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Shared Leadership and Employee Innovation in Chinese Telecommunication SMEs: The Mediating Roles of Employee Motivation, Voice, and Knowledge Sharing

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Abstract

Employee innovation has become a critical source of competitiveness for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in China's telecommunication industry, where rapid technological change, resource constraints, and intense competition from large state-owned operators require firms to rely heavily on the creativity of their own employees. However, hierarchical organizational cultures, weak incentive structures, information silos, and suppressed employee voice continue to limit bottom-up innovation in many telecom SMEs. Although shared leadership has been proposed as an alternative to traditional top-down leadership, limited attention has been given to how it shapes employee innovation in Chinese SMEs and the mechanisms through which these effects occur. Guided by Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this paper develops an integrated framework linking shared leadership to employee innovation through three mediating mechanisms: employee motivation, employee voice, and knowledge sharing. Employee motivation represents the psychological pathway, employee voice represents the communicative pathway, and knowledge sharing represents the collaborative pathway. Perceived organizational support (POS) is positioned as a boundary condition that strengthens the translation of these mechanisms into innovative work behavior. The proposed study focuses on frontline and mid-level employees in telecommunication SMEs located in Guangdong Province. 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 multiple mediators and a contextual moderator within one SET- and SDT-informed model and by clarifying how collective leadership fosters employee-driven innovation in a high power-distance, technology-intensive SME context.

Keywords: Shared Leadership, Employee Innovation, Employee Motivation, Employee Voice, Knowledge Sharing, Perceived Organizational Support, Telecommunication Smes, China

Introduction

Employee innovation has become a central concern in organizational research and practice because sustainable competitive advantage in knowledge-intensive industries depends increasingly on the ideas, initiative, and problem-solving capabilities of individual employees. Employee innovation, commonly conceptualized as innovative work behavior, refers to the generation, promotion, and realization of new ideas within work roles and organizational processes (Janssen, 2000). Because organizational innovation ultimately originates in individual behavior, understanding the conditions that enable or constrain employees' innovative efforts is essential for organizations operating in dynamic environments (Anderson et al., 2014).

The importance of employee innovation is particularly evident in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs constitute more than 99% of all businesses in China, account for roughly 60% of national GDP, and provide more than 80% of urban employment (EU SME Centre, 2023). Unlike large firms, however, many SMEs lack dedicated R&D departments, generous innovation budgets, and easy access to finance. Their capacity to innovate therefore depends heavily on the initiative and ingenuity of their workforce (Sahibzada et al., 2023). Nurturing employee innovation is not merely desirable for SMEs; it is a condition for survival and growth.

China's telecommunication industry offers a particularly important context for examining these issues. The sector is one of the largest in the world, with more than four million 5G base stations deployed and over one billion 5G subscriptions by 2024 (CAICT, 2024; GSMA, 2024). While core infrastructure is dominated by large state-owned operators, numerous SMEs supply network components, telecom software, value-added services, and IoT applications that enrich the value chain (MERICS, 2023). These firms operate under rapid generational technological change, which makes continuous innovation essential. Yet industry-level growth has not been matched by innovation performance among telecom SMEs. Fewer than 0.2% of China's SMEs have been designated as "specialised and innovative" (MERICS, 2023), and only 6% of Chinese employees report being actively engaged at work (Gallup, 2023).

Within this context, leadership is increasingly recognized as a critical and modifiable organizational factor influencing employee innovation. Leadership research in China has focused predominantly on vertical styles, such as transformational, paternalistic, or authoritarian leadership, in which authority remains concentrated in a single formal leader (Zhu et al., 2018). In contrast, shared leadership refers to the distribution of leadership responsibilities, influence, and decision-making among multiple team members (Carson et al., 2007). By promoting autonomy, mutual influence, and participative decision-making, shared leadership may create the psychological and social conditions under which employees are more motivated, more willing to speak up, and more willing to share knowledge (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Wu et al., 2024).

The motivation for this study arises from three recent developments that have made employee innovation in Chinese telecommunication SMEs both more necessary and more difficult. First, the sector has entered a period of rapid generational change. The large-scale rollout of 5G has shortened product cycles and opened new markets in telecom software, value-added services, and IoT applications, yet most SMEs serving these segments cannot rely

on large R&D departments to keep pace (MERICS, 2023; Sahibzada et al., 2023). Second, national policy increasingly expects SMEs to become "specialised and innovative", but the very small share that has achieved this designation reveals a wide gap between policy ambition and firm-level innovation capability (MERICS, 2023). Third, the human foundation of innovation appears weak: employee engagement in China remains low (Gallup, 2023), and preliminary interviews with telecom SME employees in Guangdong Province point to weak motivational structures, fragmented knowledge sharing, and voice suppressed by fear of negative repercussions.

These developments expose a central challenge. In many Chinese SMEs, hierarchical leadership concentrates decision-making in a small number of managers, which can discourage employees from proposing ideas, questioning established practices, or sharing knowledge across departmental boundaries (Wang et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021). As technological demands grow faster than managerial capacity, relying on a single formal leader to generate and direct innovation becomes increasingly unrealistic. Shared leadership, which distributes influence across team members, offers a possible response, but whether it can function in a high power-distance culture remains uncertain (Zhu et al., 2018).

The study is therefore motivated by academic, theoretical, and practical considerations. Academically, evidence on shared leadership comes mainly from Western contexts and large organizations (Carson et al., 2007; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014), leaving its relevance for Chinese SMEs largely untested. Theoretically, prior research usually examines motivation, voice, or knowledge sharing one at a time (Hughes et al., 2018; Wang & Noe, 2010), so it remains unresolved which mechanisms carry the effect of shared leadership and whether they operate together. Combining SDT and SET allows the psychological, communicative, and collaborative pathways to be examined within one model, while POS clarifies when these pathways are converted into innovation. Practically, telecom SMEs need low-cost ways to unlock innovation from their existing workforce. If shared leadership strengthens motivation, voice, and knowledge sharing, managers can redistribute responsibility rather than rely on large financial investment. These unresolved issues make the present study both timely and worthwhile.

It is therefore important to examine not only whether shared leadership influences employee innovation, but also how and under what conditions such effects occur. The study is beneficial for several groups. For frontline employees, it highlights how collective leadership can expand autonomy and participation. For SME managers, it provides guidance on distributing leadership responsibilities without losing coordination. For organizations, it offers insights into building supportive climates that convert employee effort into innovation. For policymakers, it provides implications for SME development programs in strategic technology sectors.

This paper therefore proposes an integrated framework explaining how shared leadership influences employee innovation in Chinese telecommunication SMEs. Drawing on SET and SDT, the model argues that shared leadership satisfies employees' psychological needs and initiates reciprocal exchange relationships. These conditions are expected to enhance employee motivation, employee voice, and knowledge sharing, which in turn promote

employee innovation, with perceived organizational support strengthening the latter relationships.

Literature Review

Employee Innovation

Employee innovation refers to employees' innovative work behavior, comprising the generation, promotion, and realization of new ideas in their work tasks and organizational context (Janssen, 2000). Idea generation concerns producing novel and useful solutions. Idea promotion concerns building support for those ideas among colleagues and decision-makers. Idea realization concerns turning ideas into practical applications that improve products, services, or processes. Viewed this way, innovation is a multi-stage behavioral process rather than a single creative act (Anderson et al., 2014).

In telecommunication SMEs, employee innovation is particularly important yet particularly fragile. These firms operate under rapid technological change, such as the shift from 4G to 5G, but often lack formal R&D resources. At the same time, hierarchical structures, short-term profit orientation, and departmental silos in many Chinese enterprises can discourage employees from proposing or implementing new ideas (Zhao et al., 2021). Leadership, motivation, communication, and collaboration therefore become decisive in determining whether employees' innovative potential is realized.

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership refers to an emergent team property in which leadership roles, influence, and decision-making authority are distributed among multiple team members rather than concentrated in a single appointed leader (Carson et al., 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Unlike transactional or transformational leadership, which still centralize authority around one individual, shared leadership treats leadership as a dynamic, interactive, and collective process characterized by mutual influence and joint accountability (Zhu et al., 2018).

Shared leadership appears especially suitable for SMEs in dynamic, technology-driven industries, where flexibility, rapid response, and the full use of limited talent are essential. Empirical studies show that shared leadership improves team creativity and innovative performance by enhancing cohesion, psychological safety, and open communication (Hoch, 2013; Sun, 2023; Wu et al., 2024). However, its adoption in Chinese organizations may be constrained by high power distance and clearly defined hierarchical roles (Zhu et al., 2018). Whether and how shared leadership operates in Chinese telecom SMEs therefore remains an important empirical question.

Employee Motivation

Employee motivation in this framework refers specifically to intrinsic motivation, namely engaging in work because it is inherently interesting, enjoyable, and satisfying rather than for external rewards (Tremblay et al., 2009). Intrinsic motivation is widely regarded as a core psychological driver of creativity and innovation because it sustains curiosity, persistence, and willingness to explore unconventional solutions (Amabile, 1997; Amabile & Pratt, 2016).

According to SDT, intrinsic motivation flourishes when employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Autonomy-supportive leadership enhances intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling leadership tends to suppress it (Deci et al., 2017). In Chinese SMEs, where structured incentives and clear career paths for innovative employees are often lacking, intrinsic motivation may be an especially important resource for innovation.

Employee Voice

Employee voice refers to the discretionary expression of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions intended to improve organizational functioning (Morrison, 2014). Liang et al. (2012) distinguish promotive voice, which expresses ideas for improving existing practices, from prohibitive voice, which expresses concerns about practices or behaviors that may harm the organization. Both forms supply the information needed to identify problems and opportunities for innovation.

Voice is inherently risky because it challenges the status quo and may be interpreted as criticism of superiors. In hierarchical Chinese workplaces, employees may remain silent to preserve harmony and avoid negative consequences (Wang et al., 2019). Leadership practices that flatten hierarchy and signal openness are therefore critical for encouraging employees to speak up.

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing refers to the exchange of task information, know-how, expertise, and experience among individuals and teams in an organization (Wang & Noe, 2010). Because innovation frequently emerges from recombining existing ideas, knowledge sharing expands the pool of information available for creative problem-solving and accelerates collective learning (Foss et al., 2009).

Knowledge sharing depends heavily on trust, reciprocity, and a supportive social climate. Employees may hoard knowledge when they fear losing status or when departmental boundaries are rigid. Prior research shows that knowledge sharing mediates the effects of organizational and leadership conditions on innovative work behavior (Afsar et al., 2019; Akram et al., 2020). In telecom SMEs, where information silos remain common, knowledge sharing is a key collaborative pathway to employee innovation.

Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support (POS) refers to employees' general beliefs about the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). High POS creates a felt obligation to reciprocate and increases employees' willingness to invest effort, take risks, and engage in discretionary behavior (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

In the present framework, POS is positioned as a boundary condition. Even when employees are motivated, willing to speak up, or willing to share knowledge, these behaviors may not translate into innovation if the organization does not provide resources, recognition, and tolerance for failure. POS is therefore expected to strengthen the effects of motivation, voice, and knowledge sharing on employee innovation.

Theoretical Foundation: Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory

Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory jointly provide the theoretical foundation for this paper. SET proposes that workplace relationships develop through reciprocal exchanges: when employees receive favorable treatment, such as trust, respect, and empowerment, they feel obligated to reciprocate with discretionary behaviors that benefit the organization (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017). SDT proposes that individuals are intrinsically motivated when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, and that social contexts either support or thwart these needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In China's telecommunication SMEs, shared leadership can be conceptualized as a social context that both satisfies psychological needs and initiates favorable exchange relationships. From the SDT perspective, distributing decision-making authority enhances autonomy, collaborative problem-solving builds competence, and mutual influence strengthens relatedness. These conditions are expected to increase employees' intrinsic motivation. From the SET perspective, shared leadership signals trust and respect, encouraging employees to reciprocate by voicing constructive ideas and sharing valuable knowledge with colleagues.

The two theories also explain why motivation, voice, and knowledge sharing should be examined together and why POS acts as a boundary condition. Motivation captures the psychological pathway emphasized by SDT, while voice and knowledge sharing capture the communicative and collaborative pathways emphasized by SET. POS, in turn, reflects the organization's side of the exchange: when employees believe the organization values their contributions, they are more confident that their motivated effort, voiced ideas, and shared knowledge will be recognized and implemented. This multi-pathway explanation allows a more complete understanding of how shared leadership fosters employee innovation.

Research Gaps and Hypothesis Development

Three research gaps justify the present framework. First, the positive effects of shared leadership have been documented mainly in Western contexts and large organizations (Carson et al., 2007; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014), whereas leadership research in China continues to focus on vertical leadership styles (Zhu et al., 2018). The applicability of shared leadership in Chinese SMEs, characterized by high power distance and entrenched hierarchies, remains underexplored. Second, prior studies typically examine single mediators, such as motivation, voice, or knowledge sharing, in isolation (Afsar & Umrani, 2019; Hughes et al., 2018; Wang & Noe, 2010). Few studies integrate psychological, communicative, and collaborative mechanisms within one model. Third, the conditions under which these mechanisms translate into innovation remain unclear. Although POS is known to shape discretionary behavior (Kurtessis et al., 2017), its role as a boundary condition in the shared leadership–innovation process has received limited attention, particularly in telecommunication SMEs.

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

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Shared leadership is positively related to employee motivation.
H2	Shared leadership is positively related to employee voice.
H3	Shared leadership is positively related to knowledge sharing.
H4	Employee motivation is positively related to employee innovation.
H5	Employee voice is positively related to employee innovation.
H6	Knowledge sharing is positively related to employee innovation.
H7	Employee motivation mediates the relationship between shared leadership and employee innovation.
H8	Employee voice mediates the relationship between shared leadership and employee innovation.
H9	Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between shared leadership and employee innovation.
H10	Perceived organizational support moderates the relationship between employee motivation and employee innovation, such that the relationship is stronger when POS is high.
H11	Perceived organizational support moderates the relationship between employee voice and employee innovation, such that the relationship is stronger when POS is high.
H12	Perceived organizational support moderates the relationship between knowledge sharing and employee innovation, such that the relationship is stronger when POS is high.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual framework. Shared leadership is positioned as the independent variable, employee innovation as the dependent variable, employee motivation, employee voice, and knowledge sharing as parallel mediators, and perceived organizational support as the moderator. The framework proposes that shared leadership enhances employee innovation indirectly through psychological, communicative, and collaborative pathways, and that perceived organizational support strengthens the effects of these mechanisms on innovation.

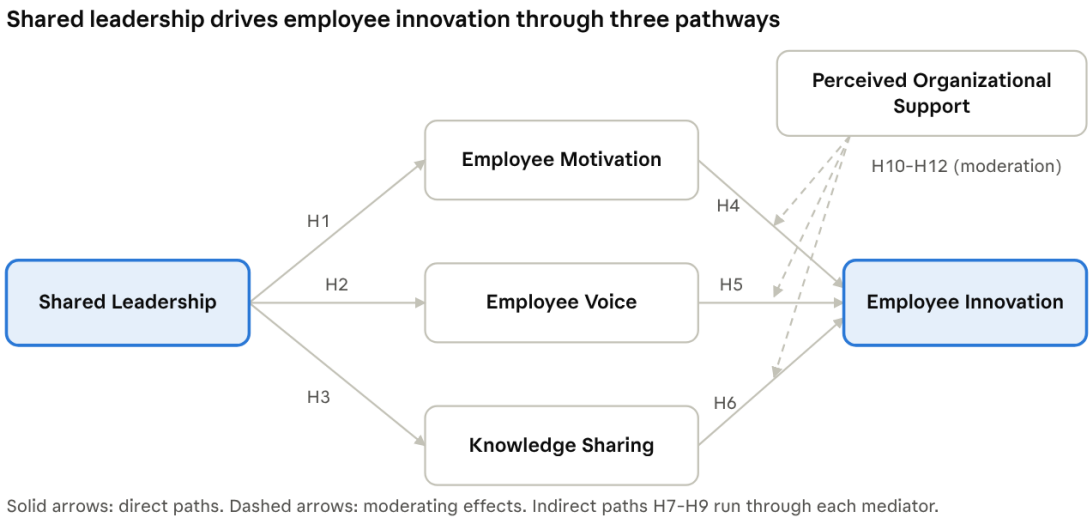

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the present study

Proposed Methodology

The proposed study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design grounded in a positivist and deductive approach. 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, mediating, and moderating effects within a defined organizational context.

The target population comprises frontline and mid-level employees working in telecommunication SMEs in Guangdong Province. These respondents include non-executive staff in departments actively involved in collaboration and innovation-related activities, such as research and development, technical support and engineering, product management, customer service and sales, and operations and quality control. Top managers and business owners are excluded because the study focuses on how leadership practices shape employee-level motivation, voice, knowledge sharing, and innovation.

Guangdong is selected because it is a major economic and technology hub with a dense concentration of telecommunication SMEs. SMEs are defined according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018) classification for the information transmission industry, namely enterprises with no more than 2,000 employees and annual revenue not exceeding RMB 1 billion. Micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees are excluded because they typically lack the formal team structures needed to observe shared leadership. Based on provincial economic census data, the population is estimated at approximately 170,000 to 180,000 telecommunication employees in Guangdong (Guangdong Statistics Bureau, 2019, 2023).

Purposive sampling will be used because respondents must meet specific inclusion criteria. Eligible participants should be full-time frontline or mid-level employees of a telecommunication SME located in Guangdong, and should work in a team setting with regular involvement in problem-solving or idea generation. Organizational gatekeepers, such as HR managers or department heads, will be contacted to distribute the questionnaire link through internal channels such as company email and WeChat groups. The questionnaire will be hosted on Wenjuanxing and provided in Chinese and English, with the Chinese version prepared through back-translation (Brislin, 1980).

The minimum sample size is determined through G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007). Employee innovation is the endogenous construct with the largest number of predictors, namely seven: employee motivation, employee voice, knowledge sharing, POS, and three interaction terms. With a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of 0.05, and statistical power of 0.95, the minimum required sample is 153. To allow for non-response and to improve generalizability, approximately 1,000 invitations will be distributed across about 20 SMEs.

Established measurement scales will be used for all constructs. Shared leadership will be measured with the 10-item scale of Carson et al. (2007), capturing shared purpose, social support, and voice within the team. Employee voice will be measured with the 10-item promotive and prohibitive voice scale of Liang et al. (2012). Employee motivation will be measured with the three-item intrinsic motivation subscale of the Work Extrinsic and Intrinsic

Motivation Scale (Tremblay et al., 2009). Knowledge sharing will be measured with five items adapted from Huang (2009). Employee innovation will be measured with the nine-item innovative work behavior scale of Janssen (2000), covering idea generation, promotion, and realization. POS will be measured with the eight-item scale of Eisenberger et al. (1997). Five-point and seven-point Likert formats will be varied across predictor and criterion constructs as a procedural remedy for common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The instrument will be refined through expert review and a pilot test with 30 respondents (Hertzog, 2008).

Data analysis will be conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM is appropriate because the study examines a predictive model involving multiple latent variables, parallel mediators, and interaction effects (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis will include data preparation, assessment of non-response bias, assessment of common method variance using a theoretically unrelated marker variable (Lindell & Whitney, 2001), evaluation of the reflective measurement model, assessment of the structural model, and bootstrapping to test the significance of direct, indirect, and moderating effects. Predictive relevance will be evaluated with PLSpredict.

Contributions and Practical Implications

This paper offers several theoretical contributions. First, it extends shared leadership research to Chinese SMEs, a high power-distance context traditionally dominated by vertical leadership, thereby testing the cross-cultural applicability of collective leadership theory. Second, it integrates employee motivation, employee voice, and knowledge sharing as parallel mediators, addressing the fragmentation of research that examines these mechanisms separately and clarifying their relative importance. Third, it combines SET and SDT to explain how shared leadership works through both need satisfaction and reciprocal exchange, offering a more complete account than either theory alone. Fourth, it specifies POS as a boundary condition, clarifying when employees' motivation, voice, and knowledge sharing are most likely to be converted into innovative work behavior.

The framework also has practical implications for employees, managers, organizations, and policymakers. For frontline employees, the study highlights how taking part in leadership functions can expand autonomy, competence, and influence over work. For SME managers, the model emphasizes the value of distributing decision-making responsibilities, inviting input from all team members, and recognizing employees' contributions. Strict top-down control may achieve short-term coordination, but it may also suppress motivation, silence voice, and reinforce information silos. For organizations, the findings can inform the design of supportive practices, such as cross-functional knowledge platforms, structured suggestion systems, recognition of employee-led improvements, and tolerance for well-intentioned failure. For policymakers, the study supports SME development programs in strategic technology sectors that consider not only financing and technology, but also leadership capability and innovation-friendly workplace climates.

Conclusion

This paper develops an SET- and SDT-based framework to explain how shared leadership influences employee innovation in China's telecommunication SMEs. By focusing on frontline and mid-level employees in telecommunication SMEs located in Guangdong Province, the paper aligns the conceptual model with a clearly defined empirical setting and methodology.

The proposed framework argues that shared leadership enhances employee innovation indirectly through stronger employee motivation, more active employee voice, and more extensive knowledge sharing, with perceived organizational support strengthening the conversion of these mechanisms into innovative work behavior.

Overall, the paper contributes to leadership and innovation research by integrating collective leadership, psychological, communicative, and collaborative mechanisms, and a contextual boundary condition into one coherent model. It also provides a clear foundation for future empirical testing using quantitative survey data and PLS-SEM.

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