

## Article

# Potential of Passive Employees: How Servant Leadership Can Stimulate Innovation among Control-Oriented Employees

Ziyang Qiang <sup>1,\*</sup>, Jigan Wang <sup>1,2</sup>, Kaiyuan He <sup>1,\*</sup> and Lin Xu <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Business School, Hohai University, Nanjing 211100, China

<sup>2</sup> Research Institute of Human Resources, Ministry of Water Resources, Nanjing 210024, China

<sup>3</sup> School of Management, Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Nanjing 210003, China

\* Correspondence: qiang\_zy@hhu.edu.cn (Z.Q.); he\_ky@hhu.edu.cn (K.H.)

**Abstract:** Depending on the organizational context, a control orientation on the part of an employee may either inhibit or promote their innovative job performance. To explore the question of which external conditions are conducive to control-oriented employees' innovative potential, this study examined the effects of servant leadership on control-oriented employees' motivation internalization processes and innovative job performance from a self-determination theory perspective. This study was conducted in Jiangsu, Shanghai, and Anhui provinces, which are relatively developed high-tech industries in China. An analysis of paired data from 298 employees and their leaders in nine technology-intensive companies revealed that servant leadership plays a positive moderating role between control orientation and employees' autonomous motivation. Moreover, the interaction between control orientation and servant leadership can affect innovative job performance through the mediation of identified regulation, but not through that of integrated regulation. These findings are beneficial in promoting healthy development and innovative job performance of control-oriented employees, and are instructive for sustainable human resource management. Organizations should recognize the creative potential of control-oriented employees, promote servant leadership, leverage its management strengths, and focus on enhancing employees' sense of identification with their jobs.

**Keywords:** control orientation; servant leadership; identified regulation; integrated regulation; innovative job performance



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## 1. Introduction

Innovative job performance is the result of employees purposefully generating, marketing, and implementing ideas within their job role, work group, or organization that are novel and beneficial to their role performance, work group, or organization [1]. To enhance employees' innovative job performance, businesses must understand the individual and situational factors that influence innovative job performance and their mechanisms of action [2]. Among the individual factors, general causality orientations as a personal trait are closely related to innovative job performance [3–5]. Self-determination theory defines general causality orientations as the tendency of individuals to attribute change in a general context to their own behavior [5]. Autonomy-oriented individuals are more likely to feel that their behavior is autonomous, to have stronger intrinsic motivation, to show self-innovation, and to seek challenges, whereas control-oriented individuals are more likely to feel that their behavior is externally controlled. Studies have shown that the relationship between employees' control orientation and innovative job performance is not significant, and that a control orientation may either inhibit or promote innovative job performance under different contextual factors [6–11]. These inconsistent research findings indicate that the relationship between the two traits mentioned above under different contextual factors remains to be further clarified by researchers.

Autonomous motivation is an individual's intention to act without control or coercion from outside forces and is based on self-determination [12]. From a motivation perspective,

autonomous motivation is an important link between control orientation and innovative job performance [13]. Autonomous motivation has been shown to promote behavioral persistence and improve performance in the face of complex and creative tasks [14]. Therefore, intervening to stimulate control-oriented employees' autonomous motivation is an important path to stimulating innovative job performance. Studies have shown that, if left without intervention, control orientation negatively predicts autonomous motivation [15,16]. However, under specific organizational contextual factors, control-oriented employees may also perceive their own behavior as autonomous rather than controlled. Because the definition of general causality orientations emphasizes the tendency of individuals to make behavioral attributions in general contexts, whether the "perceived locus of causality" (PLOC) is "autonomous" or "controlled" in practice depends not only on the individual's personal characteristics but also on the context in which they are living at that moment [5].

Among the organizational contextual factors, leadership style can have an impact on employees' behavioral attributions, which can, in turn, stimulate or inhibit different levels of autonomous motivation, ultimately affecting innovative job performance [2,17,18]. Research has shown that control orientation is associated with low self-actualization [5] and defense against environmental stress [19], while servant leaders prioritize employee needs, help employees grow, are good at emotional soothing, and have a host of other traits [20,21] that are better coupled with the typical psychological characteristics of control-oriented employees. In recent years, moral and ethical conflicts between leaders and subordinates have become increasingly prominent, and the concept of servant leadership, which is based on the concept of people-oriented leadership, has gained popularity and become widely used in a variety of organizations [22–24]. Numerous studies have found that servant leadership positively influences subordinates' attitudes, job satisfaction, and job performance [25–30]. Such studies generally consider servant leadership as an antecedent variable that affects employees' innovative job performance but less frequently explore the effects of servant leadership on employees with different traits when it is an external condition. Research has shown that servant leadership promotes the satisfaction of employees' three basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness), which help them internalize their external motivation (i.e., the process of transforming controlled motivation into autonomous motivation), thus enhancing innovative job performance [20]. Considering the degree of coupling between servant leadership and control-oriented employees, it can be hypothesized that servant leadership acts as a significant organizational contextual force that plays a moderating role between control orientation and innovative job performance. The mechanism governing this relationship is also one of the questions of interest in this study.

Overall, this study dissects the influence of servant leadership on control-oriented employees' motivation internalization from a self-determination theory perspective and explores the organizational contextual boundary conditions for stimulating innovation. First, it contributes to an in-depth understanding of the inconsistent findings in the research literature concerning the relationship between control orientation and innovative job performance from a motivational perspective; second, it helps to bridge the gap between theoretical studies of the mechanism by which servant leadership regulates the internalization of motivation in control-oriented employees; and third, it helps to advance the theoretical understanding of the transmission mechanism between control orientation and innovative job performance from a motivational perspective.

The above-mentioned theoretical discussions have practical implications for improving the motivation and autonomy of control-oriented employees. On the one hand, they are conducive to the implementation of a people-oriented corporate culture and philosophy, providing employees with a robust and positive environment for psychological growth and career development. On the other hand, they are also conducive to enhancing the innovative job performance of control-oriented employees and providing organizations with healthy and sustainable development momentum.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Connotations of Control Orientation

Control orientation is one of the three general causality orientations, which originate from the description of the degree of individual autonomy in self-determination theory. Self-determination theory consists of two main sub-theories: cognitive evaluation theory (CET), which defines intrinsic motivation based on basic psychological needs, and organismic integration theory (OIT), which describes the process of motivation internalization. In self-determination theory, the general causality orientation is defined as the tendency of the individual to steadily perceive the degree to which they can determine external activities and refers to the degree to which the individual is autonomy-oriented, control-oriented, or impersonally-oriented [5]. Specifically, an autonomy orientation refers to the tendency of individuals to feel that they receive support from their social environment to act autonomously and to feel that they can easily determine their own behavioral motivations; control-oriented individuals tend to experience the social environment in terms of control and being controlled, and are prone to feel that their behavior is being controlled; and an impersonal orientation refers to the tendency of individuals to feel that their behavior is out of their control or that they are incompetent, and leads to a lack of motivation to act. It is essential to emphasize that every individual has all three general causality orientations, only to different degrees [31].

Early research established that a control orientation is associated with low self-actualization [5] and defense against environmental stress [19]. Control-oriented individuals' behavior results from external environmental factors or from various controls of their own. The key determinant of their behaviors, cognition, and emotions is the stress caused by initiating or regulating events. Individuals with a high control orientation act because they believe they "should" do so and rely on controlling events (e.g., deadlines) or supervision to motivate themselves. Pay and status, for example, are crucial factors in determining what jobs they take on. All of their other decisions are constrained by similar external factors. Being under the constraint of external factors—whether acting under their control or being forced to resist them—reflects the psychological characteristics of stress and conflict in control-oriented individuals.

To understand the nature of the control-oriented personality trait, its external manifestations and internal psychological factors should be explored. Research has shown that a control orientation is associated with a high regard for pay, public self-consciousness, defensive functions, Type A behavioral patterns, and other extrinsic motivations [5,32–34]. Specific aspects of the performance of such individuals are: vulnerability to the external environment; caring about what others think of them; being hard-working and competitive; being impatient and irritable; having a high sense of time urgency; having the potential to be competitively hostile; a tendency to be controlled by compensation, deadlines, structure, self-involvement, and instructions from others; and a tendency to base their activities on the attitudes of others, rather than their own ideas. External manifestations of stress and conflict map themselves onto their general internal psychology of tension and fear.

Self-determination means giving up alternative options and suffering the consequences of the choice. The tendency to forgo autonomous choice is a human weakness, and the logic behind it is to avoid worry and pain. The essence of abandoning autonomous choice and becoming accustomed to external control is a lack of courage and a tendency to be constrained by fear [35]. This also partially explains the positive correlation between control orientation and negative affect. Research has demonstrated that control orientation scores are significantly and positively correlated with negative emotions such as distress, guilt, and fear in the context of self-determination [5,36].

### 2.2. The Relationship between Control Orientation and Innovative Job Performance from a Motivational Perspective

The types of motivation generated by individuals form an essential bridge between general causality orientations and job performance. Autonomous motivation facilitates

relatively complex work behaviors, whereas controlled motivation shows a short-term advantage on common tasks (relatively mechanical task activities) [37]. Further studies have shown that the facilitative advantage of controlled motivation for simple tasks disappears in less than one week [14]. Autonomous motivation is more likely to promote behavioral persistence and improved performance than controlled motivation in the face of complex and creative tasks, and autonomous motivation is conducive to efficient performance and well-being. However, controlled motivation may affect these outcomes, especially when the task requires creativity, cognitive flexibility, or deep information processing [12].

Autonomy is a core characteristic of the creative personality [4,38–40]; studies have shown that, without intervention, a control orientation on the part of employees negatively predicts autonomous motivation, positively predicts controlled motivation, and is not significantly correlated with aspects of job performance such as innovation [6,41]. As a result, control-oriented personality traits have received less attention in the exploration of issues related to innovative job performance. In fact, if we take a more microscopic view of employees with high levels of control orientation, we can see that there is no shortage of individuals with this general causality orientation who show excellent job performance and high levels of innovative job performance. The innovative potential of this group and how to stimulate their innovative potential effectively is an important issue to be explored.

Individuals with a control orientation tend to experience the social environment in terms of control and being controlled and are prone to controlled motivation. Controlled motivation may either promote or inhibit innovation, depending on whether the workplace is one in which focusing on innovation can generate sufficient external rewards or allow individuals to avoid penalties. Controlled motivation may promote innovative job performance if individuals perceive external stimuli as encouraging them to engage in innovative behavior. The motivation to innovate may be reduced if reward and punishment mechanisms are not sufficient to motivate employees' desires or put them under pressure. In fact, individual differences inevitably lead to different subjective feelings by different individuals faced with the same levels of reward and punishment. Thus, controlled motivation does not show a significant correlation with innovative performance. However, OIT suggests that controlled motivation can be transformed into autonomous motivation through motivation internalization, and that autonomous motivation positively predicts innovation as a unified theoretical concept [42,43]. Depending on the degree of internalization, OIT further subdivides autonomous motivation into two types:

1. Identified regulation, a moderately autonomous type of motivation. That is, individuals identify with the value of the activity in which they are engaged and feel that the activity is important;
2. Integrated regulation, an autonomous type of motivation. That is, individuals are in a state in which the value of the activity is completely internalized.

The higher the control orientation, the more external motivational resources can be internalized, and both identified regulation and integrated regulation resulting from this process of motivation internalization can have a significant impact on improving innovative job performance. Thus, control-oriented employees' significant internalizable motivation resources explain, at least in part, the specific content of the innovative potential of this group. On the basis of the above analysis, this study considers autonomous motivation formed by motivation internalization as an antecedent variable of innovative job performance and proposes the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Autonomous motivation positively predicts innovative job performance.*

**Hypothesis 1a (H1a).** *Identified regulation and innovative job performance are positively correlated.*

**Hypothesis 1b (H1b).** *Integrated regulation and innovative job performance are positively correlated.*

A general causality orientation is an individual's tendency to attribute change in a general context to their own behavior, which also alludes to the fact that behavioral attributions change across contexts. Whether the PLOC is "autonomous" or "controlled" in practice depends, not only on the individual's personal characteristics, but also on the environment in which they are living at that moment [12]. Control-oriented individuals place more importance on how they are perceived by others and are more susceptible to external environmental influences, which may profoundly influence their motivation internalization processes and ultimately result in changes in innovative job performance. Therefore, providing certain specific organizational contextual factors in the workplace to enhance autonomous motivation is one of the key paths to stimulating control-oriented employees' innovative potential and improving their innovative job performance. The environmental boundaries of the motivation internalization of control-oriented employees and their impact on innovative job performance remain to be further clarified by researchers.

On the basis of the current status of existing research, this study argues that there are boundary conditions for the impact of control orientation on innovative job performance, and, when referring to the impact of control orientation on innovative job performance, the environment in which this takes place should be pointed out. In theoretical models that include mediating variables, the independent variables need not be correlated with the dependent variable [44–46]. Therefore, this study will not single out the hypothesis that control orientation has a direct effect on innovative job performance, but will explore the relationship between control orientation and innovative job performance from the perspective of motivation internalization in the context of specific organizational contextual factors.

### *2.3. The Moderating Role of Servant Leadership in the Motivation Internalization of Control-Oriented Employees*

In practice, many activities are not intrinsically interesting. When engaging in uninteresting activities, individuals develop multiple extrinsic motivations (interesting activities correspond to intrinsic motivations), and these extrinsic motivations differ in terms of their varying degrees of autonomy [42]. OIT suggests that the most significant cause of such differences is the varying degree to which individuals internalize the values and rules of the activities in which they engage. Internalization is the process by which individuals assimilate values or rules. As internalization deepens, individuals further perceive the management rules as part of themselves; they are subsequently mapped onto their sense of self [47]. Motivation internalization is an umbrella term used to describe the continuous process of transforming extrinsic motivation from control to autonomy. This process contains four types of motivation: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. Their internalization levels increase sequentially. Of these, identified regulation and integrated regulation belong to autonomous motivation, and they can effectively promote individual performance and health [12]. Therefore, finding appropriate external interventions in the workplace to facilitate control-oriented employees' motivation internalization is beneficial for improving innovative job performance.

Numerous studies have explored how to promote the internalization of extrinsic motivation and have come to the relatively consistent conclusion that this involves the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs [12,41]. According to CET, human beings' three basic psychological needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When individuals satisfy their need for autonomy and consider their behavior as being autonomous, it is easier for them to recognize and internalize the value of their behavior [12]. When individuals satisfy their need for competence and feel competent with respect to a particular behavior, they deepen their understanding of the meaning of that behavior and increase the likelihood of internalizing the rules of the behavior. When individuals satisfy their need for relatedness and feel that they belong to a specific group, it helps them internalize the values and behaviors endorsed by that group. Thus, by enhancing the satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs, the intrinsic motivation behind an individual's actions will be enhanced, or the internalization of extrinsic motives will be promoted, resulting in proac-



tive behavior [48]. Control-oriented employees have relatively low levels of satisfaction of their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. First, control-oriented employees are largely sensitive to, and even seek out, controlling factors in their work environment, and are prone to feeling controlled by compensation, deadlines, structure, self-involvement, and the directives of others [5]. Control-oriented employees are habitually subject to the external environment and lack a sense of control over their behavior, resulting in low levels of satisfaction of their need for autonomy. Second, control-oriented employees are more concerned with others' perceptions of them, tend to approach work based on others' attitudes rather than their own ideas, and are susceptible to social pressures, opinions, and evaluations [49]. The desire to be recognized by others is a specific manifestation of the control-oriented employee's desire for relatedness. Third, control orientation is associated with low self-actualization [5] and defense against environmental stress [19], and is negatively related to performance and effort [31]. This tends to make control-oriented employees more sensitive to perceptions of costs and risks while tending to underestimate the feasibility and controllability of their work content and having insufficient belief in their own abilities. As a result, a large gap in control-oriented employees' satisfaction of their need for competence still exists.

Leadership, as an important situational factor within the workplace, can have a significant impact on the satisfaction of employees' basic psychological needs [20,50,51]. To facilitate the internalization of motivation in control-oriented employees, the three basic psychological needs can be better met by matching leadership styles to alleviate their internal emotions of tension and fear and by addressing the psychological characteristics of stress and conflict.

Servant leadership is a servant-conscious, altruistic, ethical style of leadership that helps subordinates grow and bond with their leaders through intellectual enlightenment, emotional comfort, and empowerment and inspires members to create value for the team and the community by building a common vision and leading by example [52]. Servant leadership encompasses seven dimensions: emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowerment, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically [53]. Greenleaf argues that servant leaders want to serve others rather than control them, and always have goodwill toward their subordinates, making their followers healthier, wiser, freer, more self-directed, and more willing to turn themselves into servants [54]. Research has shown that servant leadership is positively related to followers' intrinsic motivation [55]. On the basis of the CET perspective, servant leadership can enhance the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of control-oriented employees and provide a supportive environment for the reinforcement of autonomous motivation and the internalization of controlled motivation [20,56,57].

First, servant leadership can meet control-oriented employees' need for autonomy. Decentralization, trust, and support from leadership will facilitate control-oriented employees to start thinking about how to do their jobs effectively and to engage more deeply and autonomously in their work, rather than acting based on others' attitudes [58]. Second, servant leadership can meet control-oriented employees' need for relatedness. Servant leaders have strong emotional soothing skills that alleviate negative emotions and environmental stresses directed at employees, and employees are willing to turn to their leaders for help with personal issues when they show servant leadership. Better interpersonal relationships and a better work atmosphere help control-oriented employees enhance their sense of group identity, reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, and thus integrate themselves better into the group, satisfying their need for relatedness [59,60]. Finally, servant leadership can meet control-oriented employees' need for competence. Servant leaders value their employees' career development, giving them wisdom and inspiration to help them grow and succeed. When employees encounter difficulties at work, servant leaders can provide timely help and guide employees in finding solutions so that they feel capable of doing their jobs well or even taking on more challenging tasks. These aspects greatly enhance control-oriented

employees' job confidence and sense of control, reduce their perception of stress and risk, and meet their need for competency [25].

Control-oriented employees have larger gaps in their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, more external motivational resources to internalize, and greater potential for motivation internalization. In the context of low levels of servant leadership, there is little room to enhance the degree to which control-oriented employees' three basic psychological needs are met, the process of motivation internalization is stagnant, and identified regulation and integrated regulation do not occur [57]. In the context of high levels of servant leadership, control-oriented employees' three basic psychological needs can be met to a greater extent, the effect of motivation internalization is significant, and the increase in autonomous motivation is more pronounced [12,41]. This is demonstrated by the fact that control-oriented employees are able to gradually identify with the value of the activity in which they are engaged, recognize the importance of the activity to themselves, and, furthermore, see the management rules of servant leadership as part of themselves and map them to their sense of self so that they do not feel pressured or controlled in the course of their actions but experience more free will [47]. In order to test the positive effect of servant leadership on the motivation internalization of control-oriented employees, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Servant leadership positively moderates the relationship between control orientation and autonomous motivation.*

**Hypothesis 2a (H2a).** *Servant leadership positively moderates the relationship between control orientation and identification regulation.*

**Hypothesis 2b (H2b).** *Servant leadership positively moderates the relationship between control orientation and integrated regulation.*

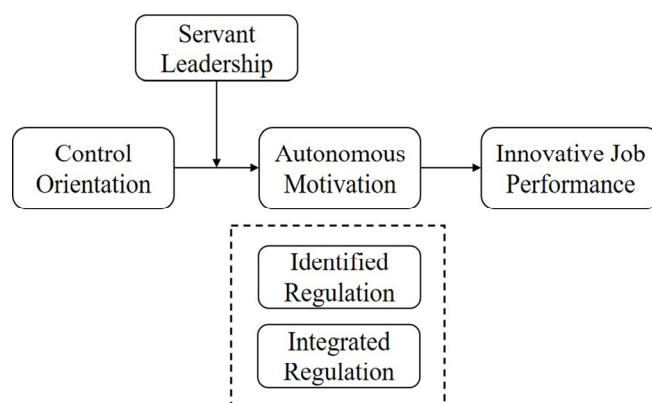
#### 2.4. Mediated Moderation

Combining H2a~H2b, the effect of servant leadership on the motivation internalization of control-oriented employees, and H1a~H1b on the relationship between autonomous motivation and innovative job performance, this study further argues that autonomous motivation can transmit the interaction effect of control orientation and servant leadership on innovative job performance, namely, that there is a moderated mediating effect. In a high servant leadership environment, control-oriented employees are able to receive more support for their autonomy and more opportunities for development, build friendly relationships, and gain confidence in their competence [60]. This helps control-oriented employees recognize the value of their own work behavior and internalize the values and management rules recognized by their leaders and the collective. As the motivation of control-oriented employees is internalized, identified regulation and integrated regulation improve, thus enhancing the level of innovative job performance. In the context of low servant leadership, there is little room to enhance the degree to which the three basic psychological needs of control-oriented employees is met, the process of motivation internalization is stagnant, and identified regulation and integrated regulation do not occur [57]. The autonomous motivation of control-oriented employees is at a low level, making it difficult to stimulate their potential for innovation and ultimately leading to lower innovative job performance [49]. Therefore, this study concludes that when the level of servant leadership is higher, control-oriented individuals have enhanced identified regulation and integrated regulation, thus improving innovative job performance. When the level of servant leadership is low, control-oriented individuals have lower identified regulation and lower integrated regulation, resulting in lower innovative job performance. In order to test two specific paths for servant leaders to stimulating control-oriented employees' innovative potential and improving their innovative job performance, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 3a (H3a).** *The interaction effect of control orientation and servant leadership affects innovative job performance through the mediating effect of identified regulation.*

**Hypothesis 3b (H3b).** *The interaction effect of control orientation and servant leadership affects innovative job performance through the mediating effect of integrated regulation.*

In accordance with the above discussion, this study constructs a theoretical model of how employee control orientation affects innovative job performance (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants and Procedures

This study investigates in Jiangsu, Shanghai, and Anhui provinces, where high-tech industries are relatively developed, involving nine technology-intensive companies, covering a wide range of industries, such as high-tech and services, and the participants were supervisors and their direct subordinates in the companies' work teams. To reduce the effects of common method bias on the study's results, a paired approach to collect data from different sources was used. The answers to the questions about control orientation, autonomous motivation, and servant leadership were filled out by the team members, while the team members' innovative job performance was rated by the team supervisor. The research procedure consisted of the following steps: In the beginning, all participants were informed about the academic research use of the survey data and were ensured of full confidentiality of their responses, so as to receive honest responses. For each sample team, the researcher first explained the purpose of the study to the team supervisor, prepared a matched questionnaire based on the team member roster provided by the team supervisor, and then distributed the matched questionnaire. Finally, the researcher checked, screened, entered, and analyzed these paired questionnaires. A total of 80 supervisor questionnaires and 390 employee questionnaires were distributed to the work teams at these companies. After eliminating missing data with only supervisor or employee responses and excluding randomly answered questionnaires, the study ended up with a valid paired sample of 60 supervisor questionnaires (75.0% effectiveness) and 298 employee questionnaires (76.4% effectiveness). In the valid sample, supervisors had a management range of two to nine employees, with a mean of 4.97 employees. In terms of sex, 40.9% of the valid sample were male, and 59.1% were female. For age, the mean age was 27.61 years ( $SD = 6.879$ ). In terms of education, 53.4% had a bachelor's degree, and 95.6% had a college degree or above. The average length of experience in the organization was 4.34 years ( $SD = 6.303$ ), and the average length of experience with supervisors was 24.38 months ( $SD = 20.014$ ). The above information reflects a good degree of representativeness among the respondents in this study.



### 3.2. Measures

To ensure the validity of the measurements, scales with high reliability and validity were chosen for this study, and a Chinese version was created for all variables in our survey, following a translation and back-translation procedure. All questionnaires were scored on a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 7 for “very unlikely” to “very likely”, respectively).

First, general causal orientations were measured using the “General Causal Orientation Scale” developed by Deci et al. to measure employees’ levels of autonomy orientation and control orientation [5]. The original scale consisted of 17 scenarios, such as “You have been transferred to a new position in your organization”, and was designed with three responses, such as: “I want to know if the new job is interesting”; “Will this position pay more?”; and “What if I don’t think I am competent to do the job?”, representing autonomy orientation, control orientation, and impersonal orientation, respectively. The General Causal Orientation Questionnaire has been validated many times in international studies and has decent psychometric metrics. In the revised questionnaire prepared for this study, six scenarios from the original questionnaire were retained, and data measuring the level of control orientation were extracted. The Cronbach’s alpha of the control orientation entries was 0.846, showing good internal consistency.

Second, identified regulation and integrated regulation were measured using the section on autonomous motivation of the Work Motivation Scale [61]. This 12-item scale measures employees’ motivation in their current work situation, for example, “Because I enjoy the job (task) very much” and “Because the work being done (task) matches my values”. After the actual measurement, the overall Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.912, and the Cronbach’s alphas for identified regulation and integrated regulation were 0.886 and 0.904, respectively, both showing acceptable internal consistency.

Third, servant leadership was measured using a 7-item scale developed by Liden et al. [53]. The example entry is, “My leader will make my career development a priority”. Liden developed a scaled-down version of the Servant Leadership Questionnaire based on his 2008 development of it. Liden et al. used an independent sample to compare the 7-item and 28-item scales to test the validity of the shortened version of the scale [52]. The results showed that the correlation between the 28-item and 7-item composites was 0.97, and the Cronbach’s alphas for the 7-item and 28-item versions were 0.87 and 0.96, respectively. The short version of the scale was chosen for this study, and the Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.877 after the actual measurement.

Fourth, innovative job performance was measured using a 9-item scale developed by Janssen et al. [1]. This questionnaire was completed by the supervisors to evaluate their subordinates’ innovative job performance. An example entry is, “At work, the employees tend to propose original solutions”. The Cronbach’s alpha for the questionnaire was 0.922.

In the research literature on employee innovative job performance, variables such as employee sex, education, age, length of tenure in the organization, and length of experience working with their supervisors are commonly used as control variables that affect employee innovative job performance [62,63]. Therefore, we also used the above variables as control variables in this study, where we treated sex as a dummy variable, with “1” for men and “0” for women. We used four levels of education: below college, college, undergraduate, graduate, and higher. Age was measured in years, organizational experience was measured in years, and experience working with their supervisors was measured in months. Because the data analysis revealed a high correlation between employee age and length of tenure in the organization ( $r = 0.607$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), using them as control variables at the same time would run the risk of serious multicollinearity problems. Therefore, this study ultimately did not include employees’ length of tenure in the organization as a control variable, which is in line with a related study [64] that deals with the above issue.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics Analysis

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the main variables are presented in Table 1. Servant leadership was positively associated with identified regulation ( $r = 0.648, p < 0.01$ ) and integrated regulation ( $r = 0.510, p < 0.01$ ). Innovative job performance was positively associated with servant leadership ( $r = 0.550, p < 0.01$ ), identified regulation ( $r = 0.636, p < 0.01$ ), and integrated regulation ( $r = 0.498, p < 0.01$ ). Identified regulation was positively correlated with integrated regulation ( $r = 0.682, p < 0.01$ ). The correlation between control orientation and innovative job performance ( $r = 0.101, p > 0.05$ ) was not significant.

**Table 1.** Means, SDs, correlation coefficients, AVEs, and CR among the variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	CR
1. Age	27.72	7.011										
2. Gender	0.410	0.493	0.078									
3. Education	3.670	0.715	0.146 *	0.011								
4. WEWS	24.380	20.014	0.343 **	−0.039	0.024							
5. CO	4.510	0.931	0.102	−0.036	0.075	0.092	(0.695)					0.848
6. SL	4.586	1.137	−0.019	−0.060	0.104	0.116 *	0.066	(0.713)				0.878
7. IDR	4.668	1.285	−0.014	−0.073	0.093	0.079	0.055	0.648 **	(0.849)			0.885
8. INR	4.160	1.373	0.032	−0.049	0.098	0.006	0.008	0.510 **	0.682 **	(0.871)		0.904
9. IJP	4.893	0.959	0.047	−0.017	0.185 **	0.088	0.101	0.550 **	0.636 **	0.498 **	(0.773)	0.922

WEWS, working experience with supervisors; CO, control orientation; SL, servant leadership; IDR, identified regulation; INR, integrated regulation; IJP, innovative job performance. The square root of AVE is in parentheses on the diagonal. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

The VIF values of the independent variables in this study were all below 3, so there was no multicollinearity problem among the independent variables.

### 4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To ensure that the data had good discriminant validity, this study conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on five constructs: control orientation, servant leadership, identified regulation, integrated regulation, and innovative job performance. The results of the CFA using Mplus7 (see Table 2 for details) show that the fit of the five-factor model ( $\chi^2/df = 2.032 < 3$ , RMSEA =  $0.059 < 0.08$ , CFI =  $0.932 > 0.90$ , TLI =  $0.925 > 0.90$ , SRMR =  $0.042 < 0.08$ ) was statistically significantly better than the fit of the other nested models, and their matching indices were all at an acceptable level. This means that the five main constructs in this study had good discriminant validity. In addition, based on the hypothesized model, we calculated the CR and AVE for each variable which is shown in Table 1. Although one of the AVEs (i.e., control orientation) was slightly below 0.5, factor loadings were all higher than 0.6, and the square root of AVEs were all higher than correlation coefficients. CR were all higher than 0.8, so the results also supported the discriminant validity and construct validity for each variable.

**Table 2.** Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Five-factor model (A, B, C, D, E)	642.299	316	2.032	0.059	0.932	0.925	0.042
Four-factor model (A, B, C + D, E)	845.405	318	2.658	0.075	0.890	0.879	0.049
Three-factor model (A, B + C + D, E)	1141.177	321	3.555	0.093	0.829	0.813	0.060
Two-factor model (A, B + C + D + E)	1656.839	323	5.130	0.118	0.722	0.698	0.081
Single-factor model (A + B + C + D + E)	2274.753	324	7.021	0.142	0.594	0.560	0.122

A, control orientation; B, servant leadership; C, identified regulation; D, integrated regulation; E, innovative job performance.

As mentioned earlier, this study collected data on the above five constructs from two sources: employees and their supervisors, which mitigated the common method bias to

some extent, and the CFA of these constructs also showed them to have good discriminant validity, thus indicating in a sense that the common method bias in this study was not serious. To further test this question, Harman's single-factor test, which is currently the most commonly used approach in academia, was conducted on the data for the four constructs of control orientation, servant leadership, identified regulation, and integrated regulation, as self-reported by employees. In the unrotated principal component analysis of the four factors, the largest factor explained 35.483% of the variance, less than 50%.

This further indicates that the common method bias in this study is at a manageable level. In summary, the common method bias in this study was within an acceptable range.

#### 4.3. Hypothesis Testing

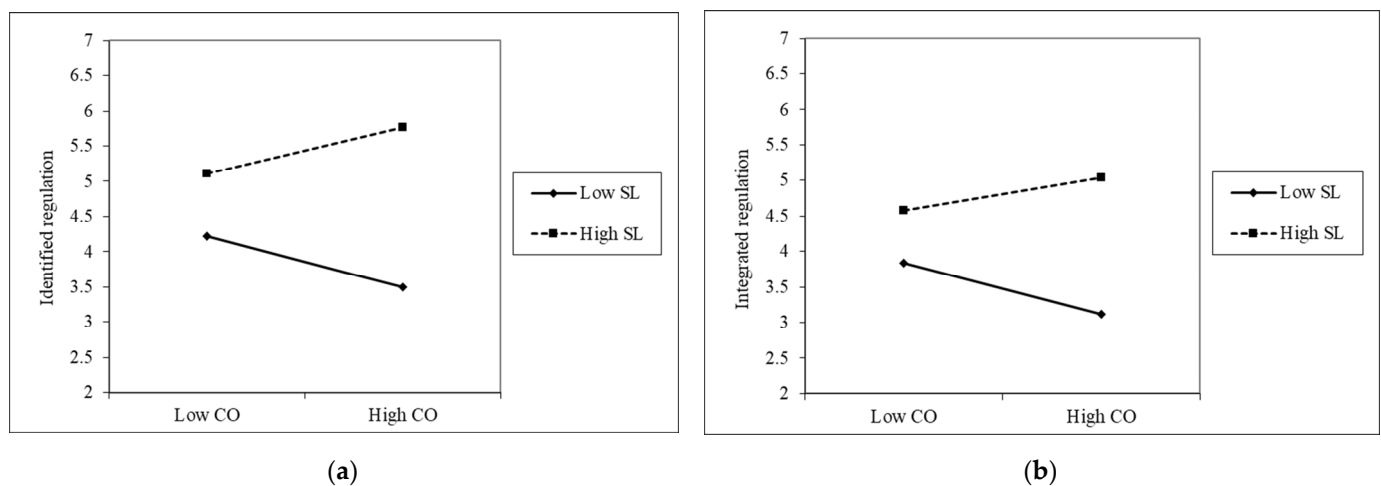
This study mainly used the SPSS macro program PROCESS developed by Hayes for hypothesis testing, based on 5000 bootstrap sampling tests at a 95% confidence interval level [65,66]. The results of the tests for each hypothesis are as follows. First, H1 proposed that identified regulation and integrated regulation are positively correlated with innovative job performance. The results indicated that identified regulation positively influences innovative job performance with  $\beta = 0.408$  and a 95% confidence interval [0.318, 0.498]; and integrated regulation positively influences innovative job performance with  $\beta = 0.087$  and a 95% confidence interval [0.003, 0.171]. Therefore, H1a and H1b are supported by the data.

Second, H2a and H2b proposed that servant leadership positively moderates the effects of control orientation on identified regulation and integrated regulation. The results showed that the interaction term of servant leadership and control orientation has a significant effect on identified regulation ( $\beta = 0.077$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and integrated regulation ( $\beta = 0.051$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). To further explore the moderating roles of different levels of servant leadership and visualize these interactions, this study further mapped the moderating roles and investigated the interactions using the Johnson–Neyman (1936) technique [67,68] (see Figures 2 and 3). Figure 2 shows that when servant leadership (SL) takes two different conditional values (i.e., Mean,  $\pm 1$  SD), employees' control orientation (CO) is positively related to identified regulation (IDR) and integrated regulation (INR) in the high servant leadership context, whereas it is negatively related to identified regulation and integrated regulation in the low servant leadership context (see Table 3 for details). From Figure 3a, the respective Johnson–Neyman points are 4.272 and 5.006, indicating that control orientation has a significant negative effect on identified regulation when servant leadership is less than 4.272, and a significant positive effect on identified regulation when servant leadership is greater than 5.006; from Figure 3b, the respective Johnson–Neyman points are 4.304 and 5.421, indicating that control orientation has a significant negative effect on integrated regulation when servant leadership is less than 4.304 and a significant positive effect on integrated regulation when servant leadership is greater than 5.421. Therefore, H2a and H2b are supported by the data.

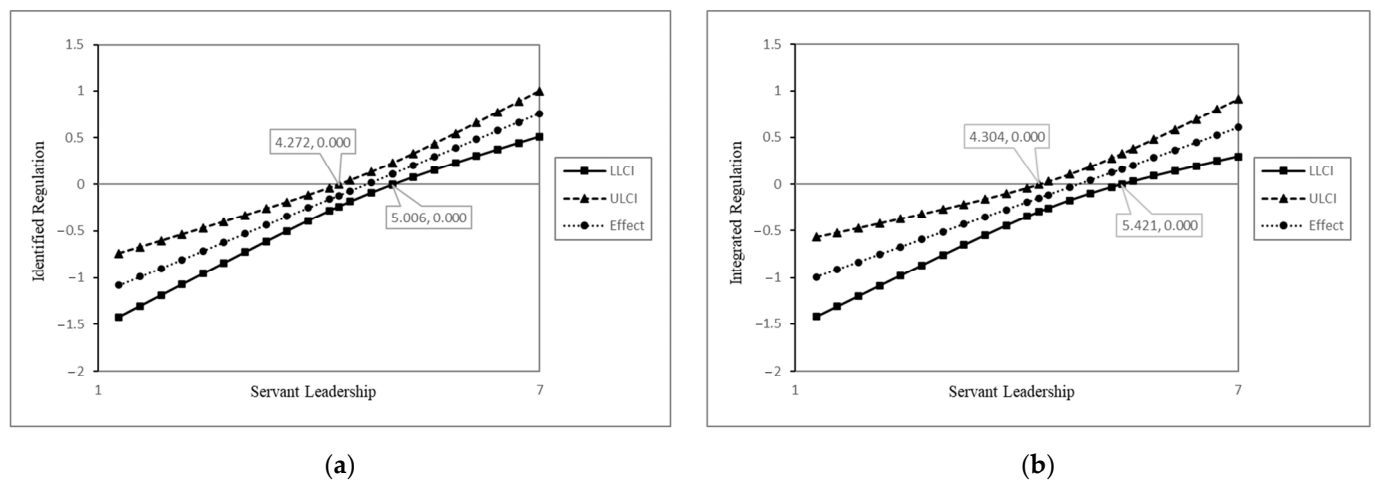
**Table 3.** The moderating role of SL on the relationship between CO and IDR/INR.

Dependent Variable	Moderator	Effect Size	SD	t Value	p	LLCI	ULCI	Moderating Role Size	t Value
IDR	Low SL	−0.384	0.083	−4.638	0.000	−0.547	−0.221	0.322	6.705
	High SL	0.347	0.075	4.599	0.000	0.198	0.495		
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.497							
	F	96.929							
INR	Low SL	−0.388	0.104	−3.743	0.000	−0.591	−0.184	0.280	4.672
	High SL	0.249	0.094	2.642	0.009	0.064	0.435		
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.312							
	F	44.347							

SL, servant leadership; IDR, identified regulation; INR, integrated regulation; CO, control orientation.



**Figure 2.** (a) The moderating effect of SL on the relationship between CO and IDR; (b) The moderating effect of SL on the relationship between CO and INR.



**Figure 3.** (a) Relationship between CO and IDR under different levels of SL. For SL scores below 4.272, CO is negatively correlated with IDR; For SL scores above 5.006, CO is positively correlated with IDR; (b) Relationship between CO and INR under different levels of SL. For SL scores below 4.304, CO is negatively correlated with INR; For SL scores above 5.421, CO is positively correlated with INR.

Third, the mediated moderation of servant leadership on the relationship between control orientation and innovative job performance is shown in Table 4. H3a proposed that the interaction between control orientation and servant leadership affects innovative job performance through the mediating effect of identified regulation. The results indicate that the mediated moderation is significant, with  $\beta = 0.131$  and a 95% confidence interval [0.077, 0.197]. For each additional unit of servant leadership, the effect of employee control orientation on innovative job performance through identified regulation increases by 0.131 units; therefore, H3a is supported by the data. H3b shows that the interaction between control orientation and servant leadership affects innovative job performance through the mediating effect of integrated regulation. The results indicate that the mediated moderation is not significant, with  $\beta = 0.024$  and a 95% confidence interval [−0.005, 0.058]. With an increase in servant leadership, the effect of employee control orientation on innovative job performance through integrated regulation is not significant. Therefore, H3b is not supported by the data.

**Table 4.** The mediated moderation of SL on the relationship between CO and IJP.

Path	Moderator	Conditional Indirect Effect				Mediated Moderation		
		Effect Size	SD	LLCI	ULCI	Effect Size	LLCI	ULCI
Path 1	Low SL	−0.157	0.040	−0.239	−0.082	0.1312	0.0768	0.2000
	High SL	0.142	0.045	0.067	0.239			
Path 2	Low SL	−0.034	0.023	−0.084	0.006	0.0243	−0.005	0.0572
	High SL	0.022	0.016	−0.004	0.058			
R <sup>2</sup>					0.4165			
F					69.9268			

Path 1: CO → IDR → IJP; Path 2: CO → INR → IJP. CO, control orientation; SL, servant leadership; IDR, identified regulation; INR, integrated regulation; IJP, innovative job performance.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Main Findings of the Study

Through the lens of self-determination theory, this study dissects the impact of servant leadership on control-oriented employees' motivation internalization processes and explores the organizational contextual boundary conditions for stimulating innovation among control-oriented employees. We constructed and validated the moderating roles of servant leadership in the motivation internalization of control-oriented employees and the transmission mechanisms of identified regulation and integrated regulation on innovative job performance. The main findings obtained were as follows. First, the inconsistency of the relationship between control orientation and innovative job performance is related to contextual factors [6,9]. This study verified that the relationship between control orientation and innovative job performance is not significant in the absence of theoretical boundaries [7].

Second, autonomous motivation formed by the motivation internalization is a source of control-oriented employees' innovative potential. Hypothesis 1 was supported by data indicating that autonomous motivation positively predicts innovative job performance, where both identified regulation and integrated regulation are positively associated with innovative job performance. When individuals identify with the value of the activity in which they are engaged, or fully internalize that value, it is expressed through positive individual behavior, resulting in higher innovative job performance [12].

Third, in organizational contexts, servant leadership can activate the process of control-oriented employees' motivation internalization. Hypothesis 2 was supported by data indicating that servant leadership positively moderates the relationship between control orientation and autonomous motivation. That is, in the context of a higher level of servant leadership, employees' motivation internalization process is activated, the controlled motivation of control-oriented employees is transformed into autonomous motivation, and identified regulation and integrated regulation are enhanced. In the context of lower levels of servant leadership, employees' motivation internalization process is not activated, and the motivation of control-oriented employees remains more controlled than autonomous; thus, the degree of identified regulation and integrated regulation is lower.

Fourth, motivation internalization deepens from identified regulation to integrated regulation, requiring a higher level of servant leadership. As shown in Figure 3a,b, the effect of identified regulation begins to be significant when servant leadership is higher than 5.006, and the effect of integrated regulation begins to be significant when servant leadership is higher than 5.421. Therefore, the internalization of integrated regulation is more difficult to achieve, and the process of motivation internalization from identified to integrated requires stronger external influence. On the other hand, as the level of servant leadership decreases, the decrease in employees' integrated regulation precedes the decrease in identified regulation. The externalization of motivation due to the external environment (i.e., disruption of motivation autonomy by the external environment), which begins with a decrease in integrated regulation, is the reverse of the process of motivation internalization.



Fifth, servant leadership enhances the identified regulation of control-oriented employees to facilitate the process of motivation internalization, thereby improving their innovative job performance. Hypothesis 3a was supported by data indicating that the interaction between control orientation and servant leadership can affect innovative job performance through the mediating effect of identified regulation.

The hypothesis 3b that the interaction of control orientation and servant leadership affects innovative job performance through the mediating effect of integrated regulation is, however, not supported. This may be because, first, integrated regulation is the most autonomous type of motivation on the continuum of motivation internalization, representing a manifestation of the complete internalization of the values, and the conditions for its generation and change are more demanding [47,69]. Second, leadership, as a situational factor in the work field, may not have a comprehensive, continuous, or long-term impact on the individual, and is not sufficient to profoundly alter the fundamental values that arise under the long-term influence of multiple environmental factors (e.g., family of origin, educational experience, cultural differences, etc.) [70–72]. Therefore, it makes sense that integrated regulation is not significant as a mediating path that affects innovative job performance.

### *5.2. Theoretical Implications and Practical Implications*

The main theoretical contributions of this study are as follows. First, it effectively explains the innovative potential of control orientation as a personal trait from the perspective of self-determination theory, further opens the “black box” between control orientation and innovative job performance, and enriches the research on the relationship between the two while explaining the inconsistency in the findings of existing research on the relationship between them [7] and verifying the importance of contextual factors in elucidating the relationship between control orientation and innovative job performance.

Second, this study, which couples control orientation with servant leadership, expands the interaction between personal employee traits and leadership style, explores the internal logic of servant leadership’s impact on control-oriented employees, and somewhat enriches the research literature related to the effectiveness of servant leadership.

Third, this study extends the study of motivation internalization to some extent by exploring the activation threshold of motivation internalization and the different degrees of motivation internalization in control-oriented employees in different levels of servant leadership situations [5]. This helps to clarify the relationship between control orientation and identified regulation and integrated regulation.

Fourth, this study validates the motivation internalization process from identification to integration in OIT, and also validates the idea that the reverse motivation internalization process begins with the disruption of integration regulation [47].

The main practical implications of this study are as follows. First, organizations should deepen their understanding of control orientation as a personality trait and recognize the potential for innovation of control-oriented employees. The specific external manifestations of control-oriented employees should be further clarified, and information concerning the level of control orientation of employees should be collected and assessed in order to stimulate their autonomy in a targeted manner. This is conducive to enhancing employees’ capacity for innovation and enhancing the organization’s innovative vitality and innovation atmosphere.

Second, organizations should focus on enhancing the service consciousness of leaders at all levels, and on creating an organizational climate of autonomy and support [52]. Specifically, organizations can train leaders at all levels to understand the connotations, performance, and innovative potential of employees with a control orientation and enhance leaders’ awareness of service; instruct them to understand the level of employee control orientation on a regular basis through individual talks, group discussions, and questionnaires to more accurately grasp employees’ psychological needs; instruct them to promote an atmosphere of autonomy within the organization by providing educational

and training opportunities, encouraging participation in work decisions, optimizing the organization's internal learning and mobility systems, and creating platforms for exchange and communication.

Third, organizations should deepen their understanding of the process by which servant leadership facilitates control-oriented employees' motivation internalization [57] and clarify the essential role of identified regulation in stimulating control-oriented employees' potential for innovation. On the one hand, it is necessary to recognize and leverage the advantages of servant leadership and to shift the behavioral style of leaders at all levels to create an organizational context that is conducive to improved innovative job performance by employees. Leaders should be encouraged to be more attentive to and considerate of employees' needs and emotions, to be willing to empower and give direction and enlightenment at work to help them grow better, and to emphasize the importance of community and ethics [53]. On the other hand, it is important to be aware of the damage that lower levels of servant leadership can do to the autonomy of control-oriented employees, resulting in lower innovative job performance. It should be advocated that leaders at all levels should not ignore the three basic psychological needs of their subordinates, namely, the need for autonomy, the need for relatedness, and the need for competence, and should strive to improve management flexibility and give employees a certain degree of autonomy in their work; actively portray the vision and mission of the organization to employees; cultivate employees' sense of identification with the organization's goals and their sense of belonging in the organization and the team; attach importance to the cultivation of employees' work competence; give timely positive feedback; and enhance employees' self-confidence. The positive role of identified regulation should be harnessed comprehensively from multiple perspectives to better stimulate the potential for innovation of control-oriented employees.

### *5.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

This study had several limitations. First, a cross-sectional study design was used. On the one hand, a cross-sectional study design cannot strictly satisfy all the conditions for causal inference between constructs, and thus the present study suffers from a deficiency in terms of persuasive validation of the causal relationship between constructs. On the other hand, the cross-sectional study design meant that data on the four variables of servant leadership, control orientation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation were taken from employees' self-reports at the same point in time, making it susceptible to the problem of common method bias, which is difficult to eliminate completely, although the present study attempted to address this problem by using Harman's single-factor test. Future studies should adopt a longitudinal research design, collecting data through multiple time points and sources to further reduce the negative impact of both issues.

Second, this study measured servant leadership using an employee assessment questionnaire. Because this method only reflects employees' self-perceived leadership styles, its objectivity is inevitably limited. In future research, a more valid measurement model for assessing servant leadership should be adopted, such as a combination of employee assessments and supervisor interviews.

Third, the autonomy and impersonal orientations were not included in this study. They may have different effects on motivation internalization. Future research should therefore include the autonomy orientation and impersonal orientation as control variables in studies related to stimulating innovation among control-oriented employees.

Fourth, this study did not specifically explore which specific dimensions of servant leadership have a significant impact on control-oriented employees' motivation internalization. Therefore, future research can use servant leadership as a latent variable in seven dimensions (i.e., emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowerment, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically) and specifically compare the different effects of each dimension on innovative job performance.

Fifth, this study initially explored the innovative job performance of control-oriented employees from the perspective of motivation internalization alone. Future research could be based on this to further explore how to stimulate innovation by employees under multiple motivations.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the perspective of self-determination theory, this study opens the “black box” between employee control orientation and innovative job performance which explains the inconsistency in the findings of existing research. To explore the external conditions for stimulating the innovative potential of control-oriented employees, this study couples control orientation with servant leadership, extends the interaction of employee personal traits and leadership style, and explores the positive impact of servant leadership on control-oriented employees. Moreover, we further examined the relationship between control orientation and employee’s autonomous motivation (i.e., identity regulation, integration regulation) in different levels of servant leadership situations, and identified the paths and contextual conditions for promoting control-oriented employees’ innovative job performance. Then, we constructed and validated the moderating role of servant leadership on the motivation internalization and the transmission mechanisms of identified regulation and integrated regulation on the innovative job performance.

The results show that control-oriented employee motivation internalization deepens from identity regulation to integration regulation, requiring a higher degree of servant leadership. This validates the OIT’s description of the motivation internalization process. Moreover, the interaction between control orientation and servant leadership can positively affect innovative job performance through the mediating role of identified regulation, but not through integrated regulation. Thus, servant leadership enhances control-oriented employees’ identified regulation to facilitate the process of motivation internalization and is a sustainable path to promote their innovative job performance.

These findings are useful for promoting healthy development and innovative job performance of control-oriented employees, and are relevant to sustainable human resource management.

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