

The Influence of Employees' Power Distance Perception and Trust on Their Implicit Followership Behavior: Based on Construal Level Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory

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Abstract

Background and Aims: With the intensification of organizational complexity, employees' spontaneous support behaviors, such as implicit followership behavior, have become crucial for sustaining enterprise innovation and competitiveness. This study examines how employees' perceived power distance and trust influence their implicit followership behavior, drawing on Construal Level Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

Methodology: A quantitative survey of 405 R&D employees in Chinese high-tech SMEs was conducted using structured questionnaires. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and multiple regression analysis were used to test hypotheses regarding the relationships among employees' power distance perception, cognitive trust, affective trust, and implicit followership behavior.

Results: The results reveal that employees' power distance perception has a significant positive impact on their implicit followership behavior. Both cognitive trust and affective trust play partial mediating roles in this relationship. Higher power distance perception enhances implicit followership through increased cognitive and affective trust in leaders.

Conclusion: Employees' power distance perception significantly influences their trust levels and implicit followership behaviors. Organizations should pay attention to employees' perceptions of power structures, actively cultivate cognitive and affective trust, and thereby stimulate employees' positive, spontaneous behaviors. This study provides theoretical contributions to the fields of organizational behavior and leadership and offers practical guidance for optimizing leadership and management practices in dynamic organizational contexts.

Keywords: Employees' Power Distance Perception; Cognitive Trust; Affective Trust; Implicit Followership Behavior

Introduction

Hofstede (1980) defined power distance as the degree to which members of a society or organization expect and accept unequal power distribution. High power-distance cultures maintain strong hierarchical structures where authority is seldom questioned. According to Hofstede (2001), environments with low power distance promote shared decision-making processes and organizational structures with minimal levels of hierarchy. The way employees perceive power distance in their workplace determines their engagement with authority figures and their understanding of their organizational roles. It is crucial to understand these perceptions because they directly shape communication methods and both employee motivation and organizational behavior patterns (Zhang, Tsui, Song, Li, & Jia, 2008).

The relationship between leaders and followers fundamentally depends on trust. Organizational effectiveness in hierarchical structures depends heavily on trust, according to Dirks & Ferrin (2002). Leaders who earn their employees' trust will find that those employees demonstrate greater commitment and job satisfaction along with more positive discretionary actions. By functioning as a psychological safety mechanism, trust minimizes the uncertainties created by power differences and helps followers align more easily with organizational objectives (Burke et al., 2007). The examination of power distance perceptions reveals trust as an essential factor that can either moderate or intensify its impact on employee behavior.

Implicit followership theories (IFTs) represent mental structures that people maintain about follower characteristics and actions (Sy, 2010). Employees' self-perceptions about their leaders develop from beliefs that cultural experiences and organizational dynamics shape alongside interpersonal relationships. When leaders hold positive implicit followership theories about their employees being diligent and motivated, they tend to show proactive behavior, whereas negative implicit followership theories result in employee disengagement or resistance. How employees view power distance and trust in their leaders shapes their adoption of these mental frameworks, which then affects their workplace behavior (Whiteley, Sy, & Johnson, 2012). Understanding how employees' power distance perceptions and trust levels affect their implicit followership behavior remains essential for multiple reasons. Through this research, we discover how employee behavior emerges from the interaction between cultural elements and relational dynamics that extend beyond official job responsibilities. Leadership development and human resource strategies benefit from understanding how trust-building processes reduce hierarchical perception effects. Understanding workforce dynamics becomes vital for developing both inclusive and high-performing organizational cultures within our globalized business environment (Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012). The research integrates both psychological and cultural aspects of organizational existence to benefit theoretical understanding and practical application.

In the highly competitive business environment, the sustainable development of enterprises depends on the active participation and collaboration of employees. Implicit followership behavior, as a behavioral pattern in which employees spontaneously support organizational decisions and actively respond to organizational goals, is of great significance for enterprise innovation and performance improvement. In the context of Chinese high-tech enterprises facing resource constraints and rapid market changes, it is particularly crucial to deeply explore the factors influencing employees' implicit followership behavior. Employees' power distance perception reflects their cognition and attitude towards the organizational power structure, while cognitive trust and affective trust embody employees' trust in leaders and the organization. These factors may jointly influence employees' implicit followership behavior. Based on the Construal Level Theory and the Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this study aims to reveal their internal relationships and provide theoretical support and practical guidance for enterprise management.

Objectives

This study focuses on the relationships among employees' power distance perception, cognitive trust, affective trust, and implicit followership behavior, aiming to verify the following key hypotheses:

H1: Employees' power distance perception has a positive impact on implicit followership behavior.

H2: Cognitive trust has a positive impact on implicit followership behavior.

H3: Affective trust has a positive impact on implicit followership behavior.

Literature Review

Employees' Power Distance

The concept of power distance was first proposed by Hofstede to measure the degree of acceptance of unequal power distribution in different national cultures (Hofstede, 1980). With the deepening of research, the research on power distance has expanded from the national level to the organizational and individual levels. At the organizational level, power distance affects the organization's management model, decision-making process, and the interaction among employees (Xu et al., 2021). At the individual level, employees' power distance perception reflects an individual's tolerance and acceptance of power inequality within the organization and embodies an individual's perception of power and authority (Adamovic, 2022).

In this study, employees' power distance perception is defined as the subjective assessment of the power difference between employees and their direct supervisors. This definition includes two dimensions: cognitive assessment of power differences and emotional

acceptance, and it is acknowledged that this perception can be dynamically adjusted with changes in the interaction context and organizational environment (Beugelsdijk, Ambos & Nell, 2020; Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2020). For example, under a democratic leadership style, employees have more opportunities to participate in decision-making, and their power distance perception may decrease; while under an autocratic leadership style, employees may feel a greater power difference, and their power distance perception will increase accordingly (Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2020).

The influencing factors of employees' power distance perception are complex and can be divided into controllable and uncontrollable categories. Controllable factors include organizational management practices such as leadership style, task design, and communication mechanisms (Zhang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Uncontrollable factors involve cultural values, industry characteristics, etc. (Puthusserry et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). In terms of measuring employees' power distance, scholars have developed various scales. Among them, the scale developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988) is widely used. In this study, considering the reliability and usage of various variables, this scale is adopted and appropriately adjusted and supplemented according to the research background (Khalid, Malik & Atta, 2024).

Trust

Trust, as an important concept in social interaction and organizational behavior, has received extensive attention from multiple disciplines. Scholars have provided rich interpretations of trust from different disciplinary perspectives, such as psychology, sociology, and economics (Deutsch, 1958; Luhmann, 1979; Arrow, 1974). In the field of social psychology, trust can be divided into cognitive trust and affective trust (McAllister, 1995).

Cognitive trust is the trust that employees place in leaders based on rational judgments and recognition of their abilities, professionalism, sense of responsibility, and integrity (Gallagher & Petracca, 2024; Lahno, 2020). Employees form a cognition of whether a leader is trustworthy by observing various aspects of the leader's performance at work, decision-making ability, experience, and attitude towards employees (Qian & Papadonikolaki, 2021; Pavez et al., 2021). For example, when employees believe that a leader has professional technical capabilities and rich industry experience, they are more likely to have cognitive trust in the leader.

Affective trust is based on the emotional bond and mutual care between employees and leaders (McAllister, 1995; Zhang et al., 2023). This trust is manifested as leaders' concern for employees' well-being, full consideration of employees' needs, as well as employees' emotional identification and sense of belonging to leaders (Saleem et al., 2020). For example, when a leader provides timely help and support to employees in times of difficulty, it will enhance employees' affective trust in the leader.

There are many influencing factors of trust. Scholars such as McAllister (1995) have found that factors such as a sense of belonging, frequent interaction, and reliability, respectively, promote the formation of affective trust and cognitive trust. In an organizational context, trust has an important impact on employees' work attitudes and behaviors. A high level of trust can promote effective communication and collaboration among employees and enhance team cohesion and overall effectiveness (Newman & Ford, 2021; Mayo, 2017; Punyatoya, 2019). In this study, based on the measurement scales of cognitive trust and affective trust proposed by McAllister (1995), the items are modified and supplemented in combination with the research context to more accurately measure employees' trust in leaders (Hsu, 2022; Muliadi et al., 2024).

Implicit Followership Behavior

The concept of implicit followership behavior originated from McGregor's X-Y Theory and has gradually received attention with the deepening of research (Vestraeten et al., 2021). It refers to the behavior in which employees, without explicit instructions or external pressure, spontaneously support decisions and actively respond based on their identification with leaders' and the organization's values. It encompasses dimensions such as extra-role behavior, innovation initiative, and organizational citizenship behavior (De Vries & van Gelder, 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Organ et al., 2019).

In terms of individual factors, gender, age, values, and trust all affect implicit followership behavior (Yang et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2021; Colquitt & Baer, 2023). Research has found that men have higher scores on the implicit followership prototype in the dimensions of resistance and enthusiasm than women, and young people have higher scores on the anti-followership prototype than older people (Yang et al., 2020). Among environmental factors, early work experiences, organizational culture, leadership style, and team atmosphere play important roles (Duncan, 2024; Mutonyi et al., 2022). For example, early experiences of secure attachment make it easier for employees to form positive followership prototypes in adulthood (Dagan et al., 2021). In terms of cultural factors, employees from different cultural backgrounds have different cognitions and expectations of followership behavior, which affects the performance of implicit followership behavior (Yücel, 2021; Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020).

Among the scales for measuring implicit followership behavior, the 18-item scale developed by Sy (2010) divides it into two second-order dimensions: the followership prototype and the anti-followership prototype; Derler and Weibler (2014) proposed a trait-behavior two-dimensional model, which retained Sy's positive prototype in the trait dimension and added measurements of exploratory behavior and exploitative behavior in the behavior dimension. Based on the research of Sy (2010) and Hsiung & Lee (2021), this study refined and

revised the items and designed 6 items to accurately measure the implicit followership behavior of Chinese high-tech enterprise employees.

Conceptual framework

Through empirical analysis, this study clarifies the influence mechanisms of various factors on employees' implicit followership behavior, enriching the theoretical research on the influencing factors of employees' behavior in organizational behavior science. Meanwhile, it provides practical suggestions for enterprise managers, helping them to optimize management strategies, enhance employees' cognitive and affective trust levels, guide employees to demonstrate more positive implicit followership behavior, and thus improve organizational performance and competitiveness.

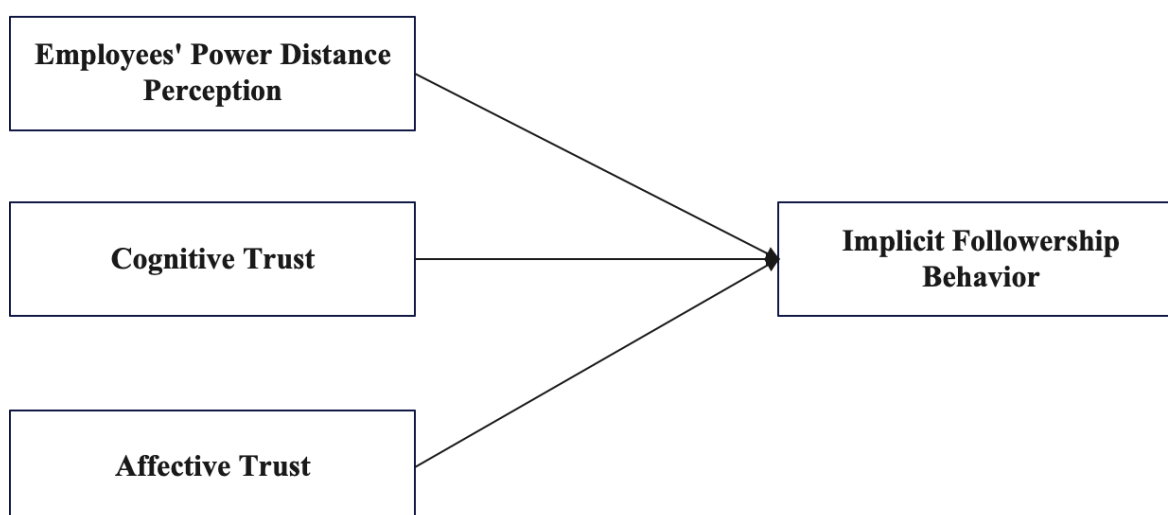


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research method and collects data through questionnaires to verify the research hypotheses. Employees in the R&D departments of Chinese small and medium-sized high-tech enterprises are selected as the research objects because the power structure and employee behavior characteristics of such enterprises are suitable for studying the impact of power distance perception on employees' implicit followership behavior.

Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling method is used to select 50 leading Chinese small and medium-sized high-tech enterprises and conduct paired sampling of their R&D employees and their direct supervisors. When sampling, first communicate with the HR departments of the enterprises, introduce the research objectives and methods. After obtaining consent, use

stratified sampling to determine the supervisors, and then randomly select 3 - 5 subordinate employees who have worked together for at least 6 months from their teams.

Measurement Scales

Employees' Power Distance Perception Scale: Referring to the scale developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988), items are added in combination with the research background to measure employees' perception of power distance.

Trust Scale: Based on the measurement scales of cognitive trust and affective trust by McAllister (1995), the items are modified to adapt to the research context, and employees' cognitive trust and affective trust in leaders are measured, respectively.

Implicit Followership Behavior Scale: Based on the research of Sy (2010) and Hsiung & Lee (2021), the measurement items are refined and revised, and 6 items are designed to measure employees' implicit followership behavior.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis software is used to analyze the collected data, and the multiple regression analysis method is adopted to verify the research hypotheses and explore the relationships among employees' power distance perception, cognitive trust, affective trust, and implicit followership behavior.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

A descriptive analysis of the recovered valid questionnaires shows that the sample's gender distribution is nearly balanced, and the proportion of employees under 30 years old is relatively high in the age distribution. The mean value of employees' power distance perception is at a moderately high level, the mean value of cognitive trust is high, the mean value of affective trust is moderately high, and the mean value of implicit followership behavior is at a medium level. These data initially present the sample characteristics and the distribution of each variable.

Table 1 Descriptive Analysis

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Employees' Power Distance Perception	3.93	0.51	3.00	5.00
Cognitive Trust	4.20	0.59	2.50	5.00
Affective Trust	3.95	0.46	3.00	4.83
Implicit Followership Behavior	4.02	0.60	2.00	5.00

Regression Analysis

The results of the multiple regression analysis show that: employees' power distance perception has a significant positive impact on implicit followership behavior, verifying H1; cognitive trust has a significant positive impact on implicit followership behavior, supporting H2; affective trust also has a significant positive impact on implicit followership behavior, confirming H3. This indicates that employees' recognition of power distance, cognitive trust, and affective trust in leaders can all promote them to demonstrate more positive implicit followership behavior.

To test the impact of power distance perception, cognitive trust, and affective trust on implicit followership behavior, a linear regression analysis was performed. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Regression Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	-0.60	0.19	-3.14	0.00
Power Distance Perception	0.53	0.07	7.55	0.00
Cognitive Trust	0.27	0.03	8.29	0.00
Affective Trust	0.35	0.08	4.50	0.00

All predictors significantly contribute to implicit followership behavior ($p < 0.01$). Among the: Power distance perception ($\beta = 0.53$) and cognitive trust ($\beta = 0.27$) have strong positive effects.

Affective trust ($\beta = 0.35$) also has a significant impact, emphasizing the importance of emotional bonds in promoting voluntary followership.

These findings suggest that both rational and emotional trust, along with perceived leadership distance, are key drivers of spontaneous support behaviors in organizational contexts, particularly within Chinese high-tech enterprises.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

Based on the Construal Level Theory and the Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this study verifies the relationships among employees' power distance perception, cognitive trust, affective trust, and implicit followership behavior, enriching the theory of organizational behavior. It reveals the mechanism by which power distance perception directly and positively affects implicit followership behavior, expanding the application of the power distance perception theory in the study of employee behavior. At the same time, it confirms the promoting effect of cognitive trust and affective trust on implicit followership behavior,

improving the theoretical research on the relationship between trust and employee behavior, and providing a theoretical basis for follow-up research.

Practical Implications

For enterprise management practices, the results of this study have important guiding value. Managers should recognize the differences in employees' power distance perception, rationally utilize the power structure, and guide employees to form positive power cognition to promote implicit followership behavior. For example, in companies with a high proportion of employees with high power distance perception, managers can strengthen the communication of corporate strategies and decision-making ideas from a macro-perspective, highlighting the authority and long-term significance of decisions, to enhance employees' acceptance and support.

At the same time, enterprises should focus on cultivating employees' cognitive trust and affective trust. To enhance cognitive trust, leaders can participate in professional training to improve their professional skills and decision-making abilities and show their strong leadership in key business issues. To strengthen affective trust, leaders should pay more attention to employees' personal needs, such as understanding employees' career development plans and providing corresponding support, and showing concern when employees encounter difficulties in work or life. Enhancing employees' sense of identity and belonging to the organization can stimulate employees' implicit followership behavior, thereby improving team collaboration efficiency and organizational performance. For instance, a technology company organized team-building activities regularly, which not only strengthened the emotional bond between leaders and employees but also promoted better communication and cooperation, and finally improved the overall R&D efficiency of the team.

Research Limitations and Prospects

This study has certain limitations. The sample mainly comes from the R & D departments of Chinese small and medium - sized high - tech enterprises. This limitation in sample selection may affect the generalizability of the research results. Future research can expand the sample scope to cover employees from different industries, such as the service industry, the manufacturing industry, and enterprises. For example, in the service industry, the power structure and work nature are different from those in high-tech enterprises, and exploring employees' power distance perception, trust, and implicit followership behavior in such industries can further verify and enrich the research findings.

In addition, this study only explored the relationships among some variables. Subsequent research can introduce more mediating variables, such as psychological capital, job satisfaction, and moderating variables, such as organizational culture types, leader-member exchange relationships. By constructing a more comprehensive theoretical model, it can deeply explore the complex mechanisms that affect employees' implicit followership

behavior. For example, the organizational culture of innovation-oriented and stability-oriented may play different moderating roles in the relationship between power distance perception and implicit followership behavior, which is worthy of in-depth study.

Conclusion

This study verifies the positive relationships among employees' power distance perception, cognitive trust, affective trust, and implicit followership behavior through empirical research. These findings provide important references for the theory of organizational behavior and enterprise management practices. They help enterprises deeply understand employees' behavior motivation, formulate scientific and reasonable management strategies, promote employees' positive implicit followership behavior, and promote the sustainable development of the organization. Enterprises can formulate more targeted management measures according to employees' power distance perception and trust levels to improve the overall efficiency and competitiveness of the organization.

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