

The Influence of Superstition on Employees' Leadership Potential: The Mediating Role of Self-esteem

Zining Luo^{1, a}

¹College of Education, Guangdong Baiyun University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510900, China

^aEmail: 17817117721@163.com

Abstract

Employee leadership potential are one of the concerns in the workplace, and studies have shown that both superstition and self-esteem have an impact on leadership potential. Therefore, this study aims to enrich the research on leadership potential by exploring the influence of superstition and self-esteem on leadership potential, and also to provide corresponding theoretical guidance for helping employees improve workplace relationships and enhance personal leadership potential. This study surveyed 218 subjects using the scale method, then analyzed demographic variables through independent sample t-tests and one-way analysis of variance, explored the relationship among superstition, self-esteem and leadership potential through correlation analysis and regression analysis, and finally used the mediating test to explain the mediating role of self-esteem between superstition and leadership potential. The findings of this study are as follows: There is a significant negative correlation between superstition and leadership ability of employees; There is a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and employee leadership potential; There is a significant negative correlation between superstition and self-esteem; Self-esteem mediates between superstition and leadership potential of employees.

Keywords

Superstition; Self-esteem; leadership potential; Mediating effect.

1. Introduction

In today's era of rapid globalization and digitalization, which is full of high uncertainty, the problems faced by organizations are becoming increasingly complex. Therefore, the psychological quality and decision-making rationality of employees have a direct and significant impact on the survival and development of organizations. Superstition, as a seemingly irrational psychological phenomenon, is very common in all kinds of organizations, both in the East and in the West. The Chinese business community has clear rules about feng shui and numerals, and Western companies often rely on lucky rituals. These superstitious practices, either openly or implicitly, permeate strategic decisions, talent selection, and even crisis management.

In organizational management, the superstition of employees is not just a personal trait; it influences organizational culture, innovation atmosphere, and organizational performance through behaviors such as employees' decision-making methods, communication styles, and team management. Although there has been much discussion in the academic circle about the direct relationship between superstition and decision-making bias and risk appetite, there is still insufficient research on the internal psychological mechanisms by which superstition affects leadership, especially the core self-awareness factors that have not been clarified. The choice of self-esteem as a mediating variable is supported by very clear, logically rigorous theoretical reasons and sufficient empirical perspectives. From a theoretical perspective, self-

esteem is an important intersection point in social cognitive theory, personality psychology, and leadership research. Fear management theory, on the other hand, provides a good illustration that superstition, as a cultural worldview defense mechanism, may maintain self-esteem by alleviating existential anxiety by offering a symbolic sense of immortality. But more importantly, superstition, if overly dependent on external mystical forces, erodes an individual's inner self-esteem based on real abilities and actual achievements, thus creating the classic paradox of illusory self-esteem and real self-esteem. Although existing studies have discussed the relationship between superstition and self-esteem, and the relationship between self-esteem and leadership, the academic community has not yet systematically and rigorously analyzed the three within the same framework, especially the relevant research from the context of China's high power distance and collectivist culture is still blank. More importantly, existing literature on the relationship between superstition and leadership often starts from the behavioral consequences, without clarifying the psychological mechanisms involved. Self-esteem is the foundation of the self-system and is likely the underlying mechanism by which superstition affects employees' self-confidence, decisiveness, stress resistance, and interpersonal charisma.

Therefore, this study, based on psychology, organizational behavior, and cultural studies, raises a clear core question: In the context of Chinese organizations, does employee superstition suppress leadership potential by eroding their self-esteem levels?

Traditional leadership studies have mostly focused on rational or semi-rational factors such as intelligence, experience, and personality traits, paying little attention to how irrational beliefs such as superstition erode leadership potential. Therefore, this study introduces self-esteem as a core self-evaluation mechanism and systematically and rigorously constructs and validates the mediating model of superstition, self-esteem and leadership ability, thereby providing a very clear psychological explanation path for how irrational beliefs affect leadership ability and enriching the cognitive foundation theory of leadership development. More importantly, it deepens and expands the application of the self-esteem theory in the organizational context. Previous research on self-esteem has mostly focused on clinical, educational, and general social psychology fields, but this study examines self-esteem in the context of the interaction between specific role positioning in the workplace and the particular cognitive factor of superstition, and responds to the long-standing call from the academic community that the mechanism of self-esteem in complex social situations needs to be specified, and provides a localized perspective for the study of organizational behavior with Chinese characteristics. Further, superstition has clear historical and cultural roots and modern manifestations in Chinese society. This study collects data and tests theoretical models in the context of Chinese organizations, which not only helps to clarify the boundary conditions of Western theories, but also makes it more likely to uncover the unique mechanisms of action based on Chinese cultural concepts such as relationship, face, and destiny, truly achieving a positive dialogue and complementarity between global psychology and management knowledge.

2. Literature Review

Superstition (superstitious beliefs/superstitious beliefs) usually refers to the psychological tendency of people to establish beliefs and ritualistic behaviors in non-causal or weakly causal situations. When individuals are faced with situations of uncertainty, stress, or lack of control, they tend to seek psychological comfort and a sense of control through irrational beliefs or behaviors such as mascots, rituals, divination, feng shui (Vyse, 2014) [1]. This study operatively defines superstitious psychology as a cognitive and emotional tendency in which an individual, in the absence of objective causal evidence to support it, tends to believe that there is a supernatural connection between certain symbols, behaviors, objects, or events, and may

adjust their behavior accordingly. It is characterized by a deviation from the framework of scientific interpretation, a preference for attribution to external uncontrollable forces, and an inadaptable response to environmental uncertainty. The Paranormal Belief Scale (PBS), developed by Tobacyk and Milford in 1983 and later revised, covers multiple dimensions such as traditional religious superstition, telepathy, precognition, witchcraft, and mystical experience, and is a common tool for measuring the degree of superstition in individuals. In the context of Chinese culture, superstition is often closely intertwined with folk beliefs such as feng shui, physiognomy, and almanac fortune-telling, as well as some folk religious practices, showing a mixture of institutional religious and non-institutional witchcraft beliefs. Superstitions are essentially a subcategory or subset of supernatural beliefs. Supernatural belief is a broader upper-level concept that refers to all tendencies to believe in the existence of phenomena or forces beyond scientific explanations (Drinkwater, Denovan, Dagnall, 2024)[2]. Superstition, on the other hand, specifically refers to the part of it that is associated with "irrational causality" - that is, the belief that certain specific behaviors, symbols, or events will influence real outcomes in mysterious ways (Wiseman, Watt, 2004)[3]. In terms of scale structure, the superstition subscale is one of the seven subscales of the RPBS, and together with the other subscales, it forms an overall measurement of supernatural beliefs (Drinkwater, Denovan, Dagnall, 2024)[2]. The study shows that there is a moderate correlation among the scores of the subscales, suggesting that they share a potential common factor - namely, a general tendency towards supernatural beliefs (Drinkwater, Denovan, Dagnall, 2024)[2]. Therefore, measuring supernatural beliefs is logically bound to involve a measurement of superstitious psychology.

Self-esteem is an individual's holistic emotional assessment of self-worth, ability, and importance, and it is a core component of personality structure. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), the most widely used self-reporting tool, measures an individual's overall level of self-esteem. People with high self-esteem typically show greater psychological resilience, positive self-concept and achievement motivation, while those with low self-esteem are more likely to fall into self-doubt, anxiety and excessive sensitivity to external evaluations. In an organizational context, managers' self-esteem levels are closely related to their confidence in decision-making, willingness to take risks, and ability to deal with criticism.

Leadership potential does not refer to the current performance of leadership, but rather to the set of potential traits, abilities, and motivations that an individual possesses to develop into an effective leader, which is future-oriented. The leadership model proposed by Silzer and Church(2009) consists of three core dimensions: the fundamental dimension covering cognitive abilities and personality, the growth dimension covering learning agility and emotional maturity, and the career dimension covering leadership motivation and values[4]. The corresponding Leadership Potential (LP) scale is often used for talent assessment and echelon building. In the context of management with Chinese characteristics, the connotation of leadership often also emphasizes the paternalistic leadership potential that is both virtuous and talented, balancing authority and kindness, as well as the ability to build harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Recent studies have found a complex relationship pattern between supernatural beliefs and self-esteem (Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, & Parker, 2017)[5]. In their sequence-mediated model, creativity and self-esteem jointly mediate the relationship between supernatural beliefs and a sense of meaning in life. Specifically, creative self-efficacy can predict higher levels of self-esteem, and higher self-esteem is associated with a stronger sense of meaning in life.

It can be seen from the existing research that there is a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and leadership ability (Wang Ting, Wang Weili, Hong Jingfang, Zhang Jing, Li Cheng, 2013)[6], and this conclusion is highly consistent with the existing literature at home and abroad. Employees with high self-esteem are emotionally more stable, make more decisive

decisions, and are more resilient in adversity. Therefore, they are more willing to put forward visions, take risks proactively, stick to their opinions, and accept constructive criticism without seeing it as a threat to themselves. These qualities fit perfectly with the confidence, transparency and psychological capital advocated by transformational and genuine leadership. On the one hand, a number of studies have shown that superstition has a negative impact on leadership. Keinan(2002) pointed out that when faced with high-pressure tasks, superstitious people are more likely to develop a dependent mentality, thereby weakening the ability to solve problems proactively[7]. Kramer and Block(2014) also found that individuals who relied on superstitious beliefs performed worse on tasks that required rational analysis[8]. These findings suggest that superstitious tendencies may affect an individual's performance in similar leadership roles by weakening their ability to think independently and their confidence in problem-solving.

On the other hand, studies have found that superstition may have positive effects in certain situations. Studies have shown that beliefs related to superstition or luck can enhance an individual's subjective confidence and task persistence in certain task situations (Damisch, Stoberock, & Mussweiler, 2010)[9]. Wiseman and Watt(2004) also pointed out that positive superstitions such as carrying lucky charms may indirectly lead to positive results by enhancing optimism[3]. These findings suggest that the influence of superstition on employees' leadership behavior may not be singular, and it is necessary to distinguish between different types of superstition and different task situations.

The path of influence of superstition on leadership can be clarified from the perspective of the mechanism of action. Superstitious tendencies suppress an individual's ability to analyze rationally and think critically, and thus tend to rely on irrational judgments when making complex decisions. Superstitious beliefs cause individuals to attribute success or failure to external uncontrollable factors, thus weakening the motivation for individuals to grasp experience based on their actual abilities. Superstitious behavior itself is often used as a dependent means to deal with stress and uncertainty, thus hindering the development of an individual's true ability.

Due to the particularity of the Chinese cultural context, the superstitious mentality of Chinese employees also has unique manifestations. Zhang Ming (2013) has done an excellent job of sorting this out. He found that many senior employees do not care about the common people but about ghosts and gods, and rely on irrational means such as feng shui and fortune-telling when making decisions, which are supported by various cultural psychological factors in traditional Chinese culture, such as the concept of fate, face anxiety and the need for a sense of control in a high-pressure environment[10]. This together reveals the adverse effects of superstition on leadership potential.

Unfortunately, there is a significant deficiency in the existing literature on the relationship between superstition and leadership potential. Most studies simply regard superstition as a cultural footnote and do not systematically examine it as an actual psychological mechanism that affects leadership effectiveness. As a result, the intrinsic psychological mechanisms of the relationship, especially the core self-awareness factors through which superstition works, have not been fully studied. For this reason, this study introduces self-esteem as a mediating variable to explain the psychological pathways through which superstition affects leadership.

Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimension theory suggests that characteristics such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance in different cultures shape the behavioral style and decision-making approach of employees[11]. In societies with high uncertainty aversion, people tend to rely more on authority and traditional experience to seek psychological security, and this cultural trait also affects employees' psychological tendencies and behavioral patterns. In a highly uncertain social environment, if one does not rely on authority or traditional

experience, superstition can become an important factor influencing employees' decision-making and thereby shaping their ability performance. Superstition has a significant impact on employees' ability to make scientific decisions, though research in the past decade has shown contradictions. On the one hand, Keinan(2002) and Kramer and Block(2014) pointed out that when faced with high-pressure tasks, superstitious people are more likely to develop a dependent mindset and weaken their ability to solve problems proactively[7][8]. On the other hand, studies suggest that beliefs related to superstition or luck can enhance an individual's subjective confidence and task persistence in certain task situations (Damisch, Stoberock, & Mussweiler, 2010)[9]. Therefore, there is no consensus on the specific impact of superstition on employees' leadership behavior and leadership, and it has long been ignored or simplified as a cultural footnote in organizational and leadership research, rather than being systematically examined as an important psychological mechanism that may determine leadership effectiveness. Based on this, this paper puts forward the hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant negative correlation between superstition and employee leadership potential.

According to Wang Ting et al. (2013), there is a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and leadership potential, which is consistent with existing research results at home and abroad[6]. Employees with high self-esteem tend to show greater emotional stability, decisiveness in decision-making, and resilience in adversity. They are more willing to put forward visions, take risks and stick to their opinions, and also more receptive to constructive criticism rather than seeing it as a threat to themselves. This aligns well with the confidence, transparency and psychological capital emphasized by transformational and genuine leadership. Instead, employees with low self-esteem may exhibit two extremes: one is defensive despotism and micromanagement to cover up their own insecurities; The other is shirking responsibility, being indecisive and unable to provide a firm direction in a crisis. Based on this, this paper puts forward the hypothesis:

H2: There is a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and employee leadership potential.

According to a study conducted by Sachs and John in China (2004), subjects with higher scores in superstition had lower scores in self-efficacy[12]. Although the correlation between the two was not significant, this negative correlation was largely consistent with previous studies of Western subjects. This cross-cultural consistency suggests that the findings should be universal, though much more research is needed to confirm them. In most cases, self-efficacy is similar to self-esteem, but the mechanism of interaction between superstition and self-esteem is complex. On the one hand, low self-esteem may be the antecedent variable of superstition. According to the theory of compensatory control, when an individual faces a threat to self-esteem or a lack of control, they tend to turn to external, supernatural interpretive systems to restore symbolic control over the environment, thereby temporarily maintaining a sense of self-worth. According to a study by Rutjens and Loseman(2010), individuals exhibit stronger superstitious beliefs in experimental scenarios that induce self-esteem frustration. In Chinese collectivist culture, the loss of face as a form of social self-esteem may also prompt individuals to seek a reversal of their social fate through superstitious behaviors such as feng shui adjustments[13]. On the other hand, long-term reliance on superstition may erode stable high self-esteem. Social cognitive theory emphasizes that true, lasting self-esteem is built on self-efficacy gained through the ability to master experience. If an individual habitually attributes success or failure to external uncontrollable factors such as fate or feng shui rather than their own efforts and abilities, it weakens their internal achievement attribution and leads to a fragile and externally controlled sense of self-worth, known as illusory self-esteem. Therefore, superstition and self-esteem can form a vicious cycle of mutual reinforcement. People with low self-esteem are more likely to resort to superstition, and superstitious behavior hinders the path of building solid

self-esteem through the improvement of real ability. Based on this, this paper puts forward the hypothesis:

H3: There is a significant negative correlation between superstition and self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a very popular and important concept, generally speaking, self-esteem is the degree to which people appreciate, value, and like themselves. But all employees who are highly dependent on superstition do not necessarily have low self-esteem and a negative relationship with leadership potential, and at the same time all employees who are less dependent on superstition do not necessarily have high self-esteem and a positive relationship with leadership potential. Based on this, this paper puts forward the hypothesis:

H4: Self-esteem mediates between superstition and employee leadership potential.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Subjects

This sample survey was mainly conducted in the Guangzhou area. The main test subjects are employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in the manufacturing and technology industries. The questionnaire was administered using random sampling and 250 questionnaires were distributed to employees. A total of 230 questionnaires were retrieved and invalid questionnaires were excluded. Finally, 218 valid questionnaires were obtained, and the validity rate of the questionnaires was 94.8%. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Table of Subjects (N=218)

Variables	Category	Number of people	Proportion %
Gender	male	84	38.5%
	female	134	61.5%
Age Group	20 ~ 29	49	22.5%
	30 ~ 39	58	26.6%
	40 ~ 49	75	34.4%
	50 or more	36	16.5%

3.2. Research Tools

3.2.1. Supernatural Beliefs Scale (PBS)

The measurement in this study was based on the revised supernatural belief Scale by Chen Peifeng (2010) based on the Chinese version of the scale used by Dr. Tan Weixiang in Taiwan in 2004. Compared with the original scale, six Chinese-specific superstitious questions were added, and the superstitious questions specific to Christian countries in the original scale were replaced with those specific to China. Such as changing "the number 13 is inauspicious" to "the number 4 is inauspicious"[14]. The scale is divided into seven dimensions: specific Chinese superstitions, spiritual power, magic power, traditional superstitions, soul theory, other forms of life, and foreknowledge of the future. It has 28 questions and is scored on a seven-point scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree". The Cronbach's α coefficient in this study was 0.96.

3.2.2. Self-esteem Scale (SES)

The measurements in this study used the Self-esteem Scale, developed by Rosenberg (1965), which was originally designed to assess adolescents' overall feelings about self-worth and self-acceptance. The scale, consisting of 10 items, was designed with ease of measurement in mind.

Subjects directly report whether these descriptions fit themselves. Score on four levels: 1 indicates very consistent, 2 indicates consistent, 3 indicates inconsistent, and 4 indicates very inconsistent. The total score ranges from 10 to 40 points. The higher the score, the higher the level of self-esteem. Dobson et al. (1979) and Fleming et al. (1984) reported Cronbach α coefficients of 0.77 and 0.88, respectively. In this study, the Cronbach α coefficient was 0.75.

3.2.3. Leadership Competency Scale (LP)

The measurements in this study were based on the Leadership Scale developed by Gough (1957), which was revised by Shigeru Ji (2004) based on conclusions drawn from domestic sample data to assess factors such as leadership ability and social initiative[15]. The scale consists of 50 questions, 14 of which are scored as "yes" and 36 as "no". The Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.82 in this study.

3.3. Data collection and statistics

This study was conducted by filling out questionnaires online and distributing them to employees of different occupations and positions in the city through cluster random sampling. General demographic information of the subjects, such as age and gender, was obtained while the scale was administered. The data from this survey will be encoded and entered into EXCEL for analysis using SPSS. The data analysis methods mainly include independent sample t-tests, one-way ANOVA, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation tests, etc.

4. Research Results

4.1. Differences in demographic variables for each variable

Descriptive analysis results showed that the average score of superstition among employees was 95.73 ± 29.52 , the average score of self-esteem was 27.89 ± 4.32 , and the average score of leadership was 25.77 ± 7.76 .

Independent sample t-tests were used to analyze the differences in superstition, self-esteem, and leadership potential between men and women at the gender level. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Test of Gender Differences in Superstition, Self-esteem, and Leadership (N=218)

Variables	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p
Superstitious	male	84	90.49	29.49	-2.094	0.037
	female	134	99.02	29.17		
Self-esteem	male	84	27.64	4.03	-0.668	0.505
	female	134	28.04	4.49		
leadership potential	male	84	27.06	7.19	1.954	0.052
	female	134	24.96	8.02		

The differences test results showed that superstition was significantly different by gender ($p=0.037<0.05$), while self-esteem and leadership potential were not significantly different by gender ($p>0.05$).

4.2. Correlation analysis of the variables

Correlation analysis was conducted on the three variables of superstition, self-esteem, and leadership, and the results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis Matrix of Variables ($N=218$)

Variables	1	2	3
1 Superstition		-0.201**	-0.264**
2 Self-esteem	-0.201**		0.367**
3 leadership potential	-0.264**	0.367**	

Note:** $p<0.01$.

The correlation analysis results are shown in Table 4 above. Superstition was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r=-0.201$, $p<0.01$), self-esteem was significantly positively correlated with leadership ability ($r=0.367$, $p<0.01$), and superstition was significantly negatively correlated with leadership ability ($r=-0.264$, $p<0.01$).

4.3. Regression Analysis

Table 4. Results of Hierarchical regression analysis for predicting leadership ($N=218$)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta.</i>
Gender	-0.237	1.124	-0.015	0.215	1.098	0.014	-0.427	1.051	-0.027
Age Group	2.198	0.521	0.298***	2.103	0.507	0.285***	1.770	0.486	0.240***
Superstition				-0.062	0.017	-0.237***	-0.046	0.016	-0.175*
Self-esteem							0.548	0.111	0.305***
R^2		0.093			0.147			0.234	

Continued Table

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
ΔR^2	0.093	0.055	0.087
<i>F</i>	10.959***	12.341***	16.303***

Note:* $p<0.05$,*** $p<0.001$.

The above-mentioned correlation analysis can only simply illustrate the relationship between demographic variables and the changing trends of independent and dependent variables. To further analyze the relationship between demographic variables and independent and dependent variables, this study conducted a hierarchical regression analysis on the relationship between gender, age group, superstitious psychology, self-esteem and leadership ability.

Among the three hierarchical models, the variables selected for Model 1 are gender and age group, the variable selected for Model 2 is superstitious psychology, and the variable selected for Model 3 is self-esteem. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are presented in Table 4 above. According to Table 4, before the two independent variables of superstition and self-esteem were introduced, the demographic variables in Class 1 accounted for 9.3% of the variation in leadership ability (see R^2), and the values of the multiple linear regression overall test reached the significance level ($F=10.959$, $p=0.000 < 0.05$). This suggests that demographic background statistics have a significant impact on leadership. With the inclusion of superstition as an independent variable, the explanation for the variance of leadership reached 14.7%, and the value of the multiple linear regression overall test reached the significance level ($F=12.341$, $p=0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that superstition has a significant impact on leadership. Finally, when self-esteem was added as an independent variable, 23.4% of the variance in leadership ability was explained, and the value of the multiple linear regression overall test reached the

significance level ($F=16.303$, $p=0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that self-esteem had a significant impact on leadership ability. The analysis suggests that after controlling for demographic background variables, superstition has a significant negative impact on leadership ability ($B=-0.046$, $SE=0.016$, $p=0.005 < 0.05$), that is, the lower the degree of superstition, the higher the leadership ability of the employee; Self-esteem has a significant positive effect on leadership ability ($B=0.548$, $SE=0.111$, $p=0.000 < 0.001$), that is, employees with higher self-esteem have higher leadership ability. Therefore, the results of the hierarchical regression analysis suggest that superstition has a significantly negative impact on employees' leadership ability, while self-esteem has a significantly positive impact.

4.4. Analysis of Mediating effects

According to the method proposed by Wen Zhonglin and Ye Baojuan (2014), the bias-corrected non-parametric percentile Bootstrap method can be used to test the mediating effect. In addition, the method proposed by Preacher and Hayes(2004) and Hayes(2013) for mediating effect analysis can help researchers estimate the size and statistical significance of the mediating effect more accurately and control some common research biases. The process program in SPSS was used for the mediating effect analysis, with a sample size of 5000. If the 95% confidence interval does not contain 0, it indicates a significant mediating path.

Table 5. Mediating effect Confidence interval table of Self-esteem ($N=218$)

	Effect values	SE	95% confidence interval	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Total effect	-0.062	0.017	-0.095	-0.029
Direct effects	-0.046	0.016	-0.078	-0.014
Indirect effects (of mediating variables)	-0.016	0.007	-0.030	-0.004

The results of the Bootstrap analysis are shown in Table 5. The results of the mediating effect test indicate that the 95% confidence interval for superstition $\rightarrow$ self-esteem $\rightarrow$ leadership is $[-0.030, -0.004]$, the interval does not include 0, and the mediating effect is significant. After controlling for the mediating variable self-esteem, the influence of superstition on leadership was still significant, with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.078, -0.014]$, excluding 0. Therefore, the variable of self-esteem plays a partial mediating role between superstition and leadership. The results of the mediating effect test suggest that self-esteem plays a partial mediating role between superstition and leadership potential. The model is as shown below:

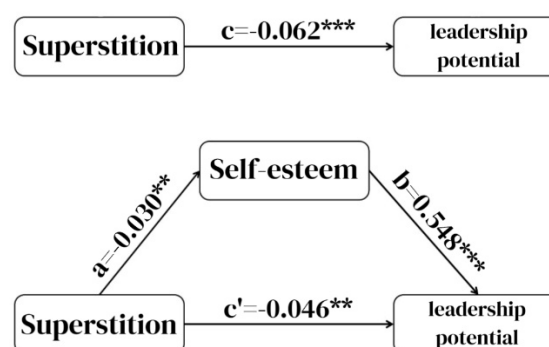


Figure 1. Mediation model of self-esteem in the relationship between superstition and leadership potential.

5. Discussion

5.1. Research status analysis and overall findings

This study, through the data analysis of 218 valid questionnaires, examined the relationship among the superstitious mentality, self-esteem and leadership ability of enterprise employees. The results showed that superstition was significantly negatively correlated with leadership ability, superstition was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem, and self-esteem was significantly positively correlated with leadership ability. Hierarchical regression analysis and Bootstrap mediating effect test further confirm that self-esteem plays a partial mediating role between superstition and leadership ability. These results fully support the four hypotheses proposed in the study, revealing the intrinsic mechanism by which irrational beliefs erode core self-evaluation and thereby diminish leadership potential.

This finding is in line with the recent trend of focus on irrational factors in the field of management. As the research in Management World points out, there is a negative correlation between the core self-evaluation of employees responsible for management work and their attitude towards supernatural beliefs (Chen Zhenhong, Wang, Dong Junwu, 2014)[16]. This study not only validates this relationship but also extends it further to the more practical outcome variable of leadership, constructing and verifying the pathways of action from superstition to self-esteem and then to leadership.

5.2. An in-depth analysis of the effects of each variable

The negative impact of superstition on leadership is the clear main conclusion of this study. According to the data, superstition has a direct and significant adverse effect on leadership, regardless of whether demographic background variables are controlled or not, thus supporting the views of Keinan(2002) and Kramer and Block(2014)[7][8]. Because superstitious people are more likely to develop dependence when faced with high-pressure tasks, their ability to take the initiative to solve problems is more likely to be weakened. More importantly, this negative relationship can be explained on two levels. At the cognitive level, superstitious tendencies make individuals more inclined to explain events with external supernatural forces, thus weakening evidence-based analytical thinking and critical thinking. In terms of behavior, superstition can cause decision-makers to avoid serious analysis of complex issues and thus miss the opportunity to solve problems and accumulate real experience with their actual abilities.

Self-esteem has a more significant positive impact on leadership potential, which is highly consistent with the findings of Wang Ting et al. (2013)[6]. People with high self-esteem generally have stronger psychological resilience, more stable emotional states, and stronger achievement motivation, all of which are essential qualities for being an effective leader. More importantly, through an analysis of the mechanisms by which self-esteem affects leadership, this study concludes that core self-evaluation plays a fundamental role in the formation of leadership potential. Specifically, employees with high self-esteem are more willing to put forward visions, take risks, stick to their opinions, and are more likely to view constructive criticism as an opportunity for improvement rather than a threat to themselves. Their behavioral patterns are highly consistent with the traits advocated by transformational and authentic leadership.

The study also found gender differences in superstition, which echoes the gender effects discussed in the current literature on the influencing factors of superstition among college students (Li Dan, Sun Yanjun, Lei Li, 2006)[17].

5.3. A theoretical explanation of the relationship between variables

The negative relationship between superstition and self-esteem supports the basic idea of compensatory control theory that when an individual is threatened with self-esteem or lacks a sense of control, they turn to an external supernatural interpretive system to restore symbolic control over the environment. Sachs and John(2004) do an excellent empirical test of this[12]. It is quite clear from the available data that subjects with higher scores of superstition had lower scores of self-efficacy, although the correlation between the two was not significant, the negative trend was consistent with the conclusion of this study. Therefore, the results of this study further demonstrate the cross-sample stability of this negative relationship.

It is worth pondering that there may be a bidirectional cyclical relationship between superstition and self-esteem. People with low self-esteem are less confident in solving problems on their own in uncertain and stressful situations, and thus are more likely to seek psychological comfort through superstition. Long-term reliance on superstition reduces the opportunity for individuals to gain experience with their real abilities and thus hinders the formation of self-esteem based on real achievements, thus falling into a vicious cycle of low self-esteem, reliance on superstition, hindered ability development, and further damage to self-esteem. Also, research reviews have clearly demonstrated that self-esteem is an important factor influencing college students' superstitious mentality, thus forming a very good supplementary argument for the relationship between the two theoretically.

The mediating mechanism of self-esteem is the core theoretical contribution of this study. The Bootstrap mediating effect test clearly confirms that self-esteem plays a partial mediating role between superstition and leadership ability, and thereby leads to the psychological pathways by which superstition affects leadership ability. Superstitious beliefs do not directly weaken leadership potential, but first erode an individual's most fundamental and core evaluation of self-worth, namely self-esteem, and then affect their confidence, decisiveness and interpersonal appeal in leadership situations. This conclusion echoes the logic of the theory of fear management. Superstition, as a defense mechanism of the cultural worldview, is intended to maintain self-esteem, but if it relies too much on external mystical forces, it will hinder the construction of self-esteem based on one's own ability.

5.4. The theoretical and practical significance of research results

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in advancing the integration of irrational cognition and leadership theory by formally incorporating superstitious psychology—long overlooked—into the leadership research framework, thereby effectively responding to Crossman's(2024) academic call for a systematic examination of the impact of superstition on organizational decision-making[18]. At the same time, this study clarifies and validates the core mediating role of self-esteem, offering a clear psychological mechanism through which irrational beliefs influence leadership competence, thus enriching the cognitive foundation of leadership development theory. Furthermore, the study rigorously tests the theory within the Chinese cultural context, particularly examining unique forms of Chinese superstition such as feng shui and auspicious calendar selection, providing empirical support for calls to contextualize the mechanisms of self-esteem in complex social settings.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer several implications for organizations. First, in selecting and evaluating leadership talent, beyond assessing ability and performance, organizations should proactively and systematically evaluate candidates' rational cognitive styles and the stability of their self-esteem. Zhang Ming's(2013) analysis of officials' superstitious tendencies clearly shows that those who rise to leadership positions through knowledge and work achievements tend to be open-minded and skeptical of supernatural beliefs[10]. Second, leadership development programs should incorporate training modules focused on rational decision-making and fostering healthy self-esteem, helping employees

build self-worth grounded in genuine accomplishments. More importantly, organizations should consciously cultivate a science-based decision-making culture rooted in evidence, reducing the risks associated with collective superstition, while simultaneously providing mental health support to help employees accept uncertainty calmly rather than seeking illusory control.

5.5. Research limitations

The findings of this study hold significant research value; however, the majority of the samples were drawn from small and medium-sized enterprises in Guangzhou, resulting in a narrow sampling scope, a relatively small sample size, and an imbalanced gender ratio. Therefore, the external validity of the current results warrants careful consideration. Moreover, since cluster random sampling inherently limits sample representativeness, caution is needed when generalizing the study's conclusions to employee populations in other provinces, industries, or cultural contexts.

Additionally, because all variables were measured at a single point in time, causal relationships among variables cannot be directly established from the data. Although theoretical assumptions suggest a clear directional pathway between superstitious beliefs, self-esteem, and leadership ability, the possibility of reverse causality or bidirectional feedback loops must be carefully considered. For example, low leadership ability might lead to reduced self-esteem, which in turn could strengthen superstitious tendencies. Thus, the cross-sectional design does not allow for examining the dynamic processes underlying variable relationships.

All scales used in this study are self-report questionnaires, which may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects. Respondents might underreport their superstitious tendencies due to social pressure when completing the superstitious belief questionnaire. Similarly, they may exhibit self-enhancement or self-deprecation biases when rating their own self-esteem and leadership abilities.

6. Research Conclusions and Prospects

This study conducted a questionnaire survey using various data processing methods to justify and analyze the research hypotheses, and finally reached the following conclusions:

- (1) There is a significant negative correlation between superstition and employees' leadership potential.
- (2) There is a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and employee leadership potential.
- (3) There is a significant negative correlation between superstition and self-esteem.
- (4) Self-esteem mediates between superstition and leadership potential of employees.

Due to the clear limitations of existing research, it is advisable to adopt a tracking design in the future, collecting data at different time points to systematically and rigorously examine the dynamic relationship among superstition, self-esteem, and leadership potential. This will provide more compelling evidence for causal inference. At the same time, experimental scenarios can be designed to directly activate superstitious beliefs or manipulate self-esteem levels to examine their immediate impact on employees' leadership behavior.

Future research should collect data in a wider range of regions, industries, and organizational types to enhance the universality of the research conclusions. Therefore, it is particularly suitable to conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to systematically examine whether the relationship between superstition and leadership varies in different cultural contexts. Based on Hofstede's (2001) theory of the cultural dimension, it is clear to predict that employees in societies with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance are more susceptible to superstition, and

that cultural differences between individualism and collectivism moderate the intensity of the mediating effect of self-esteem.

Other potential mediating variables, such as sense of control, psychological resilience, attribution style, etc., can be reasonably introduced on the basis of the self-esteem mediating model proposed in this study to construct a more comprehensive and complete explanatory framework. To complement this, it is also necessary to systematically examine various factors that regulate the relationship between superstition and leadership potential, including organizational culture type, industry characteristics, the importance and urgency of decision-making tasks, etc. The research by Chen et al. (2014) has shown that employees responsible for management work are more likely to use supernatural beliefs in major, uncertain, and urgent decisions, so the decision-making context itself is an important moderating variable.

Superstition has unique manifestations in the Chinese context. Future research could further develop and validate superstition scales suitable for the Chinese cultural context to more precisely distinguish between traditional folk beliefs and negative superstition, as well as their different effects on leadership. At the same time, the measurement of leadership potential should incorporate localized connotations such as paternalistic leadership potential and virtue and talent, which are emphasized in the Chinese context.

In the future, rational thinking training and healthy self-esteem development programs for employees can also be designed and evaluated, using quasi-experimental research methods for systematic examination. Use cognitive behavioral therapy to help employees with high superstitious tendencies adjust irrational beliefs, and use success experience accumulation and achievement attribution training to help employees build a solid foundation of self-esteem, thereby effectively improving employees' leadership potential. This kind of research is the most direct and powerful attempt to translate the theoretical findings of this study into practical application.

References

- [1] Vyse, S. A. (2014). *Believing in magic: The psychology of superstition* (Updated edition). Oxford University Press.
- [2] Drinkwater, K. G., Denovan, A., & Dagnall, N. (2024). Re-evaluation of the relationship between paranormal belief and perceived stress using statistical modelling. *PLoS ONE*, 19(11), e0312511. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0312511>
- [3] Wiseman, R., & Watt, C. (2004). Measuring superstitious belief: Why lucky charms matter. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 37, 1533-1541. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2004.02.009>
- [4] Silzer, R., & Church, A. H. (2009). The pearls and perils of identifying potential. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 2(4), 377-412. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01163.x>
- [5] Dagnall, N., Drinkwater, K., Denovan, A., & Parker, A. (2017). Belief in the paranormal: Measurement development and evaluation. *CORE*.
- [6] Wang, T., Wang, W. L., Hong, J. F., Zhang, J., & Li, C. (2013). Research on the current status of head nurse leadership and its influencing factors. *Journal of Nursing*, 28(19), 63-65.
- [7] Keinan, G. (2002). The effects of stress and desire for control on superstitious behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(1), 102-108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167202281009>
- [8] Kramer, T., & Block, L. (2014). Like Mike: Ability contagion through touched objects increases confidence and improves performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 124(2), 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2014.03.009>
- [9] Damisch, L., Stoberock, B., & Mussweiler, T. (2010). Keep your fingers crossed! How superstition improves performance. *Psychological Science*, 21(7), 1014-1020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610372631>

- [10] Zhang, M. (2013). Why do some leaders "ask ghosts and gods instead of the people". *Leadership Science*, (34), 4-5.
- [11] Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*. Sage publications.
- [12] Sachs, J. (2004). Superstition and self-efficacy in chinese postgraduate students. *Psychological Reports*, 95(2), 485-487. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.95.2.485-487>
- [13] Rutjens, B. T., & Loseman, A. (2010). The society-supporting self: System justification and cultural worldview defense as different forms of self-regulation. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 13(2), 241-250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430209351703>
- [14] Chen, P. F. (2010). *The cognitive and brain mechanisms of superstition and religious belief* [Doctoral dissertation]. Southwest University.
- [15] Ji, S. M., & Dai, Z. S. (2004). *The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Questionnaire: Latest research and multiclass scale interpretation*. Science Press.
- [16] Chen, Z. H., Wang, S., & Dong, J. W. (2014). Does folk belief influence strategic decision-making?--A two-level study based on supernatural beliefs and Chinese corporate executives. *Managing the World*, (7), 119-133.
- [17] Li, D., Sun, Y. J., & Lei, L. (2006). The formation of superstition among college students and its influencing factors. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 12(1), 80-86.
- [18] Crossman, J. (2024). *Superstition, management and organisations: Irrationality, randomness, and chaos in decision making*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-59020-7>.