


## Article

# How Distributed Leadership Fosters Individual Leadership Emergence: The Mediating Role of Empowerment Role Identity and Enacted Leader Identity

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**Abstract:** Departing from past research on managers' influence on employees' informal leadership emergence, we explore the mechanism of how distributed leadership enhances individual leadership emergence from a cognitive perspective. Drawing upon the leadership identity construction theory and role identity theory, we theoretically developed and empirically tested a serial mediation model. It examines how distributed leadership promotes employees' leadership emergence via individual empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity. Using a three-wave field survey from 496 subordinate–supervisor dyads (82 supervisors and 496 employees) in China, we found that empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity serially mediate the association between distributed leadership and employees' leadership emergence. The results demonstrate the leadership identity construction process of employees' leadership emergence under distributed leadership. The theoretical and practical implications of our findings are then discussed.

**Keywords:** distributed leadership; leadership emergence; empowerment role identity; enacted leader identity; leadership identity construction theory; role identity theory



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## 1. Introduction

Leadership emergence, unlike designated formal roles, refers to the process by which individuals become influential in other members' perceptions [1,2]. For example, leadership emergence occurs when an employee gains influence over others on a team in terms of direction and decisions [3]. By emerging as leaders, employees can enhance their effectiveness [4], exert their ability and creativity [5], and take on more responsibilities [6]. Not surprisingly, leadership emergence helps teams promote proactivity or effectiveness [7,8], and increase team performance [9].

Considering the importance of leadership emergence, scholars have sought to investigate the factors that boost it [10,11]. Drawing on the leadership–followership literature, managers are key factors in predicting subordinates' behavior and individual leadership emergence [12]. For instance, supervisors can affect employees' behavior via charisma, using inspirational motivation, and shaping their goal orientations [13,14]. Furthermore, prior research has also suggested that although leadership emergence is often driven by individual differences (e.g., gender [15]; self-efficacy [16]; personality [17]; competency [18] and intelligence [19]), managers, as an important contextual factor, play a critical role in facilitating it [20]. For instance, supervisors can provide emotional and instrumental support [21], delegate work to subordinates with professional skills, and enhance their leadership emergence by distributing roles and responsibilities within tasks, along with power, i.e., distributed leadership [22,23].

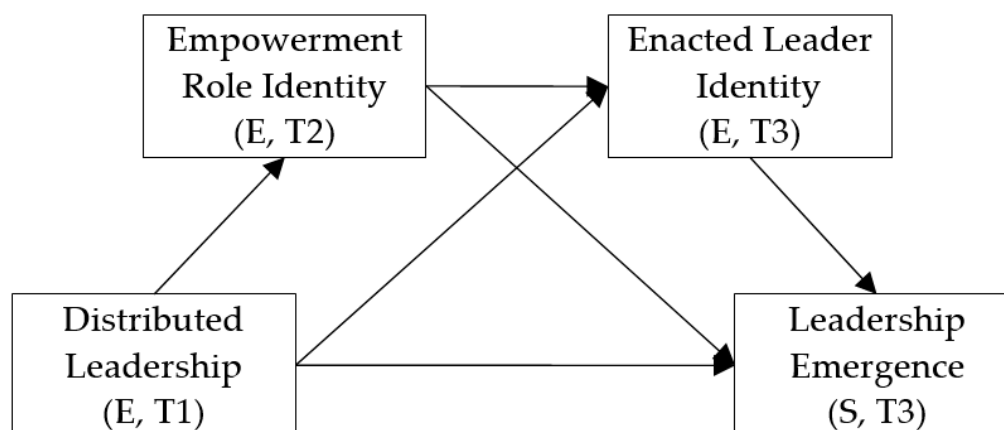
In distributed leadership, leadership functions (e.g., decision making) are allocated to individuals, shared by group members, and performed by different people at different times [24]. In this process, managers facilitate and develop individuals' leadership knowledge, skills, and expertise [25,26]. However, in spite of the positive influence of distributed leadership on individuals' learning [27] and leadership development [28], the mechanism of how the process works is understudied [23].

More importantly, current research fails to provide a clear explanation of individuals' cognition of their role in this process. Consequently, it is essential for research to move beyond merely describing the positive association between distributed leadership and employees' leadership emergence to examine why distributed leadership leads to changes in employees' perceptions of their roles and leader identity. In this current research, we develop a theoretical model to investigate the pathways of how distributed leadership affects individuals' informal leadership emergence. This examination is significant because it offers valuable insights into employees' perceptions of distributed leadership patterns and the enactment of leader identity during leadership emergence, which remains unclear in the current distributed leadership literature [29–31].

To understand the psychological underpinnings of employees who emerge as leaders under distributed leadership, we suggest that it is necessary to investigate employees' self-concepts and identity construction during the cognitive process. According to the social cognition framework [32,33], social cognition is the basis of individual behavior, and individual social behavior is the result of various perceptions and judgments made in the process of social cognition [32]. Specifically, situational factors (e.g., supervisory support) will influence individuals' evaluation of their self-attributes and change their original perceptions of the role of leadership, thereby promoting the regulation of their behavior and a performance that is consistent with their ideal self. Therefore, individuals' perceptions and behavioral responses during the social cognition essentially drive the leadership identity construction and boost employees' leadership emergence.

While prior research had explained the effect of supervisors on individuals' leadership emergence from the intrinsic motivation perspective, it ignores the fact that the most profound impact that leaders have on their followers is changing their self-concept [34], that is, changing how they see themselves as leaders. Role identity, as a core aspect of self-concept, is based on the individual's evaluation of a specific role or the meaning assigned to it. Moreover, leadership identity construction is highly dynamic, with individuals adjusting and shifting their role identity based on its relevance and importance [35]. The more closely an individual's role identity is tied to their perception, the more likely they are to exhibit behavior consistent with the role [34]. Therefore, we integrate the leadership identity construction theory [18] and the role identity theory [36,37] to develop theoretical arguments clarifying the mechanism. We suggest that distributed leadership will enhance employees' leadership emergence by stimulating individuals' empowerment role identity and boosting subsequently enacted leader identity. Based on the process of leadership identity construction, we also examine the serial multiple mediation effect of empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity on the relationship between distributed leadership and employees' leadership emergence. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model proposed in the research.

We test the hypotheses with subordinate–supervisor dyads in a three-wave field survey. In examining the model, we take employees and their supervising managers as samples. First, knowledge-based workers are those who master heterogeneous knowledge and skills [38,39]. As the critical elements of competitiveness, they are key candidates for the training and development of leadership teams in the organization [40,41]. In addition, knowledge-based workers are not only capable of taking on the leaders' responsibility, but also aspire to becoming leaders owing to their higher levels of achievement goal orientation [42,43]. In this study, we explore the mechanism of distributed leadership to leadership emergence by investigating the changes in the perception and role cognition of employees under distributed leadership.



**Figure 1.** The theoretical model of the research. Notes: E = Employee report; S = Supervisor report. T1/2/3 = Time 1/2/3.

By developing and testing the model, we contribute to the literature in several aspects. To begin with, we advance the literature on the antecedents of leadership emergence by examining the influence of distributed leadership. Beyond the effects of individual differences proposed in previous studies [10], distributed leadership, as a contextual factor, enhances employees' leadership emergence through an identity construction process. More importantly, we build and test leadership emergence under distributed leadership by conceptually and empirically integrating relevant theories to answer the call for a better understanding of the impacts of leadership on informal leadership emergence in the workplace [3,44]. In addition, our work extends the growing conversation in the literature about examining the outcomes of distributed leadership (e.g., [45]). By integrating the leadership identity construction theory and role identity theory, we clarify the positive serial mediation effect of distributed leadership on leadership emergence via empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity. Consistent with recent research highlighting that leadership is accessible to all employees [46], our findings indicate that distributed leadership fosters informal leadership emergence by influencing individuals' self-perceptions of their identity and how they define themselves relative to others [47]. Finally, our research yields important practical implications for managers and organizations to improve employees' leadership emergence [1,48]. We highlight that distributed leadership can encourage employees to engage in the empowerment role identities and then create positive expectations for themselves as leaders. Further, these identities and expectations promote subsequent emerging leaders as well as leadership behaviors. Thus, distributed leadership can function as an effective managerial tool to develop employees' informal leadership.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

### 2.1. Identity Construction in Leadership Emergence

Through the investigation of a portion of the antecedents of leadership emergence, tremendous progress has been made [1,49,50]. Scholars have gradually realized that leadership emergence is a dynamic, social, and interactive identity construction process [46,51]. With the broader relational perspectives of leadership, leadership identity construction theory focuses on the dynamics by which leadership emerges and explores how it generalizes among organizational members, rather than just formal leaders [18,46]. Thus, according to the leadership identity construction theory, leadership is emphasized as a phenomenon socially constructed among organizational members [18,46,51,52], instead of a merely formal, high-status role conferred by position. In addition, DeRue and Ashford suggest that the collective support of an organizational context may act as a catalyst to start the process of building a leadership identity [46]. Likewise, leadership identity construction theory explicates the interactive, social process through which individuals come to be seen as leaders and provides explanations about how relational dynamics among

group members predict leadership emergence [46]. Together, this theory not only centers on the behavior of the individual who eventually emerges as an informal leader but also underlies the roles and impacts of other members on leadership emergence [18]. Therefore, drawing from leadership identity construction theory, we offer propositions about how the organizational context (e.g., distributed leadership) predicts leadership emergence by explaining the cognitive processes of leadership construction in which individuals are regarded as leaders.

We further draw from role identity theory to explain why distributed leadership can play a positive role in activating employees' cognition of their self-concept involved in role identity [46]. Identity serves as the social prism through which people interpret and engage with their surrounding circumstances [53]. Further, role identity refers to the cognitive schemata that people employ to monitor their environment, evaluate their objectives, and direct their actions [54]. As a core aspect of self-concept, it is based on an individual's evaluation of a specific role or meaning assigned to it [53,55,56]. On this basis, distributed leadership involving multiple individuals in its leadership practice, which can be a strong stimulus in an organization, will influence the self-concept of employees and guide employees' cognition of their role in the leadership identity construction process [57,58].

By integrating the theories of leadership identity construction and role identity, we propose that distributed leadership is a crucial contextual factor that affects subordinates' attitudes and behaviors regarding leadership emergence by influencing the subordinates' self-concepts regarding role identity [59,60]. Specifically, we propose that this is achieved by stimulating the subordinates' empowerment role identities and enacted leader identities, which in turn motivates individual leadership emergence.

## 2.2. Distributed Leadership as a Driver of Employees' Leadership Emergence

Distributed leadership, oriented at dynamic interactions between leaders and followers [61–63], has made significant progress in some areas of theory and practice [29]. Gronn has offered a theoretically grounded concept of distributed leadership, in which the core element of distributed leadership is the need for leadership of the widespread conjoined actions that take place on many levels in organizations [22]. Organizational members with heterogeneous talents are encouraged to emerge as informal leaders based on organizational performance and employee capabilities [64]. In certain situations, leadership emergence is the process through which a person is considered to “lead” other members without a formal position of authority [9,65]. DeRue and Ashford suggest that the process may begin as a result of widespread support for the organizational context [46]. Therefore, it is not hard to see that leadership emergence is an identity construction process that entails the implicit and/or explicit assignment of the informal leader role by distributed leadership [3].

In addition, according to the research on distributed leadership, the informal leadership offered by numerous team members has a major impact on organizational effectiveness [66]. Individual initiative and the emergence of informal leaders, as per researchers, are crucial for team performance [67]. The success of formal leaders is immediately and favorably impacted by team performance [68]. It therefore seems logical that formal leaders in distributed leadership patterns may prefer to encourage employees' engagement in leadership emergence [69] and respond positively to employees' leadership attempts [20], which also provides an open and inclusive organization environment for employees [70]. Therefore, it seems sensible to claim that distributed leadership, as a driver, supports raising the possibility of employees emerging as leaders. Accordingly, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Distributed leadership is positively related to employees' leadership emergence.*

### 2.3. Distributed Leadership and Empowerment Role Identity

Empowerment role identity defines the extent to which individuals view themselves as someone who desires to be empowered in a certain job [71]. Role identities serve as cognitive schemata that people employ to give their lives purpose, analyze their environment, and direct their actions [54]. Distributed leadership refers to a group of teams' traits and habits, not to a single person's abilities or habits [72]. It is described as a collective social process that results through contacts, reciprocal influences, and shared obligations between numerous individuals in order to accomplish common objectives [45]. In the distributed leadership pattern, empowerment is a power-sharing process that exists between employees and leaders [22]. It means that distributed leadership empowers employees in a targeted manner based on their expertise and skills, which can result in employees being more receptive to the organization's empowerment role.

In addition, role identity theory suggests that a role identity represents a set of internalized role expectations, individuals have expectations for the appropriate behavior of diverse roles and internalize them as part of themselves [36]. The burgeoning research describes the desire for status as a basic human motivation and therefore it naturally draws individuals' attention [73–75]. Distributed leadership “delegates” leadership roles to employees based on their expertise [29] and encourages employees to challenge themselves to take on leadership responsibilities [3]. This coincides with experienced employees' role expectations of status, which in turn, affect employees' empowerment role identity. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Distributed leadership is positively related to empowerment role identity.*

### 2.4. The Impact of Empowerment Role Identity on Enacted Leader Identity

Role identity theory states that individuals' role identities can be expanded through symbolic interactions [76]. Employees may have varied expectations of empowering leadership under the distributed leadership pattern, and they may give distinct empowered roles different meanings [55]. Employees who identify strongly with their role of empowerment value being empowered by their leaders and see such leadership as being in line with their expectations for the position [76]. Employees who have a low level of role identity for empowerment, on the other hand, typically do not want to take on those roles [77].

Role identities serve as cognitive schemata that people employ to give their lives purpose, analyze their environment, and direct their actions [54]. Employees may feel more in control when leaders give them high levels of empowerment and job identification [55]. Additionally, these employees may perceive that their leaders' empowering behaviors align with their beliefs, which could help them see their work as significant [71] and motivate employees to devote more effort to the organization [78]. The term “enacted leader identity” describes an explicit perceptual assessment of the degree to which one embraces their leadership role and views the word “leader” as a personal descriptor [42]. Jennings et al. have suggested that when individuals behave in leader-like ways, they may define themselves more as leaders, which is reflected in their enacted leader identities [42]. Prior studies have also suggested that when leaders delegate power to employees with an empowerment role identity, it may impact their work [55]. Based on this, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3.** *Empowerment role identity is positively related to individuals' enacted leader identity at work.*

### 2.5. Enacted Leader Identity and Employees' Leadership Emergence

Enacted leader identity is a perceptual judgement in which one sees oneself as a leader [42,79]. According to leadership identity construction theory, it is essential to internalize a leadership role into one's self-concept [80,81]. Leadership is not just “granted” by others, but it must also be “claimed” by the individual through deliberate efforts to exercise leadership [30,46]. Since how one acts can alter how one thinks about oneself, the

greatest approach to establish a view of oneself as a leader is to first act in that capacity. To be specific, individuals who have an explicit self-concept of seeing themselves as a leader tend to increase their likelihood of emerging as informal leaders [47,53,82,83].

In addition, leadership emergence can be depicted as a result of social interaction [10]. Having a powerful leadership role identity motivates individuals to take on more leadership-like behaviors (e.g., creating value for the group) so others will take them as leaders [42,53,79]. Therefore, our research argues that enacted leader identity is a kind of identification and internalization of employees' self-concept, which has a positive predictive effect on employees' leadership emergence. Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 4.** *Enacted leader identity is positively related to employees' leadership emergence.*

#### 2.6. A Sequential Mediation Model

Because of the foregoing hypotheses, we suggest a serial mediation model in which distributed leadership indirectly influences the formation of leadership emergence via empowerment role identity and then via enacted leader identity. Leadership emergence is a relational leadership identity construction process, which emerges from the complex interaction among members of organizations [3,18]. People employ role identities as cognitive schemata in an intricate process to find self-meaning, interpret experiences, and direct behavioral possibilities [54]. Cognitive schemata, role identity, and leadership perception can become powerful intrinsic drivers of leadership emergence because the expression of acting like a leader can help individuals reestablish internal consistency and coherence. Together, these concepts suggest that when employees have cognitive schemata concerning empowerment and leadership perceptions, they are more likely to act in ways that are consistent with their leaders.

Distributed leadership provides a democratic, open organizational climate and creates an empowering environment that makes it easier for employees to accept the empowerment given by an organization [64]. A relatively open organizational environment and precise empowerment brought by distributed leadership may deepen employees' recognition of authority roles [84]. Empowerment role identity represents a dynamic self-concept that captures how people see themselves in that role [36]. When employees internalize this role expectation of becoming a leader, they are more likely to incorporate the leadership role into their definition of self and, in turn, exhibit behaviors consistent with that role, ultimately facilitating informal leadership emergence. This progressive cognition is supported by earlier studies, which demonstrate that leadership empowerment deepens the self-concept of the empowered person's ability, so employees feel valued and are sufficiently able to make contributions at work, leading them to engage in leadership emergence that benefits their organization [55,85,86]. Incorporating the arguments above, we propose a serial mediation model linking distributed leadership and individual leadership emergence. Specifically, by providing an open and inclusive environment, distributed leadership will increase employees' empowerment role identity, which, in turn, engages employees' enacted leader identity and, consequently, promotes their leadership emergence.

**Hypothesis 5.** *Empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity sequentially mediate the positive relationship between distributed leadership and employees' leadership emergence.*

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Procedure and Sample

Data were collected from a large high-tech company in Southern China. This high-tech company was an ideal sample for our study because employees' proactivity and informal leadership are allowed and expected in high-tech professions, especially for those who engage in knowledge-based work [30,35]. Further, frequent communication and regular meetings within different teams in the company also ensure that leaders are able to accurately observe and evaluate employees' leadership emergence and behaviors.

This study was conducted under Institutional Review Board Protocol #ECSHU 2022-209 (The Influence Mechanism of Distributed Leadership on Employee Leadership Emergence) at Shanghai University. After the preliminary investigation, we conducted both a set of interviews and an open-ended survey, in which interviewees' responses showed their top managers' support for distributed leadership in the company. The responses also provided additional insights into how individuals specifically viewed informal leadership emergence. Previous research has shown that most employees working knowledge-based roles aspire to leadership roles [39,42]. Thus, we believe that the high-tech company chosen offers a relevant and interesting study context that provides a viable backdrop for examining the present hypotheses.

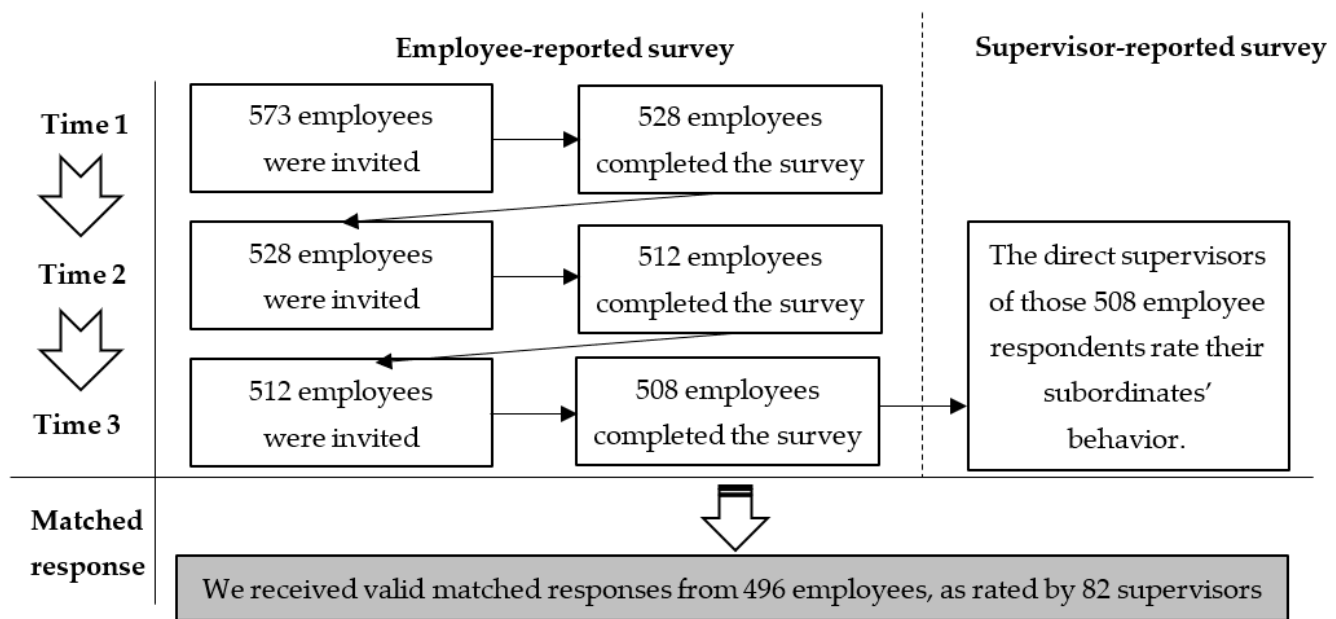
We collected three waves of data from employees and their supervisors. Prior to data collection, we obtained a name roster from the company's HR manager, which contained a description of the team structure (i.e., who was the supervisor and who were the employees). Using the name roster, we assigned codes to the participants to facilitate identification of leader–employee dyads and of matching participant responses at three time points. Then, a randomized cluster sampling was used to select respondents from departments of the company. The inclusion criteria for participants included: first, respondents should be working in the company as regular staff; second, clear dyadic relationships (i.e., supervisors and subordinates) should exist; and third, respondents should have no cognitive impairment and be able to understand the questions in the survey. As a result, participants were employees and their supervising managers from different teams in the company.

These employees specialized in a variety of domains, including new product development, product function improvements, marketing planning, and operational services. With the help of human resource staff, we informed these employees in their regular meetings about the general purpose of this study, explained the survey procedures, worded items according to company jargon to reduce the complexity and/or ambiguity of scale items, and assured them of the confidentiality of this survey. All the participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, the procedures for questionnaire completion, and the confidentiality of their responses. Finally, 573 employees and their corresponding supervisors agreed to participate in the research during work hours.

To ameliorate common method concerns, we used a time-lagged design [87]. At Time 1, we asked 573 employee participants to complete the basic information and rate the distributed leadership questionnaire. A total of 528 employees completed the questionnaire (response rate = 92.2%). At Time 2, which was one month after the completion of the Time 1 survey, we asked those 528 employee respondents to rate their empowerment role identity. A total of 512 employee respondents completed the questionnaire (a 96.9% response rate). At Time 3, after the completion of the Time 2 survey, we asked the same 512 employee respondents to report on their enacted leader identity. Then, a total of 508 employees completed the questionnaire (response rate = 99.2%).

Next, we asked the direct supervisors of those 508 employee respondents who completed both T1 and T2 surveys to rate their subordinates' leadership emergence behaviors. We received valid matched responses from 496 employees, as rated by 82 supervisors (response rate = 97.6%). Figure 2 showed a summary of the data collection process.

Among the 496 employees, 279 were female (56.3%); 29.6% were 30 years old or younger; 38.3% were between 30 and 40 years of age; 15.9% were between 41 and 50 years of age; and 12.3% were more than 50 years of age; 87.5% of participants had earned a Bachelor's degree or above; and 84.5% had at least one year of work experience. Among the 82 supervisors, 27 were female (32.9%); 13.4% were 30 years old or younger; 48.8% were between 30 and 40 years of age; 32.9% were between 41 and 50 years of age; and 4.8% were more than 50 years of age. All the supervisors had earned a Bachelor's degree or above and had at least three years of work experience.



**Figure 2.** Data collection process.

### 3.2. Measures

All measures used in this study were originally developed in English. These measures were translated into Chinese and back-translated into English by bilingual experts. The back-translated English version was compared with the original English for equivalence and agreement [88]. Table 1 showed a summary of the measures in this study. Distributed leadership, empowerment role identity, and enacted leader identity were rated by subordinates, and leadership emergence was rated by supervisors. Except when otherwise noted, all responses were made on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree).

**Table 1.** Summary of measures in the study.

Variable	Measures	Items
Distributed Leadership	8-item scale (Canterino et al., 2020) [25]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I discussed with and helped my peers in solving problems.</li> <li>2. Both my peers and I could clearly describe our vision.</li> <li>3. The organization provided me and my peers with a set of shared values that guided change.</li> <li>4. All units were expected to achieve high levels.</li> <li>5. My peers and I met regularly to discuss performance.</li> <li>6. My peers and I regularly met to discuss standards and objectives.</li> <li>7. I provided structure that encouraged all my peers to participate in improving processes.</li> <li>8. Informal leaders played an important role in improving change implementation.</li> </ol>
Empowerment role identity	4-item scale (Farmer et al., 2003) [36]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I often think about having greater control over my job.</li> <li>2. I have a clear concept of myself as an employee who wants to have greater decision-making power.</li> <li>3. Having a certain degree of power and discretion is an important part of my identity.</li> <li>4. I would feel a loss if I had no discretion at all in my job.</li> </ol>

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	Measures	Items
Enacted leader identity	4-item scale (Jennings et al., 2022) [42]	1. I displayed the characteristics of a leader. 2. I saw myself as a leader. 3. Acting as a leader was very important to me. 4. Other people saw me as a leader.
Leadership emergence	3-item scale (Marinova et al., 2013) [89]	1. The employee shows potential for advancement in the organization. 2. The employee can become an effective leader. 3. The employee can be a role model for his/her current coworkers.

Notes:  $N = 496$ . Estimates are unstandardized.

### 3.2.1. Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership was assessed by using eight items based on the work of Canterino et al. [25]. One sample item is: “The formal leader held discussions with us and helped us solve problems.” Cronbach’s alpha was 0.88.

### 3.2.2. Empowerment Role Identity

We used a four-item scale developed by Farmer et al. to measure empowerment role identity [36]. One example item is: “I often think about having greater control over my job.” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.81.

### 3.2.3. Enacted Leader Identity

We measured enacted leader identity with a four-item scale adapted from Jennings et al. [42]. Sample items included: “Today at work, I displayed the characteristics of a leader,” and “Today at work, other people saw me as a leader.” Cronbach’s alpha for enacted leader identity was 0.83.

### 3.2.4. Leadership Emergence

We measured leadership emergence with a three-item scale developed by Marinova et al. [89]. One example item was: “This employee shows potential for advancement in the organization.” Our measure was thus specifically designed and adapted for our study context (organizational workgroups with an existing supervisor). Cronbach’s alpha was 0.78.

### 3.2.5. Control Variables

To provide a rigorous test of our hypothetical model, we controlled for several factors influencing employees’ perceptions and managers’ evaluations of employees’ workplace behaviors. First, according to previous studies [66,90], employees’ demographic characteristics and background factors can affect their leadership identity construction. Hence, we controlled for the effect of team size and demographic variables, including gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age, education, and tenure. In addition, given that leader empowerment behaviors can influence employees’ psychological empowerment and working experiences [71,91], we controlled for the potential impacts of empowering leadership (assessed at Time (1) when investigating the relationship between distributed leadership (Time 1) and employees’ self-perceptions (including empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity at Time (2) using the seventeen-item scale from Konczak et al. [92]. A sample item was “My manager gives me the authority I need to make decisions that improve work processes and procedures”. The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.85. Furthermore, consistent with prior research, in which leader–member exchange (LMX) was shown to influence supervisors’ perceptions and evaluations of their subordinates’ behavior [93], we included LMX as a control variable in the study by using the seven-item scale developed by Liden et al. [94]. An example item was “My supervisor understands my problems and needs.” The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.86.

### 3.3. Analytical Approach

In the study, our phenomenon of interest focused on the employee level of analysis (level 1). However, the data structure was nested because employees were nested within different teams and supervised by their corresponding leaders. In our research, the leader's average span of control was 6.05 subordinates, ranging from four to eight. This means that each supervisor rated multiple subordinates' leadership emergence (level 2), statistically violating the assumption of independent observations [95]. Thus, consistent with prior studies [96], we used the multilevel method to test the hypotheses in Mplus. To prevent conflation of the individual- and group-level effects, we modeled all independent variables of our study at the individual level and grand-mean centered these variables before conducting the analyses [97]. Based on Selig and Preacher's research, we calculated the confidence intervals for the indirect effects and serial mediation in the model through the Monte Carlo-based simulation (20,000 repetitions) [98].

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in Mplus to confirm the discriminant validity of the four main variables used in this study (distributed leadership, empowerment role identity, enacted leader identity, and leadership emergence). As shown in Table 2, the hypothesized four-factor model provided a model fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.39$ , CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.04) superior to other alternative models, which supported the discrimination of the measures used in our study.

**Table 2.** Model fit results for confirmatory factor analyses.

Models	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
M1: Four-factor model (DL, ERI, ELI, LE)	2.39	—	0.95	0.94	0.05	0.04
M2: Three-factor model (DL + ERI, ELI, LE)	6.71	650.144 ** (3)	0.79	0.75	0.11	0.10
M3: Three-factor model (DL, ERI + ELI, LE)	4.30	291.204 ** (3)	0.88	0.86	0.08	0.06
M4: Three-factor model (DL, ERI, ELI + LE)	4.06	254.739 ** (3)	0.89	0.87	0.08	0.06
M5: Two-factor model (DL + ERI + ELI, LE)	9.41	1071.531 ** (5)	0.68	0.64	0.13	0.11
M6: Two-factor model (DL, ERI + ELI + LE)	5.45	473.529 ** (5)	0.83	0.81	0.10	0.07
M7: Single-factor model (DL + ERI + ELI + LE)	10.61	1262.69 ** (6)	0.63	0.59	0.14	0.11

Notes:  $\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df)$  was compared with the structural model in M1. DL = distributed leadership; ERI = empowerment role identity; ELI = enacted leader identity; LE = leadership emergence. \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

### 4.2. Hypothesis Testing

The descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables are presented in Table 3. The correlations reported were generally consistent with our expectations. Distributed leadership was positively correlated with empowerment role identity ( $r = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), empowerment role identity was positively correlated with enacted leader identity ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and enacted leader identity was positively correlated with leadership emergence ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). We controlled for the relevant focal participants' demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education, tenure), team size, empowering leadership, and leader-member exchange in all the analyses. Table 4 shows the hierarchical regressions.

**Table 3.** Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	1.44	0.50	–										
2. Age	3.09	0.98	0.05	–									
3. Education	2.91	0.90	−0.04	0.03	–								
4. Tenure	3.37	1.78	0.03	0.59 **	0.23 **	–							
5. Team size	8.27	2.10	−0.06	−0.04	−0.09 *	−0.06	–						
6. Distributed leadership	3.81	0.78	−0.02	0.05	−0.07	0.04	−0.05	(0.88)					
7. Empowerment role identity	3.66	0.65	−0.03	0.05	−0.08	−0.01	−0.04	0.32 **	(0.81)				
8. Enacted leader identity	3.85	0.64	0.00	0.03	−0.08	0.02	−0.03	0.42 **	0.50 **	(0.83)			
9. Empowering leadership	3.83	0.42	−0.01	−0.03	−0.02	−0.02	−0.01	−0.01	−0.02	0.03	(0.85)		
10. Leader-member exchange	3.13	0.72	0.06	0.03	0.03	0.07	−0.15 **	0.03	−0.01	−0.02	0.20 **	(0.86)	
11. Leadership emergence	3.99	0.69	−0.01	0.05	−0.04	0.01	0.01	0.44 **	0.50 **	0.47 **	0.04	0.01	(0.78)

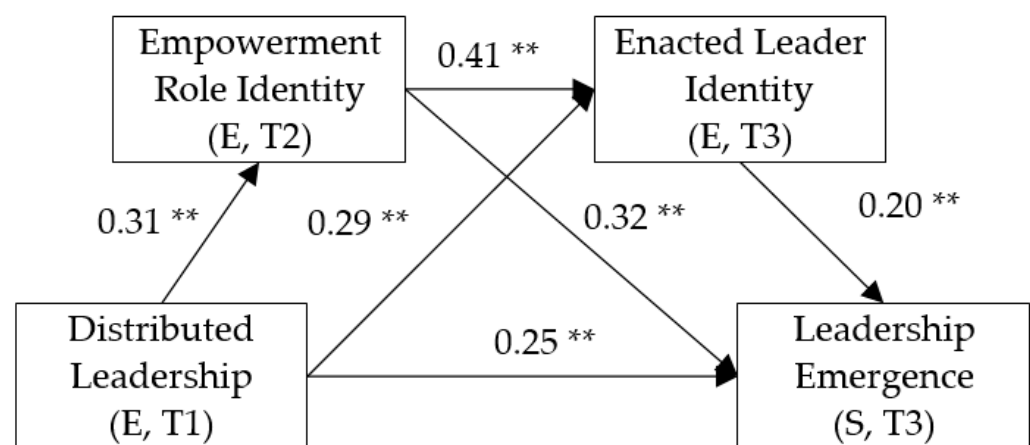
Notes:  $N = 496$ . Cronbach's alpha coefficients are on the diagonal in parentheses. SD, standard deviations. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female; Age: 1 = under 21 years old, 2 = 21 to 30 years old, 3 = 31 to 40 years old, 4 = 41 to 50 years old, 5 = over 51 years old; Education: 1 = junior college or below, 2 = Bachelor's degree, 3 = Master's degree, 4 = doctoral degree; Tenure: 1 = less than one year, 2 = one to three years, 3 = three to five years, 4 = five to seven years, 5 = seven to nine years, 6 = nine to eleven years, 7 = over eleven years. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed).

**Table 4.** Results of the hierarchical regressions.

	Empowerment Role Identity		Enacted Leader Identity		Leadership Emergence				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)
Intercepts	40.08 ** (0.35)	30.01 ** (0.37)	30.95 ** (0.35)	10.92 ** (0.34)	30.72 ** (0.38)	20.13 ** (0.37)	10.54 ** (0.37)	10.74 ** (0.38)	0.54 ** (0.36)
Control variables									
Gender	−0.05 (0.06)	−0.04 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.00 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)
Age	0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Education	−0.06 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.06 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Tenure	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Team size	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
EL	−0.03 (0.07)	−0.02 (0.07)	0.05 (0.07)	0.07 (0.06)	0.06 (0.08)	0.07 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)	0.06 (0.06)
LMX	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Independent variables									
DL		0.26 ** (0.04)				0.39 ** (0.04)			0.22 ** (0.04)
ERI				0.50 ** (0.04)			0.54 ** (0.04)		0.35 ** (0.05)
ELI								0.50 ** (0.04)	0.22 ** (0.05)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.11 **	0.01	0.26 **	0.01	0.19 **	0.26 **	0.22 **	0.37 **
$\Delta R^2$		0.10 **		0.25 **		0.19 **	0.25 **	0.22 **	0.36 **

Notes: N = 496. Estimates are unstandardized. Standard errors of the regression coefficients were reported in the parentheses. EL = empowering leadership; LMX = leader–member exchange; DL = distributed leadership; ERI = empowerment role identity; ELI = enacted leader identity. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female; Age: 1 = under 21 years old, 2 = 21 to 30 years old, 3 = 31 to 40 years old, 4 = 41 to 50 years old, 5 = over 51 years old; Education: 1 = junior college or below, 2 = Bachelor’s degree, 3 = Master’s degree, 4 = doctoral degree; Tenure: 1 = less than one year, 2 = one to three years, 3 = three to five years, 4 = five to seven years, 5 = seven to nine years, 6 = nine to eleven years, 7 = over eleven years. \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between distributed leadership and individual leadership emergence. The results in Mode 6 showed that distributed leadership was positively associated with individual leadership emergence ( $B = 0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. The results suggested that distributed leadership provides support for and increases the likelihood of employees' leadership emergence. The more individuals perceive distributed leadership patterns, the more they are likely to engage in informal leadership behaviors. Hypothesis 2 focused on a positive relationship between distributed leadership and empowerment role identity. The results in Mode 2 supported this hypothesis ( $B = 0.26$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The relationship between empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity was the focus of Hypothesis 3. As shown in Mode 4, the results supported this hypothesis ( $B = 0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Hypothesis 4 focused on a positive relationship between enacted leader identity and leadership emergence. The results in Mode 8 supported this hypothesis ( $B = 0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, Figure 3 presents the standardized coefficients related to the hypotheses.



**Figure 3.** Path analysis of the serial mediation model. Notes: Standardized coefficients are presented, all predictors entered simultaneously in the model; E = Employee report; S = Supervisor report. T1/2/3 = Time 1/2/3. \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

The fifth hypothesis was assessed using a Monte Carlo-based simulation (20,000 repetitions). As shown in Table 5, the serial mediation effect from distributed leadership to leadership emergence via empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity ( $DL \rightarrow ERI \rightarrow ELI \rightarrow LE$ ) was significant (Effect size = 0.02,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI = (0.01, 0.04)). In addition, the indirect association between distributed leadership and leadership emergence via empowerment role identity was significant (Effect size = 0.09,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI = [0.06, 0.12]). At the same time, the indirect association between distributed leadership and leadership emergence via enacted leader identity was significant (Effect size = 0.05,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI = (0.03, 0.08)). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

**Table 5.** Results of the mediation effects.

	Indirect Effect			
	Effect Size	SE	95% CI	
			Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
DL $\rightarrow$ ERI $\rightarrow$ LE	0.09 **	0.02	0.06	0.12
DL $\rightarrow$ ELI $\rightarrow$ LE	0.05 **	0.01	0.03	0.08
DL $\rightarrow$ ERI $\rightarrow$ ELI $\rightarrow$ LE	0.02 **	0.01	0.01	0.04

Notes: N = 496. Estimates are unstandardized. DL = distributed leadership; ERI = empowerment role identity; ELI = enacted leader identity; LE = leadership emergence. \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

## 5. Discussion

Despite the considerable interest in uncovering the behavioral antecedents associated with leadership emergence, the cognitive schemata as a central dimension have received relatively little scientific scrutiny [10,99–101]. The purpose of our study was to shed fresh light on the cognitive mechanisms and underlying processes behind the association between distributed leadership and employees' leadership emergence. Drawing from leadership identity construction theory [18,46,102] and role identity theory [36,103], we put a sequential mediation model to the test, looking at how empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity affected how distributed leadership affected leadership emergence. Our studies confirmed that distributed leadership is a strong stimulus in organizational environments and can influence subordinates' role identity processes by making a specific empowerment role identity salient and subsequently activating subordinates' enacted leader identity, ultimately facilitating informal leadership emergence. The theoretical and practical implications of our results are outlined below.

### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

Our study makes several key contributions. First, it contributes to the current leadership literature by enriching the evidence on employees' leadership emergence. Although the influences of supervisors' support on subordinates' development and informal leadership are demonstrated in current research [10], Badura et al. [10] have suggested that the mechanism of the trickle-down process and how distributed leadership fosters subordinates' leadership emergence are understudied. By developing a serial mediation model, we revealed the role of an individual's social cognition process in fostering their leadership emergence and clarified the sequential perceptual and behavioral responses during identity construction via empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity. Our findings corroborate that empowerment role identity is a critical step for employees to define themselves as a leader and enacted leader identity is a critical step for employees to act in leader-like ways. This injects new theoretical support to explain the relationship between distributed leadership and employee leadership emergence. Moreover, it enriches the literature on the emergence of informal leadership, because although it is important to encourage members to play a leadership role [104], it is also important to understand how to stimulate them to emerge as an informal leader.

Second, our findings add to the body of knowledge by highlighting the contribution of distributed leadership to the leadership emergence of workers in knowledge-based roles. The concept of distributed leadership was first proposed and developed in the field of education [105]. Distributed leadership blurs the lines between followers and leaders [22,106]. It is now being applied in the field of organizational management [64]. Distributed leadership assumes some level of interaction of formal leaders who have assigned roles and informal leaders who come from any position within the organizational community [107]. Few researchers have empirically looked at whether distributed leadership contributes to employees' leadership emergence in other fields, despite the theoretical literature in the education field revealing the relationship between distributed leadership and teacher leadership [108]. Several studies have been conducted to show that distributed leadership can increase employees' job satisfaction [23], proactive behavior [109], and innovative behavior [64] as well as individual and team effectiveness [70]. While these studies have provided interesting results, the implications of distributed leadership remain at an embryonic stage [25,110]. We examine the effects of distributed leadership on individual leadership emergence through the leadership identity construction. On this basis, we explained why distributed leadership can play a positive role in activating employee' perceptions of their self-concept and role identity, which are involved in the cognition process [46]. Thus, our study contributes to the literature by enhancing our knowledge about the outcomes of distributed leadership and enriching the empirical evidence of the cognition process. Ultimately, it also enriches the concept of distributed leadership, as well as research fields.

Finally, our research broadens the existing theoretical account for how and why followers in a distributed leadership pattern are likely to become unofficial leaders. Scholars have only just started to formally investigate and dissect the mystery of how these social dynamics contribute to the creation of leadership [10]. Although employees' leadership emergence, as a kind of proactive behavior, is self-initiated and whether employees engage in emergence is an individual decision [40,111], research has, so far, largely ignored the perception mechanisms underlying the relationship between organizational leadership pattern and leadership emergence [10]. Unlike previous studies, which only describe the positive relationship between leadership style and employees' leadership emergence [44], we pay more attention to the impact of distributed leadership on self-concept and leadership perception during the process of leadership emergence. By doing so, we address scholarly calls for a more integrative perspective to conceptualize leadership emergence as a sequential process granted through others (empowerment role identity) and self-claimed (enacted leader identity) [18,46,112]. Our study is unique in explicating the association between empowerment role identity and enacted leader identity, further enriching the theoretical structure between the variables by focusing on the cognitive schemata of becoming an informal leader.

### 5.2. Practical Implications

Our findings provide several practical implications. First, we demonstrate that distributed leadership is crucial in motivating followers who do not hold official leadership positions to act as leaders among their coworkers. Learning from this, it is necessary for organizations to pay more attention to managers' training program and development plan, in order to help supervisors to promote employees' informal leadership via distributed leadership. For instance, monitoring and offering feedback on team members' knowledge sharing and coordination. Moreover, based on the leadership identity construction theory applied in our model, managers should also be aware of employees' perceptions of their self-concept and self-regulation during the leadership emerging process and offer professional guidance when necessary. For example, they should encourage staff to develop learning-oriented goals for their job and career [27]. In addition to providing support in jobs, leaders can also carry out experience-sharing activities among supervisors and subordinates, such as sending messages and examples that can be internalized into their employees' self-concept [34].

Our findings also have implications for employees. According to the role identity theory, we found that the process of an individual's perception of leadership roles changes according to their situation and self-concept [36]. Our results suggest that employee leadership emergence is a result of social interactions in which an individual's self-construction of a leadership identity is an essential part [46]. In the literature, the focus of leadership is predominantly concerned with the evolution and analysis of top-down hierarchies and power structures [112]. As an extension, our results revealed that individuals can emerge as leaders through their own proactive leadership identity construction. Drawing on this, we suggest that employees need to shift from a relatively narrow and traditional view of leadership, which holds that leadership cannot be learned or developed [1]. Therefore, we encourage employees to actively participate in training program and cooperation developed by managers. It will not only help employees to update their presumptions and ideas about leadership, but also improve their ability to engage in the construction of leadership identity and stimulate higher levels of leadership potential.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contributions and strengths of our study, we recognize some theoretical limitations that merit attention for future research. First, additional factors to those we examined may be able to explain the connection between distributed leadership and employees' leadership emergence. In this study, we focused on the impact of distributed leadership on employees' leadership emergence by examining employees' self-concept

from a cognitive path. However, factors other than leader identity probably also have an impact on both variables. For example, previous research has confirmed that emotions, as one of the basic psychological processes of individuals, can have an impact on employees' decisions and behaviors [113]. Future research should examine additional factors theorized to be involved in the mechanism of leadership emergence, such as leader self-efficacy [114]. In addition, as Cai et al. noted, several factors may work together to predict subsequent behaviors (e.g., the need for power) [44,115]. Being an informal leader is a demonstration of an employee's proactivity [116]. Thus, scholars can further contribute to this mechanism by capturing different pathways and views.

Second, it is worth investigating other boundary conditions of distributed leadership that may lead to leadership emergence. This study neglects the influence of contextual elements by focusing solely on the multistep mechanism and not considering any moderating functions. We speculated that there would be differences in boundary conditions in predicting leadership emergence. For example, employees need to emerge in environments in which they believe in the group's supportive climate [114]. Thus, a supportive empowerment climate that allows employees autonomy and space to emerge will encourage employees' leadership emergence under a distributed leadership pattern, which should be considered as parallel mechanisms in further studies. In addition, employees can also acquire unofficial authority through their informal social networks within the company, especially through network centrality within team social networks [117]. Moreover, employee traits are also possible moderators. Different employees may have different interpretations of the distributed leadership patterns; some people may be conflicted about taking the reins, while others may be cognizant of the dangers of and potential rewards for their achievements as well as the success of the group [116]. It would be worthwhile to study how people deal with such ambivalence in future research. We thus encourage future research to extend our model by expanding on the boundary conditions of employees' leadership emergence.

Third, future research needs to emphasize both formal supervisors' cognitive attitudes and would-be leaders' cognitive attitudes, which influence how would-be leaders are regarded as leading. It seems logical that formal supervisors under a distributed leadership pattern should try to motivate team members to engage in actions that influence others' opinions of their informal leadership. Although it is obvious, it is crucial to keep in mind that this justification is probably oversimplified. For example, previous studies have revealed distinct disparities in each member's vulnerability to supervisory influence [69,104]. In addition, despite the prevalent perception of leading as a noble, necessary, and frequently rewarding undertaking, people do not always volunteer to lead as informal leaders [116]. Sometimes people even perceive threats they might face if they take the initiative. These connections are interesting and merit additional investigation.

Fourth, this paper aims to describe the ongoing process of employees' leadership emergence; however, it falls short in portraying the complex dynamics underlying the process. We recommend that further research include a quasi-experimental design or cross-lagged panel survey to clarify the dynamics across dispositional attributes to distributed leadership, empowerment role identity, enacted leader identity, and emergence behavior over time. In addition, the between-person research design is limited to investigating leadership emergence and its effects on changes in leadership emergence. A within-person approach is rare in leadership emergence research and it should be encouraged to reveal the sophisticated changes in leadership emergence.

Finally, a more in-depth analytical engagement with the influences of distributed leadership is needed. Although distributed leadership positively fosters employees' leadership emergence, scholars have pointed out its potential dark side and negative outcomes as well [118]. For instance, distributed leadership might result in detrimental impacts on individual task performance and team performance. In addition, distributed leadership challenges the conventional hierarchical structure and power pattern, which could trigger more conflicts in teams and organizations [119]. Thus, future researchers can contribute to

the distributed leadership literature by conducting more studies exploring the interaction of team members and investigating its potential dark sides, such as whether it thwarts team operations and innovation and decreases employees' prosocial behavior [109]. Furthermore, scholars can examine the possible negative effects of distributed leadership from the perspective of the leaders themselves. For instance, whether distributed leadership reduces leaders' wellbeing and managerial self-efficacy [120].

## 6. Conclusions

Organizations increasingly need employees to take more initiative and exhibit leadership. Combining insights from the leadership identity construction theory and role identity theory, we contribute to the leadership literature by investigating the mechanism of activating employees' leadership emergence. Our results demonstrate that distributed leadership enhances employees' leadership emergence by prompting the individual self-concept of empowerment and perceptions of leader identity. These findings will encourage more studies to investigate the individual cognitive process of leadership emergence and shed light on managerial practices in the organization to nurture the employees' leadership emergence.

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