

Authoritarian Leadership, Electronic Monitoring and Employee Well-Being in Chinese Information Technology Industry: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Psychological Detachment

Sun Xuan, Mohd Anuar Bin Arshad
School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia
Email: sunxuan.usm.my@student.usm.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i6/28426>

Published Date: 16 June 2026

Abstract

Employee well-being has become a critical concern in China's information technology (IT) industry, where demanding work cultures, authoritarian supervisory practices, and pervasive digital monitoring may intensify psychological strain among frontline technical employees. Although prior research has examined leadership control and electronic monitoring separately, limited attention has been given to how these two organizational practices jointly influence employee well-being and the psychological mechanisms through which these effects occur. Guided by Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this paper develops an integrated framework linking authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring to employee well-being through two mediating mechanisms: emotional exhaustion and psychological detachment. Emotional exhaustion represents the resource depletion pathway, whereas psychological detachment represents the recovery pathway through which employees mentally disengage from work and restore resources. Employee well-being is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising psychological, social, workplace, and subjective well-being. The proposed study focuses on frontline, non-executive technical employees in large IT enterprises located in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design is proposed, with purposive sampling, online questionnaire distribution through organizational gatekeepers, and PLS-SEM for hypothesis testing. This paper contributes to the literature by integrating leadership-based control and technology-enabled surveillance within one COR-informed model and by clarifying how resource depletion and impaired recovery explain employee well-being in China's high-pressure IT context.

Keywords: Authoritarian Leadership, Electronic Monitoring, Employee Well-Being, Emotional Exhaustion, Psychological Detachment, China's It Industry, Conservation of Resources Theory

Introduction

Employee well-being has become a central issue in organizational research and practice because sustainable organizational performance depends not only on technical and financial resources but also on employees' psychological functioning, social relationships, workplace experiences, and broader life evaluations. Contemporary well-being research increasingly treats employee well-being as a multidimensional construct rather than a single indicator of happiness or job satisfaction (Diener et al., 2018; Pradhan & Hati, 2022). This multidimensional view is especially important in high-demand industries, where intensive workload, strict performance targets, and blurred work-life boundaries can influence employees across several domains of well-being.

The importance of studying employee well-being lies in its relevance to both employees and organizations. For employees, well-being reflects not only positive life evaluations but also psychological functioning, workplace experiences, social relationships, and the ability to maintain health and recovery under work demands (Diener et al., 2018; Pradhan & Hati, 2022). For organizations, employee well-being is closely connected to productivity, work effectiveness, and sustainable organizational functioning because employees' psychological and emotional resources influence how they perform, cooperate, and remain engaged at work (Robertson & Cooper, 2011). This issue is particularly important in the IT sector, where employees often experience cognitive overload, tight deadlines, rapid technological change, and always-connected work systems (Godliauskas & Šmite, 2025; Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the factors that may weaken or protect employee well-being is necessary for building healthier and more sustainable workplaces.

China's IT industry offers a particularly important context for examining these issues. The sector is a key driver of China's digital economy, yet it is also associated with long working hours, intense competition, and demanding performance cultures. The widely discussed "996" schedule, which refers to working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. for six days a week, has become emblematic of the pressures experienced by employees in technology firms (Chen et al., 2023). Although China's labour regulations formally restrict excessive working hours, overwork practices may persist because of market competition, job insecurity, career pressure, and organizational norms that equate long hours with commitment (Ding et al., 2022; Liu & Chen, 2025). These conditions can weaken employees' recovery opportunities and increase vulnerability to stress, burnout, and declining well-being.

Within this context, two organizational control practices are especially salient: authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring. Authoritarian leadership is characterized by centralized decision-making, strict control, and expectations of obedience. In hierarchical organizational contexts, this leadership style may reduce employee autonomy and voice while increasing fear of making mistakes (Cheng & Wang, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Electronic monitoring refers to the use of digital technologies to track, record, and evaluate employee activities, such as work logs, email use, internet activity, attendance, task progress, and performance indicators (Fusi & Feeney, 2017). While monitoring may improve accountability, it can also intensify perceived surveillance, reduce privacy and trust, and increase vigilance demands (Ball, 2021; Siegel et al., 2022).

This topic is worth studying because authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring are often used to improve discipline, efficiency, accountability, and performance control. However, their utility and effectiveness may be limited if they damage employees' psychological resources, increase emotional exhaustion, and reduce employees' ability to mentally detach from work. Thus, it is important to examine not only whether these control practices influence employee well-being, but also how such effects occur. The study is beneficial for several groups. For frontline IT employees, it highlights the psychological risks associated with excessive control and continuous monitoring. For managers, it provides guidance on balancing control with autonomy, trust, and psychological safety. For organizations, it offers practical insights into designing healthier leadership practices and more transparent monitoring policies. For policymakers, it provides implications for workplace well-being standards in digitally intensive industries.

This paper therefore proposes an integrated framework explaining how authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring influence employee well-being in China's IT industry. Drawing on COR theory, the model argues that both practices can operate as resource-threatening conditions. Authoritarian leadership may deplete autonomy, psychological safety, and emotional energy, while electronic monitoring may threaten privacy, perceived control, and recovery boundaries. These resource threats are expected to reduce employee well-being directly and indirectly through emotional exhaustion and psychological detachment.

Literature Review

Employee Well-being

Employee well-being refers to employees' overall state of psychological, social, workplace, and subjective health, reflecting their ability to function effectively at work and in life (Pradhan & Hati, 2022). Psychological well-being concerns positive mental health, resilience, and a sense of purpose. Social well-being concerns interpersonal relationships, belonging, and perceived support. Workplace well-being concerns satisfaction with the work environment, growth opportunities, and work-life balance. Subjective well-being concerns life satisfaction and affective evaluations of life circumstances.

In the IT sector, employee well-being is particularly vulnerable because employees often face cognitive overload, tight deadlines, rapid technological change, and always-connected work systems (Godliauskas & Šmite, 2025; Liu et al., 2021). When employees remain under continuous pressure and lack sufficient opportunities to recover, strain in one domain may spill over into others. For example, reduced psychological detachment after work may intensify emotional exhaustion, which in turn can undermine workplace satisfaction, social functioning, and overall life satisfaction.

Authoritarian Leadership

Authoritarian leadership refers to a leadership style characterized by centralized decision-making, strict control, and demands for obedience from subordinates (Cheng & Wang, 2015). In Chinese organizational settings, hierarchical cultural traditions may make authoritarian leadership especially visible. Although such leadership may appear to promote discipline and short-term efficiency, it can also constrain autonomy, suppress participation, and create a climate of fear and compliance.

From the COR perspective, authoritarian leadership functions as a chronic job demand because employees must continuously invest cognitive and emotional resources to comply with instructions, avoid criticism, and meet strict expectations. Such resource investment may increase emotional exhaustion and reduce employees' ability to detach from work. Consequently, authoritarian leadership is expected to have both direct and indirect negative implications for employee well-being.

Electronic Monitoring

Electronic monitoring involves the use of digital technologies by organizations to oversee, track, and record employee activities (Fusi & Feeney, 2017). In large IT enterprises, monitoring can be embedded in attendance systems, task management platforms, performance dashboards, system logs, communication tools, and algorithmic evaluation systems. These tools may support productivity and accountability, but they can also increase feelings of constant surveillance and distrust.

Meta-analytic evidence suggests that electronic monitoring is meaningfully related to employee outcomes, including stress, job satisfaction, performance, and counterproductive work behavior (Siegel et al., 2022). In the Chinese IT industry, monitoring may be particularly consequential because it is often combined with long working hours and high performance expectations. Under COR theory, monitoring can be understood as a resource threat that reduces perceived autonomy and privacy while increasing vigilance demands. These processes may heighten emotional exhaustion and weaken psychological detachment from work.

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the state of feeling emotionally drained, fatigued, and depleted of psychological resources as a result of chronic work stress. It is widely treated as the core component of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In the current framework, emotional exhaustion represents the resource depletion pathway linking authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring to employee well-being.

When employees experience strict supervisory control and continuous monitoring, they may expend additional resources to regulate emotions, maintain attention, and avoid negative evaluation. Over time, these demands may create resource loss spirals, whereby initial depletion makes employees more vulnerable to further strain (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Emotional exhaustion is therefore expected to mediate the effects of organizational control practices on employee well-being.

Psychological Detachment

Psychological detachment refers to the ability to mentally disengage from work during non-working hours by refraining from job-related thoughts and activities (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). It is a key recovery process because it allows employees to restore cognitive and emotional resources after work demands.

In high-pressure and digitally connected work environments, employees may find it difficult to detach from work. Authoritarian leaders may create continuing fear of evaluation, while electronic monitoring may make work psychologically present even outside formal working

hours. If employees cannot mentally disconnect, recovery is impaired and well-being is likely to decline. Thus, psychological detachment is positioned as a recovery-related mediator in the proposed model.

Theoretical Foundation: Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources theory provides the central theoretical foundation for this paper. COR theory proposes that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and maintain valued resources, such as time, energy, autonomy, control, social support, and psychological safety. Stress occurs when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently replenished (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In China's IT industry, authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring can be conceptualized as persistent resource-threatening conditions. Authoritarian leadership may restrict autonomy and psychological safety, while electronic monitoring may heighten perceived surveillance and reduce privacy. Together, these practices require employees to invest additional emotional and cognitive resources, increasing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion. At the same time, they may disrupt recovery by making work concerns remain mentally active during non-work time, thereby reducing psychological detachment.

COR theory also explains why emotional exhaustion and psychological detachment should be examined together. Emotional exhaustion captures the resource loss pathway, while psychological detachment captures the resource recovery pathway. This dual-pathway explanation allows a more complete understanding of how organizational control practices undermine employee well-being.

Research Gaps and Hypothesis Development

Three research gaps justify the present framework. First, prior studies often examine authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring separately, even though employees in contemporary IT workplaces may experience leader-driven control and technology-enabled surveillance simultaneously. Second, existing research has not sufficiently integrated depletion and recovery mechanisms in one model. Emotional exhaustion explains how resources are drained, while psychological detachment explains whether resources can be restored. Third, research focusing specifically on frontline employees in China's large IT enterprises remains limited, despite the sector's scale, high-pressure work culture, and growing reliance on digital monitoring.

Based on the above reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Authoritarian leadership is negatively related to employee well-being.
H2	Electronic monitoring is negatively related to employee well-being.
H3	Authoritarian leadership is positively related to emotional exhaustion.
H4	Authoritarian leadership is negatively related to psychological detachment.
H5	Electronic monitoring is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

H6	Electronic monitoring is negatively related to psychological detachment.
H7	Emotional exhaustion is negatively related to employee well-being.
H8	Psychological detachment is positively related to employee well-being.
H9	Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between authoritarian leadership and employee well-being.
H10	Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between electronic monitoring and employee well-being.
H11	Psychological detachment mediates the relationship between authoritarian leadership and employee well-being.
H12	Psychological detachment mediates the relationship between electronic monitoring and employee well-being.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual framework. Authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring are positioned as independent variables, employee well-being is positioned as the dependent variable, and emotional exhaustion and psychological detachment are positioned as mediators. The framework proposes that organizational control practices reduce well-being both directly and indirectly through resource depletion and impaired recovery.

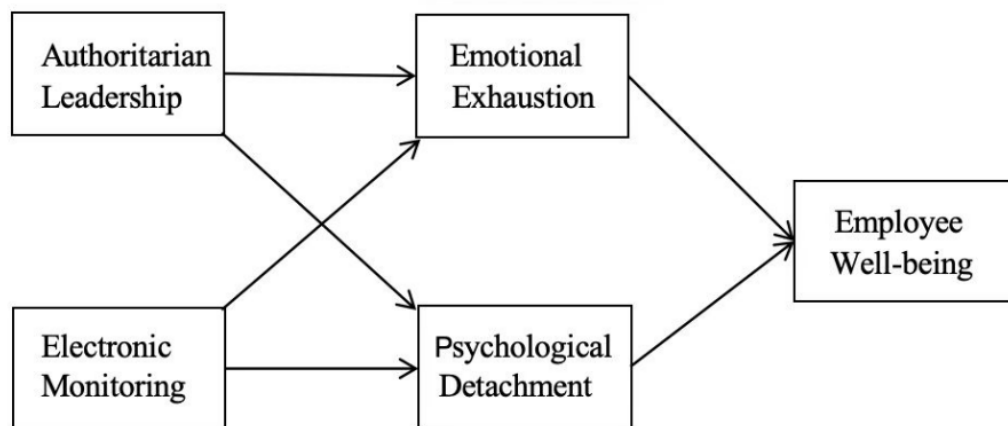


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the present study

Proposed Methodology

The proposed study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. Data will be collected at a single point in time through a structured online questionnaire. This design is suitable because the study aims to test theoretically derived relationships among latent constructs and to examine direct and mediating effects within a defined organizational context.

The target population comprises frontline employees working in Chinese IT firms who are exposed to authoritarian leadership practices and electronic monitoring systems. Frontline employees are defined as non-executive, full-time technical staff directly involved in core operational activities, such as software developers, system engineers, data analysts, programmers, and IT support engineers. These employees are suitable respondents because they are directly subject to supervisory control and digital performance monitoring in daily work.

The study focuses on large IT enterprises located in five major technology hubs: Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou. Large IT firms are defined as those employing more than 1,000 employees, consistent with the classification logic used for the information transmission, software, and information technology services sector. The focus on large enterprises is justified because such organizations are more likely to possess formalized hierarchical structures, structured HR systems, KPI-based performance management, and institutionalized electronic monitoring mechanisms.

Purposive sampling will be used because respondents must meet specific inclusion criteria. Eligible participants should be full-time frontline IT employees, have worked in their current company for at least six months, work in one of the five selected cities, and have direct exposure to leadership and monitoring practices. Organizational gatekeepers, such as HR departments or line managers, will be contacted to distribute the online questionnaire link through internal communication channels such as email or enterprise messaging systems.

The minimum target sample size is 384 valid responses. This number is determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which recommends a minimum sample size of 384 respondents for a large population. As the target population of this study is approximately 4.4 million frontline employees in China's IT industry across the five major technology hubs, 384 valid responses are considered sufficient to achieve an acceptable level of representativeness and statistical reliability.

Established measurement scales will be used for all constructs. Authoritarian leadership will be measured using items reflecting centralized decision-making, strict discipline, and demands for obedience, adapted from Cheng et al. (2004). Electronic monitoring will be measured through items capturing organizational access to employees' digital activities and monitoring systems, adapted from Fusi and Feeney (2017). Emotional exhaustion will be measured as the feeling of being emotionally drained and depleted due to chronic work stress, adapted from Maslach and Jackson (1981). Psychological detachment will be measured as employees' ability to mentally disengage from work during non-working time, adapted from Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). Employee well-being will be measured as a multidimensional construct comprising psychological, social, workplace, and subjective well-being, adapted from Pradhan and Hati (2022).

Data analysis will be conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is appropriate because the study aims to examine a predictive model involving multiple latent variables, direct paths, and mediating effects. The analysis will include data preparation, assessment of common method variance, evaluation of the reflective

measurement model, assessment of the structural model, and bootstrapping to test the significance of direct and indirect effects.

Contributions and Practical Implications

This paper offers several theoretical contributions. First, it integrates authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring within one framework, thereby addressing the fragmentation of research on leadership-based control and technology-enabled surveillance. Second, it extends COR theory by explaining employee well-being through two complementary mechanisms: resource depletion and resource recovery. Third, it conceptualizes employee well-being as a multidimensional construct, allowing a more comprehensive assessment of how organizational control practices influence psychological, social, workplace, and subjective well-being. Fourth, it contextualizes the framework within China's large IT enterprises, where long working hours, hierarchical control, and digital monitoring are especially salient.

The framework also has practical implications for employees, managers, organizations, and policymakers. For frontline IT employees, the study highlights how excessive supervisory control and continuous digital monitoring may threaten psychological resources, increase emotional exhaustion, and weaken recovery from work. For managers, the model emphasizes the need to balance discipline and accountability with autonomy, trust, and psychological safety. Excessive authoritarian control may achieve short-term compliance, but it may also deplete employee resources and reduce well-being. For organizations, the findings can inform the design of more effective and humane monitoring policies by encouraging transparency, proportionality, privacy protection, and clear boundaries around data collection and after-hours availability. For policymakers, the study supports the development of workplace well-being standards that consider not only working hours but also leadership practices, digital surveillance, and employees' recovery opportunities.

Conclusion

This paper develops an updated COR-based framework to explain how authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring influence employee well-being in China's IT industry. By focusing on frontline, non-executive technical employees in large IT enterprises located in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, the paper aligns the conceptual model with the latest scope and methodology of the thesis. The proposed framework argues that authoritarian leadership and electronic monitoring may reduce well-being directly and indirectly through heightened emotional exhaustion and weakened psychological detachment.

Overall, the paper contributes to organizational behavior and employee well-being research by integrating leadership control, digital monitoring, resource depletion, and recovery into one coherent model. It also provides a clear foundation for future empirical testing using quantitative survey data and PLS-SEM.

References

- Ball, K. (2021). Electronic monitoring and surveillance in the workplace: Literature review and policy recommendations. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/451453>
- Baruch, Y., & Holtom, B. C. (2008). Survey response rate levels and trends in organizational research. *Human Relations*, 61(8), 1139-1160.
- Chen, X., Masukujjaman, M., Al Mamun, A., Gao, J., & Makhbul, Z. K. M. (2023). Modeling the significance of work culture on burnout, satisfaction, and psychological distress among the Gen-Z workforce in an emerging country. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, Article 828. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02371-w>
- Cheng, M. Y., & Wang, L. (2015). The mediating effect of ethical climate on the relationship between paternalistic leadership and team identification: A team-level analysis in the Chinese context. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 129(3), 639-654. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2172-5>
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542-575. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542>
- Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Oishi, S. (2018). Advances and open questions in the science of subjective well-being. *Collabra: Psychology*, 4(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.115>
- Ding, Z., Sun, Y., Zhang, X., & Zhang, X. (2022). Study on the realization dilemma and guarantee system of workers' right to rest from the perspective of "996" working system. In 2022 7th International Conference on Social Sciences and Economic Development (pp. 2150-2155). Atlantis Press.
- Fusi, F., & Feeney, M. K. (2017). Electronic monitoring in public organizations: Evidence from US local governments. *Public Management Review*, 20(10), 1465-1489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1400584>
- Godliauskas, P., & Šmite, D. (2025). The well-being of software engineers: A systematic literature review and a theory. *Empirical Software Engineering*, 30, 35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10664-024-10543-8>
- Gu, J., Wang, G., Liu, H., Song, D., & He, C. (2020). Linking authoritarian leadership to employee creativity: The influences of leader-member exchange, team identification, and power distance. *Chinese Management Studies*, 14(4), 995-1014. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CMS-07-2019-0250>
- Halbesleben, J. R. B., Neveu, J. P., Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., & Westman, M. (2014). Getting to the COR: Understanding the role of resources in conservation of resources theory. *Journal of Management*, 40(5), 1334-1364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314527130>
- Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513-524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.3.513>
- Hobfoll, S. E., Halbesleben, J., Neveu, J. P., & Westman, M. (2018). Conservation of resources in the organizational context: The reality of resources and their consequences. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 5, 103-128. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640>
- Kayas, O. G. (2023). Workplace surveillance: A systematic review, integrative framework, and research agenda. *Journal of Business Research*, 168, 114212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114212>

- Keyes, C. L. M. (1998). Social well-being. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(2), 121-140. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787065>
- Liu, M., & Chen, Y. (2025). Blessing or curse? Recontextualizing 996 in China's overwork debate. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 22(1), 91-107.
- Liu, W., Song, Z., Li, X., & Liao, Z. (2021). Why and when leaders' affective states influence employee upward voice: Examining the roles of emotional exhaustion and authoritarian leadership. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 38(3), 1087-1113. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-019-09676-9>
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103-111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>
- McParland, C., & Connolly, R. (2020). Employee perceptions of electronic monitoring and their consequences. *Information Technology & People*, 33(4), 1227-1256. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-12-2018-0564>
- Milanez, A., Lemmens, A., & Ruggiu, C. (2025). Algorithmic management in the workplace: New evidence from an OECD employer survey (OECD Artificial Intelligence Papers No. 31). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/287c13c4-en>
- Pradhan, R. K., & Hati, L. (2022). The measurement of employee well-being: Development and validation of a scale. *Global Business Review*, 23(2), 385-407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150919856992>
- Robertson, I., & Cooper, C. L. (2011). *Well-being: Productivity and happiness at work*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 719-727. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719>
- Shimazu, A., Matsudaira, K., de Jonge, J., Tosaka, N., Watanabe, K., & Takahashi, M. (2016). Psychological detachment from work during non-work time: Linear or curvilinear relations with mental health and work engagement? *Industrial Health*, 54(3), 282-292. <https://doi.org/10.2486/indhealth.2015-0097>
- Siegel, R., König, C. J., & Lazar, V. (2022). The impact of electronic monitoring on employees' job satisfaction, stress, performance, and counterproductive work behavior: A meta-analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 8, 100227.
- Sonnentag, S., & Fritz, C. (2007). The recovery experience questionnaire: Development and validation of a measure for assessing recuperation and unwinding from work. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(3), 204-221. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.12.3.204>
- Sonnentag, S., & Fritz, C. (2015). Recovery from job stress: The stressor-detachment model as an integrative framework. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 36(S1), S72-S103. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1985>
- Wendsche, J., & Lohmann-Haislah, A. (2017). A meta-analysis on antecedents and outcomes of detachment from work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 2072. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.02072>
- Zhang, Y., Wang, J., Akhtar, M. N., & Wang, Y. (2022). Authoritarian leadership and cyberloafing: A moderated mediation model of emotional exhaustion and power distance orientation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1010845. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1010845>