve their competitiveness and ensure long-term competitive advantage [21]. Innovation behavior is regarded as valuable and important capital for organizations and individuals. Innovative behavior is necessary to combat sustainability challenges in the 21st century and ensure longevity and success. Therefore, it is considered an indispensable asset to organizational success [22,23]. Many scholars believe that the IB of followers is the premise and foundation of enterprise innovation [24,25]. Employee innovative behavior enhances organizational performance [26]. Thus, the importance of innovative behavior in organizations has been acknowledged and investigated by several researchers [26–30]. IB is also strongly linked to the prosperity and development of enterprises and regional economies. Enterprises comply with globalization trends and carry out foreign-related business and cooperation, which helps promote

the sustainable development of local economies. Innovation is crucial for organizations to face the challenges related to the sustainable development goals introduced by the United Nations [31] and to promote humane and productive organizations [32–36]. As studies on the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development highlight, innovative behaviors are necessary to meet sustainable project goals and help workers achieve growth and enrichment.

The process of followers' input IB is affected by individual characteristics, leadership, and other factors. Duradoni et al. [28] confirmed that personality traits, such as extraversion, were closely related to follower's IB. Dedahanov et al. [37] proposed that paternalistic leadership influenced IB via psychological empowerment. Opoku et al. [38] verified the premise of servant leadership to enable IB in employees via the empirical analysis of Ghana's manufacturing sector. In the creativity component model, Amabile [39] proposed that intrinsic motivation is the key factor influencing individual creativity and IB. Shalley et al. [25] and Zhang et al. [40] believe that one of the important responsibilities of leaders is to promote IB among followers and ultimately achieve sustained competitive advantage and organizational success. It is invaluable for theory and management practice to identify the subjective and objective factors that influence followers' IB in an organization, especially to examine the influence mechanism of new concepts or theories on followers' IB. Wang Hongyu et al. [16] found that felt observation for constructive change played a part in mediating the relationship between followers' PFP and followers' IB. The results show that there are other mechanisms between followers' PFT and followers' IB, which need to be shown from different perspectives.

In summary, we examine the important role of IB in the sustainable development of organizations and regions in the context of globalization. Based on the social cognitive theory, the trait activation theory, and the Pygmalion effect, this study clarifies how IFCD affects IB as a precursor variable. We focus on the mediating role of PE in this relationship and examine the person–organization fit (P-O Fit) as its boundary condition. Next, we describe our methods and present the empirical results of the study. Finally, we discuss the major theoretical and practical impacts.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

2.1. PFP and PFT: Differences and Connections

Followership is a cognitive structure of the role of followers. It mainly demonstrates “the characteristics that followers' roles should have”. The core dimension is followership prototype, i.e., an individual's positive expectation of followers [9,41]. Unlike PFP at the cognitive level, PFT belongs to the category of actual followership, which refers to the real, objective, and directly observable psychological quality of followers in the following process [42]. Followership traits have positive and negative attributes. Influenced by positive psychology, this study focuses on the positive attributes, such as excellent working ability, positive emotion, and noble morality. In theory, PFP and PFT are dissimilar yet related to each other. In particular, followership prototype has the function of recognition. Using this function, leaders match the perceived PFP with the PFT of followers to form an impression of the followers [8,17]. Several researchers have focused on the identification function of the followership prototype and found that when the “leader's PFP” and the “follower's PFT” match, the follower can meet the leader's requirements and standards, which favors the development of trust and the relationship between leaders and followers [6]. It can also inspire leaders' benevolence and empowerment [42,43]. From the perspective of IFCD, this study examines its consequence variables and mechanism.

2.2. IFCD and IB

IB is a dynamic process comprising three stages: generating creative ideas and promoting and implementing new ideas [21]. When leaders' PFP and followers' PFT are more consistent, that is, the smaller the IFCD, the more significant is the influence on followers' IB. First, role expectation and innovation support by leaders are important factors that encourage followers to practice IB [21]. Leaders

with positive perceptions of followers have positive role expectations for them [17]. The performance expectation, liking, and leader–member exchange evaluation of followers also improves. In terms of behavior, more support is provided to followers, more challenging tasks are assigned, and more learning opportunities are facilitated [7,19]. A leader’s affection and support can effectively improve a follower’s confidence in self-ability and creativity. Furthermore, the sense of innovation self-efficacy is an important factor affecting followers’ IB [44]. Second, in addition to completing their own work, followers who have positive role expectations show exploratory behaviors such as finding new methods and proposing new ideas in their work [45]. The behavior outside the role of followers is consistent with leaders’ expectations of followers’ roles and reverts to stimulate and activate the positive concepts of “good followers” and “in-group members” [46]. The Pygmalion effect can strengthen a leader’s PFP to show increasing affection and trust and can help to support followers. The aforementioned attitude and behavior of leaders both have a positive effect on followers’ IB. When leaders’ PFP and followers’ PFT are inconsistent, that is, when the IFCD is significant, leaders and followers will not have positive interaction in their work. When followers’ performance is lower than leaders’ expectations and requirements, it will weaken leaders’ expectations, affection, and trust for followers and, thus, negatively affect the support behavior, which does not help followers to propose, promote, and implement new ideas. By contrast, when followers have low expectations for their role, they tend to complete their own work and do not show exploratory behaviors such as thinking about new ideas [45]. Thus, IFCD appears to have a significant impact on followers’ IB.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis H1. *IFCD has a significantly negative impact on IB.*

2.3. The Mediating Effect of Psychological Empowerment

According to the theory of self-determination [47], PE can affect followers’ interpretation of leaders’ PFP. Different PE can lead followers to have different feelings about leadership. When followers feel empowered, they have a more positive attitude toward the organization and, therefore, can improve performance output [48]. Spreitzer [49] defined PE as an intrinsic motivation that demonstrates a forward-looking tendency to work and a sense of control. In the study of creativity, individual intrinsic motivation is considered an important factor influencing innovation. The empirical study by Spreitzer [49] showed a positive correlation between PE and IB.

When leaders and followers reach an agreement on followership prototype, leaders’ PFP conveys more positive role expectations to followers. Thus, leaders demonstrate a more positive leadership attitude and behavior, trust, and affection toward followers and can provide more care and authorization to followers [41,50,51]. In particular, these expectations guide followers to show more positive work behaviors [52] to improve performance and reach their own expectations. When the followership prototype of leaders and followers matches, followers’ positive performance satisfies leaders’ positive expectations and followers become leaders’ “favorite people” [19]. Meeting expectations can enhance leaders’ trust in followers, inspire followers to repay leaders with higher PE and IB, and realize leaders’ expectations. When there are differences in role expectations between leaders and followers, it is easy to cause cognitive differences or conflicts in work interaction between the two sides [53]. At this time, followers must make additional efforts to deal with these differences or conflicts [54] to reduce their PE and ensure their work is not affected. It often produces negative emotions such as tension, anxiety, and unhappiness [55]. Moreover, the difference in expectations also leads to uncertainty in the interaction process and motivates leaders to focus on their own interests [56] and reduce working resources for followers. With a decrease in leader resources, followers’ innovation willingness and behavior further weaken.

According to the theory of self-actualization, expectations can guide individuals to work toward proving themselves, thus turning expectations into reality [57]. This phenomenon is also known as the

Pygmalion effect and is supported by studies such as “teacher expectation–student performance” and “leader’s expectation–follower’s performance”.

Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis H2. *PE plays a mediating role in the relationship between IFCD and IB.*

2.4. The Moderating Effect of Person–Organization Fit (P-O Fit)

P-O Fit is developed from person–environment matching, which refers to the consistency between individual characteristics and organizational culture, values, etc. In other words, P-O Fit is the compatibility between individuals and organizations [58], including person–organization value matching, demand–supply matching, and demand–capability matching [58]. Person–organization matching shows that an organization’s core values and promotion mechanism, together with followers’ values and needs, influence their attitudes and behaviors. Past literature has confirmed that when individuals and organizations are highly compatible, followers provide higher work input [59] and show better task and innovation performance [60]. According to the theory of empowerment, work situation directly influences empowerment [61,62]. PE has individual differences; different people will explain empowerment differently for the same management practice. Authorized individuals are often optimistic about their work roles and try to influence the work environment [63]. Individuals who are well adapted to their organizations usually have a unique feeling of PE, because they understand the organization’s requirements better and realize that the organization provides them more resources to satisfy organizational goals [64]. Earlier studies found that some antecedents of PE include information on corporate mission and performance, reward for positive performance, low role ambiguity, more social political support, access to information, participatory working atmosphere, and P-O Fit [49,62]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis H3. *P-O Fit plays a positive regulatory role in the relationship between IFCD and PE.*

Amabile [65] highlighted that matching people and organizations affects the generation and implementation of followers’ innovation ideas. The followers with a higher matching degree with organizations are more willing to produce IB on the premise of obtaining support. Meanwhile, the study stressed that P-O Fit influences followers’ IB. From the perspective of the principle of reciprocity, Eisenberger [66] proposed that the matching of person and organizations stimulates the corresponding feedback behavior of followers, such as IB. Shin et al. [67] believe that P-O Fit can influence followers’ IB through intrinsic motivation. According to the theory of social exchange, when enterprises provide followers with the resources they need, followers tend to make more commitments and show higher loyalty to enterprises. They also present corresponding rewards such as showing additional IB. Yang Ying et al. [68] introduced PE as a mediated variable, and a further study found that P-O Fit improved the role of followers’ IB through PE. Woodman [24] also believed that IB is the result of the interaction between humans and environment. Numerous studies show that the interaction between humans and environment can predict followers’ creativity [69,70]. For example, the matching of internal motivation between leaders and subordinates promotes followers’ creativity. In other words, the balance between individuals and environment is an important condition for the improvement of creativity. Choi [71] studied the influence of matching supply expectations and demand ability on creative behavior in terms of two aspects of human environment matching. The results showed that individual expectation and ability had a significant impact on creative behavior, while environment supply and demand had no significant impact.

Accordingly, this study can be further shown as a mediation model with moderating variables. In particular, PE mediates the influence of a leader’s positive IFCD on a follower’s IB; however, the size of the mediating effect depends on followers’ individual organization matching level.

Hypothesis H4. *P-O Fit moderates the mediating effect of PE on the relationship between IFCD and IB.*

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. Research Model

According to previous research, this study proposes hypotheses and constructs a research model. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.

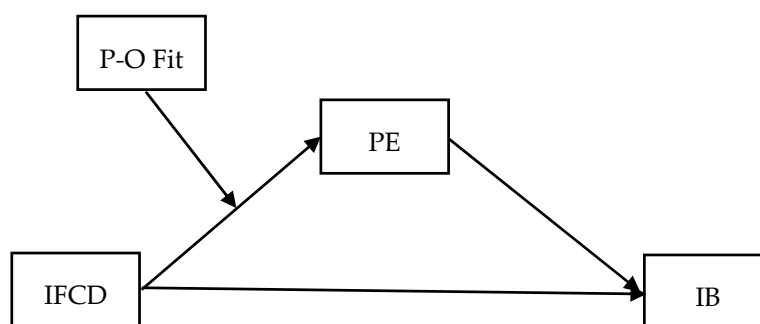


Figure 1. Research model. Note: IFCD = Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences, PE = Psychological Empowerment, P-O Fit = Person-Organization Fit, IB = Innovation Behavior.

3.2. Sample Characteristics

To avoid deviation in the homologous method, this study uses the method of leaders and followers 1:1 matching to send out questionnaires and gather data. Before issuing the questionnaire, each of the 35 large and medium-sized enterprises in Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Jiangsu, Hebei, Henan, and other places in China selected a contact person. Each contact person, in turn, contacted 10 leaders and their matching subordinates who filled in the questionnaire in their own units. Thus, 350 pairs of questionnaires were issued. The survey was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, in September 2019, in addition to filling in demographic information, the leaders evaluated leaders' PFP and followers' needs to evaluate followers' PFT. In the second stage, three months later, questionnaires were sent out to the followers who completed the first stage of the survey. Followers evaluated their PE, IB, and P-O Fit. Finally, 268 valid questionnaires were collected. The sample details are as follows: Of the 35 large and medium-sized enterprises, 27 (77.1%) have foreign-related business and cooperation. In the leaders' sample, men accounted for 60.4% and leader's work experience of 6–10 years accounted for 66.4%. In the followers' sample, men accounted for 56.0%, follower's work experience for less than five years accounted for 59.7%, and followers who earned 2000–5000 Yuan accounted for 61.9%.

3.3. Operational Definition and Measurement of Variables

To ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement, this study chose an international scale with higher reliability to measure the variables. It uses the 5-point Likert scale, with 1–5 ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" and asks the subjects to respond to the descriptive question. The operational definition and measurement scale of the major variables in this study are as follows.

IFCD: In this study, leaders' PFP and followers' PFT were measured, and the absolute value of their difference was used to measure the matching situation. Leaders' PFP was measured using the scale proposed by Sy (2010) [5]. In the guidance part, the participants (leaders) were asked to evaluate the extent to which the nine positive words (such as loyalty) met their expected PFP. The Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.864. According to the practice of Peng Jian et al. [42], nine positive words in the Sy (2010) [5] scale were also used to measure the PFT, but the guide asked the followers to evaluate the extent to which these words conform to their own real-life situation. The Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.806. This shows that the scale has good reliability.

Followers' IB: Data were collected through followers' self-evaluation, and the IB evaluation questionnaire of nine projects developed by Janssen [72] was used; for example, "I often use original methods to solve problems in my work". In this study, the internal consistency Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.878. This shows that the scale has good reliability.

PE: PE was measured using the scale of Spreitzer [49]; for example, "What I have done is very meaningful to me". The internal consistency of Cronbach's α coefficient in this study was 0.909. This indicates that the scale has good reliability.

P–O Fit: The scale of nine topics of Cable et al. [73] is adopted, which is divided into three dimensions: value matching, demand–supply matching, and capacity demand matching; for example, "my personal values and organizational values are very similar". The internal consistency Cronbach's α coefficient in this study was 0.736. This shows that the scale has good reliability.

3.4. Analysis Method

In this study, the variables are set on the basis of previous research, and the relationship between the variables is verified through empirical analysis. First, Amos 24.0 was used to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis of the main variables to evaluate the validity of differentiation among the variables. Second, SPSS 24.0 was used to analyze the descriptive statistics of the variables and calculate the mean value, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient between the variables. Finally, the related hypothesis was tested using hierarchical regression analysis and the asymmetric interval estimation method of bootstrap sampling.

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1. Validity Test

In the research design stage, we used a multi-source and multi-time approach to collect data to reduce common method biases (CMB). However, in this study, except for the leader's PFP, other variables are answered by followers. However, this can lead to CMB and potentially misleading results [74]. To assess the effects of common method variance, we followed the recommendation of Podsakoff et al. [75] and conducted Harman's single-factor test. We found that the first common factor only explained 27.6% of the total variation and did not explain most of the variation. Moreover, we assessed common method bias using a single-factor measurement model in IBM AMOS 24.0. The model fit was evaluated using the chi-square ratio to its degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). Values less than three for the χ^2/df ratio demonstrate a good model fit [76]. When CFI and TLI values are greater than 0.90 and the RMSEA is equal to or lower than 0.08, the model fit is perceived to be acceptable [77]. In this study, after adding the common method variance, the fitting degree of the model does not significantly improve [$\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.151$; RMSEA = 0.024, CFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.971; CFI, TLI, RMSEA change values are less than 0.020]. All these analyses indicate that, in our study, there is no obvious common method deviation [78]. Next, convergent validity is tested. The results are shown in Table 1. We assessed average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) values. All variables' AVE and CR values were above the recommended values of 0.50 and 0.70, respectively [79]. To assess discriminant validity, according to the method suggested by Fornell and Larcker [79], the AVE values of all variables were compared with the squared correlations of all factors. The results indicated that AVE values were greater than their squared correlations of all variables. This shows that the variables have good discriminant validity, and they are indeed five different variables. Therefore, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis show that subsequent analysis can be carried out.

Table 1. Mean, variance and correlation analysis of variables.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. PFP	3.44	0.75	0.85	0.65					
2. PFT	3.28	0.38	0.84	0.64	0.61 **				
3. IFCD	0.50	0.36			0.16 **	−0.21 **			
4. IB	3.49	0.73	0.74	0.59	0.36 **	0.58 **	−0.52 **		
5. PE	3.50	0.71	0.84	0.57	0.47 **	0.67 **	−0.48 **	0.61 **	
6. P-O Fit	3.38	0.29	0.73	0.58	0.17 **	0.30 **	−0.38 **	0.54 **	0.41 **

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. PFP = Positive Followership Prototype, PFT = Positive Followership Traits, IFCD = Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences, PE = Psychological Empowerment, P-O Fit = Person-Organization Fit, IB = Innovation Behavior.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Table 1 summarizes mean, variance, AVE, CR values, and correlation analysis results of each variable in this study. The results showed that there was a significant negative correlation between IFCD and IB ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$), PE ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$), and P-O Fit ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$). There was a significant positive correlation between the IB of followers and PE ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) and P-O Fit ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$). There was a significant positive correlation between PE and P-O Fit ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, there was a significant negative correlation between IFCD and follower's income ($r = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$) but no significant correlation between IFCD and follower's gender, age, and working years. This shows that leaders' IFCD are different among followers with different incomes.

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

This research uses a hierarchical regression model. The analysis results are shown in Table 2. First, in Models 1–4, the first layer takes demographic variables as independent variables; the second layer takes IFCD as independent variables; the third layer takes the P-O Fit as independent variables; and the fourth layer takes the product terms of IFCD multiplied by the P-O Fit and IFCD*P-O Fit, as independent variables. It then analyzes their influence on PE. Second, in Models 5–7, the first layer takes demographic variables as independent variables; the second layer takes IFCD as independent variables; the third layer takes PE as independent variables, and it then analyzes their influence on IB. Using this analysis easily yields the main, mediating, and moderating effects.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results.

Variable	PE				IB		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Gender	0.086	0.074	0.045	0.035	0.050	0.038	0.005
Age	0.043	0.012	−0.002	0.007	0.074	0.042	0.037
Work experience	0.049	0.019	0.019	−0.013	0.059	0.029	0.020
Income	0.180 **	0.103	0.059	0.074	0.338 ***	0.257 ***	0.212 ***
IFCD		−0.459 ***	−0.372 ***	−0.329 ***		−0.475 ***	−0.273 ***
PE							0.440 ***
P-O Fit			0.249 ***	0.183 **			
IFCD * P-O Fit				0.242 ***			
R ²	0.041	0.244	0.295	0.344	0.121	0.338	0.485
ΔR ²	0.041	0.204	0.050	0.049	0.121	0.218	0.146
F	2.784 *	16.924 ***	18.165 ***	19.439 ***	9.032 ***	26.804 ***	40.937 ***

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. IFCD = Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences, PE = Psychological Empowerment, P-O Fit = Person-Organization Fit, IB = Innovation Behavior.

4.3.1. Testing of Main Effect

Hypothesis H1 suggests that IFCD are negatively correlated with followers' IB. To test this, hierarchical regression modeling was used to set IFCD as an independent variable and followers' IB as

a dependent variable in SPSS 24.0, and these were included into the regression equation together with control variables.

The results of Table 2, Model 6, show that there is a significant negative correlation between followers' IFCD and IB ($r = -0.475, p < 0.001$); this indicates that IFCD has a significant negative effect on IB. Therefore, Hypothesis H1 is supported.

4.3.2. Testing of the Mediating Effect

To test the mediating effect of PE proposed by Hypothesis H2, we use the asymmetric interval estimation method based on bootstrap sampling, because the size of the mediating effect is equal to the product of the regression coefficients of the core variables in Table 2, Models 2 and 7 (i.e., the product of the regression coefficients of IFCD on PE and the regression coefficients of PE on followers' IB). In most cases, the product term belongs to extremely skewed distribution, and it is more appropriate to use an asymmetric interval for testing [80]. In particular, this study uses the SPSS plug-in process developed by Hayes to estimate the asymmetric interval. Based on the bootstrap method, 5000 samples are put back. Table 3 shows the results: The mediating effect is -0.2236 , and its 95% confidence interval is $[-0.2985, -0.1588]$, excluding 0, indicating that the mediating effect is significant; however, after controlling the mediating effect, the direct effect is still significant. Thus, PE plays a part in mediating the relationship between the two; therefore, Hypothesis H2 is supported.

Table 3. Mediation effect of PE.

Path	Total Effect	Confidence Interval	Direct Effect	Confidence Interval	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval
IFCD→PE→IB	−0.5221	[−0.6251, −0.4192]	−0.2985	[−0.4015, −0.1955]	−0.2236	[−0.2985, −0.1588]

Note: IFCD = Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences, PE = Psychological Empowerment, IB = Innovation Behavior.

4.3.3. Testing of the Moderating Effect

To eliminate the collinearity, the variables were standardized before the adjustment effect was verified. Table 2 shows the results of the hierarchical regression analysis. The interaction effects of IFCD and P-O Fit are significantly related to PE (Model 4, $\beta = 0.242, p < 0.001$). To more intuitively show the direct regulatory effect of P-O Fit on IFCD and PE, according to the procedure recommended by Cohen, West, and Aiken (2013) [81], this study draws a simple slope diagram, as shown in Figure 2, based on a standard deviation higher than the mean of PE and a standard deviation lower than the mean. Compared with followers with low P-O Fit, those with high P-O Fit can enhance the influence of IFCD and followers' PE. Through this analysis, Hypothesis H3 is supported.

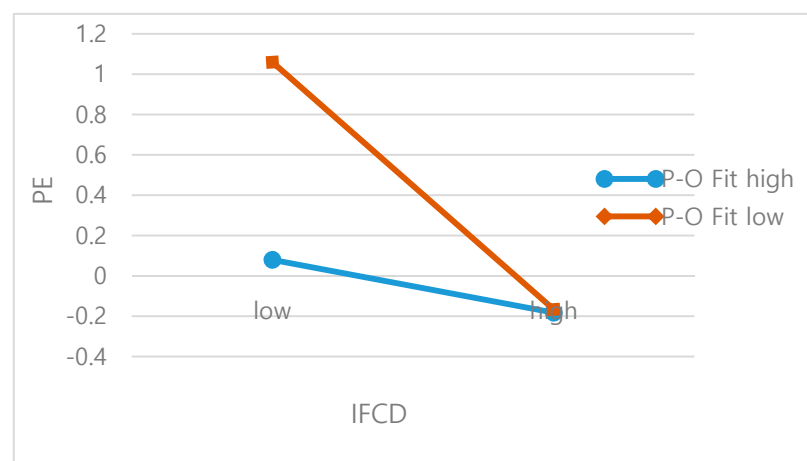


Figure 2. P-O Fit's moderating effect. Note: IFCD = Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences, PE = Psychological Empowerment, P-O Fit = Person-Organization Fit.

Hypothesis H4 proposes that the P-O Fit moderates the mediating effect of PE on the relationship between IFCD and IB. According to the moderated mediation analysis model (Model 7) proposed by Preacher et al. [82] and Hayes [80], the bootstrapping method was used to analyze the mediating effect of PE between IFCD and IB at different P-O Fit levels. The sample size was 5000. Under the 95% confidence interval, through PROCESS operation, the indirect effect under different P-O Fit levels is obtained. According to Table 4, when the P-O Fit is at a relatively low level and the indirect effect of IFCD on IB through PE is -0.2446 confidence interval (confidence interval = $[-0.3270, -0.1833]$). When the P-O Fit is at a high level, the indirect effect of IFCD on IB through PE is -0.0664 (confidence interval = $[-0.1377, -0.0074]$). No confidence interval contains 0; this indicates that the indirect effect of IFCD on IB through PE is significant, regardless of whether the P-O Fit level is low or high. However, the effect values are different. The difference is 0.1802 (confidence interval = $[0.1007, 0.2748]$). The confidence interval does not include 0, indicating that the indirect effect value is significantly different at different levels of P-O Fit. Hayes (2015) [83] believed that to determine whether the moderated mediation effect really exists, the index should be used to further test the moderated mediating effect, and the results showed that the index is 0.0901 , and the confidence interval does not contain 0. This shows that P-O Fit positively moderates the mediating role of PE in the relationship between IFCD and IB, and the moderated mediation effect value is 0.0901 . Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 4. Mediating effects and confidence intervals at different levels of P-O Fit.

Condition			IFCD→PE→IB		
			Effect	Boot SE	Bootstrap 95%CI
P-O Fit	Direct effect		-0.2985	0.0523	$[-0.4015, -0.1955]$
	Indirect effect	M – 1 SD	-0.2466	0.0366	$[-0.3270, -0.1833]$
		M + 1 SD	-0.0664	0.0330	$[-0.1377, -0.0074]$
	Differences between low and high conditions		0.1802	0.0446	$[0.1007, 0.2748]$
	Index of moderated mediation		0.0901	0.0223	$[0.0503, 0.1374]$

Note: IFCD = Implicit Followership Cognitive Differences, PE = Psychological Empowerment, P-O Fit = Person-Organization Fit, IB = Innovation Behavior.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion and Implications

In recent years, implicit followership is a new research topic in the Western management field. Considering that the concept and theory are proposed, numerous studies provide a vital method to understand the leadership and followership processes in organizations [5,7,8,18]. Based on the Chinese context, this study constructs the relationship model among IFCD, IB, PE, and P-O Fit. The following conclusions are drawn: First, IFCD is significantly negatively related to IB. Second, PE has the mediating variable effects of IFCD on IB. Moreover, the relationship between P-O Fit positively moderates IFCD and PE and positively moderates the mediating effect of PE on IFCD and IB.

The conclusions of this study not only enrich the theoretical research on followers' IFCD and IB, PE, and P-O Fit but are also of great value and significance to organizations' practices.

First, this study examines the IFCD and IB of followers and determines the internal relationship between them. Further, it enriches the understanding of the antecedents of followers' IB and suggests that to better promote followers' IB, organizations should promote leaders who have positive expectations of followers. Moreover, in the process of follower recruitment, followers who meet the cognitive characteristics of leaders should be selected. Having PFT is not only the basis of improving followers' initiative and creativity but also an important premise for stimulating followers' IB.

It also clarifies the mechanism and boundary conditions between IFCD and followers' IB and focuses on the role of followers' PE in this process. PE affects followers' interpretation of leaders' PFP, which leads to different perceptions of followers about leaders and leads to different results. In the context of Chinese enterprise management, the process of leaders' PFP depends on followers' PE, which

indicates that the influence of leaders on followers and the practice of human resource management implemented by organizations are not unconditional but determined by the organizational context formed by followers' PE. PE has become the key to the effectiveness of the interaction between leaders and followers, which provides important clues for human resource management to focus on the feelings of followers for leaders.

Second, this study enriches the research on the relationship between P-O Fit and PE. In addition, previous studies do not deal in depth with the mechanism through which P-O Fit affects followers' IB. This study offsets this deficiency. This suggests that the staff in charge of recruitment should have a deep and accurate understanding of the values of the organization and the candidates; after followers are recruited and trained, they can reach an agreement with the enterprise on the values and objectives. In addition, followers should be trained in skills to improve their own strengths, achieve requirement ability matching, and improve the possibility of followers' IB.

5.2. Limitation and Further Research

An important advantage of this study is the preciseness of its research design: As a longitudinal research design is adopted, homologous variance is avoided to a large extent, and the research results are more real and reliable. The study still has certain limitations: (1) The majority of the scales used are developed in the background of Western organizations. Although some of them have been proven to have measurement stability between Chinese and Western samples, choosing local or localized scales may bring the research results closer to the local reality. (2) The enterprises involved in this study were selected by the researchers. This limits the external validity of the study to a certain extent, and a follow-up study could be broader in scope. (3) For the measurement of followers' IB, this study adopts the method of followers' self-report to collect data. Although this method is also common in current research, choosing the method of third-party evaluation may be more helpful in increasing the reliability of research results.

In future research, the following two aspects should be included: (1) This study shows that the mediating variables between IFCD and followers' IB play a mediating role, which indicates that there are other mediating mechanisms. (2) We could study different groups such as new-generation followers and knowledge followers to explore how to construct implicit theory following diagrams of different types of followers and how to influence the interaction with leaders and their own performance. This is expected to solve more key challenges to promote the development of leadership in the future.

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