



Research article

Perceived superior trust and organizational commitment among public employees: The mediating role of burnout and the moderating role of public service motivation

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ABSTRACT

The significance of trust as a vital element in the workplace, fostering a strong bond between leaders and their teams, and generating positive organizational outcomes is emphasized in this research. Leveraging the job demand-resource (JD-R) theory, the study employs a dual methodology: experimental (Studies 1 and 2) and field survey (Study 3), to investigate how trust perceived from superiors influences the organizational dedication of public sector employees. It also examines burnout's role as an intermediary and the influence of public service motivation (PSM) as a conditional factor. The key outcomes are: (1) enhanced organizational dedication can result from trust perceived from superiors; (2) this trust indirectly affects dedication through the lens of burnout; and (3) PSM plays a critical role in moderating the impact of perceived superior trust on organizational dedication. By elucidating the dynamic between perceived superior trust and organizational dedication, and its influence, this study presents novel strategies to boost organizational commitment among public employees.

1. Introduction

Trust refers to positive expectations for others' intentions or behaviors, as well as a willingness to show their vulnerability to others [1]. Interpersonal trust is hailed as a vital workplace resource [2], and trust between supervisors and subordinates serves as an essential component of a high-quality work relationship [3]. Studies showed that the effect of trust in the superior-subordinate relationship cannot be fully explained by subordinates demonstrating trust in their superiors [4]. Superior trust plays its role through subordinates' perception of trust [5], i.e., when subordinates feel trusted, they may change their attitudes and behaviors, including improved job performance, reduced counter behaviors, and lower willingness to leave [6–8]. Perceived trust refers to the perceived willingness of two parties to take risks, for example, when superiors assign their subordinates a task of considerable importance. As only superiors know whether they truly trust subordinates, it can only be considered “perceived superior trust” when subordinates perceive trust from their superiors [9].

As an important part of national governance, the public sector bears the burden of providing public services and allocating resources to the population. Improving the organizational commitment of public sector employees is the key to achieving efficient and

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high-quality public services [10]. In recent times, there has been a growing focus on the commitment of employees to their organizations and the various elements that influence it [11]. Superior trust perceived by individuals is reflected by perceived reliance and disclosure from superiors, whose help and support may minimize their work stress [12], which is an important positive work characteristic that explains organizational commitment in individuals [13]. Employees often view their superiors' support positively due to the trust and openness shared, leading to enhanced organizational commitment [14,15], creating a positive work atmosphere [16]. Thus, this study will investigate how perceived superior trust affects burnout via organizational commitment.

According to recent studies, public employees experience higher burnout [17], as well as decreased work engagement [18], owing to prolonged emotional exertion and occupational stress [19,20]. China's commitment to service-oriented governments may put higher demands on public employees in the new era, subjecting them to a mix of pressures including hefty workloads, performance reviews, a wealth of paperwork, as well as emotional labor of friendly interaction with the public [21,22]. Furthermore, burnout occurs when public employees are tense with their superiors [23], and are emotionally stressed due to the organizational setting of high power distance in Chinese Confucian culture and the traditional hierarchical concept of "superiority and inferiority" in organizations [24]. The well-being, both physical and psychological, along with the interpersonal dynamics and job efficiency of public sector workers, suffer due to these factors [25,26]. This leads to lower administrative efficiency, poor service quality, and a negative image for the government in the public sector.

The JD-R theory categorizes workplace conditions into two segments: job demands and job resources. Job demands are defined as elements of the job environment that consume energy, including aspects like workload, complexity of tasks, and uncertainty in roles [27]. On the other hand, job resources refer to components that support individuals in fulfilling their fundamental psychological needs and in attaining organizational objectives [28], such as social support, autonomy, and work value [29]. In situations where work resources are scarce, individuals experience continuous energy depletion at work, which will lead to burnout [30] and ultimately reduce organizational commitment [31]. Individuals with more resources at work (for example, social support and positive relationships with supervisors) may feel instrumentally and emotionally supported, mitigating the influence of job demands on employee burnout [32], and more energy to be committed to their organization [33]. As subordinates' perceived trust reflects superiors' trust in them [9], perceived superior trust functions as an expression of job resources. According to the findings of this study, burnout mediates between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

In the public sector, as an intrinsic altruistic motivation to contribute to society and benefit others, public service motivation encourages public employees to make better use of job resources to produce high levels of work engagement [27]. Public sector employees, depending on their level of Public Service Motivation (PSM), show varied reactions to their everyday job demands and resources. Those with higher PSM levels tend to be more committed to public interests, which drives them to effectively utilize job resources and achieve superior work outcomes [27]. Consequently, this research aims to explore how PSM influences the interplay between perceived trust from superiors and organizational commitment.

The significance of the study is as follows: Firstly, this study contributes to the expansion of the JDR framework by focusing on public employees' perceived trust in superiors as a key innovation indicator of organizational commitment. Several recent studies have integrated leadership into the JD-R model [34], including healthy leadership [35], transformational leadership [36], and authentic leadership [37]. Although these studies draw our attention to the importance of superior leaders in the workplace, we know very little about how superior trust affects employees' organizational commitment, especially employees' perceived superior trust. We intend to address these questions in this study. Additionally, this research delves into the role of burnout in the dynamic between perceived trust from superiors and organizational commitment. There is limited research within the JD-R framework that examines the effects of both negative and positive factors on organizational commitment. Anchored in the JD-R model, this study investigates how job resources influence organizational commitment, aiming to shed light on the direct impact of job resources on organizational outcomes. Meanwhile, some researchers believe that burnout is an antecedent of organizational commitment, and burnout can reduce individuals' attachment to the organization [38,39]).

Research also indicates that organizational commitment can have an impact on burnout [40,41]. This study aims to elucidate the relationship between organizational commitment and burnout, providing a mediating explanatory path to understanding perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, and helping to open the "black box" between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment. Furthermore, a key contribution of this study pertains to the influence of public service motivation. Prior research has demonstrated that employees with a high level of public service motivation are more capable of managing their job demands and averting burnout [42], suggesting that organizations should strive to promote employees' public service motivation [27]. Yet, certain scholars argue that public service motivation might lead to negative outcomes in public organizations [43]. For instance, employees with higher public service motivation have been linked to lower job satisfaction, attributed to heightened stress levels [44]. Therefore, we tested whether public service motivation might be more closely associated with organizational commitment among employees with high job resources and examined the boundary conditions that might improve organizational commitment.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Perceived superior trust and organizational commitment

Organizational commitment refers to the psychological reaction that individuals have to stay in the organization due to the increasing opportunity cost of leaving the organization caused by a growth in their single inputs to the organization [45]. It reflects the identity of individuals to their organization and determines their organizational commitment and desire to resign [46]. Organizational commitment encompasses three distinct types: affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment, as

identified by Ref. [47]. Affective commitment emphasizes individuals' emotional attachment to their organization, representing that they want to stay at their organization, and accept and uphold the organizational goals and values. Normative commitment is characterized by a feeling of obligation to remain with an organization and the intention to reciprocate the benefits received from it [48]. Continuance commitment means that individuals have to stay at the organization due to increasing investment over time [49]. Most scholars regarded organizational commitment as a link between individuals and their organization, with a significant impact on their work behaviors and attitudes such as willingness to quit [50], job performance [51], and overall job satisfaction [52].

JD-R theory emphasizes that individual well-being can be explained from two perspectives of job resources and demands [30]. Research conducted by Albrecht et al. [53] revealed a positive correlation between job resources and organizational commitment, and superior support as an important work characteristic in explaining organizational commitment among subordinates [54]. Compared with reductions in job demands, an increase in satisfaction with the organizational environment promotes organizational commitment more effectively, that is, superiors need to create organizational environments where their subordinates' contributions at work are supported and recognized [55]. Due to the inherent power distance between superiors and subordinates in the public sector, subordinates have limited access to autonomy and are aware of the hard-won trust received from their superiors. Therefore, they develop a greater sense of responsibility and obligation for the trust received and are more motivated to make efforts to reciprocate the trust from their superiors as a means of maintaining a good relationship with them [56].

Based on the above analysis, this study suggested that perceived superior trust increased individuals' organizational commitment, which can be explained by three reasons. Firstly, when perceiving trust from their superiors, subordinates are more likely to make a positive evaluation of their relationship with their superiors, increasing their emotional connection to the organization. This perceived trust contributes to a supportive environment where a strong link between subordinates' goals and values and the organization is fostered, which poses a positive effect on subordinates' organizational commitment [14,15]. Secondly, superiors who highly trust their subordinates usually affirm their abilities and recognize their value in the organization to meet their needs for self-efficacy and a sense of belonging [57], making subordinates feel obligated to contribute to the organization to repay the trust of their superiors. In this sense, perceived superior trust fosters a high organizational commitment among subordinates. Thirdly, the superior-subordinate relationship is in essence a social relationship in which the former relies on and shares information with the latter, while the latter contributes to the organization's success. This exchange relationship minimizes work-related tensions [12], enabling security for subordinates at work, which will increase their continuous commitment to work and further give up the desire to quit [58]. Therefore, this study proposed the hypothesis below.

Hypothesis 1. Perceived superior trust is positively correlated with subordinates' organizational commitment.

2.2. The mediating role of burnout

As a psychological syndrome caused by long-term exposure to work stress [59], burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficiency. Among these characteristics, emotional exhaustion is defined as a state of persistent and intense fatigue; cynicism as a depersonalized attitude away from work or others; and low professional effectiveness as lack of accomplishment or a sense of incompetence at work [25]. Burnout reduces productivity and causes individuals to want to quit or to quit promptly [60]. This study assumes that superior trust reduces burnout among public employees for the following: First of all, based on the JD-R framework, perceived superior trust can be treated as a resource at employees' disposal. The trust of superiors often implies emotional support for subordinates, and employees will be more likely to think that their work goals can be achieved with the help of superiors, which can help employees effectively reduce the cost of completing work requirements and deal with the negative effects of work pressure [28,61]. Employees' perceived trust from their superiors may also imply a psychological contract between them, such as allowing employees to grow within the organization and perform their duties effectively without fear of retaliation from superiors [62]). In other words, when an employee realizes that his superior trusts him, he feels more positive about his job [63]. Perceived superior trust also means a good relationship between superiors and inferiors, and a relationship with higher quality buffer the effects of work overload on burnout [64].

In addition, when employees believe that their supervisors trust them, it indicates that employees are valued by the organization, which promotes employees' sense of value in the organization, thereby enhancing employees' organizational-based self-esteem and self-efficacy [7], increasing work engagement [65]. When employees consider themselves important and experience high levels of self-worth in the workplace, they strive to maintain this expectation [7]. At the same time, social exchange theory holds that when employees perceive trust from their superiors, they often feel a sense of duty to reciprocate this trust, as suggested by Ref. [66]. That is, employees who perceive the trust of their leaders will be psychologically affected, to have a sense of responsibility and mission to the superior and the organization, "people die for the confidant" [67], it is this desire for leader recognition that makes them more engaged in work. This increases work input.

Based on the above analysis, this study predicted that a high level of perceived superior trust can reduce burnout among public employees and proposed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. Perceived superior trust was significantly negatively related to burnout.

Based on the JD-R theory [68], it has been shown that there is a positive, albeit slight, correlation between exhaustion and disengagement. That is, burnout links resources to work outcomes and has an impact on organizational commitment [33]. Highly burned-out employees are less likely to be committed to their organizations when they are exhausted or feel increasingly unable to adequately respond to their work demands [33]. And the emotional resources that are gradually depleted as employees cope with the

stresses and professional challenges they endure at work can lead to emotional stress [69] and reduce positive feelings and identification with the organization [70]. It also distracts employees [71], which affects their loyalty and commitment to the organization [31]. In fact, employees with high burnout sometimes develop an indifferent and distant attitude toward others. Such attitudes may lead to a deterioration in the relationship between employees and their colleagues and superiors [72]. Consequently, this diminishes the employees' feeling of connection and identification with their organization [73]. Building on this analysis, the study puts forward the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3. burnout is negatively correlated with Organizational commitment.

Based on the above analysis, perceived superior trust encourages public employees to develop a sense of responsibility and obligation to their superiors, increase trust in them, and establish a positive working relationship with them. In this way, job burnout is alleviated [74] to enable employees to have time and energy to repay their superiors relying on them to complete important tasks and share information, increase organizational commitment among subordinates, and motivate them to work for the organization. Therefore, this study proposed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4. Burnout mediates between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

2.3. The moderating role of PSM

PSM is defined as an inclination where individuals are primarily or uniquely motivated by the values and goals of public institutions and organizations [75]. It represents a broad altruistic motivation centered on serving the public and their interests, as outlined by Rainey & Steinbauer (1999), Liu et al. (2008), and [76]. PSM combines various motivations that encourage individuals to embrace social responsibility and contribute to societal welfare.

Originally, the JD-R model primarily focused on the attributes of the work environment. However, acknowledging the widely held psychological view that human behavior is shaped by the interplay of personal and environmental factors, personal resources have increasingly been incorporated into the JD-R model [77]. Therefore, resources can be divided into organizational resources (eg, leadership, and supportive policies), resources related to the job itself (diversity and social interaction), and other personal resources (eg, abilities, and experience). PSM is one of the personal resources [78]. Based on this, the role of PSM as a resource is validated in two competition models. Public service motivation serves as both a fundamental requirement for employee job engagement and a moderating factor in the relationship between resource/challenge stressors and employee job engagement. Strengthening employees' personal resources may be a fruitful intervention that can reduce burnout [79] and effectively improve employees work performance [80]. Simultaneously, research by some scholars, such as [16]; indicates that personal resources can influence the role played by organizational commitment. Therefore, this study argues that public service motivation as a personal resource closely related to work status, can moderate the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

For one thing, a "lever" affecting organizational commitment lies in subordinates' obligations and mission, and individuals possessing a high level of PSM are more inclined to make sacrifices for the benefit of their organization and more effectively internalize the significance of the organization's goals and mission [81]. It means that they are committed to organizational goals and interests and can recognize their value in maintaining the organizational vision [82]. In this case, when employees perceive trust from their superiors, employees with high PSM may feel that organizational goals are more aligned with their personal values, thus increasing organizational identification and further strengthening organizational commitment. For another, as a resource closely related to work status, public service motivation is manifested as public employees have a strong desire to serve the organization, contributing to its success, and committed to serving the public interest [83]. When employees have strong public service motivation, they are likely to show higher motivation and commitment to work when they perceive trust from their superiors. This is because trust stimulates employees' intrinsic motivation [84], making them more willing to work hard to achieve organizational goals and social values, further strengthening employees' organizational commitment. Building on the preceding analysis, this research puts forth the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 5. PSM can moderate the correlation between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, i.e., compared

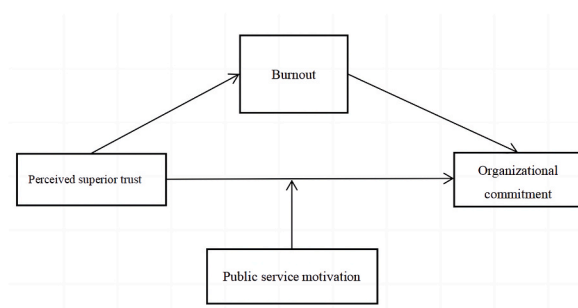


Fig. 1. Research model.

with a low PSM, a high one will boost the positive relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

To summarize, this research developed a model (illustrated in Fig. 1) aimed at investigating the mediating and moderating mechanisms of perceived superior trust predicting the public employees organizational commitment, to provide ideas for improving public employees organizational commitment.

3. STUDY 1 an experimental study of perceived superior trust on organizational commitment, burnout

Study 1, employing a scenario-based experimental design, involved a sample of public-sector employees. In this study, we aimed to assess whether manipulating perceived trust from superiors would lead to increases in organizational commitment and burnout, thereby testing hypotheses H1 and H2.

3.1. Participants

Participants for the experiment were recruited via WJX, an online platform in China akin to Amazon MTurk. The reliability of data gathered from platforms like MTurk has been established [85]. After discarding responses from non-public sector employees, those with identical answers to scale questions, and responses completed in less than 200 s, we obtained 112 valid responses, resulting in a 93.33 % valid response rate. Among these participants, 56.3 % were male, 88.4 % held a bachelor's degree, and the average age was 35.4 years (SD = 5.06).

3.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly allocated to either the perceived superior trust group (n = 57) or the control group (n = 55). Both groups were given a piece of material to read.

For the manipulation of perceived superior trust, those in the perceived superior trust group received a descriptive narrative about a public employee named Chen, who experienced a high level of trust from their superior. Participants were instructed to immerse themselves in the scenario, imagining themselves as Chen. This narrative was adapted from manipulative materials used in previous studies [86,87] and combined with items from the Perceived Superior Trust Scale [88], such as "My immediate leader is willing to have me alone be responsible for projects important to him/her". The content of the manipulated material is described as follows: "In a farmer's market improvement project, I researched and proposed a solution to the farmer's market improvement process. My superiors were very satisfied with my proposal and gave me exclusive responsibility for the work. Then, I successfully completed the evacuation of merchants and made an important contribution to the safety and security of farmers' food."

In the control group, participants were asked to read a paragraph of material about something that was done under the guidance and direction of superior to complete a work task. The word count of the material was the same as the material in the manipulation group. The content of the control group material was described as follows, "In a farmers' market remediation effort, my supervisor needed me to research and propose solutions to the farmers' market remediation process, and the supervisor revised my proposed solution several times before the supervisor made the final determination. Then, the superior led me to carry out the remediation work together."

Once participants finished the reading task, they were requested to recall and describe in detail the content of the material they had read. Following this, they completed a questionnaire that encompassed measures of organizational commitment, burnout, manipulation checks, as well as demographic variables of the participants.

3.3. Measures

Burnout. Burnout was measured using the Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schutte et al., 2000). This instrument has seen extensive application among public employees in China, including healthcare workers [89], police officers [90], and teachers [91]. It has been demonstrated to possess satisfactory reliability and validity (Wu et al., 2007). The 15-item scale revised by Ref. [92]; MBI-GS, was used in this study to measure burnout, with representative items such as "My current job makes me feel physically and mentally exhausted" and "I am not as enthusiastic about the job as before". The assessment employed a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (daily), with the scale demonstrating a high level of internal consistency, as indicated by an alpha coefficient (α) of 0.968.

Organizational commitment. In this study, organizational commitment was assessed using the 24-item scale revised by Meyer & Allen (1997). This scale includes items like "I am delighted to spend the rest of my career in this organization" and "It is difficult for me to leave the organization immediately even if I want to resign". A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was utilized for the measurement. The scale demonstrated a high level of internal consistency, evidenced by an alpha coefficient (α) of 0.902.

Manipulation inspection: Perceived superior trust. The 10-item scale developed by Ref. [88] was employed in this study to measure perceived superior trust, with representative items such as "My immediate leader is willing to have me alone be responsible for projects important to him/her" and "My immediate leader explains to me without reservation when I have doubts at work". The assessment utilized a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 signifies 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicates 'strongly agree'. The scale exhibited a high internal consistency, as denoted by an alpha coefficient (α) of 0.907.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Manipulation testing

Initially, the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation was evaluated. T-tests showed that participants in the manipulated group reported significantly higher levels of perceived superior trust (Mean = 3.54, Standard Deviation = 0.38) compared to those in the control group (Mean = 2.52, Standard Deviation = 0.41), $t(112) = 13.00$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.58$, Effect Size (r) = 0.79. Hence, Study 1 successfully manipulated perceived superior trust.

3.4.2. Hypothesis testing

For hypothesis analysis, a t -test was employed. The results indicated that participants in the perceived superior trust group demonstrated significantly higher organizational commitment (Mean = 3.70, Standard Deviation = 0.41) compared to those in the control group (Mean = 2.96, Standard Deviation = 0.47), $t(112) = 8.95$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.68$, Effect Size (r) = 0.64, as depicted in Fig. 2. Consequently, hypothesis 1 was supported by these findings.

Participants in the perceived superior trust group had significantly lower levels of burnout ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.56$) than participants in the control group ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(112) = -15.35$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.90$, Effect Size(r) = 0.82. As shown in Fig. 3. Thus hypothesis 2 was tested.

4. STUDY 2 experimental study to investigate the regulatory effect of PSM

To elucidate the moderating effect of PSM, we explored how the interaction between perceived superior trust and PSM influences organizational commitment. Study 2, like Study 1, was a scenario-based experiment involving public-sector employees. In this study, we manipulated both perceived superior trust and PSM to examine if their combined interaction would lead to an increase in organizational commitment, thereby testing H5.

4.1. Participants

315 public sector employees from various regions across China were recruited to participate in an experiment conducted through WJX, an online survey platform. After filtering out responses from non-public sector employees, responses with identical answers to scale questions, and those completed in under 200 s, a total of 300 valid responses were obtained, resulting in a 95.24 % valid response rate. Among these participants, 54.7 % were female, 87.0 % were aged 45 years or younger, 74.0 % held a bachelor's degree, and 26.0 % had attained a graduate degree.

4.2. Procedure

The experiment employed a 2×2 two-factor between-subjects design. Initially, all participants completed a questionnaire measuring Public Service Motivation (PSM). Based on their PSM scores, the top 30 % ($n = 90$) were categorized as the high PSM group. This group was further randomly divided into high ($n = 45$) and low ($n = 45$) perceived superior trust groups. Similarly, the bottom 30 % ($n = 90$) were designated as the low PSM group, which was also split into high ($n = 45$) and low ($n = 45$) perceived superior trust groups. All four groups were instructed to read a specific piece of material.

For the manipulation of perceived superior trust, participants were divided into high and low perceived superior trust categories. The procedure for this manipulation was consistent with the one used in Study 1.

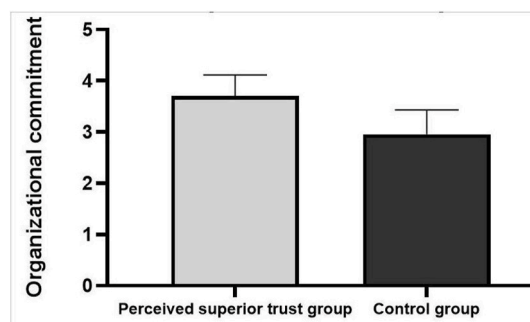


Fig. 2. The effect of perceived superior trust on organizational commitment
PST = Perceived superior trust; OC = Organizational commitment.

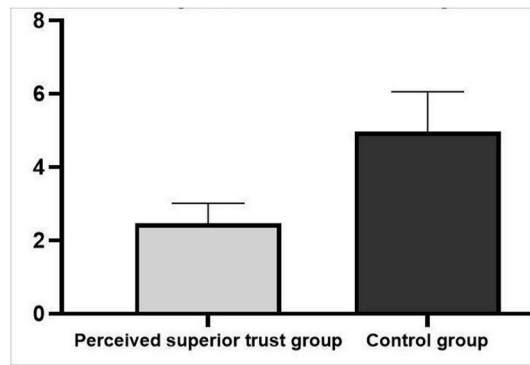


Fig. 3. The effect of perceived superior trust on burnout
 PST = Perceived superior trust; BT = burnout.

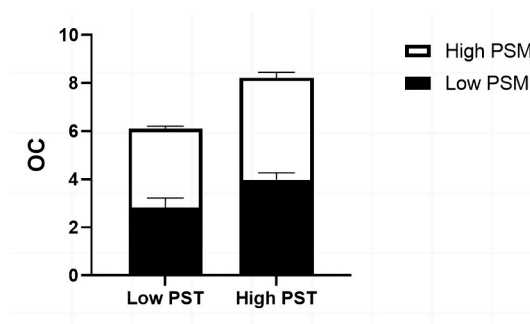


Fig. 4. Moderating Role of PSM (Study 2)
 PST = Perceived superior trust; OC = Organizational commitment; PSM = Public service motivation.

4.3. Measures

1. Perceived superior trust. This was measured in the same way as in Study 1. The internal consistency of the scale, indicated by an alpha coefficient (α), was 0.977.
2. Organizational commitment. Also consistent with Study 1, this scale had an internal consistency coefficient α of 0.914.
3. Public service motivation. To measure this, the study used the 18-item scale developed by Wright (2013). Representative items included “I am interested in public programs that benefit the country or society” and “I am willing to make great sacrifices for public welfare.” A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used, with the scale’s internal consistency coefficient α being 0.977.

4.4. Results

4.4.1. Manipulation testing

The initial step in Study 2 involved testing the manipulation of the experiment. The *t*-test outcomes revealed significant scoring differences: In the high Public Service Motivation (PSM) group, participants scored notably higher (Mean = 4.62, Standard Deviation = 0.25) than those in the low PSM group (Mean = 2.93, Standard Deviation = 0.49), with a *t*-value of -23.185, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s *d* at 4.34, and an Effect Size (r) of 0.91.

Additionally, participants in the high perceived superior trust group registered significantly greater scores (Mean = 4.37, Standard

Table 1

Analysis of variance results (N = 180).

	Experimental grouping				Mean Difference					
	High PST × High PSM(A)	High PST × Low PSM(B)	Low PST × High PSM(C)	Low PST × Low PSM(D)	A-B	A-C	A-D	B-C	B-D	C-D
OC	4.25 (0.22)	3.98 (0.29)	3.27 (0.11)	2.83 (0.39)	0.27***	0.97***	1.42***	0.71***	1.15***	0.45***

Note: $n = 180$. Table $\times p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

PST represents for perceived superior trust, OC for organizational commitment, PSM for public service motivation.

Deviation = 0.45) compared to those in the low trust group (Mean = 1.92, Standard Deviation = 0.38), with $t(180) = -38.941$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 5.88$, and Effect Size (r) = 0.95.

These findings indicated the successful manipulation of both PSM and perceived superior trust in Study 2.

4.4.2. Hypothesis testing

Descriptive statistics and ANOVA, accompanied by post hoc analysis, were applied to the four experimental groups, with the outcomes presented in Table 1. These results indicated significant differences in organizational commitment among the groups ($F = 255.033$, $p < 0.001$).

Specifically, for participants with low Public Service Motivation (PSM), those in the high perceived superior trust group showed significantly higher organizational commitment (Mean = 3.98, Standard Deviation = 0.28) compared to the low trust group (Mean = 2.83, Standard Deviation = 0.39), $t(90) = -15.925$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 3.39$, Effect Size(r) = 0.86. In the high PSM bracket, the high trust group's organizational commitment (Mean = 4.25, Standard Deviation = 0.22) also differed significantly from the low trust group (Mean = 3.27, Standard Deviation = 0.11), $t(90) = -26.249$, $p = 0.000 < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 5.63$, Effect Size(r) = 0.94, as illustrated in Fig. 4. Consequently, Hypothesis 5 was supported by these findings.

5. STUDY 3 full model questionnaire research

Studies 1 and 2 offered robust causal evidence regarding the influence of perceived superior trust on organizational commitment and burnout. They also examined the moderating role of Public Service Motivation (PSM) in the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment. While both studies affirmed the internal validity of the theoretical framework, their external validity was somewhat constrained. To address this limitation and broaden the external applicability of our findings, Study 3 was conducted. This study aimed to test the comprehensive research model utilizing a multi-source questionnaire, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the results.

5.1. Participants and procedure

This survey was conducted based on the level and position nature of public employees. Considering the convenient access to questionnaire data, the training sessions for public employees at the Chongqing University were selected as the main platform for selecting study objects. A total of 473 electronic questionnaires were distributed to public employees in various locations, including Tianjin and Chengdu. From these, 450 valid responses were obtained, resulting in a 95.1 % valid response rate. Responses were screened for missing data, identical answers to scale questions, and overly short completion times (less than 200 s), and these were excluded from the analysis. The survey process emphasized anonymity and voluntariness, and a strict confidentiality system was implemented to ensure the reliability and objectivity of the data. Detailed demographics and characteristics of the survey participants are provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Sample information (N = 450).

Variables	Category	Quantity	Percentage
Gender	Male	272	60.4 %
	Female	178	39.6 %
Age (year)	≤30	37	8.2 %
	31–35	56	12.4 %
	36–40	103	22.9 %
	41–45	79	17.6 %
	46–50	107	23.8 %
	≥51	68	15.1 %
Education	College and below	13	2.9 %
	Undergraduate	298	66.2 %
	Postgraduate	139	30.9 %
Administrative Level	Section member and below	35	7.7 %
	Section chief/deputy section chief	155	34.4 %
	Division chief/deputy division chief and above	260	57.7 %
Length of Service (year)	0–5	25	5.6 %
	6–10	64	14.2 %
	11–15	83	18.4 %
	16–20	62	13.8 %
	21–25	77	17.1 %
	26–30	72	16.0 %
	>30	67	14.9 %

5.2. Measures

This study adopted measurement items from well-established scales with high reliability and validity in first-rate domestic and international journals, which were translated from English into Chinese following standard translation and back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1986) and subjected to proofreading by scholars in related fields before being finalized for the formal investigation.

1. Perceived superior trust. As in Study 1, with an alpha coefficient (α) of 0.909.
2. Burnout. Also consistent with Study 1, the scale's alpha coefficient was 0.802.
3. Organizational commitment. In line with Study 1, with an alpha coefficient of 0.815.
4. Public service motivation. Following the approach in Study 2, this scale had an alpha coefficient of 0.929.
5. Control variables. Based on prior research, it's been noted that public employees' experiences of burnout may vary by gender [93], age [94], and education [90]. Consequently, gender, age, and education level were incorporated as control variables in this study.

5.3. Data analysis

SPSS24.0, the PROCESS plug-in, and AMOS24.0 were utilized for sample data analysis. The process began with testing the discriminant validity among variables using confirmatory factor analysis. This was followed by assessing potential same-source bias through Harman's single factor test and a common method latent factor. Subsequently, the impact of perceived superior trust on burnout, as well as the mediating effect of organizational commitment and the moderating role of public service motivation, were examined via stratified regression analysis. Finally, the moderated mediating effect was evaluated by estimating the effect size for the 95 % confidence interval using the bootstrap method.

5.4. Results

5.4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis and common method deviation test

This research carried out a confirmatory factor analysis for four variables—perceived superior trust, burnout, organizational commitment, and public service motivation—using Amos 24.0. The findings, as detailed in Table 3, revealed that the four-factor model provided the best fit for the data ($X/df = 1.597$, CFI = 0.921, TLI = 0.912, RMSEA = 0.036, SRMR = 0.059). This model outperformed the other three competing models. The results thus indicated that the four variables under study had strong discriminant validity and represented four distinct constructs.

In this study, where all variables were self-reported through questionnaires, there was a potential for common method bias. To address this and ensure rigor, Harman's single factor test [95] was applied. The analysis revealed 15 factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1. The fact that the largest factor accounted for 23.349 % of the variance, which is below the threshold of 40 %, indicated that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study. Furthermore, the study assessed the impact of common method variance (CMV) by observing changes in model fitting indexes after incorporating a common method latent factor. As shown in Table 3, there was a minimal decrease (less than 0.5) in RMSEA and SRMR after adding the CMV, and no substantial change in the five-factor model fitting indexes. These analyses collectively suggest that common method bias was not a significant issue in this research.

5.4.2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of variables

Correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among perceived superior trust, burnout, public service motivation, and organizational commitment. The resulting correlation coefficients and their levels of significance are detailed in Table 4. According to these results, perceived superior trust was found to have a significant positive correlation with both organizational commitment and public service motivation, and a negative correlation with burnout. Additionally, organizational commitment showed a significant positive correlation with public service motivation and a negative correlation with burnout. Furthermore, public service motivation exhibited a significant negative correlation with burnout.

Table 3

Validity analysis table (N = 450).

Models		X/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SEMR
Five-factor Model	PST; BT; PSM; OC; CMV	3.243	0.691	0.610	0.071	0.135
Four-factor Model	PST; BT; PSM; OC	1.597	0.921	0.912	0.036	0.059
Three-factor Model	PST; BT + PSM; OC	4.644	0.481	0.464	0.090	0.102
Two-factor Model	PST + BT + PSM; OC	5.231	0.397	0.378	0.097	0.110
One-factor Model	PST + BT + PSM + OC	5.409	0.371	0.351	0.099	0.109

PST represents for perceived superior trust, OC for organizational commitment, PSM for public service motivation, BT for burnout, and CMV for common method latent factor.

Table 4
Descriptive statistical results and correlation analysis of main.

		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Gender	1.40	0.49	1						
2	Age	3.82	1.51	-0.130**	1					
3	Education	2.28	0.51	-0.025	-0.046	1				
4	PST	3.23	0.55	-0.065	0.120*	-0.033	1			
5	OC	3.35	0.41	-0.147**	0.247***	-0.050	0.707***	1		
6	PSM	4.09	0.54	-0.123**	0.171***	-0.070	0.460***	0.680***	1	
7	Burnout	3.03	0.76	0.072	-0.102*	-0.047	-0.302***	-0.351***	-0.187***	1

N = 450; ***P < 0.001, **P < 0.01, and × P < 0.05.

PST = Perceived superior trust; OC = Organizational commitment; PSM = Public service motivation. Gender coded as 1 means male and 2 means female; age coded as 1 means less than 30 years old, 2 means 31–35 years old, 3 means 36–40 years old, 4 means 41–45 years old, 5 means 46–50 years old, 6 means older than 50 years old; education coded as 1 means college and below, 2 means undergraduate, 3 means postgraduate.

Table 5
Stratified regression analysis.

Variables	BT		OC			
	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4	M 5	M 6
Gender	0.067	-0.070*	-0.084*	-0.065*	-0.042	-0.049*
Age	-0.032	0.042***	0.054***	0.039***	0.035***	0.028***
Education	-0.087	-0.018	-0.048	-0.025	0.001	0.003
PST	-0.330***	0.418***		0.393***		0.298***
BT			-0.177***	-0.075***		
PSM					0.499***	0.353***
PSTx PSM						0.024**
R ²	0.101	0.534	0.181	0.546	0.477	0.676
F	12.467***	127.389***	24.544***	108.984***	103.463***	157.351***

N = 450; ***P < 0.001, **P < 0.01, and × P < 0.05.

PST = Perceived superior trust; OC = Organizational commitment; PSM = Public service motivation; BT = burnout.

5.4.3. Hypothesis testing

Data from the study were analyzed using SPSS (version 25.0), with a focus on stratified regression analysis. The outcomes of this analysis are summarized in Table 5. In Model 2, perceived superior trust was found to have a significant positive effect on organizational commitment (b = 0.418, p < 0.001), thus supporting Hypothesis 1 (H1). Model 1 indicated a significant positive effect of perceived superior trust on burnout (b = -0.330, p < 0.001), lending support to Hypothesis 2 (H2). Additionally, Model 3 revealed a significant positive impact of burnout on organizational commitment (b = -0.177, p < 0.001), thereby validating Hypothesis 3 (H3).

In Model 4, the dependent variable, organizational commitment, was regressed on the independent variable, perceived superior trust, and the mediating variable, burnout. The results showed significant coefficients for both perceived superior trust (b = 0.393, p < 0.001) and burnout (b = -0.075, p < 0.001). This indicates that burnout partially mediates the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, thereby supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3). Furthermore

the mediating effect was tested using the PROCESS macro plugin for SPSS (Hayes, 2013), employing 5000 bootstrap samples for repeated sampling. The analysis revealed that with burnout included, the direct effect of perceived superior trust on organizational

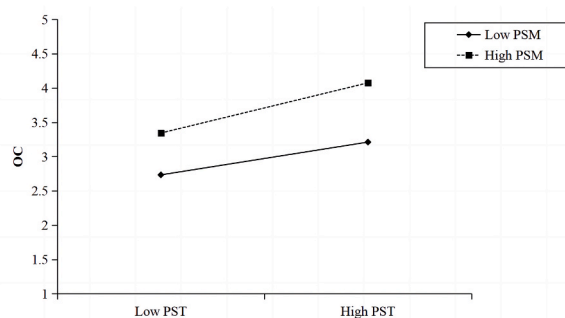


Fig. 5. Moderating Role of PSM (Study 3)

PST = Perceived superior trust; OC = Organizational commitment; PSM = Public service motivation.

commitment was 0.405 (SE = 0.210), with a 95 % confidence interval (CI) of [0.3638, 0.4464] (not including 0). The indirect effect of burnout was 0.0279 (SE = 0.0083), with a 95 % CI of [0.0134, 0.0459] (also not including 0). These results confirm that burnout serves as a mediator in the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

To examine the moderating effect of Public Service Motivation (PSM) on the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, an interaction term was created. This was done by first centering perceived superior trust and PSM, then multiplying the centered perceived superior trust by PSM, followed by a stratified regression test. The findings, as shown in Model 5 of Table 5, indicate that after accounting for the main effects of perceived superior trust and PSM, the interaction between perceived superior trust and PSM significantly affects organizational commitment ($b = 0.024$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that PSM has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment.

A simple slope analysis was also performed to illustrate the interaction effect of PSM at high and low levels (defined as the mean plus or minus one standard deviation). As depicted in Fig. 5, at lower levels of PSM, the positive predictive coefficient of perceived superior trust on commitment was significant ($b = 0.387$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, at higher levels of PSM, the positive predictive coefficient of perceived superior trust on commitment, while still significant, was less pronounced ($b = 0.360$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that the positive relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment is enhanced with increased levels of public service motivation.

6. Discussion

Drawing on the job demand-resource theory, this research developed a model tailored to public sector employees. It utilized two experimental studies and a questionnaire-based study to conduct an in-depth examination. This study attempts to link employees' perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, bringing new working conditions for improving organizational commitment. The results show that employees' perceived superior trust positively influence organizational commitment. Furthermore, we find that burnout mediates the direct effect of perceived superior trust on organizational commitment. In addition, PSM enhanced the effect of perceived superior trust on organizational commitment. The outcomes of this research offer implications that are both theoretical and practical in nature.

6.1. Theoretical implications

This research makes three significant contributions to existing literature. First, it pioneers the exploration of the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, thereby broadening the scope of job resources within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework. The impact of both negative and positive forces on organizational outcomes, such as organizational commitment, has been less frequently addressed in JD-R studies. Most research within this paradigm has focused on the mediating effects of factors like burnout and motivation on the relationship between job demands, resources, and organizational outcomes [96], often overlooking the potential for a direct relationship between these elements [30]; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). However, Bakker et al. [30] highlighted the exclusive predictive power of resources on organizational commitment, a perspective that this study further investigates and expands upon. We argue that superior trust, as a work resource, will affect employees' organizational commitment. Trust from superiors creates a good organizational climate, and employees are more willing to invest energy in the organization in return for trusting superiors [56]. Superiors provide support to satisfy public employees' sense of self-efficacy and belonging to the organization [57], further promoting the formation of their organizational commitment [53,54]. The explanation of this cognitive pathway can help people realize the importance of organizational commitment. Previous research has shown that superior support creates a positive working environment and exerts a positive effect on subordinates' organizational commitment [16, 97]. Since superior trust functions through subordinates' perception of trust [5], our study bridges a crucial gap by establishing a connection between employees' perceptions of trust from their superiors and their commitment to the organization.

Next, Previous research has shown that leadership style [98] and superior support [99] have a direct impact on burnout and are an important source of job resources, however, there has been limited exploration into how trust from superiors impacts employee burnout. Hailed as an important resource in the workplace [2], trust is a classic and challenging research topic. Moreover, the work status of public employees directly determines their work quality and affects their service level while efforts are made to build a service-oriented government. Therefore, the study of burnout is of great value to the public sector. The findings of this study indicate that perceived superior trust notably lessens burnout. This is in line with the research of Shuck et al. [34,100]; which both suggest that supportive leadership positively influences individual burnout levels. Chinese Confucian culture emphasizes the role relationship between and obligations of superiors and subordinates in an organization, and public employees trusted by their superiors may receive more possible help and support from the latter in the future, thus subordinates value trust from their superiors and show more enthusiasm to reciprocate the received trust. Public employees with perceived superior trust exhibit more responsibility and obligation to avoid abuse of their superiors' trust, and the desire to reward their superiors and the organization also encourages their motivation, initiative, and creativity [7].

In certain research, burnout is viewed as a primary factor influencing organizational dedication, which is considered a resultant effect [101]. The perception of stress leading to burnout tends to diminish the commitment of employees to their organization [102, 103]. Those suffering from burnout might mentally detach or reduce their engagement in their work, consequently showing a decreased loyalty to their employer [104]. Conversely, other studies have examined career commitment as the influencing factor, with burnout as the outcome [105,106]. For example, certain aspects of organizational commitment constitute job resources that can reduce burnout [107]. In addition, studies have found that organizational commitment can moderate the relationship between

stressors [108], workplace inactivity [41], and burnout. Thus, our research explores burnout mediated the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, helping to clarify inconsistent findings on the link between organizational commitment and burnout.

Finally, we explore the theoretical boundaries of organizational commitment by introducing personal resources. Contemporary studies have increasingly concentrated on exploring the negative aspects of public service motivation, it is believed that high public service motivation does not necessarily enhance the positive effects of organizational commitment [109]. For public sector workers possessing strong public service motivation, alongside the beneficial impact of heightened organizational dedication, it may also deplete their enthusiasm due to overemphasis on the mission to integrate into public organizations and the need for too much energy for them to do their best for the organization [110]. Our research revealed that certain leadership styles, particularly ethical leadership, can synergize with Public Service Motivation (PSM) to enhance job performance. Specifically, the traits of ethical leaders align well with individuals who have high PSM, fostering a positive synergy that leads to increased organizational commitment (Potipiroon & Ford, 2017). In our investigation, we recognized public service motivation as a key moderating factor in the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment. The findings suggest that public service motivation amplifies the positive impact of perceived superior trust on organizational commitment. In the organizational context of Chinese Confucian culture, the relationship between superiors and their subordinates is similar to that between the monarch and his subjects and between the father and his son [24]. Superior trust undoubtedly increases the connection between subordinates and the organization, as well as their organizational commitment [111]. The more the organization emphasizes obedience and loyalty to superiors, the more the principles and procedures of the organization will be solidified in the minds of each member. Consequently, public sector employees with a high level of public service motivation are likely to cultivate a more profound sense of belonging within their organization. In addition, once a superior trusts a subordinate, it means that the subordinate is included in the circle of “one of us” and distinguished from “outsiders”. The higher the level of trust from a high-powered superior, the more likely public sector employees will perceive themselves as an important part of the organization.

6.2. Managerial implications

This study holds significant practical implications for the public sector. Primarily, it emphasizes the crucial role of organizational commitment in public sector entities [112]. The research illustrates a link between organizational commitment and the perception of trust in superiors. The formation of organizational commitment is closely related to individuals’ investment in the organization and the relationship between them, as well as the emotional bond of goals and values between them [113], which affects individual performance and work attitudes [58]. The public sector can increase public employees’ organizational commitment by improving individual-organizational fit. It is also necessary to inform organizational members of the changes in necessary tasks. By doing so, they can be familiar with changes in the internal and external environment of the organization and work information, yielding better results for assigned tasks and keeping pace with the organization in terms of goals and values, after which their sense of responsibility can be enhanced.

Secondly, trust and burnout have been hot issues in the organizational management of the public sector. Burnout ultimately damages public employees’ psychological health, perception of the organization, and quality of public service. This study focuses on the psychological state of public employees after perceiving superior trust, and provides an effective way to alleviate public employees’ burnout. Superiors should strengthen their trust performance by showing more trust and supportive behaviors. They should affirm and trust their subordinates’ work ability as much as possible, making public employees experience an emotional connection with the organization and recognize their value in it. In particular, special attention should be paid to the emotional trust behaviors for subordinates, such as sharing more core resources and work information, which is more effective in increasing subordinates’ organizational commitment and work engagement. Public employees whose emotional needs are met will increase their commitment to the organization.

Finally, our research delved into the moderating effect of PSM in the dynamic between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment. The results indicate that employees with elevated levels of PSM possess greater capabilities to enhance organizational performance [114]. This underscores the need for organizations to prioritize PSM over the long term. Additionally, it’s noted that fostering a service-oriented environment within public sector organizations can significantly boost employees’ inherent motivation to serve the public [115]. At the same time, support can be actively provided to employees to help them manage work stress and improve resilience by establishing personalized psychological assistance programs for public employees in the form of educational training and stress counseling [116].

6.3. Limitations

The study encounters a few constraints. Firstly, the sample, comprising solely of Chinese public employees, raises concerns about the external validity. Consequently, the findings may not be universally applicable across different cultural or industrial settings, highlighting areas for future research to validate the hypothesized causal relationships. Additionally, this research focused exclusively on the mediating role of burnout in the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment. Future research should explore if perceived superior trust influences burnout among public employees through role load, as suggested by the trait activation theory [117]. Meanwhile, we should be aware that burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficiency [25], which may have different effects on organizational commitment. For example, among employees with strong emotional exhaustion, the instinct to avoid overexerting resources will make it difficult for them to have the energy to maintain

an emotional connection with the organization [33]. For cynical employees, a negative perspective may prevent them from developing effective relationships with the organization [118]. Future research should provide clear findings on the relationship between the multidimensional aspects of burnout and various forms of organizational commitment. Moreover, this study incorporated public service motivation to examine the boundary conditions affecting the relationship between perceived superior trust and organizational commitment, and future research could also explore more boundary conditions that exacerbate or mitigate organizational commitment in terms of individual differences, such as individual cognitive flexibility and mental toughness.

7. Conclusion

The contextual experiment and comprehensive questionnaire conducted in our study revealed that perceived superior trust mitigates burnout and bolsters organizational commitment. This research contributes fresh insights into the working conditions conducive to elevating organizational commitment. It proposes that perceived superior trust is instrumental in augmenting employee commitment to the organization by diminishing burnout. Additionally, PSM offers a novel lens for examining this process and aids in public sector management by furnishing both theoretical insights and practical recommendations.

Data availability statement

Data associated with the study has not been deposited into a publicly available repository and data will be made available on request.

Ethics statement

The study involving human participants was submitted to the Chongqing University Institutional Review Board. The introduction to the questionnaire provided the purpose of the study, social value, scope of information collection, potential privacy risks, and countermeasures. Signatures and contact information for the researcher and Chongqing University were also included. Participants were asked to read the introduction of the questionnaire and then complete a written informed consent form. Based on this, the ethical risk of this study was minimal and it was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Chongqing University without the need for further ethical review.

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Mi Lin: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Qian Liu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation. **Zhi Li:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e24997>.

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