Regulatory theory and career encouragement in explaining leadership aspiration

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Abstract: Leadership aspiration – the desire to achieve leadership positions – is a key indicator to career advancement and success. This study proposes that self-esteem serves as a central identity anchor that shapes individuals' motivation to pursue leadership roles by influencing their regulatory orientation. Findings from a two-wave field study of US-based working adults show that high self-esteem is positively associated with promotion focus and negatively associated with prevention focus, which in turn mediate self-esteem's effects on leadership aspiration. A Monte Carlo bootstrap analysis further reveals that career encouragement strengthens the positive impact of promotion focus while amplifying the negative effect of prevention focus on leadership aspiration. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: leadership aspiration; self-esteem; regulatory focus; motivation; identity-based theory.

Biographical notes: Jie Guo's research focuses on leadership, including various precursors and consequences of, and contingencies on, various types of leadership. Her research has been published in the top-tier journals such as *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Leadership Quarterly* and *Group and Organization Management*.

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1 Introduction

Leadership aspiration is defined as individuals' desire and interest in achieving a leadership position and accepting leadership responsibilities for such a position (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018, 2020; Singer, 1991). In today's business world, there is a growing recognition of fostering leadership aspirations across all levels of the workforce

(Gambill, 2021). For years, organisations have invested substantial resources in leadership development, with US companies alone spending nearly $14 billion annually (Gurdjian et al., 2014). Similarly, organisational scholars share views on valuing leadership aspirations, noting that employees who actively seek promotions or leadership roles are often perceived as more engaged and committed, and as a key predictor of career advancement and employee effectiveness (Seibert et al., 2017). However, only a small percentage of senior managers believe their companies effectively develop global leaders, and many acknowledge missed opportunities due to a lack of leaders with necessary authentic motivation to lead (Ghemawat, 2012).

Given the massive expenses on leadership training and development, a deeper understanding of psychological factors that *directly* drive or prohibit authentic leadership aspiration is necessary. Existing research has made important progress in mapping the antecedents of motivation to lead. For example, Cunningham and colleagues (2023) pointed out the importance of having 'leaders' as part of one's identity and identified psychodynamic obstacles to incorporating this leadership identity as proximal antecedents for leader emergence. A recent meta-analysis identified a massive framework with distal (i.e., gender, personality), semi-distal (i.e., self-efficacy), and proximal (i.e., identity-based motivation) antecedents of leadership aspirational outcomes, such as leader emergence and leadership behaviours (Badura et al., 2020). However, existing studies have predominantly emphasised trait-like or relatively stable predictors (e.g., Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2020; Litzky and Greenhaus, 2007), offering limited insight into the identity-motivational mechanisms that determine whether individuals ultimately choose to invest effort and pursue leadership responsibilities (Kim et al., 2023).

The present work, therefore, draws on identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2017) and self-regulation research (Johnson et al., 2015) to offer an *identity-based motivational* perspective on leadership aspiration. Specifically, this work seeks to explain why some individuals are genuinely motivated to lead, while others approach leadership roles with reluctance or disinterest. Specifically, identity-based motivation theory posits that individuals are driven to act in ways aligned with their self-concepts (Browman et al., 2017); that is, when leadership aspiration is perceived congruent with one's self-views, a motivational system reflective of this alignment (promotion orientation) is activated. Conversely, when such opportunity is perceived incongruent with self-evaluations, an alternative motivational system (prevention orientation) is likely to be engaged.

In this manuscript, I propose a dual-path model in which promotion and prevention regulatory focuses are examined as parallel mechanisms linking self-esteem to leadership aspiration. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to view themselves as capable and deserving of leadership roles, activating a promotion-focused motivational pathway (Dutz et al., 2022), while individuals with lower self-esteem tend to adopt a prevention-focused orientation, making them less likely to engage in the competitive and uncertain pursuit of leadership opportunities. Leadership aspirations are examined using both intentions and behaviours. Leadership aspirational intentions refer to an individual's motivational commitment and readiness to pursue leadership roles, whereas leadership aspirational behaviours capture the observable enactment of that motivation (e.g., seeking leadership training) (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018; Tharenou and Terry, 1998). Incorporating both outcomes constitutes a serial mediation pathway that links self-esteem and regulatory focus to aspirational intent and concrete behaviours, which provides a more complete account of leadership aspirations.

Building on identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2017), which underscores the role of contextual cues in triggering identity-congruent behaviours, I suggest that career encouragement from supervisors and peers serves as a potent situational cue within leadership development contexts. Although prior research has documented the general benefits of workplace support for fostering leadership motivation (e.g., Hoobler et al., 2011), the motivational implications of such support may vary based on individuals' regulatory focus. Thus, career encouragement may differentially shape how promotion – versus prevention-focused individuals translate their self-views into leadership aspirations.

This research is important for at least three reasons. First, by integrating identity-based motivation theory with regulatory focus and self-esteem, it advances a theoretically grounded explanation for individual differences in leadership aspiration that moves beyond trait-based predictors (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018, 2020). Second, by examining two types of regulatory focuses in parallel as mediation mechanisms, this work further refines the motivation to lead literature (Badura et al., 2020; Chan and Drasgow, 2001). Unlike distal, trait-like antecedents (i.e., personality, gender), regulatory focus represents a behavioural and strategic choice that can be influenced by personal or environmental changes (Johnson et al., 2015). Third, by incorporating career encouragement as a boundary condition, this study highlights how contextual cues can amplify or inhibit identity-congruent tendencies, providing a more situational view of leadership aspiration (Browman et al., 2017).

Figure 1 Theoretical model
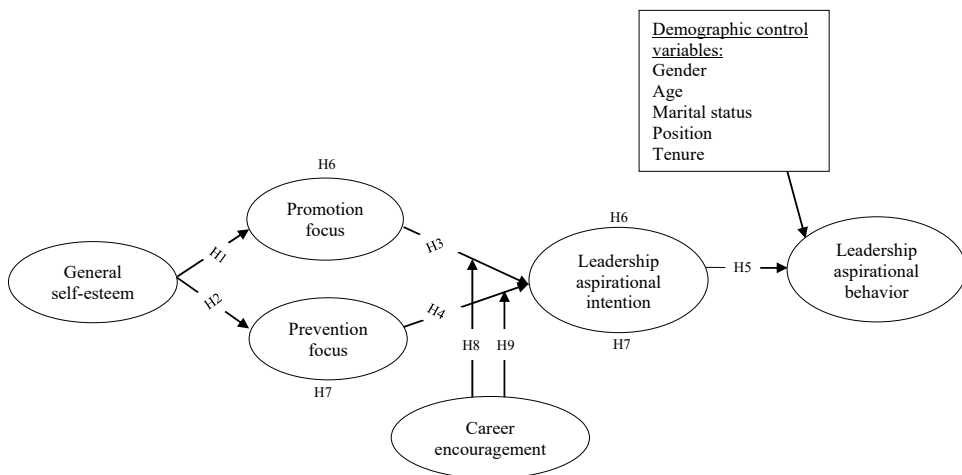
1.1 *Self-esteem as an identity anchor and regulatory theory*

Self-esteem refers to the degree to which an individual perceives him/herself as competent, worthy, and need-satisfying (Pierce and Gardner, 2004). As a core component of self-evaluation, self-esteem plays a foundational role in anchoring one's identity and shaping behavioural motivation. Empirical research has shown that individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to engage in goal-directed behaviours that affirm their self-concept and are less deterred by obstacles (Baumeister et al., 2003). High self-esteem

has also been linked to increased persistence in the face of failure and greater initiative in pursuing personally meaningful roles, including leadership (Pierce and Gardner, 2004). Given that self-esteem expresses an attitude of one approves or disapproves him/herself, it has been suggested to influence employee motivation, work-related attitudes, and work behaviours (Pierce and Gardner, 2004). Together, these findings highlight that self-esteem is not merely a reflection of self-worth but a motivational driver that guides individuals' self-regulation and goal pursuit.

While researchers have long noted self-esteem as an important identity anchor in guiding how people set and pursue their roles, this area of study has yet to detail the process of how the self-concept can initiate and activate distinctive self-regulatory mechanisms in facing aspirational goals, such as assuming leadership roles. Identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009; Browman et al., 2017) offers a compelling framework for addressing this issue by proposing that identity-congruent goals are more likely to be pursued when they align with an individual's self-concept (Bardhan and Haque, 2025). Rather than being passively shaped by external demands, self-esteem provides a lens through which individuals assign meaning to their experiences and interpret opportunities. For example, high self-esteem individuals are more likely to perceive leadership opportunities as congruent with their self-views, leading them to affirm their self-worth by overestimating their abilities and striving toward ambitious, growth-oriented goals. In contrast, low self-esteem individuals often interpret such opportunities as incongruent with their self-concept, prompting compensatory behaviours and a focus on mitigating perceived deficiencies (Pierce and Gardner, 2004).

These distinct motivational pathways closely reflect the regulatory focus framework (Higgins, 1997; Lanaj et al., 2012), which differentiates between promotion and prevention orientations. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to adopt a promotion focus, characterised by striving for gains, advancement, and ideal outcomes. Conversely, those with low self-esteem tend to engage in a prevention focus, emphasising safety, responsibility, and the avoidance of failure. Through the lens of identity-based motivation, these regulatory orientations are not merely dispositional but are activated by how individuals evaluate the fit between their self-views and aspirational opportunities. As such, self-esteem operates as both an identity anchor and a motivational catalyst, which shapes the regulatory strategies individuals deploy when confronting leadership aspirations.

Hypothesis 1   Self-esteem is positively related to promotion regulatory focus.

Hypothesis 2   Self-esteem is negatively related to prevention regulatory focus.

1.2   *Regulatory focus and leadership aspiration*

The concept of *leadership aspiration* examines the desire and inclination of employees to seek leadership opportunities within the organisation. When exposed to such opportunities, employees rely on their existing attributes to evaluate the situation and decide whether to pursue the role (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2020). According to appraisal theories (Thiel et al., 2011), employees assess the relevance of the opportunity based on two key aspects:

a their appraisals of the leadership role

b the significance of career advancement to them.

Traditionally, leadership roles have been associated with agentic traits such as competitiveness, ambition, and self-confidence (Dunegan, 2003; Eddleston et al., 2006), and advancement models remain primarily characterised by status-based indicators and risk-taking visions (Eddleston et al., 2006). Research suggests that high-status roles continue to prioritise agentic job requirements, such as achievement orientation and ambition, even when the actual demands of these roles include alternative skills (Dutz et al., 2022). These status-based career images often emphasise objective markers like pay, promotions, and hierarchical advancement, alongside subjective satisfiers such as recognition, status, and referent leadership power (Kossek and Buzzanell, 2018). Such career indicators typically reflect a vision of advancement characterised by significant hierarchical progression rather than horizontal development and increased visibility within the organisation.

This study explores how different regulatory focuses influence employees' personal interest and aspirations in pursuing leadership opportunities. Specifically, promotion-focused individuals demonstrate heightened sensitivity to potential gains and exhibit a motivational tendency toward opportunities, resource acquisition, achievements, earnings, and tangible rewards, even when these pursuits involve some level of risk-taking (Higgins, 1997). When evaluating leadership opportunities, promotion-focused individuals naturally draw on their perceptions of agentic traits and status-based advancement satisfiers associated with such opportunities. These cognitive appraisals align with their promotion-oriented needs for growth and success, reinforcing their desire to pursue the role (Johnson et al., 2015). Moreover, promotion-focused employees may intrinsically enjoy leadership roles, readily embracing associated responsibilities and information (Badura et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 3 Promotion regulatory focus is positively related to employees' leadership aspirational intentions.

Prevention-focused employees tend to avoid risk and prioritise security (Higgins, 1997). As such, they often derive fulfilment from roles that offer predictability and low exposure to uncertainty, rather than from traditional leadership paths that emphasise change, influence, and personal visibility (Heslin, 2005). Leadership roles are frequently perceived by these individuals as requiring assertiveness, hierarchical ambition, and a willingness to take risks – traits that may conflict with their core motivational focus. Consequently, they may approach leadership opportunities with heightened caution and resistance, preferring instead roles that align with their desire for structure, responsibility, and relational attachment (Johnson et al., 2015). This incongruence between the demands of leadership and the motivational orientation of prevention-focused individuals creates a psychological barrier, making them less likely to aspire to leadership positions and more inclined to protect their 'ought' selves by avoiding such aspirational pursuits.

Hypothesis 4 Prevention regulatory focus is negatively related to employees' leadership aspirational intentions.

Leadership aspirational behaviour is included as an outcome to represent more objective and observable measures of employees' leadership aspirations, beyond just intentions

(Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018; Tharenou and Terry, 1998). This distinction aligns with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which underscores the importance of considering both motivation and actionable items to predict outcomes more accurately. Leadership aspirational behaviours, such as seeking out leadership training, volunteering for leadership responsibilities, or proactively engaging in leadership tasks, demonstrate the actualisation of leadership intentions. By examining these behaviours, the model provides a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership intentions translate into actions, adding values to the model in explaining leadership progression.

Hypothesis 5   Employees' leadership aspirational intention is positively related to their leadership aspirational behaviours.

1.3   The serial mediation effects

This research draws on identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009) to explain how self-esteem influences leadership aspirational outcomes through its impact on regulatory focus. Identity-based motivation theory posits that individuals are motivated to act in ways congruent with their identities, and contextual and dispositional factors jointly shape whether a goal is experienced as identity-congruent. In this framework, self-esteem sets the tone to account for whether individuals perceive leadership opportunities as aligned with their self-concept. Regulatory focus, additionally, may be taken as *a strategic mechanism* that regulates the employee to either promoting a match with the position or preventing a mismatch with the position (Ferris et al., 2013). The two necessary steps have together mapped out a motivational process through which individual differences and situational considerations shape employees' desire for leadership positions.

To illustrate, individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to view leadership roles as compatible with their self-concept and therefore engage in promotion-focused self-regulation. With an adequate self-view, such employees attempt to *maximise* potential gain (i.e., obtaining a leadership position) by strategically choose a motivational path that aligns their perceived strengths with the goal's expectations. Because leadership roles are often associated with stereotypical attributes such as confidence and ambition, pursuing such goals may bring motivational benefits (i.e., pleasure, heightened positive emotions) to employees as they experience *a regulatory fit*. Research suggests that pursuing goals in alignment with one's regulatory orientation creates a sense of 'rightness', which enhances motivation to achieve those goals (Righetti et al., 2011). In this regard, individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to have a strong sense of self-worth, which motivates them to seek out opportunities for personal growth and achievement (Higgins, 1997). Thus, promotion focus serves as the mediating mechanism that channels self-esteem into the aspiration for leadership roles.

Hypothesis 6   Self-esteem has a positive effect on leadership aspirational behaviours via promotion regulatory focus, and in turn, leadership aspirational intentions.

Conversely, prevention focused employees may seek to *minimise* potential losses when pursuing leadership goals. With a low sense of self-adequacy, these individuals are often reluctant to envision themselves in leadership roles – not only due to their deficient self-perceptions but also because of the perceived risks associated with the time and

energy required to mould themselves into such positions. Given the stereotypical attributes associated with leadership roles, low esteemed individuals find a big gap between what they can offer and what the position requires, which signifies *a regulatory misfit* between their perceived strengths and leadership requirements. Importantly, prevention focus operates as a strategic choice that extends beyond the effects of low self-esteem; it reflects a prioritisation of preserving one's status and avoiding potential challenges or failures that could further damage their self-image (Higgins, 1997). The prevention focus thus serves as a mediating mechanism, amplifying the effect of low self-esteem by reinforcing a cautious and risk-averse approach, which ultimately diminishes their leadership aspirations.

Hypothesis 7   Self-esteem has a negative effect on leadership aspirational behaviours via prevention regulatory focus, and in turn, leadership aspirational intentions.

1.4   Moderating role of career encouragement

Career encouragement from supervisors and organisational seniors functions not only as a tangible form of support but also as a potent piece of social information that shape identity-relevant expectations (Ng et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2017). From the lens of identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009), such encouragement serves as a contextual cue that signals what types of roles are valued and expected within the organisational environment. When supervisors endorse leadership opportunities, they do more than offer access – they activate identity-congruent behaviours by communicating that aspiring to leadership is a normative, desirable path within the organisation. This signal may affirm identity alignment for employees who already view themselves as capable leaders, reinforcing a promotion-focused motivation. Simultaneously, it may challenge or reframe identity perceptions for others by suggesting that leadership aspirations are not only welcomed but expected, potentially prompting reevaluation of one's self-concept and motivational orientation. In this way, career encouragement fosters a motivational climate that both supports and shapes leadership identity development.

The relationship between high self-esteem and a promotion-focused orientation aligns seamlessly with the motivational role of career encouragement. Individuals with high self-esteem seek to affirm their self-concept through opportunities for growth, advancement, and achievement. From the perspective of identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009), career encouragement acts as an external cue that validates these identity-congruent aspirations. When supervisors or organisational leaders offer support, recognition, and developmental opportunities, they not only endorse the individual's leadership potential but also reinforce a self-view aligned with leadership identity. This validation amplifies the motivational energy of high self-esteem individuals by converting their internal drive into action – heightening their confidence and behavioural intent to pursue leadership roles. Furthermore, by signalling that the organisation values proactive leadership development, career encouragement creates a cultural context where promotion-focused individuals feel both empowered and expected to realise their leadership ambitions.

Hypothesis 8 The positive effect of self-esteem on leadership aspirational behaviours via promotion regulatory focus and aspirational intentions will be enhanced when career encouragement is high, compared to when career encouragement is low.

Career encouragement may inadvertently exacerbate the negative relationship between prevention regulatory focus and leadership aspirations. From the lens of identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009), prevention-focused individuals are driven to act in ways that maintain consistency with their self-concept, which emphasises security, stability, and the avoidance of risk. When organisational actors promote leadership roles as desirable and expected, these social cues can pose a psychological threat to prevention-focused individuals, whose self-views may not align with the demands and uncertainties associated with leadership positions. Encouragement to pursue leadership may feel intrusive or dissonant, evoking discomfort as it suggests a shift in role identity that clashes with their internal motivational orientation. Furthermore, when leadership aspirations are culturally idealised, prevention-focused individuals may experience tension between external expectations and their preference to remain in roles that emphasise responsibility, structure, and continuity. In this way, rather than motivating them, career encouragement may heighten internal conflict and reinforce their reluctance to engage in aspirational leadership pursuits.

Hypothesis 9 The negative effect of self-esteem on leadership aspirational behaviours via prevention regulatory focus and aspirational intentions will be intensified when career encouragement is high, compared to when career encouragement is low.

2   Method

2.1   Sample and procedure

The study sample was recruited via Prolific with US-based full-time employees who employed in a variety of industries. Participants were pre-screened to include only currently employed working adults with at least one year of organisational experience. Multiple attention checks were embedded in both surveys, and cases failing these checks were excluded prior to analysis. Moreover, participants' responses were cross validated through self-reported employment information (e.g., industry, tenure, and position level) to enhance external validity. This approach is consistent with prior research demonstrating that Prolific samples provide reliable, diverse, and high-quality data (Palan and Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017).

To minimise common method variance concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003), data were collected in two waves. A 10-day interval was conducted between the two survey waves. This method decision was informed by both theoretical and methodological considerations: it provides sufficient temporal separation between antecedent and outcome waves while maintaining short enough to capture the unfolding motivational mechanisms before they decay or become contaminated by external events (Dormann and Griffin, 2015; Mitchell and James, 2001).

In wave 1, 200 participants were invited to complete an online survey using a Qualtrics link; 180 completed the survey and passed attention checks (90% of retention

rate). Wave 1 measures included general self-esteem, regulatory focus, and demographics. Approximately ten days later, all participants who responded in the first wave survey were asked to report their perceived career encouragement, leadership aspirational intention, and leadership aspiration behaviour; 146 participants completed wave 2 (81.1% of retention from wave 1; 73% from initial invitation). Responses were matched across waves via Prolific IDs.

The final sample consisted of 146 individuals (M_{age} = 36.7, SD_{age} = 9.7; 63% female) across two waves of surveys. The majority of participants had received a bachelor's or high degree in college (80.14%), with 50% holding a supervisory or upper-level management position. On average, participants had worked 6.5 years at their current organisation (SD = 6.1). Respondents represented a range of industries, which provided some occupational heterogeneity: construction (2%), transportation (4%), banking (4%), retail (5%), sales (5%), social services (5%), customer service (7%), information technology (10%), education (17%), and healthcare (21%). A detailed report of participants' demographic characteristics was included in Table 1.

Table 1   Sample demographics (N = 146)

Demographic characteristics		Values
Gender (female)		63% (n = 92)
Marital status (Married)		51% (n = 74)
Age		M = 36.7; SD = 9.7
Race/Ethnicity	African American or Black	9% (n = 13)
	Asian	14% (n = 21)
	Spanish, Hispanic or Latino	11% (n = 16)
	White	64% (n = 94)
	Other	2% (n = 29)
Education	High school or associate degree in college (2-year)	20% (n = 28)
	Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)	56% (n = 82)
	Master's degree	19% (n = 28)
	Doctoral degree	2% (n = 3)
	Professional degree (JD, MD)	3% (n = 4)
Position	Intern or entry-level (non-management)	50% (n = 72)
	Supervisor/manager	43% (n = 63)
	Executive (upper-level management)	7% (n =10)
Tenure (in years)		M = 6.5; SD = 6.1
Industry sectors represented	Construction (2%), transportation (4%), banking (4%), retail (5%), sales (5%), social services (5%), customer service (7%), information technology (10%), education (17%), healthcare (21%) and others (20%)	

Note: Sample = 146. M – average score, SD – standard deviation, n – number of
         participants in a specific category.

2.2   Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all ratings were made using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

2.2.1   General self-esteem

The 6-item global self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure general self-esteem. Items include 'on the whole, I am satisfied with myself'; 'I take a positive attitude toward myself'.

2.2.2   Regulatory focus

Regulatory focus was assessed using the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire developed by Lockwood et al. (2002). This 18-item scale was appropriate because this model aims to capture the motivational processes that give rise to career promotability. Items of promotion-focus include 'I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations'; 'I often think about how I will achieve career success'. Prevention-focus items include 'In general, I am focused on preventing negative events in my life'; 'I am more oriented toward preventing losses than I am toward achieving gains'.

2.2.3   Career encouragement

Career encouragement was measured using three items developed by Tharenou (2001). Participants were asked to what extent they experience the listed items within their organisation (1 = never to 5 = very frequently). Sample items include 'has a person more senior in position than yourself encouraged you in your career development', and 'have colleagues at the same level as yourself encouraged you in your career development?'.

2.2.4   Leadership aspirational intention

Leadership aspirational intention (8-item) was adapted from Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) and Gray and O'Brien (2007). Sample items from this scale include 'I hope to become a leader in my career field' and 'I would like to obtain a higher leadership position'.

2.2.5   Leadership aspirational behaviour

Following the approach of Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018), I utilised the 8-item measure of leadership aspirational behaviour to assess the behavioural manifestation of leadership aspirations. Sample items from this scale such as 'I have sought feedback on my job performance', and 'I have discussed my aspirations with a senior person in the department/organisation'.

2.2.6   Control variables

As extant research suggests the potential effects of demographic variables on leadership aspiration (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018; Schill-Owens et al., 2025), I controlled for participants' gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age, and marital status (0 = married, 1 =

unmarried). Given that past leader experience or working experience in general may explain certain variances in motivation to lead (Badura et al., 2020), participants' current position (1 = intern, 2 = entry-level/non-management, 3 = supervisor/manager, 4 = executive/upper-level management) and their tenure in the current organisation (in years) are also controlled in the model.

3 Analysis and results

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first conducted to assess the fit of the measurement model (MacKenzie et al., 2005). Given the relatively large number of items compared to the sample size, item parcels were created to improve the sample size-to-parameter ratio and reduce the likelihood of estimation problems (Williams and O'Boyle, 2008). Parcels were used for constructs with more than six items. For the hypothesised model, a total of six constructs were included in the analysis: general self-esteem, promotion focus, prevention focus, career encouragement, leadership aspirational intentions, and leadership aspirational behaviours.

Table 2   Descriptive statistics of and correlations among study variables

| Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 General self-esteem	4.0	0.9	**.92**										
2 Promotion regulatory focus	4.0	0.7	.41	**.90**									
3 Prevention regulatory focus	3.2	0.9	–.48	–.08	**.91**								
4 Career encouragement	3.7	1.0	.39	.41	–.06	**.96**							
5 Gender	0.6	0.5	–.14	–.04	.12	–.10	--						
6 Age	36.5	9.9	.22	–.25	–.17	–.02	.14	--					
7 Marital status	0.5	0.5	–.28	–.03	.23	–.23	.23	–.30	--				
8 Current position	3.6	0.7	.17	.07	–.21	.10	–.04	.30	–.13	--			
9 Tenure	6.6	6.1	.08	–.12	–.14	–.05	.08	.59	–.18	.25	--		
10 Leadership aspirational intention	3.6	0.9	.26	.40	–.10	.40	–.19	–.05	–.11	.31	–.06	**.94**	
11 Leadership aspirational behaviour	3.6	0.8	.41	.38	–.19	.57	.06	–.07	–.12	.27	–.10	.46	**.84**

Note: N = 146. Reliability estimates are along the diagonal in bold. Gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. Marital status coded as 0 = married, 1 = unmarried. Current position coded as 1 = intern, 2 = entry-level/non-management, 3 = supervisor/manager, 4 = executive/upper-level management. Tenure calculated in years. All correlations $|r| \geq .19$ are statistically significant with $p < .05$.

Results revealed that the hypothesised six-factor model provided a good fit to the data (χ^2 (120) = 186.28, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06). This six-factor model fits better than a second-order model in which regulatory focus was represented by a higher-order factor (encompassing promotion and prevention focus) ($\Delta\chi^2$ = 13.4, Δdf = 3, $p < .001$), and a five-factor model where promotion focus and prevention focus were modelled as a single 'regulatory focus' variable ($\Delta\chi^2$ = 258.71, Δdf = 5, $p < .001$), a five-factor model where leadership aspirational intentions and behaviours were combined into a single aspiration variable ($\Delta\chi^2$ = 391.11, Δdf = 9, $p < .001$), , and a one-factor model where all variables were combined ($\Delta\chi^2$ = 1,094.91, Δdf = 15, $p < .001$). Means, standard deviations, reliability, and correlations are displayed in Table 2.

I employed a path analysis model using Mplus 8 to test the hypotheses (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017). Following Koopman et al. (2016), the disturbances between promotion focus and prevention focus were allowed to covary. As recommended by Aiken and West (1991) and Cohen et al. (2003), predictors for moderation terms were mean centered to reduce non-essential multicollinearity and yield more stable estimates of both the main and interaction effects. With a sample size of 145, a sensitivity test showed that the design had sufficient power to detect small-to-moderate effects for the focal hypothesised paths (ΔR^2 ranging from .05 to .19; two-tailed α = .05; Cohen, 1988). Indirect and moderated effects were tested with 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples, which affords adequate power for the focal paths (Fritz and MacKinnon, 2007). Effect sizes with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were reported.

Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, employees' self-esteem was positively related to their promotion regulatory focus (β = .31, $p < .001$), and negatively related to their prevention regulatory focus (β = –43, $p < .001$). Promotion regulatory focus was positively related to leadership aspirational intentions (β = .48, $p < .001$), Hypothesis 3 was supported. However, the negative relationship between prevention regulatory focus and leadership aspirational intentions was not significant, though in the expected direction (β= –.03, p = .79). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Next, the positive relationship between leadership aspirational intentions and behaviours was positive (β = .15, p = .001), supporting Hypothesis 5. All path analysis results are reported in Table 3 and shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2   Results for hypothesised model (Hypotheses 1 to 5)
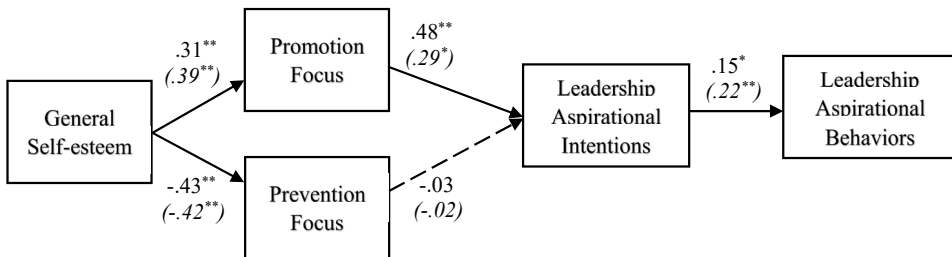
Note: N = 146. Unstandardised parameter estimates are reported, with standardised
estimates in italic. Dotted lines represent hypothesised but non-significant paths.
†p <.10. *p < .05. **p < .01.

**Table 3** Path analysis results for mediation model with control variables

Predictor	Promotion focus			Prevention focus			Leadership aspirational intentions			Leadership aspirational behaviours		
	B / β	SE	P	B / β	SE	P	B / β	SE	P	B / β	SE	P
General self-esteem	**.31****	.07	**.00**	**-.43****	.07	**.00**	.06	.12	.62	.16	.10	.11
	.39**	*.08*	*.00*	*-.42***	*.06*	*.00*	*.05*	*.09*	*.62*	*.17*	*.10*	*.09*
Promotion focus							**.48****	**.15**	**.00**	.08	.10	.47
							.29**	*.09*	*.00*	*.06*	*.09*	*.48*
Prevention focus							**-.03**	**.11**	**.79**	-.06	.07	.39
							-.02	*.08*	*.79*	*-.07*	*.08*	*.39*
Career encouragement							.38**	.10	.00	.26*	.09	.01
							.33**	*.09*	*.00*	*.33***	*.11*	*.00*
Promotion focus × Career encouragement							.25*	.11	.02	.01	.10	.95
							.16*	*.07*	*.02*	*.01*	*.09*	*.95*
Prevention focus × Career encouragement							-.17†	.08	.05	.07	.08	.34
							-.14†	*.07*	*.06*	*.09*	*.10*	*.34*
Leadership aspirational intention										**.15***	**.06**	**.01**
										.22*	*.08*	*.01*
Gender										.29*	.14	.03
										.19*	*.09*	*.03*
Age										-.01	.01	.56
										-.05	*.09*	*.55*
Marital status										.02	.13	.90
										.01	*.09*	*.90*
Position										.21*	.10	.03
										.17*	*.08*	*.04*
Tenure										-.01	.01	.34
										-.08	*.09*	*.34*
R^2	.15			.18			.27			.40		

Note: N = 146. Unstandardised estimates (B) are reported, with standardised estimates (β) in *italic*. Hypothesised direct paths were in bold. Two-tailed tests of statistical significance.
Gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. Marital status coded as 0 = married, 1 = unmarried. Current position coded as 1 = intern, 2 = entry-level/non-management, 3 = supervisor/manager, 4 = executive/upper-level management. Tenure calculated in years.
†p <.10. *p <.05. **p <.01.

Figure 3　Moderating effect of career encouragement on the relationship between promotion focus and leadership aspirational intention (see online version for colours)
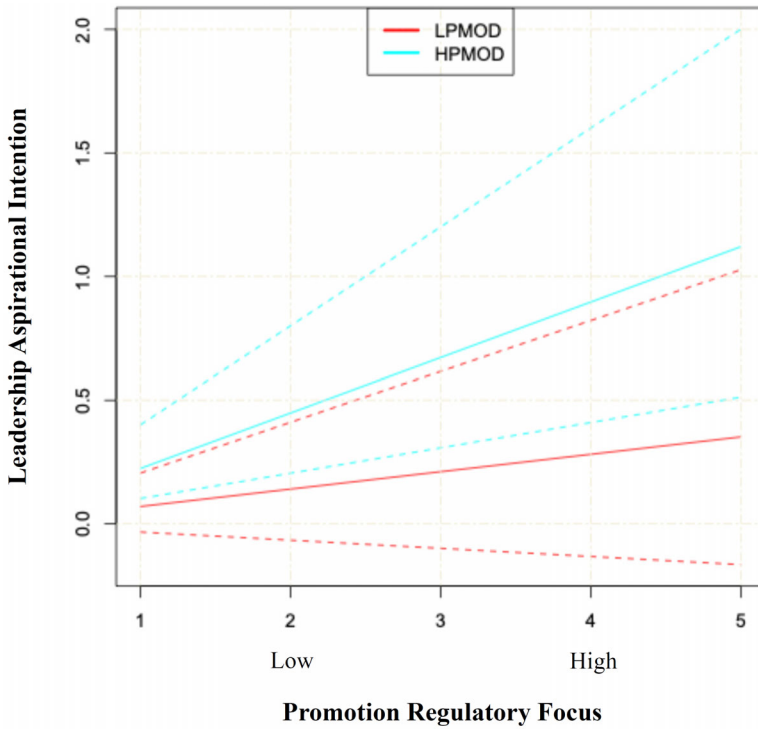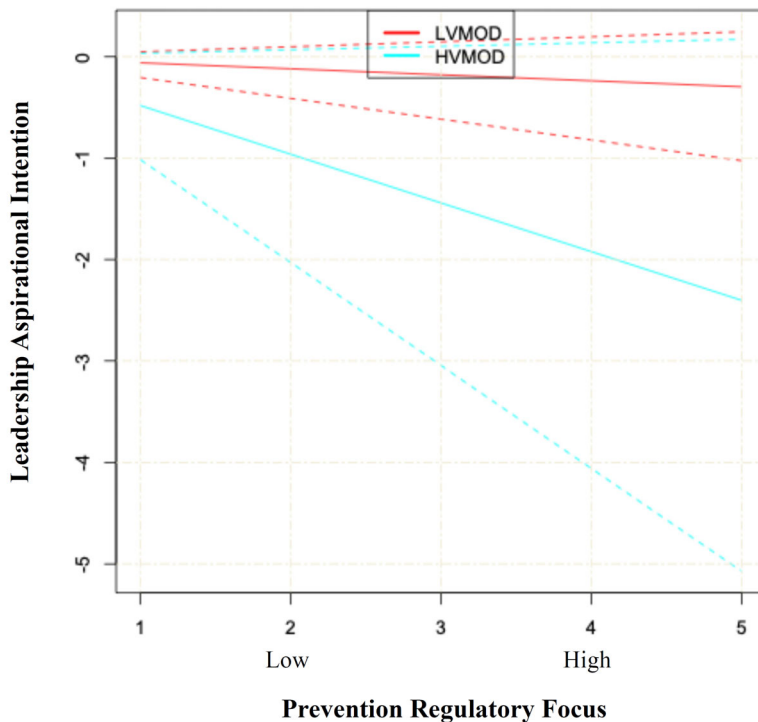

Note: LPMOD – low level of career encouragement (–1*SD*); HPMOD – high level of career encouragement (+1*SD*). Solid lines represent the interaction between promotion regulatory focus and career encouragement in predicting leadership aspirational intention at high versus low levels. Dotted lines represent 95% confidence interval.

The serial mediation model was tested using bias-corrected (BC) bootstrapping (1,000 resamples; Preacher et al., 2010). Results showed that the relationship between self-esteem and leadership aspirational behaviours was significantly and serially mediated by promotion focus and aspirational intentions (B = .022, β = .024, BC 95% CI [.007, .053])[1], supporting Hypothesis 6. The serial mediation via prevention focus, however, was not significant (B = .002, β = .002, BC 95% CI [–.011, .013]). Hypothesis 7 was not supported.

Next, the moderating effect of career encouragement was examined. Results indicated that the interaction between career encouragement and promotion regulatory focus was positive and significant (β = .25, *p* = .023). This suggests that career encouragement amplifies the effect of promotion focus, such that promotion-focused individuals show greater leadership aspirational intentions when they receive more encouragement from their supervisors or peers. On the other hand, the interaction between career encouragement and prevention regulatory focus was negative and significant (β = –.17, *p* = .046). This implies that the negative relationship between prevention-focus and leadership aspirational intention gets worse when individuals perceive higher levels of career encouragement. The interaction patterns are plotted in Figure 3 and 4.

The second stage moderating effect of career encouragement on the serial mediation was also tested via a Monte Carlo bootstrap approach in this model (Preacher et al., 2010). The magnitude of the second-stage coefficient was calculated as being conditional on the coefficient for the moderator (i.e., at +/–1 standard deviations; Preacher et al., 2007). Following Aguinis and Gottfredson (2010), to gauge the size of the interaction, I assessed incremental validity by comparing the moderated-mediation model with a baseline model that excluded the interaction terms. The measure of fit metrics ($\Delta R^2 = .076$; Cohen's $f^2 = .13)^2$ indicate the sample-based proportion of variance in leadership aspirational behaviours explained by the interaction effect above and beyond the variance explained by the baseline model, which suggests the moderation terms make a practically meaningful contribution to predicting leadership aspirational behaviours in this model.

Figure 4 Moderating effect of career encouragement on the relationship between prevention focus and leadership aspirational intention

Note: LVMOD – low level of career encouragement (–1SD); HVMOD – high level of career encouragement (+1SD). Solid lines represent the interaction between prevention regulatory focus and career encouragement in predicting leadership aspirational intention at high versus low levels. Dotted lines represent 95% confidence interval.

Results showed that the serial mediation between self-esteem and leadership aspirational behaviours via promotion focus and aspirational intentions was significant when career encouragement was high ($\beta = .034$, bias-corrected 95% CI [.012, .077], excluding zero) but not when low ($\beta = .011$, bias-corrected 95% CI [–.001, .036], including zero). The

difference between the indirect effects via promotion focus ($\beta = .023$, bias-corrected 95% CI [.006, .060], excluding zero) was significant, supporting Hypothesis 8.

In addition, the serial mediation via prevention focus was significant when career encouragement was high ($\beta = .013$, bias-corrected 95% CI [.002, .035], excluding zero), but not when low ($\beta = -.009$, bias-corrected 95% CI [–.036, .003], including zero). Though the direct path from prevention focus to leadership aspirational intentions was non-significant, the moderated mediation results showed that career encouragement served as a boundary condition: when career encouragement was high, the negative effect of prevention focus became statistically meaningful and negatively predicted leadership aspirational intentions. The difference between the indirect effects via prevention focus ($\beta = .022$, bias-corrected 95% CI [.005, .056], excluding zero) was significant. Thus, Hypotheses 9 was supported.

4   Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to examine regulatory focus as a critical, proximal antecedent to leadership aspiration and career encouragement as an important boundary condition that influences such effect. Grounded in identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009), this study emphasises that individuals are motivated to act in ways that are congruent with their self-concept. Consistent with this framework, the findings demonstrate that, while highly esteemed employees express strong leadership aspirations via a promotion focus, the self-prevention path is indeed important to understand employees with lower self-esteem. The findings revealed that career encouragement moderates both pathways. While career encouragement positively enhances the positive effect of promotion-focused on leadership aspirations, it paradoxically exacerbates the negative effect on leadership aspirations in the prevention-focused pathway. By elaborating on this dual-path model, this work highlights several theoretical implications below.

4.1   Theoretical implications

First, this research introduces regulatory focus as a proximal mechanism linking self-esteem to leadership aspirations. In doing so, it contributes the motivation to lead literature (Badura et al., 2020; Chan and Drasgow, 2001) by moving beyond the traditional emphasis on distal, trait-like antecedents such as personality, cognitive ability, and gender. Regulatory focus is a strategic mechanism that entails employees' evaluations of themselves when embedded in a leadership developmental environment. By positioning regulatory focus as a more direct antecedent to employees' desire to lead and, importantly, by highlighting the motivational choices that determine how much effort employees are willing to exert for the leadership roles, this study adds a critical layer of understanding to the concept of leadership aspiration. Specifically, regulatory focus reflects the motivational antecedent to leadership aspirations that could later influence individuals' accountability and authenticity in taking leadership roles (Kim et al., 2023). This nuanced perspective acknowledges that leadership aspirations are not solely rooted in static individual differences but are also shaped by employees' strategic responses to personal and environmental factors.

Secondly, by setting regulatory focus as proximal mechanism, this study simultaneously examines promotion and prevention focuses and their distinct effects on leadership aspirations. The findings confirmed the positive relationship between self-esteem and leadership aspiration via the promotion focus pathway. Additionally, this study addresses the prevention focus pathway, which presents a parallel pathway of strategic choice that individuals with low levels of self-esteem will follow. Unlike promotion focus, prevention focus reflects a more protective orientation (Higgins, 1997) that employees aim to protect their self-image when their regulatory needs or personal motivations conflict with the organisation's 'ideal' leadership development trajectory. A prevention-focus pathway underscores the importance of considering diverse regulatory motivations, particularly in contexts where employees' needs may not align with existing organisational schemas for leadership development.

Finally, while career encouragement is generally seen as a developmental factor (Hoobler et al., 2011), this research provides a more nuanced understanding of career encouragement in the leadership aspirational context. The findings provide empirical evidence that while career encouragement from supervisors and peers can positively enhance leadership aspirations for promotion-focused individuals, it may worsen the negative impact of prevention focus. Prevention-focused individuals may perceive leadership roles as incompatible with their current responsibilities, leading to heightened stress and reduced aspirations (Ashforth, 2000). These insights echo prior research advocating for a more inclusive perspective on career success, such as the concept of 'boundaryless careers' (Arthur et al., 2005), which emphasises flexibility, diverse career paths, and the alignment of roles with individual strengths and interests rather than solely climbing the corporate ladder (Eby et al., 2003). The present work suggests that not all employees view upward mobility as a suitable career path, nor does career encouragement always elicit positive reactions.

4.2 Practical implications

This study has practical implications for human resource (HR) practitioners, managers, and organisations. For HR practitioners and organisations, the findings underscore the importance of incorporating regulatory focus into leadership development frameworks. HR practitioners should consider assessing employees' self-regulatory orientations when designing succession planning, leadership pipeline, or talent development programs. High self-esteem employees who are promotion-focused can benefit from growth-oriented interventions such as stretch assignments, leadership training, and mentorship programs that emphasise achievement and advancement. In contrast, prevention-focused or low self-esteem employees may require structured support systems providing psychological safety, role clarity, and progressive exposure to leadership responsibilities. Tailoring interventions in this way promotes inclusive development and mitigates one-size-fits-all approaches in leadership training.

Second, HR practitioners should review recruitment and employer branding materials to ensure that leadership imagery reflects diverse pathways to assuming leadership roles. Research shows that leadership stereotypical images (i.e., ambition, risk-taking, self-confidence) are still prevalent in organisations and recruitment materials can reinforce such stereotypical beliefs about leadership jobs (Dutz et al., 2022). This may partially explain why prevention-focused individuals are hesitant to pursue leadership

roles, as they perceive a misfit between their self-regulatory styles and the stereotyped leadership attributes described or implied in these materials. Given that career imagery has become increasingly diverse in format and requirements (Kossek and Buzzanell, 2018), HR professionals should aim to reflect this diversity in job descriptions, advertisements, and related materials. These efforts can help reduce self-selection barriers and encourage broader engagement in leadership pipelines.

At the managerial level, managers/supervisors play a vital role in translating the leadership developmental policy into practice. Given the immediate and significant impact of supervisor on employees (Tepper, 2007), managers should actively learn differences in employees' motivational orientations and tailor their developmental feedback accordingly. For example, promotion-focused employees may respond better to aspirational goal framing ('taking this chance can accelerate your career advancement'), whereas prevention-focused employees may benefit from reassurance that emphasises the accumulation of career advancement through consistent, structured performance within their current roles (Kehoe et al., 2022). By providing support that meets employees' regulatory focus, managers could enhance their leadership readiness and commitment, ensuring that leadership aspirations translate into effective leadership behaviours.

5   Limitation and future directions

As with any research, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Despite using a two-wave field design to introduce temporal separation, common method variance remains a potential concern because all focal variables were self-reported (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, common method bias should barely affect the moderating effect of career encouragement found in the study because, as noted by simulation and empirical findings that method bias cannot inflate interaction effects (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Siemsen et al., 2010). Moreover, common bias is less problematic for perceptual antecedents and mediators that are appropriately assessed via self-reports (Markoczy, 1997). Nonetheless, future research should employ multisource designs, especially for criterion variables, by incorporating supervisor-rated leadership promotability, peer feedback, and archival performance records to triangulate the present findings. Meanwhile, longitudinal designs that capture the trajectory of leadership aspirations can be a promising direction to further understand how leadership motivations unfold across contexts and time.

The second concern pertains to the relationship between prevention focus and leadership aspirational intentions. In this study, the direct path from prevention focus to leadership aspirational intentions was not statistically significant. This finding, though unexpected from the hypothesis, may still hold valid by regulatory focus theories. Specifically, prevention focused individuals regulate their motivations toward security and approach career opportunities with caution (Higgins, 1997). When leadership opportunities arise – roles typically framed around advancement, change, and risk – these employees may not actively oppose but appraise as irrelevant for their identity-consistent goals. That is, their low self-esteem and prevention focus can inhibit motivational activation for pursuing leadership, yield a weak (null) association. Related work on 'individual contributors' offers a complementary account: prevention focused employees can accumulate career advantages through reliable, structured performance within their current lane, and probably become 'stars' without needing formal leadership titles (Kehoe

et al., 2022). In that context, leadership opportunities may feel irrelevant to how they advance.

This situation, however, may change when career encouragement from supervisors or peers signals an expectation to pursue such roles, it disrupts this 'balanced', or structured, career path expectations: career encouragement reinforces the relevance of pursuing leadership roles in the organisation and potential costs of inaction. In that case, career encouragement becomes a critical boundary condition that activate prevention focused employees to engage defensively (i.e., to avoid disappointing valued others or missing an expected path), which is why the relationship becomes significant when moderated by career encouragement.

Future research should seek to verify these findings and identify other boundary factors that influence the effect of regulatory focus on leadership aspirations. The motivation-to-lead literature suggests a wide range of contextual factors, such as task characteristics (e.g., difficulty, autonomy), perceived supervisor-subordinate fit, and organisational training and development, that can influence leadership aspirations (Dutz et al., 2022; Hoobler et al., 2011). Given this study's focus on identity-based motivational pathways, career encouragement (as appraised by the focal employee) is the most relevant factor examined here. Nevertheless, future work should explore additional factors to better understand the interactive effects between individual and contextual influence in shaping leadership aspirations.

Lastly, the findings of current study may be limited given that the sample was recruited in the USA using an online recruitment platform. However, it is important to note that this sample represents working adults in the USA, and includes respondents from multiple industries, which provides occupational heterogeneity and some external validity for the findings. At the sample, leadership aspirations may be shaped by cultural norms and leadership ideals, which are known to vary across societies (e.g., Den Hartog, 2024; the GLOBE program; House et al., 2004). Accordingly, future research should seek to replicate the current findings using organisational samples or cross-cultural samples to further validate the generalisability of the proposed mechanisms.

6 Conclusions

In light of the findings, this study concludes that regulatory focus, as a more proximal antecedent, mediates the effect of self-esteem on employees' leadership aspirations. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to adopt a promotion focus, which fosters authentic intentions to lead and behaviours that demonstrate their willingness to pursue upward mobility. Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem are inclined to adopt a prevention focus, which is associated with lower levels of leadership aspirations. By highlighting the interplay between regulatory focus and career encouragement in shaping leadership aspirations, this work offers valuable insights into the importance of considering individual motivational orientations and regulatory fit when understanding and supporting employees' leadership development.

Declarations

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT, were used to assist with language editing, grammar refinement, and clarity improvements in the preparation of this manuscript. No AI technologies were used to generate substantive content, design the study, analyse data, or draw conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the work presented.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

All procedures in studies involving human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution's Human Resource Ethics (IRB Study Number: 2024-018).

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Notes

1 B – unstandardised indirect effect; β – standardised indirect effect.

2 $\Delta R^2 = R^2$ (moderated mediation) $- R^2$ (baseline) $= .403 - .327 = .076$. Cohen's $f_2 = \Delta R^2/(1 - R^2$ (moderated mediation)) $= .076/(1 - .403) = .13$. By conventional benchmarks (f^2: .02 small, .15 medium, .35 large; Cohen, 1988), this approaches a medium effect. Notably, for interaction effects in field studies, even much smaller f^2 values are considered meaningful (Aguinis et al., 2005). Thus, an f^2 of .13 indicates a substantively large improvement in explained variance for a moderation pattern in field data.