

Job Autonomy and Employee Strengths Use: The Roles of Work Engagement and Job Insecurity*

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Employee strengths use has been found to be beneficial to employee and the employer organization. Yet, we have little knowledge on the antecedents to employee strengths use. Especially, there is a dearth of research investigating work characteristics and employee strengths use relationship. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, this study sought to investigate the relationship of job autonomy as a type of work characteristic with employee strengths use and the mediational effect of work engagement as well as the moderating effect of job insecurity on the relationship. A three-wave research design, spaced by a four-week interval, was utilized to collect data. A convenience sample of 218 employees working in diverse Chinese companies was applied to test our hypotheses. Results showed that job autonomy is positively related to employee strengths use, work engagement acts as a mediator in the link between job autonomy and employee strengths use. In addition, job insecurity was found to lessen the direct relationship of job autonomy with work engagement and the indirect relationship of job autonomy with employee strengths use via work engagement. This study advances the theory and research on employee strengths use.

Keywords: job autonomy, job insecurity, work engagement, strengths

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Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the North China Electric Power University and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Availability Statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available from Weilin Su (suweilin@cnu.edu.cn), upon reasonable request.

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Highlights:

- First study about the relationship between job autonomy, job insecurity, employee work engagement and strengths use in Chinese employees.
- Job autonomy is positively correlated with employee work engagement and strengths use, especially for people with low job insecurity.
- Work engagement mediates the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use.

Alongside the emergence of positive psychology, employee strengths use involving “the initiative that employees may take to use their strengths at work” (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a, p. 962) has triggered numerous researchers’ interest in recent two decades (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018). A large number of studies has shown that strengths use can bring about a wide variety of outcomes such as enhanced thriving at work (Ding & Chu, 2020), career satisfaction (Matsuo, 2020), and personal growth (Liu et al., 2022). Given that, many efforts have begun to be put into investigating how to stimulate employees to use their strengths at work. For instance, core self-evaluation (Ding & Lin, 2020), perceived shared vision (Matsuo, 2022), and humble leadership (Ding et al., 2020) have been demonstrated to positively relate to employee strengths use. Nevertheless, we are still far from a good understanding of the driving forces of employee strengths use.

Prior research has highlighted the importance of job autonomy, one of job characteristics dimensions, for shaping behaviors of employees such as voice behavior (Kao et al., 2021) and knowledge hiding behavior (Peng et al., 2021). However, we have little knowledge about whether job autonomy contributes to employee strengths use. Conservation of resources (COR) theory suggests that extant resources can lead to an increase in other resources (Hobfoll, 2002). Given that both job autonomy and employee strengths use can be considered resources available to employees (Bakker et al., 2005; Kwok & Fang, 2020), it is feasible to believe that job autonomy is positively related to employee strengths use. In addition, research has indicated that providing employees with the opportunity to autonomously decide how to do their tasks is a pre-requisite of employee strengths use (Kong & Ho, 2016; Van Woerkom et al., 2016b). Unfortunately, no prior empirical research has confirmed the positive relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to address this issue.

Work engagement as an important work attitude (Tsaor et al., 2019) has been demonstrated to mediate the effects of job autonomy (e.g., De Spiegelaere et al., 2014), primarily because job autonomy provides instrumental means of engaging at work for employees (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), such increased work engagement in turn leads to diverse positive outcomes (e.g., Wood et

al., 2020). Given that a considerable body of research has shown the positive association of work engagement with employee strengths use (e.g., Els et al., 2016), along with the theoretical position that employees who possess more resources are more likely to engage more at work that in turn, leads employees to derive other resources (Mansour & Tremblay, 2018), it is reasonable to anticipate that job autonomy is associated with employee strengths use through the mediational mechanism of work engagement. As such, the second aim of this study is to examine such a mediational effect.

In addition, previous research has demonstrated that the effects of job autonomy are contingent on contextual factors (e.g., Park & Searcy, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). Job insecurity as a contextual factor (De Jonge et al., 2014) might act as a moderator in the relationships between job autonomy, work engagement, and employee strengths use. According to COR theory, individuals who are confronted with losses of resource might reduce the investment of existing resources to impede the further resource losses (Halbesleben, 2006; Hobfoll, 1989) in that individuals need to use existing resources to deal with stress induced by resource losses (Schmitt et al., 2016). Since job insecurity enables employees to feel resource losses (Lehr et al., 2010), employees with higher job insecurity are more likely to leverage their extant resources such as job autonomy to cope with such stress, rather than to enhance work engagement and in turn, strengths use. Thus, the third aim of this study is to test whether job insecurity moderates the relationships between job autonomy, work engagement, and employee strengths use.

In sum up, this study seeks to examine a moderated mediation model regarding job autonomy, job insecurity, work engagement, and employee strengths use by a three-wave research design with a sample of Chinese employees working in various companies in China, which adds to existing literature on antecedents to employee strengths use in three ways. First, while previous research has well-documented the antecedents to employee strengths use (e.g., Ding & Lin, 2020; Ding et al., 2020), our study is the first to empirically test the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use. Thus, this study provides a new insight into the driving force of employee strengths use. Second, research has found the mediating effect of work engagement on the relationships of job autonomy with employees' outcomes such as innovative behavior (e.g., De Spiegelaere et al., 2014). Yet, this study extends previous literature by testing the mediational effect of work engagement on the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use, and contributes to a better understanding of the potential mechanism through which job autonomy correlates with employee strengths use. Third, investigating the moderating effect of job insecurity on the effects of job autonomy can help us understand the boundary condition of these relationships between job autonomy, work engagement, and employee strengths use, and to discover ways to facilitate employee strengths use more.

Theoretical Basis and Hypotheses Development

Employee Strengths Use

Strengths use has been the core construct of strengths-based approaches (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018). Strengths-based approaches stress that each individual has unique strengths and the greatest opportunity of individual growth lies in the area of strengths (Proyer et al., 2013). Strengths can be defined as “the characteristics of a person that allow them to perform well or at their personal best” (Wood et al., 2011, p. 15). A considerable amount of research has shown that when individuals capitalize on their strengths at work or life, they more readily achieve success (e.g., Jach et al., 2018; Linley et al., 2010). Given that employee strengths use has important value for employees’ growth and development because of its influence on employee creativity and well-being (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2017; Miglianico et al., 2020), it is quite important for researchers to identify the driving forces of employee strengths use.

Job Autonomy and Employee Strengths Use

Job autonomy, which can be conceptualized as an important job resource (Kim & Stoner, 2008), involves the extent to which “the job provides the employee with substantial freedom, independence, and discretion in scheduling the work and in determining the procedure to be used in carrying it out” (Vera et al., p. 1144). Employees who experience higher job autonomy are more likely to reap various benefits such as improved job performance (Morgeson et al., 2005), well-being (Stiglbauer & Kovacs, 2018), and innovative behavior (Orth & Volmer, 2017). In contrast, employees lower in job autonomy are more prone to experience higher levels of burnout (Shirom et al., 2006) and to show higher turnover intention (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2013) and counterproductive work behavior (Brender-Ilan & Sheaffer, 2019).

COR theory as a well-established motivational theory has been broadly applied to elaborate on individuals’ behavior (Hobfoll et al., 2018). According to COR theory, individuals have a tendency to retain, protect, and acquire resources and to avoid losses of resource (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Furthermore, COR theory suggests existing resources can help individuals obtain more additional resources (Whitman et al., 2014). In this sense, employees high in job autonomy tend to achieve more resources such as strengths use (Stander & Mostert, 2013). Job autonomy has been shown to be positively related to proactive behavior (e.g., Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Grant & Ashford, 2008), mainly because job autonomy can offer a crucial opportunity to acquire new capacities and skills for employees, such opportunity is conducive to an improvement in self-efficacy that, in turn, motivates employees to exhibit more proactive behaviors (Parker et al., 2006). Given that strengths use is a specific form of proactive behaviors (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a), it is reasonable to assume that job autonomy can stimulate employees to capitalize on their strengths at work. Kong and Ho (2016) pointed out that when employees

perceive greater job autonomy, they will exhibit higher levels of strengths use. Thus, based on the above reasoning and empirical findings, we formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Job autonomy has a positive association with employee strengths use.

The Mediating Effect of Work Engagement

Work engagement has been defined as “an active, positive state of vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Bakker, 2014, p. 227). Vigor means that, when working, employees have higher levels of mental resilience and energy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Dedication involves the extent to which employees consider their work as a significant, enthusiastic, challenging, and meaningful pursuit (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). “Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in work, such that time passes quickly” (Bakker, 2011a, p. 265). Work engagement as an important job attitude or intrinsic motivation (Christian et al., 2011) is a persistent state of mind rather than momentary (Salanova et al., 2005). A large amount of research has found that leadership styles such as authentic leadership (Zaabi et al., 2016) and dispositional characteristics such as proactive personality (Bakker et al., 2012) are beneficial to work engagement.

More importantly, relationships of job characteristics with work engagement have been well-documented in previous literature (Saks, 2006). Especially, job autonomy has been found to be positively related to work engagement (e.g., De Spiegelaere et al., 2014; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014) in that jobs with higher levels of job autonomy offer employees more room and better incentive to make themselves engaged at work (Kahn, 1992). In addition, job autonomy contributes to employees’ achievement of work goals (Nahrgang et al., 2011) and enables employees to respond to changing work environments (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which might drive employees to carry out their tasks with vigor, dedication, and absorption (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014; Mauno et al., 2007).

In addition to research on the driving forces of work engagement, numerous studies have investigated the potential consequences of work engagement (Christian et al., 2011) such as enhanced job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010) and stronger job satisfaction (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). It is important to note that work engagement has predictive value for proactive behavior (e.g., Hakanen et al., 2008; Schmitt et al., 2016) because it is essential for employees who attempt to take proactive behaviors to be enthusiastic about their work and to be dedicated to it (Sonnentag, 2003). In a similar vein, work engagement might be positively related to employee strengths use as a specific form of proactive behavior (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a). More importantly, work engagement is characterized by intrinsic motivation (Demerouti et al., 2015). Further, engaged employees enjoy their work (Kong & Ho, 2016), such enjoyment provides

emotional resources for employees working on strengths (Ding & Lin, 2020). Recent empirical studies have provided support for the positive association of work engagement with strengths use (e.g., Els et al., 2016; Van Woerkom et al., 2016b). As such, it is feasible to anticipate that work engagement has a positive relationship with strengths use.

COR theory suggests that employees with more resources are more apt to engage more at work so as to derive additional resources (Mansour & Tremblay, 2018). Specifically, work engagement plays an important mediating role in gain spirals of resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Park et al., 2014). Accordingly, job autonomy might predict an increase in work engagement that in turn, leads to enhanced employee strengths use. Concretely, job autonomy as an important job resource (De Lange et al., 2008) provides employees with greater room to make themselves engage at work (Kahn, 1992), which facilitates work engagement (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014). Such increased work engagement will further predict changes in employee strengths use. Hence, building on the above-mentioned theoretical arguments and empirical findings, the following hypothesis was obtained:

Hypothesis 2: Work engagement acts as a mediator in the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use.

The Moderating Role of Job Insecurity

Job insecurity refers to employee's "powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation" (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984, p. 438). That is, once employee perceives that work environments/conditions pose a threat to continuity of his/her work, job insecurity occurs (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002; Wang et al., 2014). Job insecurity is ubiquitous in today's rapidly changing business environments (Wang et al., 2014). With respect to job status, it was found that contract employees experience higher levels of job insecurity compared with permanent employees (Feather & Rauter, 2004). It is worth noting that when employee perceives job insecurity, this does not signify that he/she lost his/her job (Wang et al., 2014). However, job insecurity has the same detrimental effects as an actual job loss (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995). For example, previous studies suggested that employees who had a high level of job insecurity reported more somatic complaints, had the tendency to seek a new job (Ashford et al., 1989), and experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Piccoli & De Witte, 2015).

COR theory suggested that individuals have the propensity to prevent the loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989), and when individuals are confronted with resource losses, individuals tend to reduce the investment of remaining resources to impede the further resource losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014). This proposition was supported by previous empirical studies. For example, Schmitt et al. (2016) found that employees who suffer from higher levels of job strain are less likely to play to extant resources such as transformational

leadership to boost work engagement. With respect to job insecurity, it has been demonstrated to be closely related to resource losses (De Cuyper et al., 2012). Given employees' tendency to protect existing resources and avoid the loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Halbesleben et al., 2014), employees who experience higher job insecurity might benefit less from job autonomy in terms of work engagement in that job insecurity stimulates employees to reduce the investment of resources such as job autonomy (Bakker et al., 2005) to avoid the further loss of resources, which in turn, leads to job autonomy playing a lesser role in motivating employees to engage in work. In addition, employees high in job insecurity are more inclined to deploy extant resources such as job autonomy to cope with stress triggered by resource losses (Parker, Johnson, Collins, & Nguyen, 2013) rather than to enhance work engagement. Such a negative moderating effect of job insecurity on the effectiveness of job resources has been well-documented in previous empirical research (e.g., Cuyper et al., 2014; Kausto et al., 2005). Taken together, based on the above theoretical arguments, together with previous empirical results, the following hypothesis was proposed:

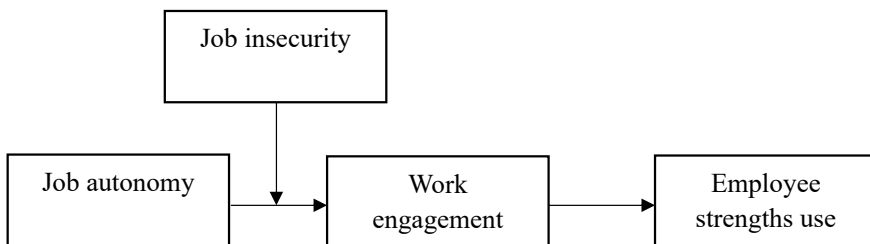
Hypothesis 3: Job insecurity can attenuate the relationship of job autonomy with work engagement, such that the relationship of job autonomy with work engagement is stronger when job insecurity is low but not when job insecurity is high.

The above hypotheses represent an integrative framework in which work engagement mediates the association of job autonomy with employee strengths use and the positive association of job autonomy with work engagement is contingent on job insecurity. Accordingly, we postulated:

Hypothesis 4: Job insecurity moderates the indirect association of job autonomy with employee strengths use via work engagement, such that the indirect association is stronger when job insecurity is low but not when job insecurity is high.

The proposed conceptual model was depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The proposed conceptual model



Method

Sample and Procedure

This study, as a part of a larger project, recruited 520 employees working in a wide variety of Chinese companies (e.g., manufacturing, energy industry and financial industry) by convenient sampling method. The research team of the third author contacted their graduated students with full-time jobs and asked these students to invite their colleagues to participate in our survey. Data were collected at three points in time with a time lag of four weeks between each phase. After receiving informed consent from employees and their companies, we carried out the process of data collection and promised that all information filled in questionnaires would be regarded as strictly confidential. In addition, each participant was assigned a fixed questionnaire code used for data matching.

At Time 1, a total of 399 participants completed a questionnaire comprising demographic variables and job autonomy scale, the response rate was 76.73%. After four weeks, we conducted the second survey. Participants were instructed to complete the measures of job insecurity and work engagement. 370 participants responded to this survey (92.73% response rate relative to Time 1). At Time 3, participants were asked to complete the employee strengths use scale. 252 questionnaires were received, indicating 68.11% response rate relative to Time 2.

Ultimately, 218 valid paired data were obtained. Among them, 53.70% were male, 46.30% were female. For education, 39.90% had master's degree, 60.10% had bachelor's degree and below. With respect to organizational tenure, 20.60% had been employed by the current company for less than 3 years, 17.00% had been employed by the current company for 4–7 years, 62.40% had been employed by the current company for more than 8 years. Besides, the average age of participants was 34.51 years ($SD = 7.45$).

Measures

All research variables of the current study were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise noted. Given that the original scales used in this study were English-based versions, they were translated into Chinese following suggestions of Brislin (1970).

Job Autonomy

Job autonomy was assessed using three items from the Job Diagnostic Survey of Hackman and Oldham (1975). An example item was “The job gives me considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do the work”. Cronbach's α for this scale was .82. These three items explained 73.96% of variance in job autonomy. The composite reliability (CR) score was .89, and average variance extracted (AVE) score was .74.

Job Insecurity

Job insecurity was assessed using a 5-item scale developed by Wang et al. (2014). An example item was “I am worried about the possibility of being fired”. Cronbach's α for this scale was .79. These five items explained 54.99% of variance in job insecurity. The CR score was .86, and AVE score was .55.

Work Engagement

Work engagement was assessed using the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006). An example item was “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”. Cronbach's α for this scale was .93. These nine items explained 64.74% of variance in work engagement. The CR score was .94, and AVE score was .65.

Employee Strengths Use

Employee strengths use was assessed using five items from Strengths Use and Deficit Correction (SUDCO) questionnaire developed by Van Woerkom et al. (2016a). An example item was “In my job, I try to apply my talents as much as possible”. Cronbach’s α for this scale was .94. These five items explained 80.82% of variance in employee strengths use. The CR score was .95, and AVE score was .81.

Control Variables

Since gender and organizational tenure have been regarded as control variables in previous studies investigating the antecedents to employee strengths use (e.g., Ding & Lin, 2020; Kong & Ho, 2016), they are also considered as control variables in the current study. Gender was coded as follows: 1 = male, 2 = female. Organizational tenure was coded as follows: 1 = one year or below, 2 = 2–3 years, 3 = 4–5 years, 4 = 6–7 years, 5 = 8–10 years, 6 = 11–20 years, 7 = more than 20 years. In addition, core self-evaluation has been found to be effective in boosting employee strengths use (Ding & Lin, 2020). Thus, in this study, core self-evaluation is also controlled to prevent its influence on our results. We measured core self-evaluation with a 12-item scale developed by Judge et al. (2003). A sample item was “When I try, I generally succeed”. Cronbach’s α for this scale was .81. At Time 1, participants completed the measure of core self-evaluation.

Data Analysis

To test our research hypotheses, we first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the construct validity of research variables and common method variance (CMV) of research data with AMOS 23.0 software. Second, we computed means standard deviations, and correlations of research variables with SPSS software. Third, we adopted structural equation modeling (SEM) to test Hypothesis 1. Fourth, we used a moderated-mediation path analysis to test Hypotheses 2–4.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We carried out CFA to inspect the construct validity of key variables of this study. Four-factor measurement model was treated as the baseline model. As presented in Table 1, four-factor model exhibited the best fit to the data compared with other four alternative measurement models.

Table 1
Results of CFAs: comparison of measurement models

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI	$\Delta\chi^2(\text{df})$
Four-factor model (baseline)	451.19	203	2.22	.08	.92	.91	.92	-
Three-factor model ^a	690.31	206	3.35	.10	.85	.83	.85	239.12*** (3)
Three-factor model ^b	1276.72	206	6.20	.16	.66	.62	.66	825.53*** (3)
Two-factor model ^c	1487.65	208	7.15	.17	.59	.55	.59	1036.46*** (5)
One factor model ^d	1772.11	209	8.48	.19	.50	.45	.50	1320.92*** (6)

Note. ^a Job autonomy and work engagement combined into one factor; ^b work engagement and employee strengths use combined into one factor; ^c Job autonomy, work engagement and employee strengths use combined into one factor; ^d all combined into one factor; *** $p < .001$.

Common Method Variance

Since this study collected data from one single source, it is essential to test the degree of CMV. To this end, we adopted “a single unmeasured latent factor” method proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2003). We created a latent common method factor and loaded all of items of focal constructs on the method factor. Analytical results demonstrated that the five-factor measurement model comprising four focal constructs and the common factor ($\chi^2 = 444.85$, $df = 202$, $\chi^2/df = 2.20$, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, IFI = .92) exerted a better fit to the data than the four-factor model comprising four focal constructs. However, the common method factor only explained 4.93% of variance less than 25% suggested by Williams et al. (1989). As such, CMV of this study did not pose a serious threat to our results.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 reported means and standard deviations of all research variables and correlations between them. As presented in Table 2, job autonomy was positively related to employee strengths use ($r = .33$, $p < .01$) and work engagement ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), job insecurity is negatively related to work engagement ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$), and work engagement is positively related to employee strengths use ($r = .40$, $p < .01$). These results offer initial support for our predictions.

Table 2
Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	1.46	.50	-					
2. Tenure	4.63	1.87	-.08	-				
3. Core self-evaluation	3.39	.51	-.09	.05	-			
4. Job autonomy	3.69	.68	-.11	-.01	.25**	-		
5. Job insecurity	2.85	.77	.04	.10	-.10	-.11	-	
6. Work engagement	3.77	.62	-.13*	-.12	.07	.33**	-.25**	
7. Strengths use	4.08	.59	-.21**	.01	.30**	.41**	-.11	.40**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Hypotheses Testing

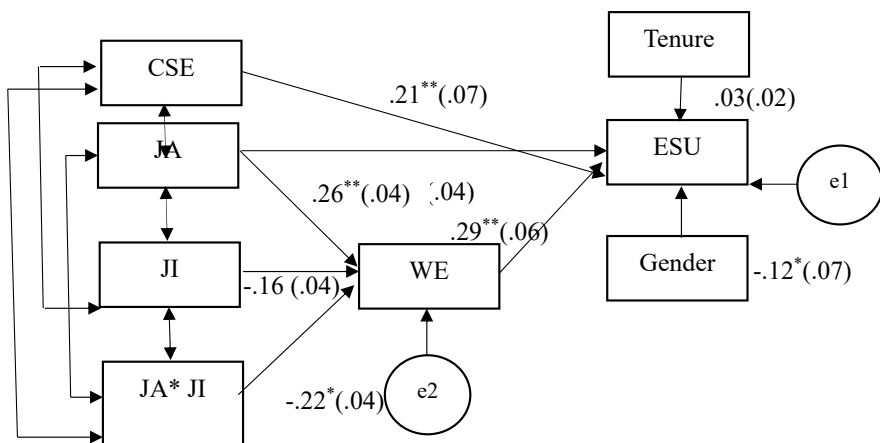
Hypothesis 1 predicted that job autonomy has a positive relationship with employee strengths use. SEM without mediator and moderator was performed to test this hypothesis. To control for inflated measurement errors resulted from multiple items for the latent variable (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Wisenbaker, 2006; Shi et al., 2015), three randomized item parcels were created for core self-evaluation. After controlling for gender, organizational tenure and core self-evaluation, this SEM exerted an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 112.70$, $df = 62$, $\chi^2/df = 1.82$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, IFI = .97), and interpreted 24.40% of employee strengths use variance. There was a positive relationship

between job autonomy and employee strengths use ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), which was supportive of Hypothesis 1.

Subsequently, we performed a moderated-mediation path analysis based on Hayes' Process Model 7 in AMOS 23.0 to test Hypothesis 2, 3 and 4. Additionally, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) with 2000 bootstrap samples was utilized to determine the significance of path coefficients and indirect effect. The standardized paths coefficients were displayed in Figure 2. The hypothesized path model showed an excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 14.92, df = 14, \chi^2/df = 1.07, RMSEA = .02, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, IFI = .995$), interpreting 19.40% of work engagement variance and 28.90% of employee strengths use variance. Hypothesis 2 assumed that work engagement acts as a mediator in the link between job autonomy and employee strengths use. The standardized indirect effect was significant (indirect effect = .08, CI 95% [.03, .14]), supporting for Hypothesis 2. Further, the direct relationship of job autonomy with employee strength use was also significant ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) after introducing work engagement as a mediator. Therefore, work engagement partially mediated the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use. Moreover, we also conducted Sobel test, showing that this indirect effect was significant (effect = .08, SE = .02, $Z = 3.29, p < .01$). In total, Hypothesis 2 received support.

Figure 2

Results of the moderated mediation path model analysis



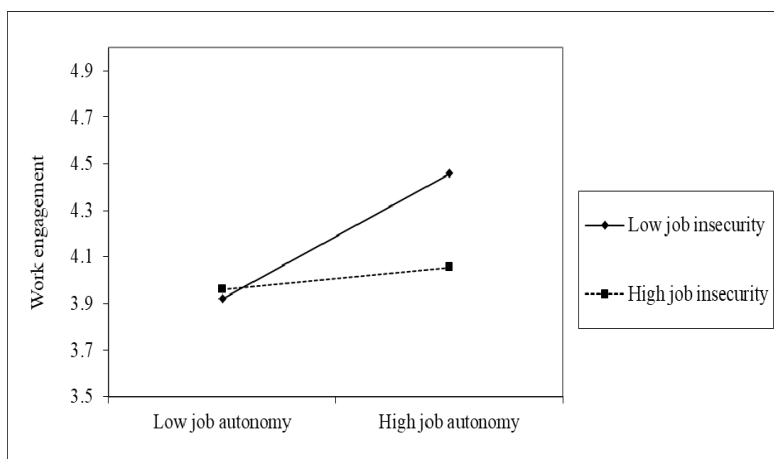
Note. CSE = core self-evaluation, JA = job autonomy, JI = job insecurity, ESU = employee strengths use; Standardized coefficients were presented; JA and JI were centered values; JA * JI was the interaction term between JA and JI; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; The standard error is in parentheses.

Hypothesis 3 postulated that job insecurity serves as a moderator in the association of job autonomy with work engagement. In line with our hypothesis, the interaction term between job autonomy and job insecurity was significant

($\beta = -.22$, CI 95% $[-.37, -.05]$, $p < .05$). To deliberately elaborate on the significant interaction effect, the statistically significant moderation of job insecurity was plotted for graphical depiction. As shown in Figure. 3, the relationship of job autonomy with work engagement was significant (Estimate = .28, $p < .01$, CI 95% $[.18, .37]$) when job insecurity was low. However, when job insecurity was high, the relationship of job autonomy with work engagement was not significant (Estimate = .05, $p > .05$, CI 95% $[-.08, .19]$). Hence, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Figure 3

Interaction plot of job autonomy and job insecurity on work engagement



Hypothesis 4 postulated that job insecurity can lessen the indirect relationship of job autonomy with employee strengths use through work engagement. The moderated mediation effect was $-.03$, $p < .01$, CI 95% $[-.06, -.01]$. Specifically, the mediating effect of work engagement on the job autonomy and employee strengths use relation was significant (Estimate = .08, $p < .001$, CI 95% $[.04, .13]$) when job insecurity was low. However, when job insecurity was high, the mediational effect was not significant (Estimate = .01, $p > .05$, CI 95% $[-.02, .06]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 received support.

Discussion

This study of 218 employees from diverse Chinese companies investigated the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use and the mediating role of work engagement as well as the moderating role of job insecurity in this relationship. Consistent with our hypotheses, all predictions of the current study received support in anticipated directions. First, this study found that job autonomy has a positive relationship with employee strengths use. This finding dovetails with previous empirical work suggesting that supervisory

autonomy support has a positive association with employee strengths use (Kong & Ho, 2016). The job autonomy and employee strengths use relation can be explained by COR theory suggesting that individuals with more resources are more likely to obtain additional resources (Whitman et al., 2014). Specifically, job autonomy resource (De Lange et al., 2008; Kim & Stoner, 2008) can lead to increased strengths use resource (Stander & Mostert, 2013). Although researchers have made many attempts to identify the antecedents to employee strengths use (e.g., Ding & Lin, 2020; Matsuo, 2022), this study is the first to investigate the relationship of job autonomy with employee strengths use, and provides a new insight into the antecedent to employee strengths use.

Second, this study revealed that work engagement acts as a mediator in the association of job autonomy with employee strengths use, which is similar to previous finding indicating that work engagement mediates the relationship between job autonomy and innovative work behavior (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014). As COR theory suggested, employees with more resources are more likely to obtain additional resources by engaging more energies and efforts in work (Halbesleben et al., 2014). In terms of job autonomy resource, it can provide employees with greater incentive to enable them to engage more at work (Kong & Ho, 2016), which in turn, elevates employee strengths use. Although previous research considered the mediating role of work engagement in the effects of job autonomy (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014), we have yet to discover why job autonomy relates to employee strengths use. Taken together, this study contributes to a better understanding of the mechanism underlying the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use by revealing the mediational effect of work engagement.

Third, this study demonstrated that the direct relationship of job autonomy with work engagement and the indirect relationship of job autonomy with employee strengths via work engagement are stronger when job insecurity is low but not when job insecurity is high. These findings are in line with prior research revealing that job insecurity lessens the positive effect of procedural justice on employee well-being (Kausto et al., 2005), which can be explained by COR theory indicating that when employees suffer from the feelings of loss of resources, they will have less likelihood of investing remaining resources in current work to impede further loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). More specifically, when job insecurity characterized by loss of resources (Schmitt et al., 2016) is high, employees are more inclined to conserve job autonomy resource, rather than use job autonomy resource to improve their own work engagement, which will further lead to a decrease in strengths use. To our knowledge, although a host of studies have explored the effects of job autonomy and its process mechanisms (e.g., Brender-Ilan & Sheaffer, 2019; De Spiegelaere et al., 2014; Stiglbauer & Kovacs, 2018) In sum, this study can help us understand the boundary condition of the relationship between job autonomy, work engagement, and employee strengths use.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are threefold. First, the positive relationship of job autonomy with employee strengths use means that organizations or leaders should create the climate of autonomy support and make employees perceive higher levels of job autonomy so as to stimulate employee strengths use. For example, empowering employees is effective in shaping autonomy climate (Breugh, 1999).

Second, the finding that work engagement plays a significantly mediating role in the relationship between job autonomy and employee strengths use signifies that improving employees' work engagement is also an important pathway of fostering employee strengths use. For example, when organizations design and implement high-performance human resource management practices, employees are more readily to be motivated to engage at work (Karatepe, 2013).

Third, this study found that the indirect relationship of job autonomy with employee strengths use via work engagement is stronger when job insecurity is low rather than when job insecurity is high, which implicitly means that when organizations or leaders attempt to facilitate employee strengths use by improving employees' perceptions of job autonomy, abating job insecurity should be appreciated. Organizations or leaders can lower employees' perceptions of job insecurity by decreasing the requirement for organizational citizenship behaviors of employees (Feather & Rauter, 2004).

Limitation and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, research data of this study were gathered from one single source, which might result in higher levels of CMV. Although we inspected the CMV of this study by an unmeasured latent common factor method and result indicated that there was no serious CMV, future research should try to collect data from multi-source to replicate our findings. Second, hypotheses of this study were examined only with a sample of Chinese employees. Since cultural difference between China and Western countries might affect employees' perceptions of work contexts (Fardale & Sanders, 2017), it is essential for researchers to extend cross-cultural applicability of our findings in Western contexts in future research. Third, this study only focused our attention on the general level of strengths use, not on deployment of specific strengths. Future research should make an effort to investigate the relationship between job autonomy and deployment of specific strengths such as humor, curiosity or judgement. Fourth, cross-sectional research design impedes the causal inferences between job autonomy, work engagement, and employee strengths use. Future research should adopt experimental method to further examine the causality of these relationships between job autonomy, work engagement, and employee strengths use.

Conclusion

This study mainly investigated how, why, and when job autonomy relates to employee strengths use. We found that job autonomy is positively related to employee strengths use, and work engagement acts as a mediator between job autonomy and strengths use. In addition, job insecurity negatively moderated the relationships among job autonomy, work engagement, and strengths use. This study not only advances job autonomy and strengths use theories and research, but also provides a new avenue for stimulating employees to leverage their strengths at work.

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Autonomija na poslu i korišćenje snaga zaposlenih: Uloga uključenosti u posao i nesigurnosti posla

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Pokazalo se da je korišćenje snaga zaposlenih korisno i za zaposlene i za organizaciju u kojoj zaposleni radi. Međutim, malo je znanja o antecedentima korišćenja snaga zaposlenih. Naime, postoji jako mali broj radova koji ispituje vezu između karakteristika posla i korišćenja snaga zaposlenih. Oslanjajući se na teoriju očuvanja resursa, ova studija je nastojala da istraži odnos autonomije na poslu kao vrste radnih karakteristika sa upotrebom snaga zaposlenih, kao i medijatorski efekat uključenosti u posao (eng. work engagement), te moderatorski efekat nesigurnosti posla na odnose ovih varijabli. Za prikupljanje podataka korišćen je trokatalni istraživački plan, pri čemu je razmak između talasa prikupljanja podataka bio četiri nedelje. Hipoteze su testirane na prigodnom uzorku od 218 zaposlenih u različitim kineskim kompanijama. Rezultati su pokazali da je autonomija na poslu pozitivno povezana sa korišćenjem snaga zaposlenih, a da uključenost u posao (eng. work engagement) deluje kao medijator veze između autonomije posla i korišćenja snaga zaposlenih. Pored toga, utvrđeno je da nesigurnost na poslu umanjuje direktnu vezu autonomije posla sa uključenosti u posao, kao i indirektnu vezu autonomije posla sa upotrebom snaga zaposlenih kroz uključenost u posao. Ovo istraživanje unapređuje teoriju i istraživanja o korišćenju snaga zaposlenih.

Ključne reči: autonomija na poslu, nesigurnost posla, uključenost u posao, snage

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