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TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP, INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR AND EMPLOYEES' INTENTION TO STAY IN START UPS: JOB CRAFTING, JOB EMBEDDEDNESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AS MODERATORS

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the dynamics of transformational leadership (TL) and intention to stay (ITS) in startup companies. A conceptual model is developed to explore the moderating role of job embeddedness and job crafting in influencing the TL and ITS mediated by innovative work behavior. Further, this study examines the role of psychological empowerment in motivating employees to stay with startup companies, especially in the context of a developing country, India. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 578 respondents working in startup companies in southern India. After checking the psychometric properties of the survey instrument by conducting structural equation modeling [using LISREL software], hypothesized relationships were tested by employing PROCESS macros. The findings support a positive association of TL with employees' ITS. Results reveal that IWB mediates between TL and ITS. Further, three-way interaction between TL, job embeddedness, and job crafting in strengthening the relationship between TL and IWB has been supported in this study. Finally, psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between IWB and ITS. The results from this study underscore the importance of providing climate-enhancing job embeddedness and allowing employees to engage in job crafting to cultivate IWB. Moreover, psychological empowerment can strengthen the relationship between IWB and employees' ITS in nuanced startup organizations. This research explores the interplay of TL, IWB, and ITS with startup organizations. Further, the moderating role of job embeddedness, job crafting, and psychological empowerment in enhancing IWB and ITS within the startup organizations. The conceptual model and three-way interaction between TL, job embeddedness, and job crafting in influencing IWB, and the two-way interaction between IWB and psychological empowerment in enhancing ITS, is a pivotal contribution to the burgeoning literature on startup organizations.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Innovative Work Behavior, Intention To Stay, Startups, Psychological Empowerment, Job Crafting, Job Embeddedness, India.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of the seminal paper by Bass (1985) on transformational leadership (TL), research on TL has progressed in gigantic proportions, highlighting several positive outcomes such as productivity, performance, and satisfaction (Banks et al., 2016; D'Souza et al., 2023; Han et al., 2020; Jnaneswar & Ranjit, 2020; Nawaz et al., 2024; Victor et al., 2024). As a construct, TL consists of four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders, by exhibiting these four dimensions, play a vital role in enhancing individual and organizational performance.. For example, TL resulted in increased performance and

satisfaction of employees in the healthcare sector in Thailand (Haq et al., 2022), state-owned enterprises in Ghana (Donkor et al., 2021), the banking sector in Bangladesh (Haque et al., 2025), the banking sector in Pakistan (Malokani et al., 2023), and educational institutions in Ghana (Opolot et al., 2025), and healthcare sector in Turkey (Yucel, 2021), higher educational institutions in India (D'Souza et al., 2023).

This research attempts investigate the influence of TL on employees intention to stay (ITS), particularly in startup companies. As employees in start-up companies have tendency to leave, as the success of start-ups is unknown and high failure rate of start-ups prompt the employees to seek shelter elsewhere. Thus, considering heavy turnover rates in startups, it is important to see how leaders will motivate the employees to stay with the organizations. Thinking along the same lines, to counter the problem of attrition rate, several scholars suggested TL, which inspires employees to stay with the organization and remain committed (Jiang et al., 2017; Middleton et al., 2015). The intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration play a vital role in ensuring that employees engage in their assigned tasks and contribute to the success (Ali et al., 2023; Ali & Ullah, 2023; Buil et al., 2019; Kwarteng et al., 2024; Park & Pierce, 2020; Thomas & Aurora, 2024). Since startups have innovation at the core of their culture, leaders need to create an environment that promotes free exchanges of ideas and embraces new processes and procedures, in addition to flexible work hours. Several studies reported that such innovative work behavior (IWB) stems from TL (Bauwens et al., 2024; Choi et al., 2016). Further, employees also perceive opportunities for professional development when leaders give due recognition to their work and reward accordingly.

RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The rationale for this study is to explore the role of TL on ITS in startup companies in India. Recent reports indicate that while the number of starts up in India increased from 300 in 2016 to 5200 in 2024, providing employment for over 53,000, the turnover of employees on an average 17 to 20 percent (Basu, 2025).It is worth investigating to see how transformational leaders motivate the employees to stay with start-ups. Literature review reveals that little is known about the impact of TL on employees' (ITS), especially in the context of startup companies in developing countries such as India. This study mainly focused on startup companies from Kerala which received 'startup India award in 2022' as the best performer in developing a robust Startup ecosystem by Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT, 2022).

The success of startups not only depends on the leadership style, but also on how employees perceive their role in meeting challenging goals (Baldegger & Gast, 2016). However, many startups are encountering issues such as excessive planning without execution, having an unsuitable cofounder or no cofounder at all, a lack of strategic direction and vision, and the absence of a mentor (Millán et al., 2026; Ziemiański., 2026). According to a latest report, though India has an increasing number of startups every year, only twenty percent survive beyond five years, and only eight percent survive beyond ten years (Counsel India, 2024). Though some of the reasons for failure include lack of market demand, poor planning and execution, and competition, one of the primary reasons is inadequate mentoring and management of human resources. According to the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) survey in 2024, startups are facing a high attrition rate of employees. According to Indian Startup Layoff Tracker, the attrition rate in startups ranges from 50 to 80 percent compared to the attrition rate of about 20 percent in the incumbent organizations (Choudhary, 2025). The intention to leave, or turnover, refers to the conscious

and deliberate decision to leave an organization. Some plausible reasons for employees leaving startups are better packages and work culture elsewhere, in addition to poor leadership. From an HR perspective, startups face challenges such as difficulty in retaining talent, failing to attract top talent, compensation issues, a lack of shared vision, and making incorrect hiring decisions (Goswami et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant research documented positive association of TL with employee intention to stay (Liu et al., 2025) and negative association with employee turnover intentions (Gyensare et al. 2016;Yucel, 2021). Liu et al (2025) found in their survey of 537 teachers in China, TL has resulted in intention to stay. Similarly, a survey of 478 Turkish healthcare employees revealed that transformational leadership was significantly and negatively related to turnover intentions.

Another conducted on 106 sports development and peace employees revealed that TL is negatively affected turnover intention (Kang et al., 2025). In a recently conducted review of 39 studies, Yusoff and Jinken (2026) found that TL is associated with lower turnover rates of employees. Further, Kanchana and Jayathilaka (2023) in their study found that IWB is negatively associated with employee turnover intentions among professionals in SriLankan startups.

Though several studies highlighted the importance of TL in enhancing retention (e.g., Park & Pierce, 2020) and reducing turnover intention (e.g., Herman et al., 2013), there is a significant gap in research that explores the mechanism by which TL increases retention or employees' intent to stay. We argue in this study that IWB, job embeddedness, job crafting, and psychological empowerment help explain the TL-ITS relationship. While TL, job embeddedness, IWB, and psychological empowerment have been studied in isolation, little is known about the dynamic interaction of these variables in influencing employees' intent to stay with startups. This study aims to bridge the gap and find answers to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How does TL result in employees' ITS in startups?

RQ2: How does IWB mediate the relationship between TL and employees' ITS in startups?

RQ3: How do job embeddedness (first moderator) and job crafting (second moderator) Increase the strength of the positive effect of TL and IWB?

RQ4: How psychological empowerment moderates between IWB and employees' ITS in startups?

This research makes four significant contributions to the advancement of transformational leadership for startups. First, this study corroborated that TL is a precursor to employees' intent to stay. Secondly, this research highlights the importance of IWB in the TL-ITS relationship.

Further, this study underscores the significance of job embeddedness and job crafting in enhancing IWB among employees in startups. Third, the role of psychological empowerment in strengthening the positive impact of IWB on employees' intent to stay is highlighted in this study. Fourth, the conceptual model developed and tested in this research makes a pivotal contribution to existing literature on TL, in addition to providing guidelines for practicing managers at startups.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPEMNT

Theoretical underpinnings for this study stem from social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) and Job-Demands and Resources (JDR) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The basic tenet of SET is that organizations work on the reciprocal relationships between employers and employees. The exchange between employers and employees largely depends on the exchange of both rewards and costs; employees perform well when they expect to receive benefits for the effort they make (Wayne et al., 1997). While extrinsic benefits may be seen in terms of rewards for performance, intrinsic benefits stem from job satisfaction, SET is relevant to this study as transformational leaders create a supportive climate and promote IWB, which in turn leads to long-term social exchange relationships. Several scholars have applied SET theory in explaining the employee-employer relationships (Herman et al, 2013; Opolot et al., 2025). Concurring with other researchers, we argue that transformational leaders create a conducive environment so that employees exhibit their ITS and maintain long-term social relationships.

JDR is another theory on which this study is based. In startup companies, employees face several job demands and require resources to meet these demands. The basic tenet of JD-R is that individuals need to balance the resources with demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al.,2023). Resources consist of support from supervisors and colleagues, autonomy in performing jobs, and feedback from supervisors. Job demands consist of the mental, physical, and emotional energies required to perform jobs. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), high job demands require employees to look for additional resources. Several scholars have applied JDR in explaining employee behavior in stressful situations (Jayaraman et al., 2025). In this study, employees in startups face challenging demands in terms of heavy workloads, time pressures to complete given tasks, and engaging in innovation to meet competition. Transformational leaders provide these additional resources by motivating them to engage in job crafting and create a climate that promotes job embeddedness. Transformationa leaders provide resources (e.g. clarity, supportive climate) and shape demands (personalized consideration, time allocation, rewards). Employees are more likely to stay with startups once they feel that TL helps them to balance the resources with demands (Kang et al., 2022). Further, psychological empowerment acts as an additional resource to employees as they feel that they are given freedom to voice their opinion and participate in decision-making and implementation of new methods and processes for completing tasks.

In summary, the relationships between the study variables – IWB, job embeddedness, job crafting, and psychological empowerment - in explaining the TL and employees' ITS are driven by SET and JDR theories.

Hypotheses development

TL and employees' ITS in startups

Transformational leaders show individualized consideration to employees so that they are motivated to stay with the organization (Yucel, 2021). Through intellectual simulation and inspirational motivation, transformational leaders create a working environment whereby employees feel comfortable facing challenging situations in startups and contribute to the achievement of organizational goals (Diko & Saxena, 2023; Park & Pierce, 2020; Saeed & Jun, 2022). Further, some studies found that transformational leaders create mutual trust and cooperation among employees and demotivate them to seek alternative employment elsewhere (Malokani et al., 2023). On the contrary, some researchers contend that TL does not positively affect ITS (Rabiul et al., 2025). In sum, a majority of studies found a positive relationship between TL and ITS and a negative relationship with turnover intentions. On the contrary, one

recent study did not show any relationship between TL and ITS (Rabiul et al., 2025), which may be an exception. In the context of startup companies in India, studies are sparse regarding the relationship between TL and ITS. However, based on available empirical evidence and logic, we offer the following exploratory hypothesis.

H1: TL is positively related to the ITS of employees in startups.

IWB as mediator

In addition to the direct effect of TL on employees' ITS, it is also possible that the indirect effect may also be through IWB. Innovative work behaviour is the capability to improve new ideas related to jobs within organizations (Jain & Sharma, 2025). In recent research on 270 nurses from seven public sector hospitals in Iraq, researchers found a positive relationship between TL and IWB (Alwali, 2024). A survey based on 221 employees working in the IT sector in India, Jain and Sharma (2025) documented that IWB mediated the relationship between empowering leadership and digital transformation. A recently conducted systematic literature review revealed a strong positive relationship between TL and IWB in the healthcare sector in Saudi Arabia (Alshahrani, 2024). Some scholars contend that TL, in addition to having a positive effect on IWB, acts as a moderator that strengthens the relationship between performance management and IWB (Bauwens et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown that TL has a positive influence on IWB (Choi et al., 2016), which in turn, reduces turnover intention and increases ITS. When employees exhibit IWB through critical and creative thinking and generate new ideas, it is more likely that they intend to stay with the startups.

this study, the benefits of TL will also be reaped through IWB. The rationale for IWB as a mediator stem from direct relationships: TL to IWB and IWB to ITS. More specifically, in startup companies, the founders exhibiting TL create opportunities for the employees to implement new ideas to increase performance, thus motivating them to stay. Based on the above arguments, we offer the following exploratory mediation hypothesis.

H2: IWB mediates the relationship between TL and employees' ITS with startups.

First stage moderation effects: Job Embeddedness and job crafting as moderators

Drawing from Force Field theory of Lewin (1951), Mitchell et al (2001) have introduced a construct called 'job embeddedness', which is related to "(1) the extent to which people have links to other people or activities, (2) the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or fit with the other aspects in their life spaces, and, (3) the ease with which links can be broken—what they would give up if they left, especially if they had to move to other cities or homes physically" (Mitchell et al., 2001; p. 1104). The basic tenet of the job embeddedness construct is that employees become attached to their jobs due to their relationships with other employees [e.g., co-workers] and their perception that they are the best fit for the job. While job embeddedness was aimed at predicting voluntary turnover and explaining the reasons why employees prefer to stay with their jobs, subsequent scholars related the construct to employee performance and job satisfaction (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Holtom et al., 2006; Jia et al., 2019). In one of the recent studies conducted among 465 IT-based employees in India, Gautam and Gautam (2024) documented that job embeddedness acted as a mediator between high-performance work practices and IWB. The adverse effect of job embeddedness on turnover intentions has been empirically demonstrated in a study conducted among 341 full-time frontline employees in the healthcare industry in Ghana (Obeng et al., 2024). The findings from a study on 236 employees in the public sector in Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2023), corroborate with existing studies that job embeddedness is negatively related to turnover intentions. Some scholars also documented the positive effect of TL on job embeddedness (Khalid et al., 2021).

Researchers also demonstrated that job embeddedness promotes innovative behavior (Coetzer et al., 2018). In this research, we explore the moderating effect of job embeddedness in influencing the relationship between TL and IWB.

Another important moderating variable we investigated in this research is job crafting, which is related to the extent to which employees engage in task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting to complete jobs comfortably (Nagarajan et al., 2022; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting was viewed as "changes that employees initiate in the level of job demands and job resources to make their job more meaningful, engaging, and satisfying" (Demerouti, 2014, p. 237). Some researchers reported positive outcomes of job crafting (e.g, performance and satisfaction) in organizations (Nagarajan et al., 2023). Afsar et al.(2019) conducted a quantitative and cross-sectional study in 325 subordinates and 126 supervisors working in the hotel industry, and the results showed that job crafting behaviours, such as increasing structural job resources, increasing social resources, and increasing job challenges, mediated the effect of TL on an employee's innovative work behaviour.

Interestingly, studies investigating the relationship between job crafting and job embeddedness are limited and scattered. A literature review reveals that in the tourism industry, a survey of 568 employees in Taiwan found that job crafting enhanced job embeddedness (Teng & Chen, 2024). In a similar vein, in the construction industry in the United Arab Emirates, researchers revealed a positive link between job crafting and job embeddedness (AlMemari et al., 2025).

In this study, we argue that job embeddedness strengthens the positive effect of TL on IWB. The logic behind our argument is that transformational leaders motivate employees to engage in innovation by creating a climate of cooperation and trust. As employees become more connected and form an inseparable community, it is more likely to enhance innovative behavior. Additionally, we contend that the strength of moderation of job embeddedness depends on the extent to which employees engage in job crafting (task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting). So, we consider job crafting as a second moderator and emphasize that the greater the level of job crafting, the greater will be the strength of the moderating effect of job embeddedness in the relationship between TL and IWB. Therefore, we explore the interaction of job embeddedness (first moderator) and job crafting (second moderator) with TL to influence IWB. Since earlier scholars have not investigated such a three-way interaction, we offer the following exploratory moderation hypothesis.

H3: Job embeddedness (first moderator) and job crafting (second moderator) influence the relationship between TL and ITS mediated through IWB.

Second stage moderation effect: psychological empowerment as a moderator

According to Spreitzer (1995), psychological empowerment is intrinsic motivation whereby employees feel competent and determined to achieve desired goals. Earlier scholars documented that psychological empowerment motivates employees to exhibit creative behavior because they feel competent to face challenging tasks (Jung et al., 2003). Further, researchers concur with the notion that psychological empowerment plays a vital role in increasing productivity, performance, and satisfaction (Dennerlein & Kirkman, 2023; Menon, 2001). A recent study reported that psychological empowerment enhances employee engagement, leading to an increase in productivity (Nawaz et al., 2024). Additionally, a survey conducted on 512 employees from small and medium-sized enterprises in Indonesia, researchers found that psychological empowerment is positively associated with IWB (Marampa et al., 2025). Further, recent studies reported a negative relationship between psychological empowerment and intention to leave (Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025).

While researchers reported positive effects of psychological empowerment, relatively few studies delve into the moderating role of psychological empowerment in strengthening the relationship between IWB and employees' ITS, especially in startup companies. We argue that IWB, coupled with empowerment in terms of flexibility, voice in decision-making, and autonomy, will likely motivate employees to stay with startups (Jung et al., 2003; Stanescu et al., 2019). When employees feel psychologically empowered, they experience a sense of ownership and control over their work tasks and outcomes; they also perceive their work as meaningful and valuable, feel competent in their abilities, and believe they can make a significant impact within the organization (Menon, 2001). A greater level of psychological empowerment results in a stronger positive relationship between IWB and ITS compared to a lower level of psychological empowerment. Thus, based on the above arguments, we offer the following exploratory hypothesis.

H4: Psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between IWB and ITS such that at higher (lower) levels of psychological empowerment, the relationship between IWB and ITS becomes stronger (weaker).

The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

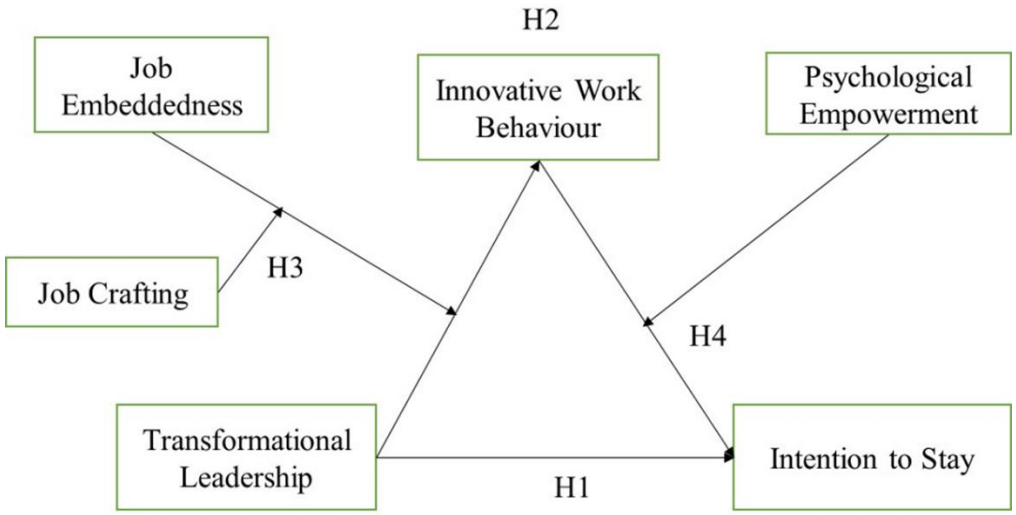

Figure 1: Conceptual model

METHODOLOGY

Ethics statement

Before starting the survey, the authors informed the participants about the study's aims and objectives and explained that the survey is purely for academic purposes. The authors also informed the respondents about their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. The authors also confirm that this study adheres to the relevant ethical guidelines for human subjects. The authors also assured that the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained throughout the study.

Sample

This study includes startup employees from three regions of Kerala State of India (Kozhikode, Kochi, and Thiruvananthapuram) since these places (districts) are recognized as a startup hub

where most of the startups are situated in Kerala, India. In fact, Kerala State won 'States Startup Ranking Award in 2022' for the 'best performer in developing a robust Startup ecosystem (DPPIT, 2022). We included the inclusion criteria that only employees working in startups registered in the Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM) portal were allowed to participate. The age of the startup is considered to be a maximum of 10 years. We distributed 800 surveys through Google Form and received 578 responses (72.25% response rate). This approach is followed by several scholars, particularly during and post-pandemic periods (Chidambaram et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022). The data were collected from September 2024 to April 2025. The founders were initially connected by phone, then an official email was sent to them to obtain permission to collect the data from their employees. The questionnaire was prepared in Google Forms, shared by either HR heads or the founder himself in the WhatsApp group of the employees in startups. Most of the startups allowed the researcher to observe the employees filling out the Google form. It helps the researcher to clarify the doubts that some of the employees raised. Some Google Forms are directly sent to employees. In small startups with fewer than 20 employees, they allowed thirty minutes together to interact with the employees and fill out the form. In the case of prominent startups, such as those with a range of employees from 50 to 300, the HR head or the founder allowed the researcher to meet with the employees' departments, by department, to complete the Google form. The size of the group in that case was 20 to 30. We checked non-response bias by comparing the first fifty respondents with the last fifty respondents. We found no significant differences between these two groups of data on the study variables (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

Demographic profile

The respondents consisted of 261(45.2 %) men, and 317(54.8%) women. Other demographic details are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Demographics	Number	Per cent
Gender	Male	261	45.2
	Female	317	54.8
Age	20-25 years	295	51.0
	26-30 years	168	29.1
	31-35 years	115	19.9
Marital status	Married	215	37.2
	Unmarried	363	62.8
Education	Undergraduate bachelor's degree	360	62.3
	Masters' Degree	218	37.7
Type of work role	Non-technical	315	54.5
	Technical	263	45.5
Type of startup	EdTech	254	43.9
	Robotics	77	13.3
	IT	228	39.4
	Fintech	9	1.6
	Services	10	1.7
Location of startup	Kochi	199	34.4
	Kozhikode	336	58.1
	Thiruvananthapuram	43	7.4
Context of startup (Area)	Urban	255	44.1
	Rural	323	55.9
Experience in the present startup	Below one year	85	14.7
	1-3 years	318	55.0
	4-6 years	106	18.3

	Above 6 years	69	11.9
Total experience in startups	Below one year	71	12.3
	1-3 years	288	49.8
	4-6 years	130	22.5
	Above 6 years	89	15.4

Measures

The survey items were measured on Likert-type five-point scale (1=’strongly disagree’; ‘5’= strongly agree). The measures for this study were adapted from well-established sources. Transactional leadership was measured with seven items (α = 0.83) adapted from Carless et al (2000), IWB was measured with nine items (α = 0.86) adapted from de Jong and den Hartog, 2010), Job embeddedness was measured with seven items (α = 0.88) adapted from Crossely et al (2007). Job crafting consisting of three dimensions Task crafting (TC), Relational crafting (RC), and Cognitive crafting (CC), was measured with thirteen items (α = 0.81) adapted from Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2013). Psychological empowerment was measured with eleven items (α = 0.89) adapted from Spreitzer (1995), and intention to stay was measured with five items (α = 0.84) adapted from Bluedorn (1982). All the constructs, indicators, and the sources of measures were mentioned in Table 2.

RESULTS

Checking the measurement model and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Following the suggestions from Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we first checked measurement model by conducting CFA before testing the structural model. [See Table 2]

The factor loadings of all constructs were well above the acceptable levels of 0.70 [ranging between 0.70 and 0.89) except with one indicator the loading of which was 0.69. We retained this indicator which loaded little less than 0.70 because in social science research factor loadings of over 0.60 are acceptable (Radomir et al., 2023). The goodness-of-fit statistics reveal good fit of the data to the six factor model data is good fit ($\chi2$=4297.23; df = 1310; $\chi2$/df = 3.27; RMSEA = 0.072; RMR = 0.051; Standardized RMR = 0.059; CFI = 0.92; NNFI = 0.90; GFI = 0.89). Most importantly, RMSEA (<0.08) and CFI (> 0.90) vouch for validity of the model to the data. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s alpha) for all the constructs were well above 0.70 (ranging between 0.81 and 0.89), and the composite reliabilities were also above 0.70, and the average variance extracted estimates (AVE) were greater than 0.50. These reliability coefficients together with CFA results establish validity and reliability of the constructs used in this research (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019). Comparison of various models is presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Measurement Properties

Variable	Alpha	Composite Reliability	Standardized Loadings (λ_{yi})	Reliability (λ^2_{yi})	Variance (Var(ε_i))	Average Variance - Extracted $\Sigma(\lambda^2_{yi})/[(\lambda^2_{yi}) + (Var(\varepsilon_i))]$
Transformational leadership (Carless et al, 2000)	0.83	0.95				0.72
My leader communicates a clear and positive vision of the future			0.81	0.66	0.34	
My leader treats staff as individuals,			0.86	0.74	0.26	

supports and encourages their development						
My leader gives encouragement and recognition to staff			0.86	0.75	0.25	
My leader fosters trust, involvement and cooperation among team members			0.89	0.79	0.21	
My leader encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions			0.81	0.65	0.35	
My leader is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches			0.82	0.67	0.33	
My leader instils pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent			0.88	0.78	0.22	
Innovative work behavior (de Jong & den Hartog, 2010)	0.86	0.93				0.58
In my workplace, I often pay attention to issues that are no part of my daily work			0.71	0.50	0.50	
In my work place I often wonder how things can be improved			0.79	0.62	0.38	
In my work I often search out new working methods, techniques or instruments			0.73	0.54	0.46	
In my work I often generate original solutions for problems			0.76	0.58	0.42	
In my work I often find new approaches to execute tasks			0.79	0.62	0.38	
In my work place I often attempt to convince people to support an innovative idea			0.73	0.54	0.46	
In my work place I often contribute to the implementation of new ideas			0.79	0.62	0.38	
In my work place I often put effort into the development of new things			0.78	0.61	0.39	
In my work I often systematically introduce innovative ideas into work practices			0.77	0.60	0.40	
Job embeddedness (Crossely *et al*, 2007)	0.88	0.93				0.64
I feel attached to this organization.			0.83	0.68	0.32	
It would be difficult for me to leave this organization.			0.88	0.78	0.22	
I'm too caught up in this organization to leave.			0.77	0.59	0.41	
I feel tied to this organization.			0.74	0.55	0.45	
I simply could not leave the organization that I work for.			0.82	0.67	0.33	
It would be easy for me to leave this organization. (R)			0.72	0.52	0.48	
I am tightly connected to this organization.			0.83	0.69	0.31	
Job crafting [Task crafting (TC); Relational crafting (RC), and Cognitive crafting (CC) (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013)]	0.81	0.95				0.57
At my work, developing my capabilities is more important (TC)			0.72	0.52	0.48	
Develop my professional skill is essential (TC)			0.74	0.55	0.45	
Additional tasks should be chosen at my work (TC)			0.75	0.56	0.44	

At my work, I introduce new work tasks that better suit my skills or interests (TC)			0.77	0.59	0.41	
I always ask whether my superior is satisfied with my work (RC)			0.81	0.66	0.34	
I look to my superior for inspiration (RC)			0.84	0.71	0.29	
Sometimes I ask others for feedback on my job (RC)			0.70	0.49	0.51	
I always ask my superior to coach me (RC)			0.77	0.59	0.41	
Sometimes I remind myself about the significance my work has for the success of the organization (CC)			0.79	0.62	0.38	
At my work I have to think about the ways which positively impact my life (CC)			0.69	0.48	0.52	
At my work I try to ensure that the work is emotionally less intense (CC)			0.74	0.55	0.45	
If there are new developments, I am one of the first to learn about them and try them out (CC)			0.71	0.50	0.50	
Regularly I take on extra tasks even though I do not receive an extra salary for them (CC)			0.78	0.61	0.39	
Psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995)	0.89	0.92				0.53
The work I do is very important to me			0.70	0.48	0.52	
My job activities are personally meaningful to me			0.72	0.52	0.48	
The work I do is meaningful to me			0.72	0.52	0.48	
I am confident about my ability to do my job			0.71	0.50	0.50	
I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities			0.70	0.49	0.51	
I have mastered the skills necessary for my job			0.72	0.52	0.48	
I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job			0.74	0.54	0.46	
I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work			0.70	0.49	0.51	
I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job			0.78	0.61	0.39	
My impact on what happens in my department is large			0.77	0.59	0.41	
I have significant influence over what happens in my department			0.73	0.53	0.47	
Intention to stay (Bluedorn, 1982)	0.84	0.88				0.60
I often think of quitting my present job. (R)			0.82	0.68	0.32	
I may leave this organization and work for another in the next year. (R)			0.84	0.71	0.29	
I plan to stay in this organization to develop my career for a long time.			0.71	0.51	0.49	
I may not have a good future if I stay with this organization. (R)			0.75	0.56	0.44	
I will not give up this organization easily			0.72	0.52	0.48	

(R): Reverse-coded item.

Table 3: Comparison of measurement models

Model	Factors	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	RMR	Standardized RMR	CFI	TLI=NNFI	GFI
Null		21037.61	1378								
Baseline model	Six factors: TL, IWB, JE, JC, PE, IS	4287.23	1310	3.27		0.072	0.051	0.059	0.92	0.90	0.89
Model 1	Five factor model: TL+ IWB, JE, JC, PE, IS	6514.68	1315	4.95	2227.45**	0.085	0.054	0.061	0.89	0.89	0.87
Model 2	Four factor model: TL+ IWB+ JE, JC, PE, IS	7517.52	1319	5.70	3230.29**	0.121	0.068	0.121	0.88	0.85	0.81
Model 3	Three factor model: TL+ IWB+ JE+JC, PE, IS	8219.27	1322	6.22	3932.04**	0.128	0.102	0.109	0.69	0.61	0.51
Model 4	Two factor model: TL+ IWB+ JE+JC+ PE, IS	9786.92	1324	7.39	5499.69**	0.131	0.153	0.165	0.56	0.47	0.49
Model 5	One factor model: TL+ IWB+ JE+JC+ PE+IS	10419.67	1325	7.86	6132.44**	0.168	0.177	0.171	0.45	0.41	0.47

Descriptive Statistics, multicollinearity and discriminant validity

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviations	1	2	3	4	5	6
1) Transformational leadership	4.14	0.80	**0.84**					
2) Innovative work behavior	3.92	0.64	0.41**	**0.76**				
3) Job crafting	3.97	0.60	0.47**	0.68**	**0.75**			
4) Psychological empowerment	4.20	0.58	0.33**	0.56**	0.63**	**0.73**		
5) Job embeddedness	3.46	0.86	0.45**	0.36**	0.43**	0.36**	**0.80**	
6) Intention to stay	3.50	0.98	0.31**	0.19**	0.19**	0.17**	0.42**	**0.77**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); Numbers in diagonals are square root of AVEs

As can be seen in Table 4, correlations between the variables ranged between 0.17 (between psychological empowerment and ITS) and 0.68 (between IWB and job crafting). Since the correlations were within the threshold levels of 0.75, data is not infected by multicollinearity (Hair et al. 2019). As an additional check, we observed the variance inflation factor (VIF) and found that all the indicators have VIF values below 5.0, suggesting multicollinearity is not a problem with the data used in this study (Hair et al., 2019). Table 5 shows the VIF values of indicators of all constructs.

Table 5: VIF (outer) values

Indicator	VIF	Indicator	VIF	Indicator	VIF	Indicator	VIF
EMP1	2.843	ISTAY4	1.19	JCRAF12	1.805	JEMB5	2.765
EMP10	2.303	ISTAY5	2.14	JCRAF13	1.536	JEMB6	1.054
EMP11	2.191	IWB1	1.163	JCRAF2	3.256	JEMB7	2.697
EMP2	3.127	IWB2	1.394	JCRAF3	2.205	TL1	2.689
EMP3	3.354	IWB3	2.191	JCRAF4	2.088	TL2	3.481
EMP4	2.41	IWB4	2.22	JCRAF5	1.484	TL3	3.539
EMP5	2.328	IWB5	2.468	JCRAF6	1.845	TL4	3.904
EMP6	1.777	IWB6	1.995	JCRAF7	2.377	TL5	2.689
EMP7	2.524	IWB7	2.454	JCRAF8	1.895	TL6	2.934

EMP8	2.535	IWB8	2.471	JCRAF9	2.208	TL7	3.838
EMP9	2.004	IWB9	2.361	JEMB1	2.787		
ISTAY1	2.22	JCRAF1	2.898	JEMB2	3.588		
ISTAY2	2.323	JCRAF10	1.598	JEMB3	2.496		
ISTAY3	1.784	JCRAF11	1.995	JEMB4	1.921		

Abbreviations: EMP = Psychological empowerment; ISTAY = Intention to stay; IWB = Innovative work behavior; JCRAF = Job crafting; JEMB = Job embeddedness; TL = Transformational Leadership

While internal consistency and convergent validity were established by reliability coefficients and AVEs, discriminant validity is checked by comparing correlations between the variables with square root of AVEs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We found that square root of AVEs for all the variables exceeded the correlations between the variables.

Common method bias (CMB)

We tested CMB in three ways. First, we conducted Harman's single-factor test an found that a single factor accounted for less than 50% of variance in dependent variable. Second, due to limitations of traditional Harman's single-factor method in testing CMB (Howard et al., 2024), we employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) and conducted latent variable method. Following this method, we found that VIF values of inner model ranged between 1.135 and 2.655 (see Table 6). These results suggest that data is not infected by CMB (Kock, 2015). In addition, we compared six-factor model with five other competing models (see Table 3) and found that single-factor model resulted in poor fit of data to the model ($\chi2$=10419.67; df = 1325; $\chi2$/df = 7.86; RMSEA = 0.168; RMR = 0.177; Standardized RMR = 0.171; CFI = 0.45; NNFI = 0.41; GFI = 0.47). This method of testing CMB is consistent with other researchers (D'Souza et al., 2023; Goel et al., 2023; Jayaraman et al., 2025; Patel et al., 2023)

Table 6: VIF values (inner model)

TLEAD -> INTSTAY	1.226
TLEAD -> IWB	1.839
IWB -> INSTAY	1.742
JCRAF-> IWB	1.652
JEMB -> IWB	1.630
EMP -> INSTAY	1.865
JCRAF x JEMB -> IWB	1.847
JCRAF x TLEAD -> IWB	2.655
JEMB x TLEAD -> IWB	1.654
EMP x IWB -> IWB	1.135
JCRAF x JEMB x TLEAD -> IWB	2.540

Hypotheses Testing

Before testing the structural model, we tested if the demographic variables (age, gender, marital status, and education) have significant impact on intention to stay. We found that none of the demographic variables have any influence on intention to stay, we did not include these in main analysis.

We tested H1 and H2 by conducting PROCESS macros (model #4) (Hayes, 2018) and presented the results in Table 7.

Table 7: Testing H1 and H2 (mediation hypothesis)

Variables	DV= Intention to stay				DV = Innovative work behavior				DV = Intention to stay			
	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	Coeff	se	t	p	Coeff	se	t	p	Coeff	se	t	p
Constant	1.5051	0.2025	7.4317	0.0000	2.5620	0.1297	19.7510	0.0000	1.0349	0.2607	3.9698	0.0001
Transformational leadership **H1**	**0.4714**	**0.0480**	**9.8237**	**0.0000**	0.3276	0.0307	10.6597	0.0000	0.4113	0.0522	7.8807	0.0000
Innovative work behavior									0.1835	0.0647	2.8383	0.0047
R-square	0.143				0.155				0.165			
F	96.55***				52.87***				113.63***			
df1	1				1				2			
df2	576				576				575			
P	0.0000				.0000				.0000			
Total Effect												
			Total Effect		**se**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**			
			0.4714		0.0480	9.8237	0.0000	0.3772	0.5657			
Direct Effect												
			Direct Effect		**se**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**			
Transformational leadership → Intention to stay			0.4113		0.0522	7.8807	0.0000	0.3088	0.5138			
Bootstrapping Indirect Effect: H2												
			Indirect Effect				**BOOT se**	**BOOT LLCI**	**BOOT ULCI**			
Transformational leadership → Innovative work behavior → Intention to stay			**0.0601 (0.3276 x 0.1835 = 0.0601)**				**0.0230**	**0.0171**	**0.1080**			

Notes: N = 578. Boot LLCI refers to the lower bound bootstrapping confidence intervals. Boot ULCL refers to the upper bound bootstrapping confidence intervals.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that TL is positively associated with ITS. The regression coefficient of TL on ITS with startup is positive and significant (H1: $\beta = 0.47$, t = $p < 0.001$). The beta corrected confidence intervals based on the results of 20000 bootstrapping samples did not contain 'zero' in the lower and upper limits [Boot LLCI = 0.3772; Boot ULCI = 0.5657]. The model is significant and explain 14.3% variance in the dependent variable (ITS) because of TL ($R2 = 0.143$; $F(1,576) = 96.55$; $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H1.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that IWB mediates the relationship between TL and ITS. To test the mediation effect, it is essential to verify whether the indirect effect is significant or not (Hayes, 2018). The results reveal that total effect (0.4714) consists of direct effect (0.4113) and indirect effect (0.0601). The indirect effect is the multiplication of the regression coefficient of TL on IWB (0.3276) and regression coefficient of IWB on ITS (0.1835) [i.e. 0.3276 x 0.1835 = 0.0601]. The beta corrected confidence intervals based on 20000 bootstrapping samples did not contain 'zero' in the lower and upper limits [indirect effect = 0.0601; s.e = 0.0230; Boot LLCI = 0.0171; Boot ULCI = 0.1080], thus support the mediation hypothesis (H2).

Testing H3

Hypothesis 3 is related to double-moderation effect of job embeddedness and job crafting in the relationship between TL and ITS mediated through IWB. To test H3, we used model number 11 of PROCESS macros (Hayes, 2018) and presented the results in Table 8.

To test this moderated moderated-mediation, we entered TL as independent variable, ITS as dependent variable, IWB as a mediator, job embeddedness as a first moderator, and job crafting as a second moderator. We used 20000 bootstrapping samples to generate output.

The results reveal that the regression coefficient of multiplicative term TL, job embeddedness, and job crafting in influencing IWB is significant (H3: $\beta_{\text{TL x job embeddedness x job crafting}} = 0.06$, $p < 0.04$; $R^2 = 0.482$; $F(7,570) = 75.78$; $p < 0.0001$), and analysis based on 20000 bootstrap samples revealed Boot LLCI (0.0027) and ULCI (0.1183). Since 'zero' was not contained in the confidence intervals, H3 is supported. Conditional effects of the focal predictor (TL) at values of moderators (Job embeddedness and job crafting) were mentioned in the bottom of Table 5.

Index of moderated moderated-mediation was 0.0107 [Boot se = 0.0067; Boot LLCI = 0.0002; Boot ULCI = 0.0257] render support to H3. The three-way interaction is shown in Figure 2.

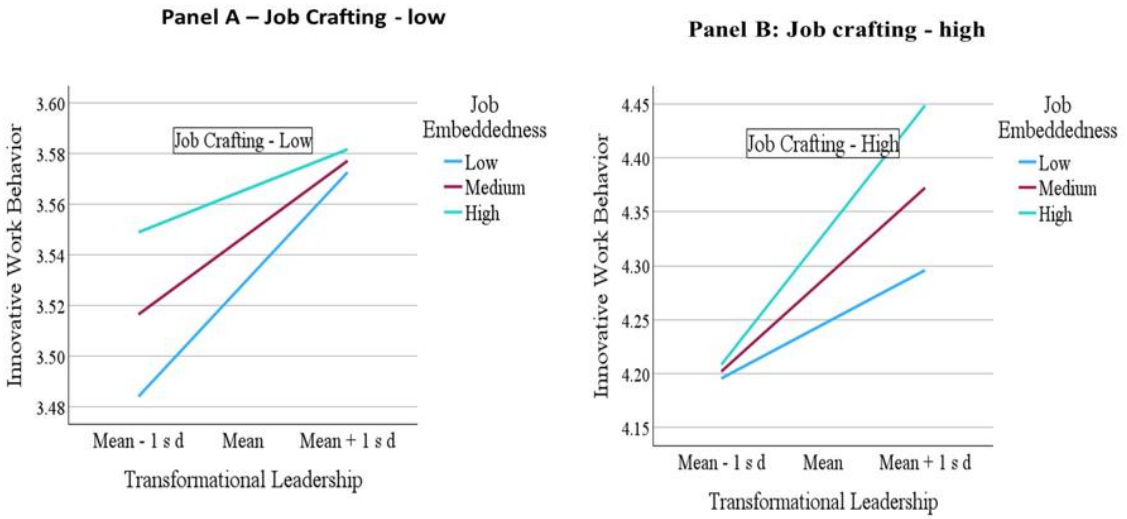

Figure 2: Panel A: Transformation leadership interacting with job embeddedness to influence innovative work behavior when job crafting is low

Panel B: Transformation leadership interacting with job embeddedness to influence innovative work behavior when job crafting is high.

Figure 2 has two panels [Panel A represents 'low' level of job crafting'; and Panel B represents 'high' level of job crafting]. As can be seen in panel A, higher level of job embeddedness interacting with TL results in higher level of IWB than at lower level of job embeddedness. When we move to higher level of TL though IWB increases when compared to low level of job embeddedness, the difference between the curves will be decreasing. However, when we consider panel B, which represents the interaction of TL and job embeddedness at higher levels of job crafting, with increase in TL, higher levels of job embeddedness results in increased IWB. If we observe the slopes of curves in panel A and panel B, the curves will be diverging in panel B whereas in panel A, the curves will be converging gradually. The differences in slopes at different levels of job embeddedness and TL render support to H3.

Testing H4

To test Hypothesis 4, we used model number 14 of PROCESS macros (Hayes, 2018) and presented the results in Table *9.*

The results show that the regression coefficient of interaction term – IWB and psychological empowerment on ITS is significant (H4: $\beta_{\text{IWB x psychological empowerment}} = 0.20$, $p < 0.04$; $R^2 = 0.278$; $F(4,573) = 27.84$; $p < 0.0001$), and analysis based on 20000 bootstrap samples revealed Boot LLCI (0.0175) and ULCI (0.3848). Since 'zero' was not contained in the confidence intervals, H4 is supported. Conditional effects of the focal predictor (ITS) at values of moderator (psychological empowerment) were mentioned in the bottom of Table 9. Index of moderated moderated-mediation was 0.0699 [Boot se = 0.0337; Boot LLCI = 0.0072; Boot ULCI = 0.1399] render support to H4. The two-way interaction is shown in Figure 3.

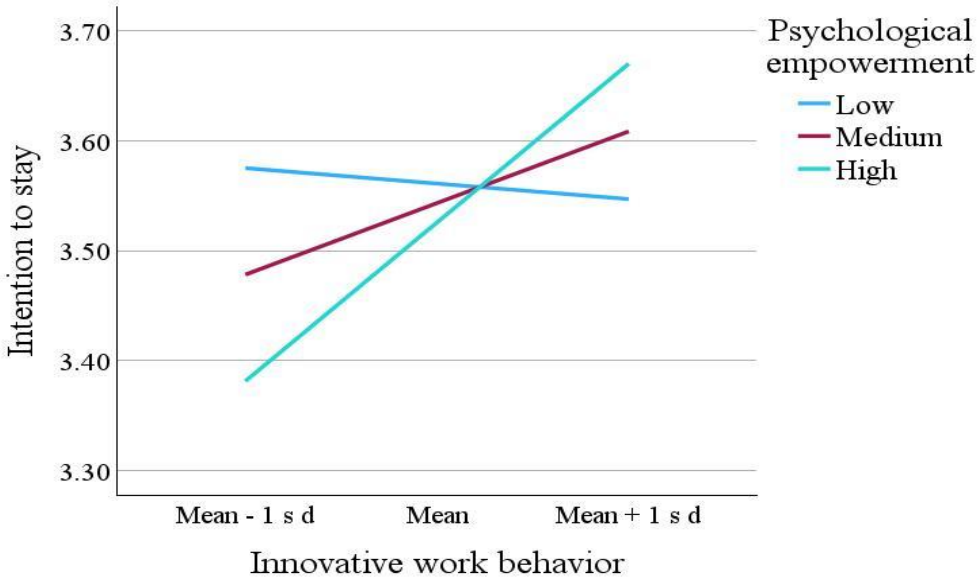

Figure 3: Innovative work behavior interacting with psychological empowerment to influence intention to stay

Table 8: Testing of Hypothesis 3 (three-way interaction) [Model # 11]

Variables	**DV = Innovative work behavior**					
	Coeff	**se**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Constant	-1.2674	1.1910	-1.0641	0.2877	-3.6066	1.0719
Transformational leadership	0.6353	0.3307	1.9208	0.0553	-0.0143	1.2848
Job embeddedness	0.9124	0.4721	1.9326	0.0538	-0.0149	1.8398
Job crafting	1.2714	0.3354	3.7906	0.0002	0.6126	1.9301
Transformational leadership x Job embeddedness	-0.2208	0.1151	-1.9176	0.0557	-0.4469	0.0054
Transformational leadership x Job crafting	-0.1586	0.0866	-1.8315	0.0675	-0.3287	0.0115
Job embeddedness x Job crafting	-0.2429	0.1263	-1.9227	0.0550	-0.4909	0.0052
Transformational leadership x Job embeddedness x Job crafting **H3**	0.0605	0.0294	2.0586	0.0400	0.0028	0.1183
R-square	0.482					
F	75.78					
p	0.0000					
df1	7					
df2	570					
Index of moderated moderated-mediation	Index	Boot s.e	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI		
	0.0107	0.0067	0.0002	0.0257		

Conditional effects of the focal predictor (Innovative work behavior) at values of moderators (Job embeddedness and job crafting)							
Job embeddedness	**Job crafting**	**Effect**	**se**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Low	Low	0.0569	0.0359	1.5849	0.1136	-0.0136	0.1275
Low	Medium	0.0563	0.0334	1.6876	0.0920	-0.0092	0.1218
Low	High	0.0557	0.0462	1.2053	0.2286	-0.0351	0.1464
Medium	Low	0.0427	0.0402	1.0622	0.2886	-0.0363	0.1217

Medium	Medium	0.0731	0.0316	2.3106	0.0212	0.0110	0.1352
Medium	High	0.1035	0.0453	2.2872	0.0226	0.0146	0.1924
High	Low	0.0285	0.0579	0.4923	0.6227	-0.0852	0.1422
High	Medium	0.0899	0.0459	1.9571	0.0508	-0.0003	0.1801
High	High	0.1513	0.0625	2.4222	0.0157	0.0286	0.2740

Table 9: Testing of Hypothesis 4 (two-way interaction) [Model # 14]

Variables	**DV = Intention to stay**					
	Coeff	**se**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Constant	1.9682	0.5768	3.4125	0.0007	0.8343	3.1021
Transformational leadership	0.3439	0.0537	6.4016	0.0000	0.2384	0.4494
Innovative work behavior	0.1669	0.0927	1.7997	0.0727	-0.0154	0.3492
Psychological empowerment	0.1702	0.0496	3.4309	0.0007	0.0727	0.2677
Innovative work behavior x psychological empowerment H4	0.2012	0.0934	2.1535	0.0319	0.0175	0.3848
R-square	0.278					
F	27.84					
df1	4					
df2	573					
p	0.0000					
Index of moderated moderated-mediation	Index	Boot se	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI		
Psychological empowerment	0.0699	0.0337	0.0072	0.1399		

Conditional effects of the focal predictor (Innovative work behavior) at values of moderator (Psychological empowerment)

Psychological empowerment	**Effect**	**se**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Low	0.2030	0.0847	2.3970	0.0173	0.0361	0.3699
Medium	0.2024	0.0875	2.3141	0.0215	0.0301	0.3747
High	0.3065	0.1013	3.0259	0.0028	0.1069	0.5060

As can be seen in Figure 3, lower levels of psychological empowerment and lower levels of IWB results in increased intention stay. However, when innovative behavior increases from 'low' to 'high', higher levels of innovative behavior results in increased ITS when compared to lower levels of psychological improvement. It is also interesting to note that when innovative work behavior increases, lower levels of psychological empowerment will result in lower intention to stay. This can be seen from downward slope of the curve representing lower psychological empowerment. On the other hand, the curves representing the interaction of IWB with medium and higher level of psychological are upward sloping (the curve is steeper for high psychological empowerment than for medium psychological empowerment). These curves showing differences in slopes render support to H4.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between TL and employees' ITS in startup companies. Riding on SET (Blau, 1964) and JDR (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) theories, a conceptual model is developed, and relationships were tested by collecting data from 578 respondents in startup companies in southern India. The PROCESS macros were employed to test the hypothesized relationships. The findings validated the conceptual model.

First, the findings from this study indicated that TL is a precursor to employees' ITS (Hypothesis 1), aligning with several studies in the literature (Diko & Saxena, 2023; Malokani et al., 2023; Park & Pierce, 2020; Rabiul et al., 2025; Saeed & Jun 2022; Yucel, 2021).

Following SET, employees reciprocate the individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation provided by leaders by remaining with their organizations. For example, Park and Pierce (2020) found in their study on child welfare works that TL reduced the intention of employees to leave. Further, in the healthcare industry in Turkey, researchers found a substantial adverse effect of TL on employee turnover intention (Yucel, 2021). In a relatively recent study conducted by Malokani et al. (2023), it was found that continuous support and a conducive environment created by transformational leaders motivated the employees to stay rather than intend to leave the organization. Corroborating with other studies conducted in various contexts, our findings highlight the relationships in the context of startup companies.

Second, this study supported a significant indirect effect of TL on ITS through IWB (Hypothesis 2). This mediating effect highlights the importance of TL in directly influencing ITS, while also indirectly increasing ITS by providing opportunities for employees to exhibit IWB.

Though previous scholars did not investigate such mediation, available empirical evidence of the positive effect of TL on IWB, which in turn results in ITS, may be used as support for this hypothesis (Alshahrani, 2024; Bauwens et al., 2024; Choi et al., 2016; Jain & Sharma, 2025). This aligns with the findings that TL positively impacts IWB (Alshahrani, 2024), which in turn results in employees' ITS (Alwali, 2024). As found in this study, IWB is also instrumental in increasing employees' ITS with startups.

Third, this research supported that job embeddedness (first moderator) and job crafting (second moderator) interact with TL to positively influence ITS mediated through IWB (Hypothesis 3). Though this type of three-way interaction was not investigated by previous scholars, existing positive relationships of job embeddedness with TL (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Holtom et al., 2006; Jia et al., 2019), and job crafting with IWB (AlMemari et al., 2025; Nagarajan et al., 2022; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) may render support to this finding. When employees have high attachment to their jobs because of their links with co-workers, it is more likely that they remain committed to the organization.

Further, job embeddedness is also more likely to increase the strength of the positive effect of TL on IWB. The first stage interaction effect, as we documented in this study, also involves job crafting as a second moderator, which further strengthens the moderating effect of employee embeddedness on IWB.

Fourth, the findings from this study supported the moderating effect of psychological empowerment in the relationship between IWB and ITS (Hypothesis 4). Though previous scholars have not investigated such moderation, this finding is consistent with the positive outcomes of psychological empowerment on productivity, performance, and employees' ITS (Jung et al., 2003; Marampa et al., 2025; Nawaz et al., 2024). For example, in a recently conducted study on 5003 respondents in academic institutions in Thailand, Chompukum and Vanichbuncha (2025) documented that psychological empowerment is negatively related to employee intention to leave.

Logically, IWB interacting with psychological empowerment motivates employees to exhibit ITS. It is also interesting to note that psychological empowerment acts as a moderator at medium and higher levels of innovative work behaviors when compared to lower levels of innovative work behavior. With increase in innovative work behaviors, psychological empowerment motivates the employees to stay with the organization especially when they have innovative work behaviors. In summary, the findings are consistent with both SET and JDR theories.

Theoretical contributions

The findings from this research make several contributions to the literature on TL and startup ventures. First, by empirically demonstrating the association between TL and employees' ITS in startup organizations, this study extends SET (Blau, 1964). Following SET, employees in startup companies tend to reciprocate by showing their ITS when leaders show personalized consideration and provide intellectual stimulation. Further, transformational leaders motivate employees to stay by creating a positive culture and giving due recognition and rewards for superior performance. Second, by encouraging IWB among the employees, transformational leaders demonstrate their commitment to staying. Most importantly, IWB as a mediator in the relationship between TL and ITS adds a new dimension to the literature on entrepreneurship and organizational behavior, particularly about startups. The third significant contribution of this study is the support for a three-way interaction between TL, job embeddedness, and job crafting in influencing IWB. Previous studies investigated the direct effect of job embeddedness on IWB (e.g. Coetzer et al., 2018), effect of job crafting on job embeddedness (e.g. Teng & Chen, 2024). To the best of our knowledge, none of the previous studies investigated the job embeddedness (as the first moderator) and job crafting (as the second moderator) interacting with TL in enhancing IWB, and hence, this study extends JDR. This study address the gap of investigating the multiplicative effect of job crafting and job embeddedness on IWB, thus represents a pivotal contribution to the advancement of literature on TL-IWB relationship.

Fourth, this study underscores the importance of psychological empowerment in strengthening the positive effect of IWB on employee ITS. Psychological empowerment instils a sense of ownership over the tasks the employees perform and develops confidence in their ability to complete tasks. As previous researchers demonstrated, psychological empowerment increases both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and enhances their willingness to stay with organizations (Kim & Beehr, 2018; Menon, 2001). This nuanced understanding of the moderating effect of psychological empowerment adds to the theoretical perspective of JDR concerning TL, IWB, and employees' ITS in startups.

Practical implications

Findings from this research have several implications for practicing managers, entrepreneurs, organizations, and policyholders. First, this study provides insights into the vital role managers play by exhibiting TL style, which is a precursor to employees' ITS. Particularly when the attrition rate in startups is very high (Basu, 2025) leaders need to motivate the employees to stay. As this study documented, TL plays a vital role in this process. Second, this study recommends that transformational leaders need to create an environment that promotes IWB. The success of startup companies largely depends on innovation (product or process). Therefore, the leaders need to promote an innovative work culture. In a recently conducted systematic literature review Alshahrani (2024) found that transformational leaders who provide suitable work environment and take responsibility of giving necessary resources to foster innovation are successful. Third, leaders need to pay attention to see whether employees work cooperatively to enhance job embeddedness. Further, by allowing the employees to engage in job crafting [task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting], leaders enable the employees to feel comfortable performing jobs successfully. Giving flexibility in work plays a vital role in this process. Fourth, the managers need to recruit employees who value empowerment, especially in startups. Managers need to understand that harnessing psychological empowerment by highlighting autonomy and participation in decision-making enables employees to demonstrate their commitment to staying.

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the importance of TL and IWB in employees' ITS in startup companies. Further, leaders creating an environment that promotes flexibility, which allows the employees to engage in job crafting, are likely to motivate employees to remain committed and show their ITS. Transformational leaders, by exhibiting individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation are more likely to encourage IWB resulting in the intent to stay. This study recommends that managers exhibit transformational style to motivate the employees to engage in teamwork and experience job embeddedness which persuade them to increase performance and satisfaction and persuade them to continue to stay with the organization. Further, it will be beneficial for the leaders to encourage a climate that fosters psychological empowerment whereby employees find work meaningful, engaging, and motivates them to remain committed and decrease their intent to leave or increase their intention to stay.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Findings from this study should be interpreted in light of some of the limitations. First, as with any cross-sectional designs, this study has inherent problems of CMB and social desirability bias. Though we employed adequate statistical tests, CMB cannot be eliminated (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Further, when respondents exhibit 'good citizen' behavior, it is more likely the social desirability bias exists.

However, following suggestions from earlier scholars, we anonymize the responses and assured the respondents about the privacy of information to reduce social desirability bias (Latkin et al., 2017). Second, this study focused on exploring the relationship between TL and ITS in startups. Third, though the sample is adequate (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), to increase generalizability sample covering startups from entire country, instead of a particular region in the country, is desirable.

Further, focusing on startups in the context of a developing country, India may limit the generalizability of results to startups in developed countries. Fourth, the conceptual model included a limited number of variables, whereas ITS depends on several other variables (e.g., trust between the members). Fifth, this study used a cross-sectional design with single-point data collection, which does not establish causal relationships.

In addition, we also acknowledge the limitations involved in data collection process. The researcher personally visited these incumbent firms, after taking prior permission from the HR managers and founders and there is a possibility that the survey completion may have some bias. However, we assured the respondents that the information will be totally confidential and even the HR managers or founders will not be provided with any information about the filled out surveys.

This study offers several avenues for future research. First, future scholars may increase sample size and employ a multi-wave data collection method to eliminate the limitations of CMB and establishing causal relationships. Second, the present study considered TL as the only predictor of employees' intent to stay, and future studies may include additional variables (e.g., psychological capital, trust, emotional intelligence) which may also influence employees' ITS with startups. Future studies may engage in multilevel models employing mixed methods, by combining qualitative and quantitative, to establish association between the variables in this study. Third, studies may test the validity of the conceptual model in developed countries.

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The authors have followed ethical guidelines

The authors did not use AI tools

The authors did not engage in digital image manipulation

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