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Driving Idea Exploration to Implementation: The Role of Transformational Leadership in Fostering Innovative Work Behavior

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital era, innovation is vital for organizations. This study examines how transformational leadership (TL) affects the dimensions of innovative work behavior (IWB)—idea exploration, generation, promotion, and implementation—using hospitality as a case. Using social exchange theory, we investigate the mediating role of innovative climate and the moderating role of psychological empowerment. Survey data from 350 employees shows that TL influences IWB indirectly through an innovative climate. Psychological empowerment strengthens this relationship, with higher empowerment levels producing stronger effects for indirect relationships. The findings emphasize how innovative climate and psychological empowerment help translate TL into enhanced employee innovation.

1 | Introduction

Today's business environment is becoming increasingly volatile and competitive, requiring organizations to continuously differentiate themselves through innovation to maintain market relevance and competitive advantage (Tan et al. 2025). Innovation, such as the internet of things, augmented reality, and virtual reality, serves as a generative source of competitive differentiation, enabling companies to create unique value propositions that competitors cannot easily replicate (Dam et al. 2025). However, innovation does not manifest itself. Businesses must adopt the right leadership style to support employees in displaying innovative work behaviors (IWBs). According to Newman et al. (2020), IWB involves the initial generation of creative ideas and the processes of championing and applying these ideas to create meaningful outcomes. In this regard, IWB is a key construct that manifests several outcomes, including the development of new products, improved problem-solving capabilities, and the ability to adapt to a changing business landscape (Lee and Jung 2025).

Among the different leadership styles, transformational leadership (TL) has been found to be most effective in encouraging IWB. For instance, Wijaya (2025) found that TL positively influences employee creativity and innovation by creating supportive climates that encourage experimentation and risk-taking. Likewise, Oh and Sabharwal (2025) demonstrate that TL, through various psychological mechanisms (such as psychological empowerment, innovative climate, and work engagement), enhances employees' innovation. Through social exchange mechanisms, transformational leaders build trust-based relationships that motivate

employees to reciprocate with enhanced innovative behaviors (Wijaya 2025).

Despite this substantial body of research, gaps remain that limit both theoretical understanding and practical application. First, many studies did not examine the dimensions of IWB. For instance, Wijaya (2025) acknowledges that IWB comprises multiple behavioral dimensions, but their empirical investigations treat it as a unidimensional construct. Likewise, Oh and Sabharwal (2025) examine IWB holistically without differentiating its four dimensions, while Ashraf et al. (2025) similarly aggregate innovative behavior despite acknowledging its multifaceted nature. This limitation prevents a holistic understanding of IWB's nuanced nature, which may produce differential effects across its dimensions. This study also responds to AIEssa and Durugbo's (2022) call for research that distinguishes between the idea generation, promotion, and implementation stages, noting that the current literature fails to acknowledge the dynamism of the IWB process, which involves generating, introducing, and implementing innovative ideas.

Like the earlier arguments, empirical evidence examining innovative climate across IWB's multiple dimensions remains limited. For instance, Wijaya (2025) identifies climate for innovation as a mediator but examines only the overall IWB rather than the dimensional effects. Kyeong (2025) similarly investigates the moderating role of innovative climate without dimensional differentiation. Most critically, recent reviews by Vu et al. (2025) note that "most studies have primarily focused on examining the mediating role of single factors from a leader-centered, collective, or organizational perspective" (p. 2), highlighting the absence of comprehensive mediation models that account for IWB's complexity. The hospitality context amplifies this gap's significance, as Dam et al. (2025) emphasize that the industry's transformation requires understanding how organizational climate translates leadership behaviors into specific innovation outcomes across different innovation stages.

Finally, psychological empowerment, which Spreitzer (1995) defined as employees' intrinsic motivation manifested through feelings of competence, autonomy, impact, and meaning, has received limited attention as a boundary condition that moderates the strength of leadership effects, far less as a moderator of an indirect effect. This gap is surprising, as early literature such as Rabiul et al. (2024) argued that leadership effectiveness is shaped not only by leader behaviors but also by employees' perceptions of the organization. Although Vu et al. (2025) examine psychological empowerment, they conceptualize it as a mediator in the TL-IWB relationship and explicitly recommend that "future research should consider other variables as moderators" (p. 12). In all, addressing this gap would clarify for whom and under what conditions TL most effectively stimulates innovation.

In all, addressing these gaps holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, examining IWB's dimensional structure provides a more granular understanding of how leadership influences different stages of employee innovation. This study responds to calls from contemporary scholars to move beyond simplistic, unidimensional conceptualizations (AIEssa and Durugbo 2022). Furthermore, integrating innovative climate as a mediator and psychological empowerment as a moderator advances understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which TL affects employee innovation, addressing the "follower-centered perspective" advocated by Vu et al. (2025). Practically, as the hospitality industry undergoes rapid transformation driven by AI adoption, data analytics, and experiential personalization (Kim et al. 2025; Gursoy and Cai 2025), managers require precise guidance on which leadership behaviors most effectively stimulate specific innovative behaviors and how organizational climate and employee empowerment shape these relationships. Such insights enable more targeted interventions to enhance innovation capacity in service-intensive environments facing unprecedented technological and competitive pressures.

2 | Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 | Research Context

The hospitality industry in Thailand is a critical segment of the nation's broader tourism economy, serving as both a significant economic driver. In 2025, the Thailand hospitality market is estimated to be worth approximately USD 22.68 billion, with projections to grow to around USD 63.58 billion by 2030 at a compound annual growth rate of about 7.2%, reflecting sustained expansion in accommodation demand and investment across Thailand (Mordor Intelligence 2024). However, the hospitality industry in Thailand is facing competition from neighboring countries. Additionally, rising labor costs, workforce shortages, and increasing guest expectations for personalized and technology-enabled service experiences place further pressure on hospitality organizations to innovate at the operational level (Thailand Ministry of Tourism and Sports 2024). As such, the hospitality industry's ability to stimulate IWB is becoming essential for sustaining service quality, differentiation, and long-term competitiveness.

2.2 | Theoretical Framework

According to the social exchange theory, transformational leaders can influence employee engagement through social exchanges by fostering an environment that is amiable and reliable, built on trust, and characterized by reciprocal relationships focused on mutual benefits beyond mere contractual obligations (Hughes et al. 2018). The fundamental tenet of social exchange theory, as demonstrated in studies by Zhang et al. (2018), is that followers of TL will reciprocate by exhibiting positive attitudes and behaviors that benefit the organization. Examples of these behaviors include IWB, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and work performance (Le and Lei 2017; Tan et al. 2024; Lee and Jung 2025). Based on this argument, Figure 1 postulates that transformational leaders motivate and inspire others, thereby creating an innovative climate and, with psychological empowerment, leading employees to display IWB.

2.3 | Transformation Leadership (TL)

Bass and Avolio (1994) state that TL entails four dimensions. First, the capacity to provide an example that inspires admiration,

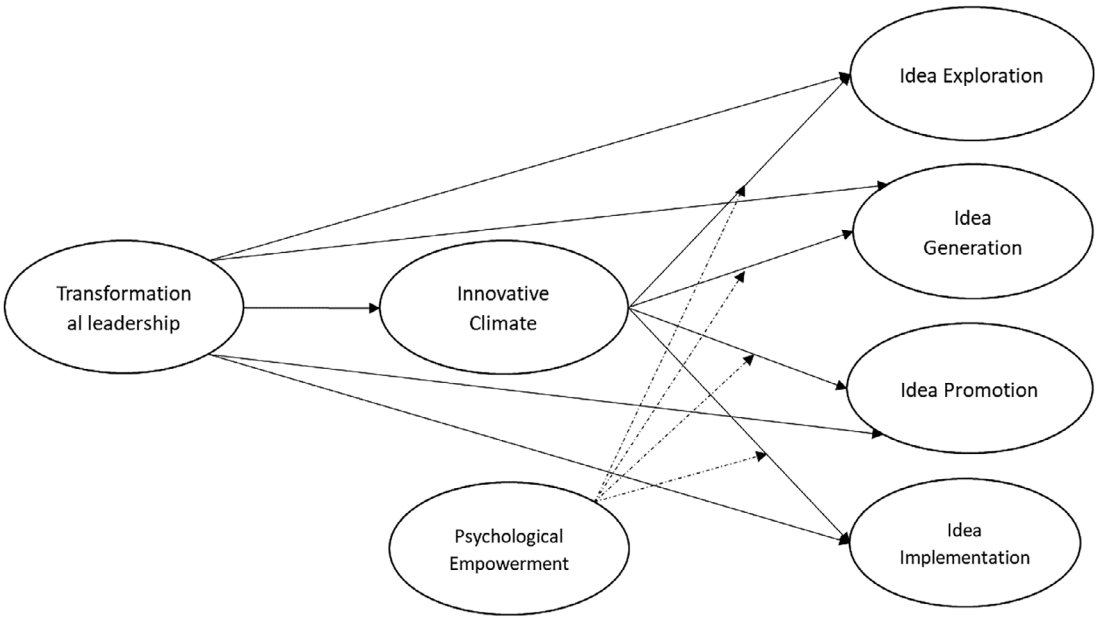

FIGURE 1 | Research framework.

respect, and trust in a leader is known as an idealized influence (Jensen and Bro 2018). Intellectual stimulation refers to a leader's capacity to inspire people to think critically about choices and take on challenging assignments (Jensen and Bro 2018). Individualized consideration is about connecting supporters' demands to the organization's mission through ongoing coaching and feedback and paying close attention to each follower's unique characteristics and personal development. Inspiring and motivating others to believe in their abilities to realize exciting visions is known as inspirational motivation. Through TL, these leaders foster intellectual thinking among their followers by continually challenging and questioning their beliefs and ways of thinking.

In other words, TL can foster organizational innovation (Zhang et al. 2018; Hughes et al. 2018). TLs can encourage creative work practices among their staff through visionary initiatives, functional expertise, individualized mentoring, a supportive culture, and intellectual stimulation. These leaders usually foster a supportive environment that encourages workers to participate in creative work behaviors (Le and Lei 2017). As Lee and Jung (2025) defined, TL fosters a supportive work environment through motivation, inspiration, and personalized attention. The atmosphere thus created significantly boosts staff members' drive to develop and implement original ideas. Additionally, this setting provides support and feedback in pursuing novel and optimal solutions (Mahmood et al. 2022). In all, transformational leaders can motivate staff members to engage in innovative work practices by forging a strong sense of shared purpose and belonging with the organization, as well as by inspiring individual employees by drawing connections between their futures and the organization's.

2.4 | Innovative Work Behavior (IWB)

The concept of IWB, defined by Janssen (2000), encompasses the actions and behaviors of individuals that contribute to innovation within an organization. IWB refers to the actions and behaviors of individuals within an organization that contribute to the introduction, development, and implementation of new ideas, processes, products, or services. It encompasses the initiative and creativity employees display in their work roles to enhance organizational effectiveness and competitiveness through innovation (Janssen 2000). IWB is operationalized in four dimensions: idea exploration, idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation (De Jong and Den Hartog 2010).

2.4.1 | Idea Exploration

Idea exploration involves searching for new concepts, technologies, or methods that can lead to organizational innovation. This dimension emphasizes the initial phase of idea generation, where employees actively explore and gather information to develop novel ideas. Janssen (2005) suggests that idea exploration is facilitated by a supportive organizational climate that encourages employee curiosity, experimentation, and knowledge sharing. Organizations that foster a culture of openness and tolerance for ambiguity are more likely to stimulate idea exploration among their workforces.

2.4.2 | Idea Generation

Idea generation is the creation of new, creative ideas that can lead to innovative outcomes within an organization. TL, characterized by vision, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation, has positively influenced employees' idea generation. De Jong and Den Hartog (2010) define idea generation as a critical component of IWB, highlighting its importance in fostering creativity and initiating innovative activities. In this regard, Agazu et al. (2025) highlighted that TL encourages employees to think creatively and challenge the status quo, fostering an environment where novel ideas are more likely to emerge.

2.4.3 | Idea Promotion

Idea promotion involves active advocacy and support for innovative ideas within the organization (Lee and Jung 2025). Once ideas are generated, they must be advocated for and promoted within the organization. Idea promotion involves convincing others of the value and feasibility of innovative ideas, gaining support, and securing resources for their development. Podsakoff et al. (1990) discuss the role of idea promotion in organizational innovation, emphasizing that promoting and championing new ideas is essential for their successful implementation and impact. TL plays a crucial role in promoting the ideas that their team members generate. They provide support, allocate resources, and remove barriers hindering the development and implementation of new ideas. Hughes et al. (2018) suggest that TL empowers employees to take ownership of their ideas and create a sense of urgency and importance around innovation. Studies such as those by Jung et al. (2003) emphasize that TL fosters an environment in which employees feel encouraged to persist in their innovative endeavors despite challenges or setbacks.

2.4.4 | Idea Implementation

Idea implementation refers to implementing and executing innovative ideas to create tangible outcomes. TL inspires idea generation and facilitates implementation by providing guidance, aligning goals, and fostering collaboration among team members.

2.4.5 | Idea Realization

Idea realization focuses on the implementation and execution of innovative ideas. It involves translating creative concepts into practical solutions or products, overcoming challenges, and achieving tangible outcomes. Škerlavaj et al. (2022) discuss idea realization as a critical aspect of IWB, noting that successfully implementing ideas requires organizational support for experimentation and risk-taking. TL plays a crucial role in this phase by providing necessary resources, removing obstacles, and creating an environment conducive to implementation. Tan et al. (2024) found that TL enhances idea realization by motivating employees to take calculated risks, providing implementation support, and maintaining momentum throughout the execution phase. Such leadership behaviors are crucial during the challenging transition from concept to practical application.

3 | Hypotheses Development

3.1 | Transformation Leadership (TL) on Dimensions of Innovative Work Behavior (IWB)

Dam et al. (2025) highlight that leadership is essential in inspiring and supporting followers to enhance their innovative performance. Effective leaders recognize the importance of timing and technique when offering assistance, which is especially critical given the demanding nature of IWB. In response to this comment, De Jong and Den Hartog (2010) mentioned that IWB is encouraged in organizational contexts when leaders support their team members' willingness to experiment, be open to new ideas, and take calculated risks. Qu et al. (2015) further demonstrated the beneficial impact of TL on employees' innovative results using a sample of 420 leader-follower groups from an energy company in mainland China. Similarly, another study by Le and Lei (2017) discovered that TL improves employees' innovative performance. In this respect, we argue that TL promotes IWB by encouraging employees to work toward group objectives (Hughes et al. 2018; Tan et al. 2024; Afsar and Umrani 2020). Besides, TL supports people's learning and increases their socialization, helping them find support for the implementation of their ideas (Zhang et al. 2018; Le and Lei 2017).

As such, TL influences how employees promote and implement ideas by inspiring them to think creatively through intellectual stimulation, fostering close social bonds among coworkers, increasing their involvement in their work and organizations, satisfying their intrinsic motivation, and addressing their needs for growth and recognition (Lee and Jung 2025). Further, "championing behaviors" are actions that TL takes to support an employee in advocating for their concept (Mahmood et al. 2022). As further mentioned by Suliati et al. (2025), these actions assist the employee in taking an idea from conception to completion by providing the necessary resources.

In sum, the above viewpoints demonstrate that TL promotes IWB by encouraging staff members to work toward collective objectives (Hughes et al. 2018; Le and Lei 2017; Lee and Jung 2025) and engaging in constant learning as well as strengthening the network to facilitate idea implementation (Zhang et al. 2018). Additionally, TL enhances how employees promote and implement ideas through multiple mechanisms that stimulate intellectual curiosity, build strong interpersonal bonds among team members, and address individual growth needs (Tan et al. 2024; Afsar and Umrani 2020). Therefore, this leads to the first set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. *TL positively influences idea exploration.*

Hypothesis 1b. *TL positively influences idea generation.*

Hypothesis 1c. *TL positively influences idea promotion.*

Hypothesis 1d. *TL positively influences idea implementation.*

3.2 | Role of Transformational Leadership on Innovative Climate

Recent literature has increasingly emphasized the crucial role of TL in fostering an innovative climate within organizations. TL catalyzes innovation by articulating compelling visions that inspire employees to think creatively and challenge existing paradigms (Le and Lei 2017; Abualoush et al. 2022). Through intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, these leaders create an environment where employees feel psychologically safe to propose novel ideas and take calculated risks (Ni and Kurniawati 2025). Research by Tan et al. (2024) demonstrates that TL significantly enhances an organizational climate by promoting open communication, knowledge sharing, and collaborative problem-solving among team members.

The impact of TL on an innovative climate is further strengthened through various organizational mechanisms and processes. Studies have shown that transformational leaders facilitate innovation by establishing supportive organizational structures and allocating necessary resources for innovative initiatives (Hughes et al. 2018; Afsar and Umrani 2020). These leaders actively promote a climate of innovation by encouraging experimentation, tolerating failures as learning opportunities, and recognizing creative efforts (Zhang 2010). Moreover, TL has been found to enhance an innovative climate by fostering psychological empowerment and intrinsic motivation among employees, leading to increased innovative behavior and creativity (Mahmood et al. 2017; Le and Lei 2017).

Additionally, transformational leaders contribute to building an innovative climate by promoting continuous learning, encouraging knowledge sharing, and facilitating cross-functional collaboration (Lee and Jung 2025). Studies by Zhang et al. (2018) demonstrate that transformational leaders enhance innovative climate by creating an environment that values diverse perspectives, encourages constructive debate, and supports the implementation of novel ideas. This leadership style is particularly effective at fostering an innovative climate by aligning organizational goals with employees' creative aspirations and providing the support systems that enable innovation to flourish (Tan et al. 2024; Afsar and Umrani 2020). Therefore, this leads to the hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *TL positively influences an innovative climate*

3.3 | Role of Innovative Climate on Dimensions of Innovative Work Behavior (IWB)

A growing body of literature emphasizes the critical role of innovative climate in fostering IWB within organizations. An innovative climate, characterized by organizational support for new ideas, resource availability, and openness to change, is a crucial antecedent of employees' innovative initiatives (Zhang 2010). Recent studies have demonstrated that when employees perceive a strong innovative climate, they are more likely to engage in idea generation, promotion, and implementation activities (Zhang et al. 2018; Tan et al. 2024). This supportive environment creates psychological safety, encouraging employees to take calculated risks and propose novel solutions without fear of negative consequences (Afsar and Umrani 2020; Lee and Jung 2025). Research indicates that an innovative climate enhances employees' creative self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, thereby increasing innovative behavior (Hughes et al. 2018; Le and Lei 2017).

When organizations cultivate a climate that values innovation, employees are more likely to invest time and effort in developing and championing new ideas. Studies have shown that an innovative climate facilitates knowledge-sharing and collaborative learning among employees, creating a synergistic environment where innovative ideas can flourish (Mahmood et al. 2022). Furthermore, an innovative climate is crucial to mediating organizational practices and IWB outcomes. Research highlights that an innovative climate strengthens the relationship between organizational support systems and employees' innovative activities by providing necessary resources, recognition, and rewards for innovative efforts (Tan et al. 2024). Recent studies by Zhang et al. (2018) and Afsar and Umrani (2020) demonstrate that an innovative climate enhances IWB by fostering a work environment that encourages experimentation, tolerates failures as learning opportunities, and supports the implementation of novel ideas.

This supportive climate is particularly effective in promoting all phases of the innovation process, from idea generation to implementation, by creating an environment where innovation is encouraged and expected (Le and Lei 2017; Lee and Jung 2025). Empirically, there is strong evidence of a direct positive relationship between innovative climate and the specific dimensions of IWB. For instance, Zhang et al. (2024) demonstrated that innovative climate enhanced idea generation through increased psychological safety and creative confidence. To promote ideas, Lee and Jung (2025) found that supportive, innovative climates facilitated employees' championing behaviors by reducing the perceived risks of idea advocacy. Furthermore, Afsar and Umrani (2020) found that an innovative climate was particularly crucial for idea implementation, as it provided the necessary organizational support structures and resources for converting novel ideas into practical innovations. These findings collectively support the theoretical arguments for direct positive relationships between innovative climate and all four dimensions of IWB.

Hypothesis 3a. *Innovative climate positively influences idea exploration.*

Hypothesis 3b. *Innovative climate positively influences idea generation.*

Hypothesis 3c. *Innovative climate positively influences idea promotion.*

Hypothesis 3d. *Innovative climate positively influences idea implementation.*

3.4 | The Mediating Role of Innovative Climate

The concept of an innovative climate explains the organizational environment that fosters innovation and supports the generation of new ideas (Zhang et al. 2018). It can be described as an innovative climate, representing employees' collective understanding of the organization's policies, practices, and procedures that signal how innovative behaviors are recognized, rewarded, and encouraged (Tan et al. 2024). Unlike the broader concept of organizational culture, which encompasses the deeper, underlying values and beliefs that shape an organization, an innovative climate focuses on the more tangible and observable aspects of the work environment. It reflects how employees perceive the organization's support for creativity, risk-taking, and the implementation of new ideas. In essence, while organizational culture provides the foundation for shared norms and values, the innovative climate describes how those values are translated into day-to-day practices that influence and guide employee behavior toward innovation.

Empirical research has demonstrated that a creative work environment encourages new ideas and increases proactiveness in

seeking new opportunities, leading to more inventive work behavior from employees (Hughes et al. 2018; Gui et al. 2024). Similarly, other studies have found that an innovative climate positively affects organizational innovation (e.g., Afsar and Umrani 2020; Lee and Jung 2025). The limited body of research on innovative climate has primarily focused on isolated aspects of IWB, offering only a fragmented understanding of the climate across levels. This narrow perspective hinders our ability to fully grasp the effectiveness of innovative climate as a multi-level phenomenon that operates and interacts at individual, team, and organizational levels (Mahmood et al. 2022). Based on our earlier arguments, we postulate that

Hypothesis 4a. *Innovative climate mediates the relationship between TL and idea exploration.*

Hypothesis 4b. *Innovative climate mediates the relationship between TL and idea generation.*

Hypothesis 4c. *Innovative climate mediates the relationship between TL and idea promotion.*

Hypothesis 4d. *Innovative climate mediates the positive relationship between TL and idea implementation.*

3.5 | Moderated Mediation of Psychological Empowerment

Research suggests that psychological empowerment plays a crucial moderating role in how TL influences IWB through an innovative climate (Zhang et al. 2018). Studies demonstrate that psychologically empowered employees are more receptive to transformational leaders' efforts to foster idea exploration and generation. Employees who feel competent and find meaning in their work are more likely to respond positively to leaders' intellectual stimulation and engage in creative problem-solving activities (Afsar and Umrani 2020; Tan et al. 2024).

We argue that the moderate effect of psychological empowerment is particularly evident across the four dimensions of IWB. For idea exploration, psychologically empowered employees may feel more confident searching for and identifying new opportunities or problems that need innovative solutions (Zhang 2010). This is evident in studies that found that when employees feel supported by transformational leaders and embedded in a strong, innovative climate, psychologically empowered employees experience greater psychological safety, which encourages proactive behaviors such as experimentation, information search, and opportunity recognition (Lee and Jung 2025).

Second, regarding idea generation, empowered individuals are more likely to believe in their capacity to develop novel and useful ideas. In a climate that supports innovation, this enhanced self-efficacy strengthens the impact of TL on employees' creative thinking and solution development (Vu et al. 2025).

Third, in the idea promotion stage, psychological empowerment increases employees' willingness to champion their ideas, seek feedback, and mobilize support from colleagues and supervisors. When the organizational climate is conducive to innovation, empowered employees are more inclined to voice their ideas and persist in gaining endorsement for them, thereby amplifying the influence of TL on idea advocacy (Mahmood et al. 2022).

Finally, for idea implementation, psychologically empowered employees demonstrate greater initiative, resilience, and persistence in translating ideas into practice, particularly when the organizational climate supports experimentation and risk-taking. Empowerment enables employees to take ownership of their ideas and sustain effort despite obstacles, reinforcing the effects of TL on the successful execution of innovative initiatives (Ni et al. 2025; Abualoush et al. 2022; Afsar and Umrani 2020; Spreitzer 1995).

Putting these together, we can see that psychological empowerment is an essential construct that may influence the strength of the relationship between TL and the dimensions of IWB. Therefore, the current study forms the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 5a. *Psychological empowerment moderates the indirect relationship between TL and idea exploration.*

Hypothesis 5b. *Psychological empowerment moderates the indirect relationship between TL and idea generation.*

Hypothesis 5c. *Psychological empowerment moderates the indirect relationship between TL and idea promotion.*

Hypothesis 5d. *Psychological empowerment moderates the indirect relationship between TL and idea implementation.*

4 | Methodology

4.1 | Sample and Procedure

Employees from hospitality organizations provided the data for the study to examine the study hypotheses. Using convenience sampling, 410 online survey questionnaires were distributed to staff members at these companies. At the end of the data collection period, 350 valid responses were received, yielding a 70.00% response rate. The sample included both full-time (n = 300, 85.70%) and temporary employees (n = 50, 14.30%). Both employee types were included, as the hospitality industry is characterized by a mixed workforce, with both permanent and temporary staff playing crucial roles in service delivery. From a theoretical standpoint, the constructs being examined are perceptual and relational in nature and operate across employment statuses, rather than being contingent on contractual arrangements. Moreover, temporary employees may be more sensitive to leadership cues and organizational climate due to lower job security and fewer formal organizational resources, making their inclusion essential for capturing variation in innovation-related responses (Chambel 2014). Finally, this sample size exceeded the recommended 160 suggested by Kock and Hadaya (2018).

4.2 | Controlling Method Bias

Given that this is a cross-sectional study, several measures recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003) were implemented. First,

the survey instruments are pre-tested to remove any forms of ambiguities. At the same time, we reiterated to respondents that all collected data are anonymous and confidential, and that participation is voluntary. Third, we created a temporal separation by placing demographic questions between the predictors and the criterion. This was done to prevent any apparent connection or relationship between the predictor variables and the criterion variables, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Finally, the Harman single-factor test showed that the largest factor accounted for 41.51% of the variance, indicating that CMB does not pose a significant issue in this model (Tan et al. 2024).

4.3 | Measurements

TL was measured using a 4-item scale developed by Podsakoff et al. (1990). Psychological empowerment was assessed through Spreitzer's (1995) 12-item scale. The innovative climate was measured using the instrument developed by Oke et al. (2013). Lastly, IWB is assessed using De Jong and Den Hartog's (2010) 12-item scale, all items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

4.4 | Analytical Procedures

We analyzed the data using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is particularly well-suited for this context because it can effectively manage small sample sizes, a limitation commonly associated with traditional covariance-based SEM (Hair et al. 2017). Moreover, its flexibility in handling complex models with numerous variables and intricate relationships makes PLS-SEM an optimal choice for our analysis (Hair et al. 2017). Besides, PLS-SEM has been applied in a wide range of fields, including tourism (Tan et al. 2023), events (Tan et al. 2023), education (Sim et al. 2020), and human resources (Tan et al. 2024).

5 | Results

5.1 | Respondents' Profile

The demographic profile in Table 1 shows that male respondents (60.60%) outnumbered female respondents (39.40%). Most respondents were aged 30–50, held bachelor's degrees, and had 15+ years of work experience.

5.2 | Measurement Model

Table 2 shows that almost all item loadings met the recommended threshold of 0.708, with the rest of the indexes of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) meeting the threshold. Unlike Aggarwal et al. (2022) and Aggarwal et al. (2021), which showed that all outer loadings are above 0.708, our study demonstrates otherwise, with a few items below 0.708. On this note, we took reference to Hair et al. (2017), who stated that indicators could be retained if the AVE and CR are already above the suggested threshold value. We further noted that recent papers of a similar nature adopted similar treatments for loadings falling below 0.708 (Al Sulaimani et al. 2026; Das et al. 2026; Tan et al. 2025). Additionally, the model achieved discriminant validity using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) criterion method (see Table 3).

5.3 | Structural Model

The first step in examining a structural model is ascertaining whether multicollinearity exists. From Table 4, the variance inflation factors (VIFs) are less than 3.3, indicating that this is not an issue. Additionally, Table 4 shows that TL has a significant positive relationship with innovation climate (H2. $\beta = 0.700$, $p < 0.001$), it did not establish any significant relationship with the dimensions of IWB, which is ideas exploration (H1a. $\beta = -0.101$, $p = 0.147$), ideas generation (H1b. $\beta = -0.028$, $p = 0.378$), ideas promotion (H1c. $\beta = 0.018$, $p = 0.410$), and ideas implementation (H1d. $\beta = 0.066$, $p = 0.199$). Hence, only H2 is supported.

Regarding the role of the innovation climate, H3a–H3d are all supported. This can be seen from Table 4 showing that innovation climate has a positive significant relationship with ideas exploration (H3a. $\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.05$), ideas generation (H3b. $\beta = 0.272$, $p < 0.05$), ideas promotion (H3c. $\beta = 0.474$, $p < 0.001$), and ideas implementation (H3d. $\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$).

Following the above results, the innovative climate is the underlying construct that bridges TL to the various dimensions of IWB. Specifically, it mediates the relationship between TL and idea exploration (H4a. $\beta = 0.255$, $p < 0.05$), idea generation (H4b. $\beta = 0.190$, $p < 0.05$), idea promotion (H4c. $\beta = 0.297$, $p < 0.001$), and idea implementation (H4d. $\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H4a–H4d are supported. Regarding the R^2 values, Table 4 shows that they range from 0.298 to 0.525, indicating a medium to substantial model. Most effect sizes range from small to medium. For some, the effect size is negligible, as indicated by the non-significant results.

Following Cheah et al. (2021), we examined the moderating role of psychological empowerment on the indirect relationship between TL and dimensions of IWB through innovative climate. As shown in Table 5, the index of the moderated mediation for all hypotheses is significant (H5a: $\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.05$; H5b: $\beta = 0.159$, $p < 0.05$; H5c: $\beta = 0.157$, $p < 0.05$; H5d: $\beta = 0.202$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that psychological empowerment significantly moderates the mediated effect of TL on all four dimensions of IWB through innovative climate. The results revealed that, at higher levels of psychological empowerment, the indirect effect of TL on each IWB dimension is substantially stronger than at lower levels. This demonstrates that increases in psychological empowerment amplify the indirect effect, supporting hypotheses H5a, H5b, H5c, and H5d.

To further illustrate these moderation effects, Figure 2 presents graphical plots showing the relationship between innovative climate and each IWB dimension at high (+1 SD) versus low (−1 SD) levels of psychological empowerment. As depicted in the figure, the slopes for high empowerment (solid blue lines) are consistently steeper than those for low empowerment (dashed red lines) across all four IWB dimensions. This pattern indicates that when employees experience high psychological empowerment, they are better able to translate supportive, innovative climates

TABLE 1 | Demographic profiles ($n = 350$).

Respondents		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	212	60.60
	Female	138	39.40
Age (years)	Less than 30	39	11.10
	30–40	145	41.40
	41–50	135	38.60
	51–65	31	8.90
Type of employee	Full-time worker	300	85.70
	Temporary worker	50	14.30
Education	PhD	1	0.30
	Master's	61	17.40
	Bachelor's	264	75.4
	Below bachelor's	24	6.90
Tenure (years)	Less than 3 years	47	13.40
	3–6 years	54	15.40
	7–9 years	34	9.70
	9–12 years	43	12.30
	13–15 years	37	10.60
	More than 15 years	135	38.60

into actual innovative behaviors. Conversely, when psychological empowerment is low, even strong innovative climates produce relatively modest increases in IWBs.

6 | Discussion

To recapitulate, the current study examines how TL influences employees' IWB dimensions through an innovative climate, moderated by psychological empowerment. First, our findings show that TL does not directly influence IWB dimensions. These findings contrast with previous studies that found direct effects of TL on IWB (e.g., Zhang et al. 2018; Stanescu et al. 2021). This finding demonstrates the nuanced relationship that earlier studies fail to capture, particularly within Thai culture. In Thailand's collectivist social and organizational culture, employees tend to exhibit lower risk-taking tendencies and place greater emphasis on group harmony and social consensus (Farzana and Charoensukmongkol 2024). As our subsequent results show, they are more likely to respond to collective cues embedded in the organizational climate, which signal whether innovation is acceptable and supported by the group. Simply put, unless there is consensus within the organization, employees may be reluctant to engage in behaviors that deviate from established norms. This explanation aligns with recent work by Farzana and Charoensukmongkol (2024), suggesting that cultural factors and organizational context can significantly shape how leadership influences innovation.

Second, the strong mediating role of innovative climate across all IWB dimensions extends the current understanding of how TL fosters innovation. There could be different reasons for this result. First, our results could reflect the challenges of fostering innovation in hierarchical Asian organizational contexts. The indirect nature of leadership effects could indicate that formal authority needs to work through organizational systems and climate rather than through direct influence to promote innovation effectively in such settings. This cultural dimension offers another potential explanation for the divergence between our findings and some Western-based studies. Second, the varying strength of mediation effects across different IWB phases—with stronger effects for implementation and promotion than exploration and generation reflects that a supportive climate is becoming increasingly important as ideas move from conception to execution. This result aligns with Hughes et al.'s (2018) findings, and it is expected that, as an idea moves into the implementation phase, more resources and support will be required from other departments, such as branding and marketing, as well as logistics. The differential effects across IWB dimensions also highlight the importance of taking a multidimensional view of innovative behavior. Although earlier research often treated IWB as a unidimensional construct (see De Jong and Den Hartog 2007), our results demonstrate that different phases require distinct enabling conditions. This suggests that managers may need to adapt their approach based on whether they are trying to encourage idea generation versus implementation.

Third, our findings on psychological empowerment's moderating role provide new insights into when TL is most effective at fostering IWB through an innovative climate. The stronger indirect effects at higher levels of psychological empowerment suggest that employees need to feel both enabled by their environment (climate) and personally empowered to engage in innovative behaviors. This interaction effect helps explain inconsistent findings in previous research regarding TL's impact on innovation (Afsar and Umrani 2020; Lee and Jung 2025).

TABLE 2 | Measurement model.

	Outer loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
IE1	0.671	0.738	0.769	0.661
IE2	0.893			
IE3	0.858			
IG1	0.880	0.882	0.882	0.809
IG2	0.901			
IG3	0.917			
IIMP1	0.889	0.878	0.878	0.805
IIMP2	0.916			
IIMP3	0.886			
Inv1	0.755	0.914	0.915	0.624
Inv2	0.791			
Inv3	0.757			
Inv4	0.806			
Inv5	0.813			
Inv6	0.847			
Inv7	0.773			
Inv8	0.775			
IP1	0.863	0.863	0.869	0.784
IP2	0.915			
IP3	0.878			
PsyE1	0.743	0.915	0.919	0.516
PsyE10	0.725			
PsyE11	0.748			
PsyE12	0.709			
PsyE2	0.757			
PsyE3	0.753			
PsyE4	0.723			
PsyE5	0.705			
PsyE6	0.689			
PsyE7	0.686			
PsyE8	0.693			
PsyE9	0.683			
TL1	0.839	0.907	0.908	0.783
TL2	0.923			
TL3	0.879			
TL4	0.896			

Abbreviations: IE, idea exploitation; IG, idea generation; IIMP, idea implementation; IP, idea promotion; PsyE, psychological empowerment; TL, transformational leadership.

These findings can be understood through social exchange and self-determination theory frameworks. The mediating role of climate aligns with social exchange perspectives on how leadership influences employee behavior by creating supportive conditions. Meanwhile, the moderating effect of psychological empowerment supports self-determination theory's emphasis on satisfying basic psychological needs to foster proactive behaviors such as innovation.

7 | Theoretical Implications

This study makes distinct theoretical contributions. First, by integrating TL, IWB, and psychological empowerment, we provide novel insights into the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which leadership shapes employee innovation in hospitality contexts. In this regard, we advance TL theory by empirically demonstrating that TL's influence on innovation

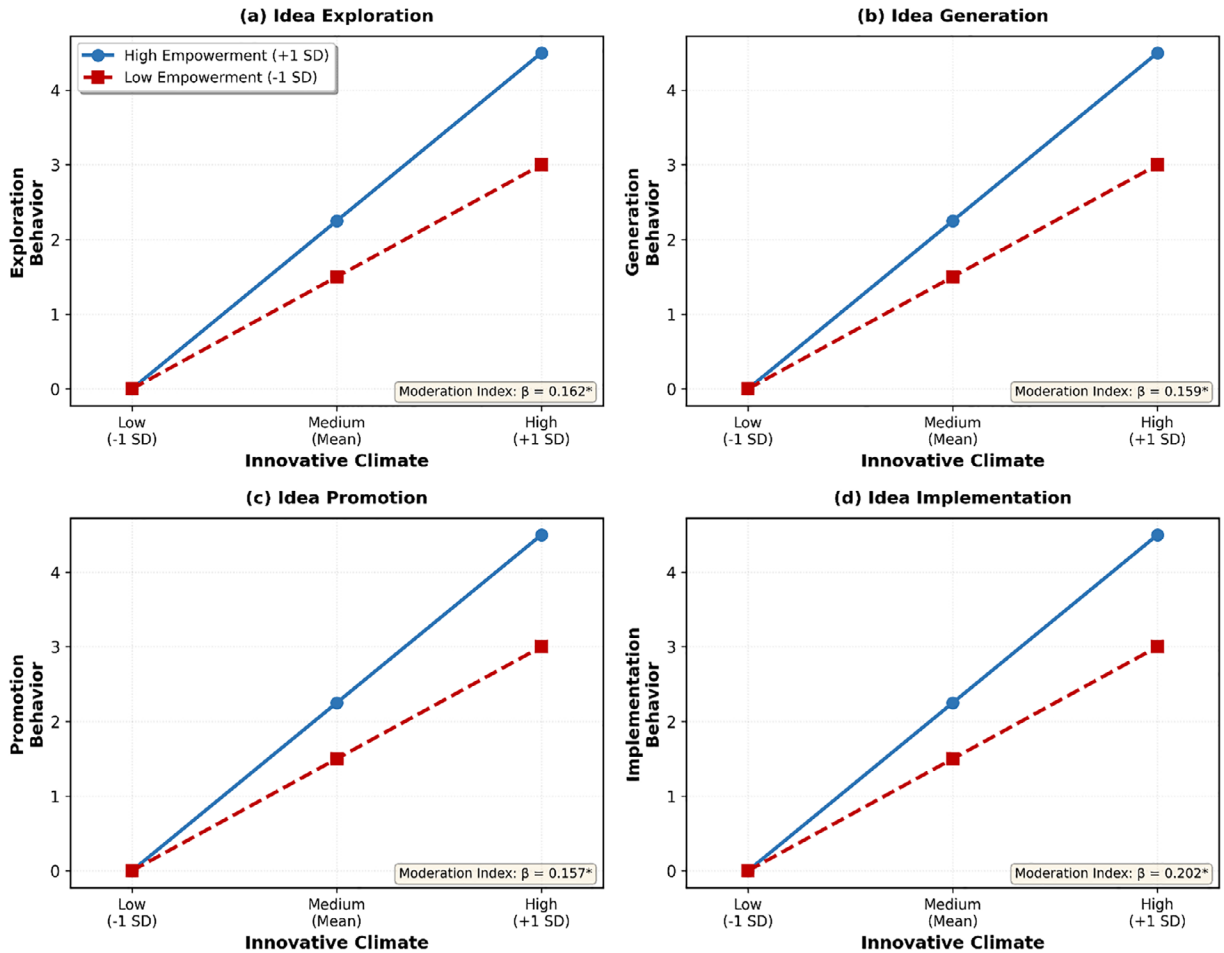

FIGURE 2 | Moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the indirect relationship between innovative climate and innovative work behavior (IWB) dimensions. *Note:* The figure displays four panels showing how psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between innovative climate and (a) idea exploration, (b) idea generation, (c) idea promotion, and (d) idea implementation. Solid blue lines represent high psychological empowerment (+1 SD), while dashed red lines represent low psychological empowerment (−1 SD). The steeper slopes for high empowerment indicate that psychologically empowered employees are better able to leverage supportive climates to engage in innovative behaviors.

TABLE 3 | Discriminant validity.

	IE	IG	IIMP	IP	Inv	PsyE	TL
IE							
IG	0.894						
IIMP	0.782	0.729					
IP	0.752	0.695	0.895				
Inv	0.570	0.504	0.733	0.711			
PsyE	0.582	0.537	0.669	0.653	0.740		
TL	0.397	0.391	0.574	0.581	0.770	0.635	

Note: Discriminant validity achieved at HTMT0.90.

Abbreviations: IE, idea exploitation; IG, idea generation; IIMP, idea implementation; IP, idea promotion; PsyE, psychological empowerment; TL, transformational leadership.

operates entirely through environmental mechanisms rather than direct effects. This study extends earlier work by successfully challenging the conventional assumption that transformational leaders directly inspire follower innovation through charismatic influence and intellectual stimulation (Bass 1985; Wijaya 2025). In the process, we further extend recent meta-analytic work by Afsar et al. (2014) by identifying innovative climate as the critical mediator explaining when and how TL influences innovation. Overall, this extension of theory reflects Lim's (2026) description of theoretical modification, in which we increase the theoretical depth of TL by providing granular insights that demonstrate how its effectiveness depends on the context in which it operates.

Rather than assuming that TL uniformly stimulates IWB, our findings reveal a more counterintuitive phenomenon. We demonstrated differential antecedent relationships across its four dimensions of idea exploration, generation, promotion, and implementation. Our findings expose a paradoxical dynamic that leadership and contextual factors do not influence all stages of the innovation process in the same way, underscoring the importance of examining IWB as a staged and dynamic phenomenon rather than a unidimensional construct. This responds to AIEssa and Durugbo's (2022) call for research distinguishing between innovation stages. In doing so, we provide finer-grained insight into how organizational conditions and leadership mechanisms facilitate or constrain specific innovative behaviors, thereby offering a more nuanced and theoretically robust understanding of employee innovation.

TABLE 4 | Structural model.

	Hypotheses	Path coefficient	Standard deviation	*t* value	VIF	f^2	R^2
H1a	TL → IE	−0.101	0.082	1.049$^{(NS)}$	2.054	0.007	0.315
H1b	TL → IG	−0.028	0.076	0.311$^{(NS)}$	2.054	0.001	0.298
H1c	TL → IP	0.018	0.081	0.228$^{(NS)}$	2.054	0.004	0.479
H1d	TL → IIMP	0.066	0.078	0.846$^{(NS)}$	2.054	0.000	0.525
H2	TL → IC	0.700	0.036	19.403***	1.000	0.963	0.491
H3a	IC → IE	0.364	0.119	3.067**	2.567	0.076	
H3b	IC → IG	0.272	0.105	2.592**	2.567	0.041	
H3c	IC → IP	0.474	0.090	5.290***	2.567	0.135	
H3d	IC → IIMP	0.424	0.094	4.504***	2.567	0.184	
H4a	TL → IC → IE	0.255	0.080	3.192**			
H4b	TL → IC → IG	0.190	0.071	2.667**			
H4c	TL → IC → IP	0.297	0.065	4.549***			
H4d	TL→ IC → IIMP	0.332	0.063	5.232***			

Abbreviations: IE, idea exploitation; IG, idea generation; IIMP, idea implementation; IP, idea promotion; NS, not significant; PsyE, psychological empowerment; TL, transformational leadership.

*$p < 0.1$.

**$p < 0.05$.

***$p < 0.001$.

Finally, by conceptualizing psychological empowerment as a moderator of the indirect relationship between TL and IWB through innovative climate, this study responds directly to calls by scholars such as Fischer et al. (2023), Aggarwal et al. (2024), and Lim et al. (2025) to move beyond mediation-only models in organization research. Rather than treating empowerment solely as an intervening mechanism, we, therefore, advance the body of knowledge by demonstrating its role as a critical boundary condition that shapes the strength of leadership-driven innovation processes. This study addresses Vu et al.'s (2025) recommendation to examine when and for whom TL is most effective by showing that employees' levels of psychological empowerment determine whether a supportive, innovative climate translates into actual innovative behaviors.

8 | Practical Implications

Our findings provide actionable guidance for hospitality stakeholders seeking to enhance employee innovation. We organize the practical implications into three groups—hospitality managers, employees, and hospitality organizations.

8.1 | Hospitality Managers

Given that TL influences innovation entirely through innovative climate rather than directly, hospitality managers should prioritize creating tangible, supportive environmental conditions over charismatic inspiration. For instance, hospitality managers can explore allocating dedicated budgets and time for innovation experimentation. At the same time, hospitality managers should explicitly communicate their tolerance for mistakes and give employees the autonomy to exercise discretion in service recovery (e.g., by offering vouchers). To foster an innovative culture, hospitality managers should also implement formal recognition systems for innovative ideas, regardless of implementation success. Providing platforms such as "Monthly Innovation Spotlight" meetings will further reinforce the message that creativity, rather than only successful implementations, is encouraged.

Since psychological empowerment amplifies the effects of climate, hospitality managers should invest in practices that enhance employees' sense of competence, autonomy, meaning, and impact. This includes (1) providing cross-training in multiple hotel departments to build perceived competence across service touchpoints, (2) granting bounded autonomy for service customization, (3) sharing guest feedback and testimonials highlighting how employee innovations enhanced experiences, and (4) creating dashboards showing how employee suggestions affect operational metrics such as efficiency gains, cost savings, and guest satisfaction scores (Lim et al. 2025).

Similarly, managers should tailor support to innovation phases. For instance, hosting regular brainstorming sessions during team meetings will support ideas generation. Similarly, establishing formal channels of distribution, such as a monthly innovative newsletter, supports idea promotion. Good ideas could be provided with the resources needed to implement them.

8.2 | Employees

Frontline employees should actively leverage available innovation support mechanisms by proactively seeking feedback on innovative ideas before full implementation, documenting guest responses to service innovations with brief notes or digital logs,

TABLE 5 | Moderated-mediation analysis.

Hypotheses	Indirect effect	5%	95%	*t* value
H5a. TL → IC→ IE X PsyE				
Low level of PsyE	0.116	−0.005	0.230	1.639$^{(NS)}$
High level of PsyE	0.292	0.153	0.436	3.388***
Mean level of PsyE	0.204	0.083	0.324	2.804**
Index of moderated-mediation	0.162	0.076	0.257	2.878**
H5b. TL→ IC → IG X PsyE				
Low level of PsyE	0.085	−0.031	0.186	1.305$^{(NS)}$
High level of PsyE	0.256	0.135	0.371	3.603***
Mean level of PsyE	0.171	0.063	0.267	2.789**
Index of moderated-mediation	0.159	0.077	0.257	2.859**
H5c. TL → IC → IP X PsyE				
Low level of PsyE	0.219	0.109	0.328	3.279**
High level of PsyE	0.394	0.252	0.535	4.533***
Mean level of PsyE	0.306	0.188	0.423	4.270***
Index of moderated-mediation	0.157	0.077	0.246	3.050**
H5d. TL→ IC → IIMP X PsyE				
Low level of PsyE	0.226	0.125	0.321	3.822***
High level of PsyE	0.451	0.309	0.590	5.293***
Mean level of PsyE	0.339	0.222	0.452	4.943***
Index of moderated-mediation	0.202	0.131	0.279	3.050**

Abbreviations: IE, idea exploitation; IG, idea generation; IIMP, idea implementation; IP, idea promotion; NS, not significant; PsyE, psychological empowerment; TL, transformational leadership.

*$p < 0.1$.

**$p < 0.05$.

***$p < 0.001$.

and collaborating across departments when innovations require coordination. Employees can enhance their perceived psychological empowerment and innovation capacity by volunteering for cross-training opportunities to understand multiple service touchpoints, studying guest feedback patterns in online reviews to identify recurring service gaps requiring innovative solutions, and attending industry webinars on hospitality technology and service trends to generate context-relevant innovation ideas such as contactless service and AI-powered personalization.

8.3 | Hospitality Organizations

For hospitality organizations, HR departments should restructure leadership training to emphasize climate creation over charismatic influence by incorporating modules on "building innovation-supportive environments" into management training, evaluating managers on climate creation metrics (employee perceptions of innovation support) rather than solely on charisma, and providing managers with diagnostic tools such as climate surveys to assess current support levels. Organizations should create systems that systematically enhance psychological empowerment by establishing cross-functional innovation committees including frontline employees to give them formal voice in decision-making, implementing job rotation programs allowing employees to experience multiple roles and identify innovation opportunities across service processes, and creating formal career pathways showing how innovation contributions lead to advancement opportunities (Lim et al. 2025; Aggarwal et al. 2024).

Organizations should measure innovation systematically by tracking phase-specific metrics (number of ideas generated, promoted, piloted, and implemented), surveying innovative climate perceptions quarterly using validated scales and benchmarking against industry norms, measuring psychological empowerment alongside employee engagement surveys to identify departments requiring intervention, and calculating innovation ROI by tracking cost savings, revenue increases, and guest satisfaction improvements attributable to employee innovations.

9 | Limitations and Future Research

This research has many benefits, but it also has a few limitations that need to be noted.

First, reliance on self-reported data raises concerns about common method bias and self-report bias. Although procedural

remedies were implemented, employees may overestimate innovative behaviors due to social desirability bias or lack accurate awareness of how supervisors perceive their leadership. Future research should employ multi-source data collection, gathering TL assessments from supervisors and IWB evaluations from multiple raters, and incorporate objective innovation metrics such as implemented suggestions or documented process improvements. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Although our framework posits sequential relationships, the data cannot rule out reverse causality. Longitudinal designs measuring constructs at different time points would enable stronger causal inference. Third, data from a single country leads to cultural homogeneity, limiting cross-cultural generalizability. Cultural values significantly shape leadership effectiveness and perceptions of empowerment. Future research should replicate this study across countries representing diverse cultural dimensions to identify cultural boundary conditions. Fourth, examining only TL excludes other potentially relevant styles, including empowering, authentic, and servant leadership. Future research should replicate this model on other leadership styles. Finally, the reliance on convenience sampling from participating hospitality organizations introduces potential selection bias and limits external validity. Future research should employ probability sampling methods across diverse organizational contexts, including organizations with varying levels of innovation maturity, to enhance generalizability and assess whether the observed relationships hold across different organizational conditions.

Author Contributions

Phakawan Phairat: conceptualization, data collection, analysis, writing. **Tan Kim-Lim:** conceptualization, analysis, writing, proof reading. **Hiram Ting:** conceptualization, writing, proof reading. **Nimit Soonsan:** conceptualization, data collection. **Piangjit Tanticharatwarodom:** conceptualization, data collection.

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Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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