Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Leader–Employee Trust (In)Congruence and Illegitimate Tasks: The Mediating Role of Leader–Member Exchange

Guangya Ma
Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College
Chunying Cui
Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College
Junhan Ji
Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College
Lei Lu
lucas@pku.edu.cn

Peking University

Research Article

Keywords: Leader trust in employee (LT), Employee trust in leader (ET), Leader–member exchange, Illegitimate tasks

Posted Date: September 28th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10752634/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Background

The study investigates leader–employee trust congruence, aiming to develop a more comprehensive understanding of when and why trust exerts differential effects on illegitimate tasks. It also explores the mediating role of leader–member exchange (LMX).

Methods

Using three-wave, multi-source data collected from 35 managers and 259 employees across multiple organizations in mainland China, we conducted polynomial regression and response surface analyses to test our hypotheses.

Results

(1) Greater congruence between leader trust in employee (LT) and employee trust in leader (ET) is associated with higher-quality LMX; (2) Compared with the low–low trust condition, LMX quality is significantly higher under the high–high trust condition; (3) Under conditions of trust incongruence, LMX quality is higher when employees' trust exceeds leaders' trust than when leaders' trust exceeds employees' trust; and (4) LMX quality mediates the relationship between leader–employee trust incongruence and employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks.

Conclusions

These findings contribute to the trust literature by reconciling previously inconsistent findings and offer practical implications for organizations and leaders seeking to cultivate effective trust relationships.

1.Background

Leaders and employees are two key stakeholders in the workplace[1], and positive interpersonal interactions between them contribute to the development of high-quality leader–employee relationships[2]. Among these interactions, trust represents a fundamental relational mechanism[3] and has been defined as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another”[4]. Accordingly, trust has long been recognized as a cornerstone of effective cooperation and social exchange within organizations[5]. Existing research on workplace trust has primarily examined employee–employee mutual trust[6], leader–employee mutual trust[1], and the relationship between LT and employees’ perceptions or expectations of being trusted[3, 7]. Within this literature, trust congruence, defined as a condition in which both parties hold similar levels of trust toward one another[5], has been identified as an important

determinant of relationship quality. In general, high levels of mutual trust are associated with a range of favorable outcomes, including enhanced employee performance, stronger teamwork, and greater leadership support and empowerment[6, 8].

Despite these positive findings, relatively little attention has been devoted to the potential negative consequences of trust or to the possibility that trust may generate outcomes that are detrimental to employees[3]. Emerging evidence suggests that being highly trusted by a leader is not invariably beneficial, as such trust is often accompanied by elevated role expectations, increased accountability, and additional work demands. As a result, subordinates may not always welcome high levels of trust from their leaders[3]. Moreover, when trust relationships are incongruent, for example, when employees place little trust in their leaders, the effectiveness of leadership behaviors may be weakened[9]. Trust, therefore, shapes not only how leaders allocate tasks and responsibilities but also how employees interpret, evaluate, and respond to those assignments.

This study argues that focusing exclusively on either the positive or the negative consequences of trust fails to capture its full organizational implications. Rather, trust is likely to function as a double-edged sword. Building on previous research, we propose that although mutual trust between leaders and employees generally facilitates workplace cooperation and motivates employees to contribute voluntarily, it may also generate unintended negative consequences. From the perspective of task perception, when leaders assign employees greater responsibilities or additional tasks based on their trust in them[8], employees may not necessarily perceive these assignments as valuable resources or developmental opportunities. Instead, they may interpret them as illegitimate tasks imposed by the leader[10]. A task is considered illegitimate when it exceeds the boundary of what employees can reasonably and appropriately be expected to perform[11]. Therefore, examining whether and how leader–employee trust congruence shapes employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks not only extends the literature on trust congruence[12]but also provides practical guidance for leaders regarding the appropriate expression of trust[5]. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) Does leader–employee trust congruence produce unintended negative consequences for employees? (2) Under what conditions do such effects emerge? (3) Through what mechanisms do these effects occur?

To address these questions, we draw on social exchange theory to explain how leader–employee trust congruence influences employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks. Specifically, we propose a mediation model involving leader–employee trust congruence, illegitimate tasks, and leader–member exchange (LMX). Prior research suggests that high levels of mutual trust foster high-quality exchange relationships characterized by reciprocity and mutual benefit[13, 14]. Such high-quality exchange relationships encourage employees to accept additional task assignments from their leaders without placing excessive emphasis on immediate rewards or perceived pressure[15], thereby reducing their perceptions of tasks as illegitimate. Conversely, low levels of mutual trust are associated with lower-quality LMX [14], making employees more likely to perceive assigned tasks as illegitimate. Likewise, when leaders' and employees' trust levels are incongruent, the resulting imbalance in the exchange relationship may likewise increase employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks through its adverse effect on LMX.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it advances the emerging double-edged sword perspective on trust by developing a social exchange framework that explains when and through what mechanisms leader–employee trust congruence influences employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks. In doing so, it responds to the call by Ding and Kuvaas (2023) for greater attention to the "dark side" of trust while extending existing research on the complex consequences of trust[16]. Second, it contributes to the literature on illegitimate tasks by identifying leader–employee trust congruence as an important relational antecedent. At the same time, prior research has predominantly focused on the consequences of illegitimate tasks for employee attitudes and behaviors; relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how such perceptions arise[16, 17]. This study incorporates the leader–employee trust relationship into the analytical framework, revealing key pathways in the formation of illegitimate tasks from a relational perspective. This addresses the shortfall in existing research regarding the lack of exploration of antecedents and promotes a shift in illegitimate task research from an outcome-oriented to a process-oriented approach. Third, this study clarifies the mechanism linking trust and perceptions of illegitimate tasks by identifying LMX as the underlying mediating process. By integrating trust congruence, LMX, and illegitimate tasks within a unified theoretical framework, this study offers a more comprehensive explanation of how trust shapes employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks.

2.Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1The (In)Congruence of Leader Trust and Employee Trust and LMX

Drawing on Rousseau et al.'s (1998) definition of trust[4], Ni et al. (2025)[18] define LT as a psychological state characterized by a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding employees' intentions or behaviors. Likewise, Kelloway et al. (2012)[19] define ET as a psychological state involving the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding leaders' intentions or behaviors. LMX refers to the quality of the social exchange relationship between leaders and employees and is characterized by mutual trust, respect, and liking[20, 21]. According to social exchange theory, reciprocal exchanges develop when one party voluntarily provides benefits that the other reciprocates[22]. Within this framework, trust serves not merely as a relational perception but also as a critical exchange signal that shapes individuals' willingness to engage in and sustain social exchange relationships[23].

Trust congruence refers to the extent to which leaders and employees hold similar levels of trust in one another at the structural level[24]. In the present study, leader–employee trust congruence describes a situation in which both parties exhibit comparable levels of mutual trust and perceive the relationship as mutually trusting[5]. Prior research suggests that congruence is generally more beneficial than incongruence in interpersonal relationships[25] and that stable, long-term exchange relationships are fundamentally built upon mutual trust[14]. From the perspective of social exchange theory, trust congruence indicates that leaders and employees have developed reciprocal expectations regarding

resource contributions and returns, thereby facilitating balanced and stable exchange relationships. When leaders and employees possess similar levels of trust, both parties are more likely to identify with one another and willingly make sacrifices for the benefit of the relationship[26]. Such reciprocal behaviors reinforce the exchange relationship over time because successful exchanges continually provide evidence of each party's trustworthiness, thereby strengthening mutual trust[27]. This sustained positive interaction helps foster high-quality LMX relationships. Furthermore, trust congruence reduces relational uncertainty and anxiety for both leaders and employees[28], creating favorable conditions for sustained cooperation and further enhancing LMX quality[14].

By contrast, when leaders and employees hold different levels of trust, the party exhibiting lower trust is less willing to accept relational risks, thereby reducing communication and cooperative interaction[6]. Without sufficient mutual trust, reciprocal exchange relationships become difficult to establish or sustain [29]. Moreover, trust incongruence signals an imbalance between contributions and expected returns, undermining both parties' willingness to engage in future exchanges. Consequently, trust incongruence destabilizes leader-employee relationships and undermines the quality of LMX.

Hypothesis 1

LMX is of higher quality when LT and ET are congruent than when they are incongruent.

2.2Trust Congruence and LMX

The preceding discussion suggests that leader–employee trust congruence is more likely to foster high-quality LMX than trust incongruence. However, even when trust is congruent, differences may exist between the two congruent conditions. High leader trust combined with high employee trust versus low leader trust combined with low employee trust. Social exchange theory suggests that LMX reflects the quality of the exchange relationship between leaders and employees, as manifested in the extent of reciprocal resource exchange, mutual support, and socioemotional investment [30].

When both leaders and employees exhibit high levels of trust, from the perspective of emotional reciprocity, social exchange theory suggests that exchange relationships are governed by norms of reciprocity that are built upon mutual trust [31]. Individuals who benefit from another party's trust are motivated to reciprocate through behaviors that maintain and strengthen the relationship, thereby sustaining the exchange process over time[32]. When leaders and employees trust one another, they are better able to observe and interpret each other's cooperative intentions and behaviors, which encourages reciprocal cooperation and further reinforces mutual trust[33]. Through repeated positive exchanges, the relationship becomes increasingly stable and supportive, contributing to higher-quality LMX. From the perspective of cognitive reciprocity, leaders occupy positions of greater authority within organizations, making the trust they extend a valuable relational resource for employees [1]. Under conditions of high mutual trust, leaders and employees are more likely to emphasize shared interests, interdependence, and collaborative problem-solving[34]. Leaders tend to provide greater support, autonomy, and developmental opportunities, whereas employees reciprocate by exerting greater effort[14], fulfilling

assigned responsibilities, and engaging in behaviors that exceed formal role expectations[35]. High levels of mutual trust also facilitate open and effective communication[36], enabling employees to better understand leaders' expectations and respond responsibly to work demands[37]. As a result, both instrumental and socioemotional exchanges are strengthened, fostering high-quality LMX relationships.

In contrast, low LT combined with low ET reflects a relatively passive relational state[7]. Under such conditions, leaders are less likely to provide support, delegate authority, or regard employees as valuable exchange partners[38, 39]. Likewise, employees perceive less care and consideration from their leaders[40] and are less willing to invest in relationship-building efforts[29]. Consequently, reciprocal exchanges become limited, reducing both the instrumental and socioemotional benefits derived from the relationship and resulting in lower-quality LMX.

Hypothesis 2

LMX is of higher quality under high leader trust–high employee trust congruence than under low leader trust–low employee trust congruence.

2.3Trust Incongruence and LMX

Social exchange theory suggests that exchange relationships are governed by implicit norms of reciprocity that are built upon trust and expectations of future mutual obligations[31]. When leaders and employees exhibit similar levels of trust, they develop aligned expectations regarding reciprocal exchanges, thereby facilitating stable and high-quality LMX. In contrast, trust incongruence creates discrepancies in how the two parties interpret exchange obligations and evaluate one another's intentions, increasing uncertainty and undermining the quality of the exchange relationship.

When leaders exhibit high trust in employees, but employees have low trust in their leaders, the asymmetry in trust may lead to negative consequences. Leaders who trust their employees are more willing to express their needs, disclose vulnerabilities, and grant discretion in the expectation that employees will respond cooperatively. However, employees who lack trust in their leaders may interpret these behaviors as attempts to ingratiate themselves or to shift responsibilities unfairly[41]. At the same time, highly trusting leaders may disclose excessive information [12]or become less vigilant regarding the exploitation of employees[42]. Therefore, the high leader trust–low employee trust combination still results in lower-quality LMX relationships due to the employees’ low level of trust.

By contrast, when leaders exhibit low trust in employees, but employees maintain high trust in their leaders, the exchange relationship is less severely disrupted. Although leaders may initially be reluctant to disclose information or delegate authority, employees who trust their leaders are more likely to interpret these behaviors as appropriate managerial decisions. Consequently, employees believe that the leaders’ actions are for their own good, and will seek to establish a high-quality exchange relationship with leaders[43]. Thus, the low leader trust–high employee trust combination leads to higher-quality LMX relationships due to the high level of employee trust.

Hypothesis 3

The quality of the LMX is higher under low LT and high ET than under high LT and low ET.

2.4The Mediating Role of LMX

Research suggests that trust congruence influences employee behavior through social exchange relationships[3]. Accordingly, this study proposes that LMX mediates the relationship between trust congruence and employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks[11]. Specifically, trust congruence between leaders and subordinates facilitates the development of high-quality LMX by fostering mutual encouragement, motivation, and the exchange of socioemotional resources such as recognition and support[44], which is beneficial to the development of high-quality social exchange relationships. Social exchange theory is grounded in the principle of reciprocity: when an exchange partner is treated favorably, it creates an obligation to reciprocate in an equally positive manner[43]. Successful reciprocal interactions reinforce perceptions of trustworthiness and gradually strengthen trust between exchange partners[45]. Within high-quality LMX relationships, leaders are more likely to assign challenging or non-routine tasks to trusted subordinates because they perceive these employees as both capable of completing such tasks and willing to accept additional responsibilities [10]. Likewise, employees who trust their leaders report higher levels of satisfaction [46], and devote greater effort toward achieving organizational and leader–related goals[35]. Employees in high-quality LMX relationships are more willing to undertake responsibilities beyond their formal job requirements to reciprocate the support received from their leaders[9, 47]. As a result, they are less likely to evaluate these assignments as illegitimate. Furthermore, because role boundaries tend to be more flexible in high-quality LMX relationships, employees are less likely to regard additional responsibilities as falling outside their expected job scope[48]. In contrast, in low-quality LMX relationships, regardless of the leaders’ reasons for assigning tasks, employees may perceive the assigned tasks as illegitimate. Consequently, even when leaders assign tasks for legitimate organizational reasons, employees may be more likely to perceive them as illegitimate, resulting in stronger perceptions of illegitimate tasks.

In summary, consistency between leader and employee trust influences the LMX, which in turn affects employee perceptions and behavior. When mutual trust is lacking, employees are less likely to develop positive reciprocity expectations and are more inclined to interpret leaders' task assignments skeptically, thereby increasing perceptions of illegitimate tasks. Conversely, trust congruence strengthens LMX, where employees, based on their trust in the leader and expectations of reciprocity, are more willing to accept non-routine task assignments and tend to view them as reasonable demands within the scope of their duties.

Hypothesis 4

LMX mediates the relationship between leader–employee trust congruence and employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks.

3.Methods

3.1Participants and Procedure

In this study, we recruited supervisor–subordinate dyads from six companies in southern China across a range of industries, including technology, finance, and real estate. Prior to the formal survey, we contacted the human resources (HR) managers of the participating companies to obtain lists of eligible participants and corresponding identification codes. With the assistance of the HR managers, we randomly selected 6–10 employees from each company while maintaining a supervisor-to-subordinate ratio ranging from 1:6 to 1:10. Questionnaires were administered online via WeChat[49]. Each questionnaire included an informed consent statement emphasizing participant anonymity, the purpose of the study, and the voluntary nature of participation.

Data were collected across three waves between early August and late October 2025, with one-month intervals between consecutive waves. This time-lagged, multi-source research design helps mitigate common method bias[50] and is consistent with prior studies examining supervisor–subordinate congruence[51, 52]. To encourage participation and improve response rates, participants received multiple reminders and a small monetary incentive (a RMB 10 WeChat red envelope) upon completion of each survey.

At Time 1 (early August 2025), employees completed a measure of ET, whereas supervisors completed a measure of LT[14]. Demographic information was also collected from both groups. One month later, at Time 2 (mid-September 2025), employees completed the LMX scale[15, 53]. At Time 3 (late October 2025), employees completed the measure of perceived illegitimate tasks[54, 55].

After data collection was completed, supervisor and subordinate questionnaires were matched using participant identification codes and the last four digits of participants' phone numbers. After excluding incomplete questionnaires, the final sample comprised 35 supervisors (valid response rate = 87.5%) and 259 employees (valid response rate = 64.8%). Among the supervisors, 60.0% were male, all were married, the mean age was 38.71 years (SD = 4.48), 94.29% held a college degree or above, and the average leadership tenure was 10.28 years (SD = 3.24). Among the employees, 42.5% were male, 71.8% were married, the mean age was 30.43 years (SD = 5.14), 91.2% held a college degree or above, and the average organizational tenure was 5.36 years (SD = 3.35).

3.2Measures

All measurement scales used in this study were well-established instruments that have been widely validated in prior research. Following Brislin's (1986)[56] forward–backward translation procedure, all scales were translated into Chinese. Unless otherwise indicated, responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Leaders’ trust in employees. LT was measured using the supervisor self-report scale suggested by Kim et al. (2018)[14]. Specifically, we adopted the scale adapted by Braun et al. (2025)[57] from Jong and

Elfring (2010). A sample item is, “I am able to count on my employees for help if I have difficulties with my job.” The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.83).

Employees’ trust in leaders. ET was measured using the employee self-report scale recommended by Kim et al. (2018)[14]. We adopted the version adapted by Braun et al. (2025)[57] from Jong and Elfring (2010)[58]. A sample item is, “I can rely on my leader to keep their word.” Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.84.

LMX. LMX was assessed using the seven-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995)[59]. A representative item is, “How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs?” The scale exhibited good reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.87).

Illegitimate tasks. Illegitimate tasks were measured using the eight-item Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale developed by Semmer et al. (2010)[11]. A representative item is, “Do you have work tasks to take care of that you believe should be done by someone else?” Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.92.

Control variables. As in previous research, we controlled for employees' gender, age, and organizational tenure[16, 17, 60], since these variables have been shown to influence perceptions of illegitimate tasks. In addition, taking into consideration the duration of the supervisor–subordinate relationship may affect the quality of their exchange relationship, we also controlled for the working time with direct supervisor.

3.3Analytical strategy

This study collected matched leader–employee dyadic data. Following established research (e.g., Jeong et al., 2026)[28], polynomial regression[28] combined with response surface analysis[61] was employed to examine the effects of trust (in)congruence.

Taking the potential multicollinearity into consideration, LT and ET were mean-centered prior to analysis. Five polynomial terms were then computed: LT (*L*), ET (*F*), LT squared (L^2), ET (F^2), and the interaction term between LT and ET ($L \times F$). These five polynomial terms, together with the control variables, were entered into a polynomial regression predicting LMX (Z). The polynomial regression model is specified as follows.

$$\mathrm{Z}=\mathrm{b}_0+\mathrm{b}_1(\mathrm{L})+\mathrm{b}_2(\mathrm{F})+\mathrm{b}_3(\mathrm{L}^2)+\mathrm{b}_4(\mathrm{F}\times\mathrm{L})+\mathrm{b}_5(\mathrm{F}^2)+\mathrm{e}$$

1

4.Results

4.1Confirmatory factor analysis

In order to evaluate the measurement model, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Mplus version 8.3[62]. As shown in Table 1, the hypothesized four-factor model demonstrated a good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 1.82$, TLI = .93, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05). Moreover, compared with the

alternative three-factor, two-factor, and one-factor models, the hypothesized four-factor model exhibited superior fit indices, providing evidence that the study constructs are empirically distinct.

Table 1
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (N = 259)

Models	χ^2	***df***	χ^2 ***/df***	**RMSEA**	**SRMR**	**CFI**	**TLI**
Four factor models (hypothesis)	490.72	269	1.82	0.06	0.05	0.93	0.93
Three factor models (A + B)	857.03	272	3.15	0.09	0.09	0.82	0.81
Two factor models (A + B+C)	986.52	274	3.6	0.1	0.09	0.78	0.76
One factor models (A + B+C + D)	2001.97	275	7.28	0.16	0.15	0.48	0.43

Notes. A: Leader trust in employee; B: Employee trust in leader; C: Leader-member exchange; D: Illegitimate tasks; "+" indicates fusion.

Composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (leader trust = .84, employee trust = .84, LMX = .88, illegitimate tasks = .92)[63]. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs met or exceeded the recommended criterion of .50 (leader trust = .50, employee trust = .52, LMX = .51, illegitimate tasks = .60)[64].

4.2Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Leader trust was positively correlated with LMX ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with illegitimate tasks ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$). Employee trust was positively correlated with LMX ($r = .65$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with illegitimate tasks ($r = -.21$, $p < .01$). LMX was negatively correlated with illegitimate tasks ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$). These findings provide preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation for Variables

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	.58	.50								
2. Age	30.43	5.14	-0.04							
3. Tenure	5.36	3.35	.00	.87**						
4. Working time with direct supervisor	3.64	2.01	− .02	.54**	.68**					
5. Leader trust in employee	4.13	0.63	.13*	− .08	.01	.02	.83			
6. Employee trust in leader	4.11	0.61	− .05	− .08	.02	.03	.30**	.84		
7. Leader-member exchange	3.93	0.64	− .05	− .02	.06	.09	.31**	.65**	.87	
8. Illegitimate tasks	2.57	0.97	− .07	.03	− .06	− .16*	− .33**	− .21**	− .29**	.92
Notes. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ (The same below).										

4.3Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1

predicted that greater congruence between leader trust and employee trust would be associated with higher-quality LMX. As shown in Model 3 of Table 3, the curvature along the line of incongruence (LT = − ET) was significantly negative (Curvature = − 0.16, SE = 0.08, p < .05), indicating that discrepancies between leader trust and employee trust were associated with lower levels of LMX. As illustrated in Fig. 2, LMX increased as the degree of congruence between leader trust and employee trust increased. Collectively, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 3

Polynomial Regressions(DV = LMX; IV = LT and ET)

Control variables	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Gender	-0.08(0.08)	-0.05(0.06)	-0.07(0.06)
Age	-0.04(0.03)	-0.003(0.02)	0.01(0.02)
Tenure	0.05(0.04)	0.003(0.03)	-0.01(0.02)
Working time with direct supervisor	0.02(0.03)	0.02(0.02)	0.03(0.02)
Polynomial terms			
b1 (LT)		0.14(0.08)	0.13(0.15)
b2 (ET)		0.64***(0.08)	0.53***(0.13)
b3 (LT^2)			-0.004(0.08)
b4 (LT*ET)			0.05(0.09)
b5 (ET^2)			-0.11(0.10)
Response surface			
Congruence line (LT = ET)			
Slope (b1 + b2)			0.66***(0.09)
Curvature (b3 + b4+b5)			-0.07(0.06)
Incongruence line (LT = -ET)			
Slope (b1-b2)			-0.4**(0.14)
Curvature (b3-b4 + b5)			-0.16*(0.08)
Lateral shift quantity (b2 - b1)/[2 * (b3 - b4 + b5)]			-1.21
R^2	0.03	0.44	0.46

Notes. Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients (β). Parentheses hold robust standard errors. LMX = Leader-member exchange, LT = Leader trust in employee, ET= Employee trust in leader.

Hypothesis 2

predicted that LMX would be higher under conditions of high leader trust and high employee trust than under conditions of low leader trust and low employee trust. As shown in Model 3 of Table 3, the slope along the line of congruence (LT = ET) was positive and significant (Slope = 0.66, SE = 0.09, $p < .001$), whereas the curvature was nonsignificant (Curvature = − 0.07, SE = 0.06, ns). These findings indicate that LMX increased linearly as both leader trust and employee trust increased. Figure 2 further illustrates this pattern. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3

predicted that, under conditions of trust incongruence, LMX would be higher when employee trust exceeded leader trust than when leader trust exceeded employee trust. As shown in Model 3 of Table 3, the slope along the line of incongruence (LT = − ET) was significantly negative (Slope = − 0.40, SE = 0.14, $p < .01$). In addition, the curvature along the line of incongruence was significantly negative (Curvature = − 0.16, SE = 0.08, $p < .05$), and the calculated principal axis location was − 1.21. Together, these results support Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4

predicted that LMX would mediate the relationship between leader–employee trust congruence and employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks. Following the construction of the block variable, Monte Carlo simulations with 10,000 replications were conducted to estimate the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect[65]. The results indicated that the block variable exerted a significant indirect effect on employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks through LMX (indirect effect = − 0.31, SE = 0.14, 95% CI [− 0.62, − 0.07]). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

5.Discussion

5.1Theoretical implications

This study makes three primary contributions to the literature on leader–employee trust, LMX, and illegitimate tasks.First, from the perspective of social exchange theory, this study extends research on the “dark side” of trust by enriching the double-edged sword perspective on trust. Social exchange theory suggests that exchange partners evaluate not only the resources they receive but also the obligations and potential costs associated with those resources. Accordingly, when leaders express trust in employees, they communicate not only confidence and support but also heightened expectations and implicit obligations to reciprocate. Existing studies have largely emphasized the resource-enhancing effects of trust, portraying it as a uniformly positive force that promotes cooperation and performance[14], while paying relatively little attention to its accompanying relational costs. Our findings demonstrate that, under certain exchange conditions, trust may increase employees' sensitivity to illegitimate tasks by strengthening perceptions of asymmetric responsibilities and implicit obligations. More importantly, this study challenges the conventional assumption that being trusted is inherently beneficial. Whereas previous research has primarily conceptualized being trusted as a valuable relational

resource [16], the present findings suggest that it may simultaneously signal heightened expectations, less clearly defined role boundaries, and greater opportunities for task expansion, thereby introducing potential stress. In doing so, this study shifts the theoretical emphasis from a resource-acquisition perspective toward an exchange perspective in which resources and obligations coexist.

Second, this study extends research on the antecedents of illegitimate tasks from the perspective of social exchange relationships. Social exchange theory argues that individuals' interpretations of workplace events are shaped not solely by objective task characteristics but also by the quality of their exchange relationships. Accordingly, perceptions of illegitimate tasks reflect employees' subjective evaluations of whether assigned tasks are appropriate given their role within a particular relational context. Existing research has primarily examined the consequences of illegitimate tasks, including job satisfaction, turnover intention, and counterproductive workplace behaviors [16, 17], whereas relatively little attention has been devoted to their relational antecedents. By incorporating leader–employee trust into the analytical framework, this study demonstrates that perceptions of illegitimate tasks arise not simply from the tasks themselves but from perceived imbalances in the distribution of resources and reciprocal obligations within exchange relationships. Consequently, this study expands the theoretical foundation of illegitimate tasks from the traditional task-characteristics perspective to include social exchange and relational structure perspectives, providing a new theoretical pathway for understanding their formation mechanisms.

Third, this study clarifies the mechanism through which trust influences perceptions of illegitimate tasks by identifying LMX as the key mediating process. Social exchange theory proposes that individuals' attitudes and behaviors are shaped by the quality of exchange relationships rather than by isolated exchange behaviors. Although previous studies have suggested that being trusted by one's leader may produce unintended negative consequences[3], the underlying mechanisms have remained largely unexplored. By introducing LMX as the mediating mechanism, this study develops a trust–LMX–illegitimate tasks framework that explains how trust is translated into employees' task perceptions through relational processes. Specifically, trust influences employees' evaluations of task legitimacy indirectly by shaping exchange quality and perceived role boundaries. This mechanism contributes theoretically in two important ways. First, it integrates trust and LMX research within a unified social exchange framework. Second, it opens the "black box" linking trust to employees' cognitive evaluations by identifying the relational process through which trust ultimately influences workplace perceptions.

5.2Managerial implications

Our study has several practical implications. First, organizations should recognize the complex relationship between trust and employees’ perceptions of illegitimate tasks [3]. Our findings reaffirm that being trusted by a leader does not necessarily result in positive employee perceptions[3]. Instead, it may increase employees’ likelihood of perceiving assigned tasks as illegitimate. More importantly, the effect of leader trust on employees’ perceptions of illegitimate tasks depends jointly on employee trust and the quality of LMX. Specifically, when employee trust exceeds leader trust, LMX tends to be of higher quality, and employees are less likely to perceive tasks as illegitimate. In contrast, when both leader and

employee trust are low, LMX quality is poorest, and employees are most likely to perceive tasks as illegitimate. Given that trust is a fundamental element of effective leader–employee relationships[66], organizations should implement practices that help leaders and employees develop a clearer understanding of both their own and each other's levels of trust. Such efforts can enable both parties to capitalize on the benefits of trust while mitigating its potential adverse effects.

Second, during team task assignment, particularly in contexts that require extensive collaboration, information sharing, and rapid decision-making, organizations should consider the degree of trust alignment between leaders and employees when determining team composition and task allocation. In particular, leader–employee dyads characterized by low levels of trust on both sides should, where possible, be avoided in critical task assignments, as such pairings are more likely to experience ineffective communication, responsibility avoidance, and dysfunctional interactions. Our findings in this study indicate that both trust incongruence and mutually low trust significantly undermine LMX quality and increase employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks. Accordingly, organizations may incorporate trust assessments into team formation processes as an important consideration in leader–employee matching and task allocation. For existing leader–employee dyads characterized by mutually low trust, trust repair interventions should be implemented to rebuild interpersonal relationships[67, 68].

Finally, organizations should recognize that a workforce characterized by generally high levels of trust does not necessarily guarantee positive outcomes. Therefore, managers should establish regular communication and feedback mechanisms that clearly communicate support and recognition of employees' capabilities, thereby reinforcing employees' perceptions of being trusted. At the same time, organizations should foster the reciprocal development of trust by encouraging leaders to place greater trust in employees through practices such as delegation, participative decision-making, and sharing credit for achievements. These practices can strengthen leaders' confidence in employees' competence and commitment, thereby promoting a mutually reinforcing cycle of trust.

5.3Limitations and future research

First, although this study employed a three-wave, multi-source research design, which helped mitigate potential endogeneity concerns, the field survey design limits the ability to draw strong causal inferences. Future research could address this limitation by employing experimental designs to examine these relationships more rigorously.

Second, the sample was drawn exclusively from Mainland China, which may limit the generalizability of the findings[69]. Given that trust relationships are strongly shaped by cultural contexts, future research could conduct cross-national comparative studies to examine whether the proposed model generalizes across different cultural settings.

Finally, although this study primarily examined the mediating mechanisms underlying the effects of trust congruence, it did not fully investigate the boundary conditions that may shape these relationships. Empathetic leadership may be especially important because empathetic leaders are better able to

recognize employees' needs and adjust their behaviors accordingly, thereby mitigating the potential negative consequences associated with excessive or asymmetric trust [1]. Future research could therefore incorporate empathetic leadership into the proposed theoretical model as a moderating variable to examine how it influences the effects of trust congruence.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College Institutional Review Board. All procedures implemented in the study adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

This study has obtained the informed consent of all participants, and all participants did so voluntarily.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

The dataset generated during and/or analysed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they currently have no potential conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could influence the research results reported in this article.

Funding

This research has been supported by the 2023 Humanities and Social Science Planning Fund project of Ministry of Education "Research on environmental safety evaluation and guarantee mechanism of key mineral resources of new energy under the goal of 'double carbon'".(Grant No.23YJA790011)

This research has been supported by the 2025 General Scientific Research Project of the Department of Education of Zhejiang Province: Research on the Formation Mechanism and Countermeasures of Professional Stress for Scientific and Technological Talents under the Background of Artificial Intelligence. (Grant No. Y202559275).

Authors' contributions

Guangya Ma: Writing-Original draft, Methodology. Chunying Cui: Resources, Methodology. Junhan Ji: Investigation, Review & Editing. Lei Lu: Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the participants in this study.

References

1. Carter MZ, Mossholder KW. Are we on the same page? The performance effects of congruence between supervisor and group trust. J Appl Psychol. 2015;100(5):1349–63.
2. Sue-Chan C, Au AKC, Hackett RD. Trust as a mediator of the relationship between leader/member behavior and leader-member-exchange quality. J World Bus. 2012;47(3):459–68.
3. Mignonac K, Caussimont M, Boutant Lapeyre J, Manville C. The ethical downside of giving employees the trust they want: When trust congruence leads to unethical pro-supervisor behavior. J Bus Ethics. 2025;201(1):63–92.
4. Rousseau DM, Sitkin SB, Burt RS, Camerer C. Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust. Acad Manag Rev. 1998;23(3):393–404.
5. Serva MA, Fuller MA, Mayer RC. The reciprocal nature of trust: A longitudinal study of interacting teams. J Organ Behav. 2005;26(6):625–48.
6. De Jong BA, Dirks KT. Beyond shared perceptions of trust and monitoring in teams: Implications of asymmetry and dissensus. J Appl Psychol. 2012;97(2):391–406.
7. Baer MD, Frank EL, Matta FK, Luciano MM, Wellman N. Undertrusted, overtrusted, or just right? The fairness of (in)congruence between trust wanted and trust received. Acad Manag J. 2021;64(1):180–206.
8. Li X, Lin C. The influence of high-commitment work system on work well-being: The mediating role of psychological empowerment and the moderating role of leader trust. Pers Rev. 2021;50(4):1128–47.
9. Qiu S, Alizadeh A, Dooley LM, Zhang R. The effects of authentic leadership on trust in leaders, organizational citizenship behavior, and service quality in the Chinese hospitality industry. J Hosp Tour Manag. 2019;40:77–87.
10. Muntz J, Dormann C. Moderating effects of appreciation on relationships between illegitimate tasks and intrinsic motivation: A two-wave longitudinal study. Eur J Work Organ Psychol. 2020;29(3):391–404.
11. Semmer NK, Tschan F, Meier LL, Facchin S, Jacobshagen N. Illegitimate tasks and counterproductive work behavior. Appl Psychol. 2010;59(1):70–96.
12. Tomlinson EC, Dineen BR, Lewicki RJ. Trust congruence among integrative negotiators as a predictor of joint-behavioral outcomes. Int J Confl Manag. 2009;20(2):173–87.
13. Colquitt JA, LePine JA, Piccolo RF, Zapata CP, Rich BL. Explaining the justice-performance relationship: Trust as exchange deepener or trust as uncertainty reducer? J Appl Psychol. 2012;97(1):1–15.
14. Kim T-Y, Wang J, Chen J. Mutual trust between leader and subordinate and employee outcomes. J Bus Ethics. 2018;149(4):945–58.

15. Hoang G, Luu TT, Nguyen TT, Du T, Le LP. Examining the effect of entrepreneurial leadership on employees' innovative behavior in SME hotels: A mediated moderation model. Int J Hosp Manag. 2022;102:103142.
16. Ding H, Kuvaas B. Illegitimate tasks: A systematic literature review and agenda for future research. Work Stress. 2023;37(3):397–420.
17. Currie RA, Lee J, Min H, Jex SM. Special privileges or busywork? The impact of qualitative job insecurity on idiosyncratic deals and illegitimate tasks among hospitality workers. Int J Hosp Manag. 2023;113:103513.
18. Ni D, Zheng X, Lin J. Do employees benefit from engaging in status-striving strategies? The roles of leader hostility and leader trust in employees. J Bus Res. 2025;192:115299.
19. Kelloway EK, Turner N, Barling J, Loughlin C. Transformational leadership and employee psychological well-being: The mediating role of employee trust in leadership. Work Stress. 2012;26(1):39–55.
20. Mahsud R, Yukl G, Prussia G. Leader empathy, ethical leadership, and relations-oriented behaviors as antecedents of leader-member exchange quality. J Manag Psychol. 2010;25(6):561–77.
21. Yukl G. Leadership in Organizations. 5th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall; 2001.
22. Whitener EM, Brodt SE, Korsgaard MA, Werner JM. Managers as initiators of trust: An exchange relationship framework for understanding managerial trustworthy behavior. Acad Manag Rev. 1998;23(3):513–30.
23. Dirks KT, Ferrin DL. Trust in leadership: Meta-analytic findings and implications for research and practice. J Appl Psychol. 2002;87(4):611–28.
24. Edwards JR. The study of congruence in organizational behavior research: Critique and a proposed alternative. Organ Behav Hum Decis Process. 1994;58(1):51–100.
25. Lewicki RJ, Tomlinson EC, Gillespie N. Models of interpersonal trust development: Theoretical approaches, empirical evidence, and future directions. J Manag. 2006;32(6):991–1022.
26. Rupp DE, Cropanzano R. The mediating effects of social exchange relationships in predicting workplace outcomes from multifoci organizational justice. Organ Behav Hum Decis Process. 2002;89(1):925–46.
27. Molm LD, Takahashi N, Peterson G. Risk and trust in social exchange: An experimental test of a classical proposition. Am J Sociol. 2000;105(5):1396–427.
28. Jeong, J., Lee, J.H., Dai, Y. and Cheong, M. (2026). I've crossed the line for my underling… Congruence effect of leader-subordinate trust on unethical pro-subordinate behavior. J Bus Ethics, in press.
29. Ilkhanizadeh S, Karatepe OM. Does trust in organization mediate the influence of servant leadership on satisfaction outcomes among flight attendants? Int J Contemp Hosp Manag. 2018;30(12):3555–73.

30. Graen G, Dansereau F. Dysfunctional leadership styles. Organ Behav Hum Perform. 1972;7(2):216–36.
31. Konovsky MA, Pugh SD. Citizenship behavior and social exchange. Acad Manag J. 1994;37(3):656–69.
32. Gouldner AW. The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. Am Sociol Rev. 1960;25(2):161–78.
33. Ferrin DL, Bligh MC, Kohles JC. It takes two to tango: An interdependence analysis of the spiraling of perceived trustworthiness and cooperation in interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Organ Behav Hum Decis Process. 2008;107(2):161–78.
34. Doz YL, Olk PM, Ring PS. Formation processes of R&D consortia: Which path to take? Where does it lead? Strategic Manag J. 2000;21(3):239–66.
35. Colquitt JA, Scott BA, LePine JA. Trust, trustworthiness, and trust propensity: A meta-analytic test of their unique relationships with risk taking and job performance. J Appl Psychol. 2007;92(4):909–27.
36. Mohr J, Nevin JR. Communication strategies in marketing channels: A theoretical perspective. J Mark. 1990;54(4):36–51.
37. Ahmed F, Naqshbandi MM, Waheed M, Ain Nul. Digital leadership and innovative work behavior: Impact of LMX, learning orientation and innovation capabilities. Manag Decis. 2024;62(11):3607–32.
38. Guo Q, Zhang Z. Employees' taking charge behavior and empowering leadership: The role of leader trust in employees and risk propensity. Leadersh Organ Dev J. 2024;45(3):526–43.
39. Sluss DM, Ashforth BE. Relational identity and identification: Defining ourselves through work relationships. Acad Manag Rev. 2007;32(1):9–32.
40. Liu J, Siu O-L, Shi K. Transformational leadership and employee well-being: The mediating role of trust in the leader and self-efficacy. Appl Psychol. 2010;59(3):454–79.
41. Graebner ME. Caveat venditor: Trust asymmetries in acquisitions of entrepreneurial firms. Acad Manag J. 2009;52(3):435–72.
42. Goel S, Bell GG, Pierce JL. The perils of Pollyanna: Development of the over-trust construct. J Bus Ethics. 2005;58:203–18.
43. Blau PM. Exchange and Power in Social Life. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction; 1964.
44. Kong DT, Dirks KT, Ferrin DL. Interpersonal trust within negotiations: Meta-analytic evidence, critical contingencies, and directions for future research. Acad Manag J. 2014;57(5):1235–55.
45. Kaltiainen J, Lipponen J, Holtz BC. Dynamic interplay between merger process justice and cognitive trust in top management: A longitudinal study. J Appl Psychol. 2017;102(4):636–47.
46. Fulmer CA, Gelfand MJ. At what level (and in whom) we trust: Trust across multiple organizational levels. J Manag. 2012;38(4):1167–230.
47. Poon JML. Trust-in-supervisor and helping coworkers: Moderating effect of perceived politics. J Manag Psychol. 2006;21(6):518–32.

48. Sias, P.M. and Duncan, K.L. (2019). I know it's not your job but … Extra-role tasks,communication, and leader-member exchange relationships. Commun Q, 67(4), 355–382.
49. Lu L, Zhou Y, Li G. The paradoxical consequences of high performers: How and when subordinate performance drives paradoxical leader behaviors. J Bus Res. 2026;207:116018.
50. Podsakoff PM, MacKenzie SB, Lee J-Y, Podsakoff NP. Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. J Appl Psychol. 2003;88(5):879–903.
51. Liu X, Zheng X, Zhang Y, Liao H, Harms PD, Qin X, Yu Y. Paradoxical effects of narcissism on creative performance: Roles of leader-follower narcissism (in)congruence and follower identification with the leader. Hum Relat. 2025;78(5):517–49.
52. Yuan Y, Wu Z. The more congruence, the better? The effect of leader-employee congruence in moral identity on unethical pro-supervisor behavior. J Bus Psychol. 2025;40(6):1493.
53. Gu Q, Tang TL-P, Jiang W. Does moral leadership enhance employee creativity? Employee identification with leader and leader-member exchange (LMX) in the Chinese context. J Bus Ethics. 2015;126(3):513–29.
54. Ma J, Peng Y. The performance costs of illegitimate tasks: The role of job identity and flexible role orientation. J Vocat Behav. 2019;110:144–54.
55. Wang Z, Jiang F. It is not only what you do, but why you do it: The role of attribution in employees' emotional and behavioral responses to illegitimate tasks. J Vocat Behav. 2023;142:103860.
56. Brislin R. Field methods in cross-cultural psychology. In: Lonner WJ, Berry JW, editors. The wording and translation of research instruments. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1986.
57. Braun S, Sleebos E, Zou LL, Wisse BM. (2025). Sparking or smothering darkness: Motivational climates influence the leader grandiose narcissism–follower trust relation via leader self-serving behaviour. J Occup Organ Psychol, 98(1).
58. Jong BA, Elfring T. How does trust affect the performance of ongoing teams? The mediating role of reflexivity, monitoring and effort. Acad Manag J. 2010;53(3):535–49.
59. Graen GB, Uhl-Bien M. Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. Leadersh Q. 1995;6(2):219–47.
60. Minei EM, Eatough EM, Cohen-Charash Y. Managing illegitimate task requests through explanation and acknowledgment: A discursive leadership approach. Manag Commun Q. 2018;32(3):374–97.
61. Edwards JR, Parry ME. On the use of polynomial regression equations as an alternative to difference scores in organizational research. Acad Manag J. 1993;36(6):1577–613.
62. Cheung GW, Cooper-Thomas HD, Lau RS, Wang LC. Testing moderation in business and psychological studies with latent moderated structural equations. J Bus Psychol. 2021;36(6):1009–33.

63. Bagozzi RP, Yi Y. On the evaluation of structural equation models. J Acad Mark Sci. 1988;16(1):74–94.
64. Fornell C, Larcker DF. Structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error: Algebra and statistics. J Mark Res. 1981;18(3):382–8.
65. Preacher KJ, Selig JP. Advantages of Monte Carlo confidence intervals for indirect effects. Commun Methods Meas. 2012;6(2):77–98.
66. Gatling A, Shum C, Book L, Bai B. The influence of hospitality leaders' relational transparency on followers' trust and deviance behaviors: Mediating role of behavioral integrity. Int J Hosp Manag. 2017;62:11–20.
67. Grover SL, Hasel MC, Manville C, Serrano-Archimi C. Follower reactions to leader trust violations: A grounded theory of violation types, likelihood of recovery, and recovery process. Eur Manag J. 2014;32(5):689–702.
68. Kähkönen T, Blomqvist K, Gillespie N, Vanhala M. Employee trust repair: A systematic review of 20 years of empirical research and future research directions. J Bus Res. 2021;130:98–109.
69. Lu L, Duan J, Wu W, Ma G. Exploring the dual impact of workplace gossip on employee voice behavior: A social identity perspective. Pers Individ Dif. 2024;227:112711.

Figures

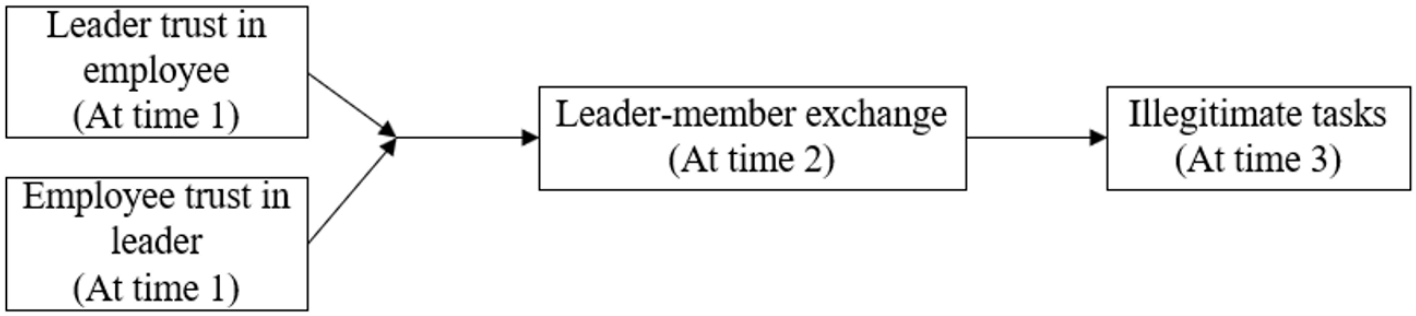


Figure 1

Study Model

Note. Leader trust in employee= rated by direct supervisor; Employee trust in leader= rated by employee; Leader-member exchange = rated by employee; Illegitimate tasks = rated by employee.

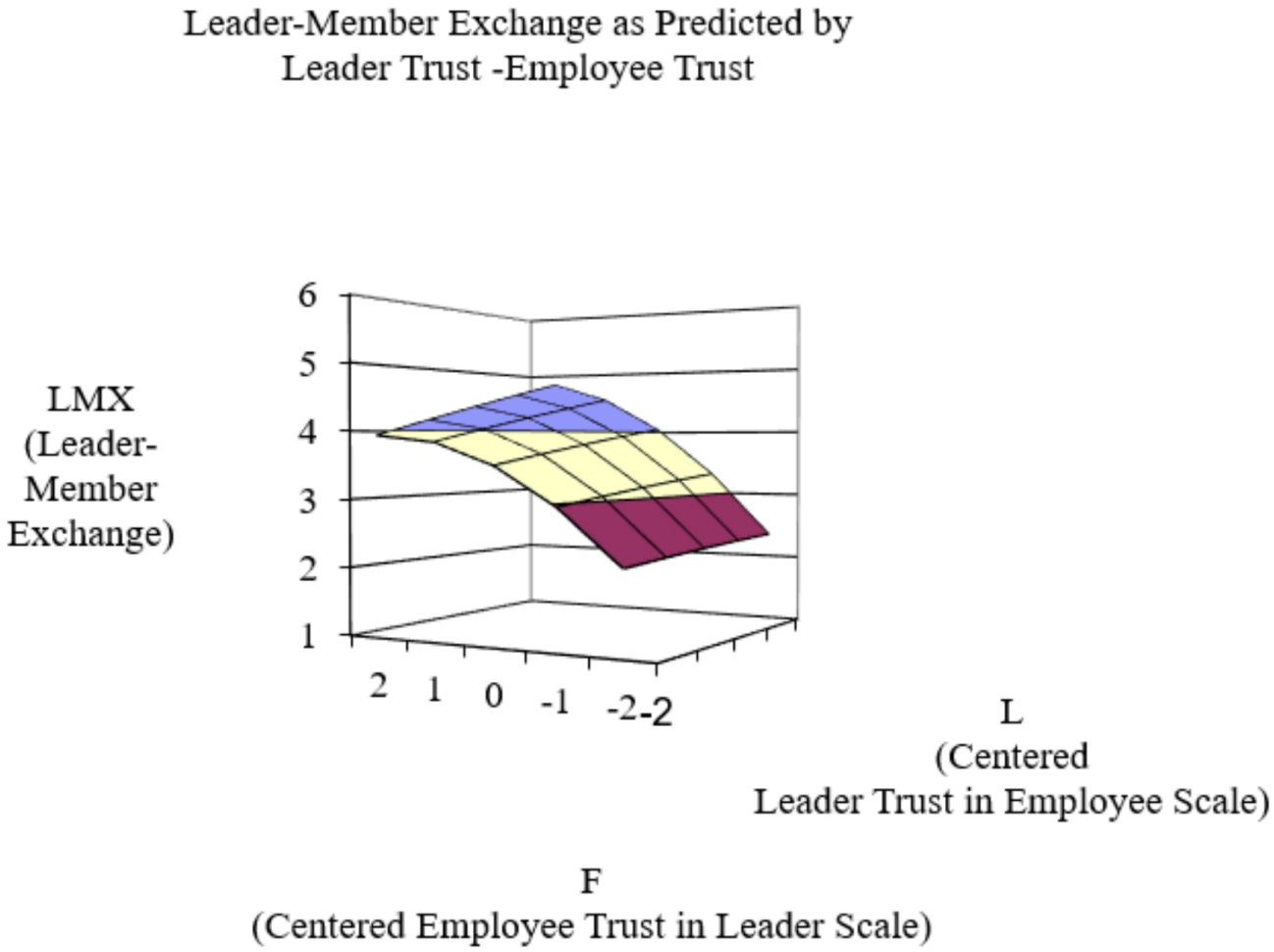


Figure 2

Polynomial Response Surface