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**THE IMPACT OF EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP ON RECRUITMENT AND
RETENTION IN HONG KONG'S
PINK-COLLAR SMES**

Author(s): Royan Lam

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SBS Swiss Business School

Flughafenstrasse 3

8302 Kloten-Zurich

Switzerland

Call us: +41 44 880 00 88

General inquiries: editor@sbs.edu

Working Paper Series Inquires: editor@sbs.edu

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the labor shortage and employee retention challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong's pink-collar sector and outlines the pathway for remediation. The research framework focuses on the causal chains linking Empathetic Leadership to Employee Recruitment and Retention through the mediating influence of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and the moderating effect of Hong Kong Cultural Identity on the relationships between Empathetic Leadership and Intrinsic / Extrinsic Motivation.

A mixed methods approach was adopted for triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses through questionnaires and interviews with employers and employees. Statistical analyses, including ANOVA and PLS-SEM, validated the relationships among the constructs. Qualitative findings from the interviews were coded and decoded for themes and patterns to obtain and triangulate findings.

The practical implications of this research are to address the current literature gap and develop a holistic framework by providing insights into ongoing labor challenges and formulating possible solutions for retaining and recruiting pink-collar employees.

Keywords: Empathetic Leadership, Job Satisfaction, Extrinsic Motivation, Intrinsic Motivation, Hong Kong Cultural Identity, Employee Recruitment and Employee Retention, Small and Medium Enterprise, SME, pink collar industry, Hong Kong.

1. INTRODUCTION

As of March 2023, in Hong Kong, more than 40,000 job vacancies existed among the top eight employment sectors (Research Office, 2023), amongst which, the service and education sectors experienced the highest vacancy. The tight labor market in the service sector warrants investigation as it accounted for 88% of Hong Kong's total employment (Trade and Industry Department, 2023, p.1).

This research examines the employment situation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within Hong Kong's pink-collar industry, which currently faces labor shortage and difficulty in retaining and recruiting talent. The pink-collar industry refers to the service sectors, comprising beauty and healthcare; nursing/medical assistance; social/religious work; teaching and tutoring; secretarial work; childcare and elderly care; and sales with services (Barnes et al., 2021; Dilmaghani & Tabvuma, 2019; Mutisi, 2019; Rutkowska & Sulich, 2020). This research formulated possible solutions for retaining and recruiting pink-collar employees drawing on theories such as the Job Demands-Resources Model, the Social Cognitive Career Theory, and the Affective Events Theory. The framework identified interconnections among Empathetic Leadership, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations, Hong Kong Cultural Identity, and Job Satisfaction. The SMEs selected were in Stages 2 (Growth) and 3 (Maturity and Decline) of the Growth Stage Model (Bachtiar & Amin, 2019).

This research conducts hypothesis testing by using statistical results (quantitative) and case study findings (qualitative) and examines the perspective of both employers and employees. The framework should provide impetus for Hong Kong SMEs to solve human resources issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Research Overview

Hong Kong's economic slowdown in recent years was due to many reasons (H. Y. Ng, 2022), including emigration, which had resulted in the most significant shrinkage of Hong Kong's workforce in nearly 40 years (Lindberg, 2023). SMEs require insights to navigate the current employment landscape.

2.2 Labor Shortage in Hong Kong

With job vacancies unfilled and declining productivity (HK Labor Rights Monitor, 2024), businesses in the pink-collar industry were severely impacted as they require employees for personalized services (Yeung, 2023). Negative employment growth in Hong Kong led to a decline in output (HK Labor Rights Monitor, 2024). Increasing wages is not viable as it would encourage a price war between employers.

Thus, understanding empathetic leadership is crucial as it is a primary factor driving employee retention and recruitment (Fuller, 2023; Kamran, 2018; Kock et al., 2019; Rivera, 2020). Research into cultural identity may also help employers understand their employees' mindset (Czapran, 2022; Gu et al., 2022; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020; Theresia et al., 2018; Turyakira, 2018; Ye & Ng, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020).

2.3 Research Gaps

Hong Kong lacks literature studying the challenges faced by SMEs due to the shortage of pink-collar labor. Most studies focused on white-collar workers lack broad coverage for SMEs (Chang et al., 2011; Hämmig, 2014; Hennequin, 2007; Huang, 2011; Hu et al., 2010). Studies have not holistically addressed employment factors, including leadership style (Arghode et al., 2022; Hadziahmetovic et al., 2023; Rivera, 2020), motivation of labor (Kampf et al., 2017; Lorincová et al., 2018), relationships and communications between employers and employees (Bastian & Poussing, 2023; Campbell et

al., 2020), and SME human resource management practices (Chandrakumara, 2013; Simić et al., 2020). Researchers observed that literature on the culture and management of SMEs is essential yet limited, and no single theory effectively engages with these concepts (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018; Dunay et al., 2017; Kaasa, 2021; Kertai-Kiss, 2014; Panigrahi & Al-Nashash, 2019; Yilmaz, 2020). Culture influences company management and the behavior of employees in Asian SMEs, which are wholly or partly owner managed. Developing a model for employee motivation and job satisfaction is worthwhile (De Sousa Sabbagha et al., 2018; Htun & Bhaumik, 2022).

2.4 Research framework

Focus was on Empathic Leadership (Kock et al, 2019; Rivera, 2020; Rogers, 2018; Ye & Ng, 2019) as the independent variable and its relationships with other constructs. It drives motivation as Kamran (2018, p. 6) notes that empathy motivates low-skilled employees who perform repetitive and straightforward tasks. Empathetic Leadership (Kock et al., 2018; Sarraf, 2018; Zivkovic, 2022) is amongst the most effective leadership styles for employee motivation and satisfaction. Intrinsic Motivation gives inner self-fulfillment, personal interest, challenges, pleasure, or the achievement of psychological needs without reliance on rewards or recognition (Fuller, 2023; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). Work responsibility, autonomy, personal and skill development, and appealing projects affect Intrinsic Motivation (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Linvill & Onosu, 2023). Ha et al. (2020) state that Intrinsic Motivation likely sustains a longer-term outcome as it grows internally and becomes embedded in people's minds. Extrinsic Motivation is not primarily derived internally, but from obtaining external benefits, such as monetary rewards, social status, or avoidance of adverse outcomes (Linvill & Onosu, 2023) and better remuneration (Lorincova et al., 2018, p.18). Job Satisfaction is the sum total of employees' contentment or happiness with their work (Jha & Pandey, 2015), which can be extrinsic and intrinsic. It stems from pleasure in material or

monetary rewards, promotional or ranking structures, or from internal feelings, including happiness, growth opportunities, respectful treatment, trust, and fair pay (Jha & Pandey, 2015; Judge et al., 2020). Satisfied employees perform better and increase their efficiency (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Empathetic Leadership involves honest interaction with employees, which can lead to substantial Job Satisfaction (Fuller, 2023; Judge et al., 2020; Kock et al., 2019; Sarraf, 2018). Motivation drives Job Satisfaction (Febrianti et al., 2020; de Juana-Espinosa & Rakowska, 2018; Ha et al., 2020; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020), resulting in better performance for employees and employers (Gonçalves, 2018). Powerful motivation satisfies employees and improves their overall performance (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Andreas, 2022; De Sousa Sabbagha et al., 2018; Febrianti et al., 2020; Pananrangi et al., 2020; Silva, 2020; Smith et al., 2023). Stankovska et al. (2017) and Jamal and Anwar (2021) note that motivation has a direct impact on Job Satisfaction. Intrinsic Motivation drives Job Satisfaction. Meeting employee expectations improves Intrinsic Motivation, which leads to higher Job Satisfaction and quality of work (Haralayya, 2021; Inegbadion et al., 2020; Irabor & Okolie, 2019; Judge et al., 2020; Karthikeyani, 2020; Maiti & Vuković, 2020; Muwardi et al., 2020; Sarraf, 2018; Yang & Chang, 2008). Extrinsic Motivation drives Job Satisfaction by increasing salary and wages, and structured rewards to enhance Job Satisfaction (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Alrawahi et al., 2020; Kamran, 2018; Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021). In relation to Employee Recruitment, the employer should develop its reputation through understanding its fundamentals (Oncioiu et al., 2020; Prajapati & Patel, 2017; Ramos & Casado-Molina, 2021; Rice et al., 2023). Good branding attracts employees, making recruitment efficient (Banerjee et al., 2020; Oncioiu et al., 2020; Zhang, Y. et al., 2023). Employer branding demonstrates the leadership style of the company and signals the empathetic leadership of the employer in the aspects of work culture, practices, learning, open communication, pay, benefits, reward scheme, work/life balance, career advancement,

and so on (Dasan, 2022; Dewey, 2020; Raina, 2022). Employee Retention is a key success factor for employers (Hom et al., 2017; Judge et al., 2020). A retention policy includes a range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Ali & Anwar, 2021; De Sousa Sabbagha et al., 2018). Employees have better loyalty in a reputable company that encourages them to stay (Dasan, 2022; Kock, 2019; Rice et al., 2023; Sarraf, 2018; Upadhyaya & Ayari, 2019). The concept of empathetic leadership in a cross-cultural Hong Kong environment is crucial, as it influences employer competence and employee acceptance (Aponte-Moreno, 2020; Deliu et al., 2019; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020; Purwadi et al., 2020). It can strengthen employee engagement, the bond between leaders and followers, motivation, job satisfaction, productivity, and commitment to the organization, and is a moderator between empathetic leadership and both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Arghode et al., 2022; Chow et al., 2020; Judge et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2015; Raithel et al., 2021).

Relating to human resource dynamics, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Borst, 2022; Dhaneesh et al., 2025; Jenny et al., 2020; Kostelić et al., 2024; Scheepers et al. (2023), Pansini et al., 2024; Radic et al., 2020; Ramaci et al. 2024), Social Cognitive Career Theory (Jones, 2019; Goodall, 2024; Pham et al., (2019; Sang et al., 2022), and Affective Events Theory (Bano et al., 2021; Ghasemy et al., 2021; Küçük & Konuk, 2023; Masitoh and Sudarma, 2019; Williams et al., 2024) were employed to link the above constructs together.

As formulated by the above, significant factors considered include empathy and culture in the Hong Kong workplace, employee job satisfaction, motivation, recruitment and retention are the focal points of this current research.

2.5 Research Questions and Research Hypotheses

Building on existing studies (Hadziahmetovic et al., 2023; Lorincova et al., 2018), this research formulates possible solutions for SMEs to tackle their labor shortage. Five research questions (RQ), in Table 2.1, and 18 related hypotheses were proposed.

Table 2.1*Five Research Questions (RQ) Proposed for this Research*

RQ	Question Raised
1	How does empathetic leadership influence employees' motivations in Hong Kong's pink-collar SMEs during the current labor shortage?
2	Is there a gap between employers' and employees' perceptions of job satisfaction under empathetic leadership in Hong Kong's pink-collar SMEs during the current labor shortage?
3	What factors affect employee retention in Hong Kong's pink-collar SMEs during the current labor shortage?
4	What measures can employers adopt to improve recruitment in Hong Kong's pink-collar SMEs during the current labor shortage?
5	How does Hong Kong's cultural identity shape the relationship between empathetic leadership and employee motivations of pink-collar SMEs during the current labor shortage?

Firstly, to answer RQ1, two null hypotheses were tested to assess the impact or significance of Empathetic Leadership on employee motivation, as shown in H₀₁-H₀₂.

Secondly, employers should ensure their employees enjoy job satisfaction. Without understanding employees' perspectives on job satisfaction, employers cannot lead effectively (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Gu et al., 2022; Jha & Pandey, 2015; Judge et al., 2017). As a result, to address RQ2, the three null hypotheses H₀₃ – H₀₅ were developed.

Thirdly, employers who understand their employees should reduce the costs of employee turnover. The relationships amongst Empathetic Leadership, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Employee Retention (Anwar et al., 2018; Morello et al., 2018; West et al., 2019; Yue et al., 2023; Zaharee et al., 2018) were investigated. Ten additional null hypotheses relating to Job Satisfaction are listed in H₀₆ – H₀₉. Null hypotheses relating to Employee Retention are listed in H₀₁₀-H₀₁₃ and relating to Employee Retention with mediating effect by Job Satisfaction were listed as H₀₁₄-H₀₁₅.

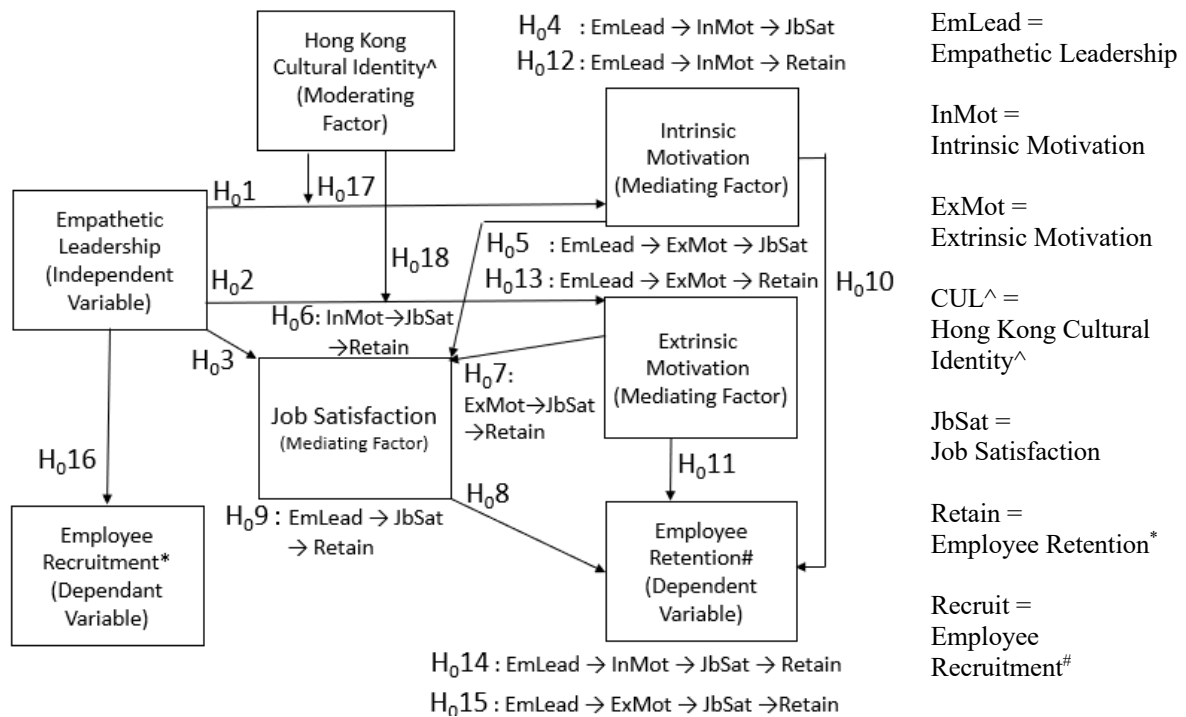
Fourthly, SMEs lacking a high profile or brand face difficulty attracting new talent. RQ4 was proposed. A related null hypothesis involving Empathetic Leadership was included (Humphrey et al., 2019; Dewey, 2020; Salas, 2022; Zivkovic, 2022), as listed in H₀16.

Lastly, culture influences Empathetic Leadership and employees' motivations (Fuller, 2023; Kamran, 2018; Irfan & Marzuki, 2018; Popa et al., 2020; Chen & Kirkman, 2024). The Hong Kong cultural identity is a bicultural hybrid of Chinese and Western influences (Chen & Kirkman, 2024; Steers & Sánchez-Runde, 2017; Vo et al., 2022). RQ5 was posed, with its two related null hypotheses stated in H₀17 and H₀18.

Based on the above hypotheses, Figure 2.1 illustrates the research structure based on the quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (case studies) findings from both employees and employers (Farquhar et al., 2020; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Morse, 2016).

Figure 2.1

Proposed Framework of the Research Prepared by the Researcher



Note. Quoted from: [^] Dual Cultural Selves (Ye & Ng, 2019); *Psychological Contract Fulfilment (Chang & Busser, 2020); [#]Intention to Pursue Employment (Könsgen et al., 2018).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To analyze and validate the proposed relationships within the labor supply and demand chain, this research applied the widely used Research Onion for practical convenience (Alturki, 2021; Bianchi, 2021; Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2020). Research philosophies included positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism, and critical realism, with a mixed-method approach of deduction and induction via quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (case studies) methods with a cross-sectional time horizon.

3.1 Method of Sampling

Due to practical constraints, approximate non-probability sampling was employed (Aljumah, 2023; Bianco et al., 2023; Mueller et al., 2021; Vehovar et al., 2016), to maximize randomization, as each non-probability sample inherently contains randomization. This research employed convenience sampling combinations (Simkus, 2022; Stratton, 2021), utilizing face-to-face and online questionnaires with identical content. Respondents were selected randomly from different relevant settings to encompass wider demographics. Secondly, purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) was employed to select the most appropriate individuals as respondents (seven employers and seven employees, from each sub-sector) who were likely to participate in comparing findings and triangulate data.

3.1.1 Minimum Sample Size for Quantitative Results

The sample size was subject to the data analysis methods used (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Hair Jr. et al., 2017; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024; Wong, 2013). Sarstedt and Liu (2024) suggested that the minimum sample size for PLS-SEM analysis is between 30 and 100. Hair Jr. et al. (2017) recommended 100 or fewer for PLS-SEM. G*Power analysis verified the minimum sample size of 77 (Faul et al., 2017; Kang, 2021; Perugini et al., 2018).

3.2 The Main Study

The study mainly uses a questionnaire, 7-point Likert scores (Taherdoost, 2019), and scales were adapted from relevant studies. Demographic questions for ANOVA testing confirmed data reliability and validity (Mishra et al., 2019; De Winter, 2019; Shehata et al., 2018). Employees, primary respondents, were engaged via probability sampling. Convenience and purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020; Etikan et al., 2016; Stratton, 2021) enhanced the relevance of the samples. 108 usable data sets were obtained from employees.

3.3 Case Study

Case studies involving interviews of employers and employees were conducted to gather data and insights into the ethnographic and human experience of the pink-collar industry, guided by phenomenology (Sundler et al., 2019; Tuffour, 2017; Williams, 2021). Inductive analysis was conducted through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions to elicit rich, in-depth responses (Kyngäs, 2020; Raudeliuniene, 2018; Vears & Gillam, 2022; Yin, 2018) for identifying themes and concepts, creating open codes and subcodes for analysis and confirming the findings. Empirical findings from these case studies were compared and triangulated (Farquhar et al., 2020). Seven employers, each representing a sub-sector, who participated in interviews, also completed a slightly modified main questionnaire to capture the employers' perspectives. Seven randomly selected employees from the respective companies were invited for separate interviews. Quantitative findings from the questionnaires in the main study and the qualitative results from interviews were used in various permutations.

3.4 Ethical Use of Information

Respondents were informed of the academic purposes of this research. They participated voluntarily in the self-administered and anonymous questionnaire without interference from anyone (Nitschinsk et al., 2023; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). They could withdraw at any time. All information was kept strictly confidential.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Questionnaire for the Main Study

The quantitative component randomly engaged SME employees working in the pink-collar industry to complete a questionnaire using a 7-point Likert scale. The following respondents, employees in companies, were filtered out: (i) with more than 50 employees (categorized as large corporations), (ii) with fewer than 10 employees, and (iii) established less than five years ago (in the initiation stage).

4.1.1 Questionnaire item scales

The first part of the questionnaire comprised questions covering demographic information, and the second part comprises 31 questions (Questions 9–39), relating to the latent variables of the constructs under investigation. Different major scales were employed (Anwar et al., 2018; Chang and Busser, 2020; Gheitani et al., 2019; Judge et al., 2020; Kock et al., 2018; Könsgen et al., 2018; Ye and Ng, 2019; Zhu et al., 2018)

4.1.2 Quantitative Analysis – ANOVA, Validity and Reliability Tests

The statistical data were ANOVA tested, using the software SPSS version 26 from IBM. The results indicated that all the null hypotheses of the same group means cannot be rejected, and equal means in all groups exist, except for the role of work, where the difference in Intrinsic Motivation between operational and managerial employees was identified.

The result implies that managerial employees have higher Intrinsic Motivation than operational employees. This aligns with studies (Kampf et al., 2017; Bhattarai & Shah, 2021), suggesting that higher intrinsic motivation is necessary for effective planning and management. Operational employees are more task-oriented and can deliver the basic job requirements without high intrinsic motivation. Other ANOVA results were concluded:

- Reliability test - Cronbach's alpha values for the constructs ranged from 0.825 to

0.922, all exceeding 0.7. Therefore, the internal consistency of reliability was significant, and this combined scale was acceptable for evaluating the latent variables.

- All the correlations fell within the range of 0.464–0.796, which were categorized as moderate to strong. (Papageorgiou (2022) interprets the value of the correlation coefficient.)

4.1.3 Quantitative Analysis - Partial Least Squares – Structured Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)

Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was deemed more suitable (Abdul Basit et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2023; Purwanto, 2021; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024). to assess the Reflective Measurement Model and Structural Model, determining the significance of direct and indirect paths, and the strength and direction of the relationships between variables of the 18 hypotheses. The coefficient of determination (R^2), Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were above the threshold, indicating convergent validity (Abdul Basit et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2023; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024). Cross-loading and the Fornell-Lacker Criterion confirmed the discriminant validity of the constructs. Path coefficients validated the significance of all relationships, except the moderating effect of Hong Kong Cultural Identity on Empathetic Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation. This suggests the lack of a strong and distinct cultural identity. Extrinsically, however, Hong Kong people possess a strong materialistic awareness. Therefore, extrinsic motivation, such as monetary rewards, is a valid incentive (Yeung, 2023); however, the lack of a distinct cultural identity may weaken its significance. Direct and indirect effects were tested (Afthanorhan et al., 2021; Davison & Hinkley, 1997; Efron et al., 1987; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2021; Hilkenmeier et al., 2020; Jia et al., 2023; Mohammad et al., 2019) and bootstrapping confirmed the statistical significance of the sample data from PLS-SEM (Fithri et al., 2024; Gimenez-Nadal et al., 2019; Michelucci et al., 2021; Purwanto, 2021).

4.1.3.1 Comprehensive PLS-SEM Assessment. A prior pilot test evaluated the constructs of the model structure and adjusted any potential abnormalities (Hair et al., 2021). Thereafter, a comprehensive assessment with a larger sample size tested the significance, validity, and reliability of all the latent variables (Hair et al., 2021).

4.1.3.2 Reflective Measurement Model. The loading, AVE, CRs, Cronbach's Alpha, Fornell-Larcker, and HTMT for all constructs, excluding CUL, passed all the threshold levels and supported the decision for validity and reliability. The Structural Model examined the collinearity and path through the PLS algorithm. The coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), path coefficients (β), and effect size (f^2) were generated. Bootstrapping was performed using 5,000 resamples at a 95% significance level to obtain standard errors for the estimates, followed by the calculation of the t- and p-values to assess their significance for direct and indirect effects if the hypotheses were supported (Becker et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2023; Mohammad et al., 2019; Zhu, Y. Q. et al., 2018). The variance inflation factor (VIF) values of the construct items were all below 5, indicating low multicollinearity, which was acceptable. To conclude, the accuracy and stability of the regression model were significant.

4.1.3.3 Structural Model. This examined the collinearity and path of the research framework through the PLS algorithm.

4.1.3.3.1 Direct Effect The critical values of the structural model revealed causal relationships and confirm hypotheses in direct relationships. A Bias-Corrected Bootstrap Confidence Interval (95% BCCI) was adopted to confirm the 95% confidence interval, indicating the probability that the variables lay within this interval. If zero was not within the 2.5% and 97.5% of the BCCI level, it was statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

The effective size f^2 of regression analysis determined the strength of the relationships between variables. The path coefficient refers to the proposed relationship among latent

variables in a regression model, indicating the direction and the strength of the relationships. Path coefficient analysis revealed a positive association between Empathetic Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Employee Recruitment, indicating that Empathetic Leadership associated positively with Intrinsic Motivation ($\beta = 0.542$, $t = 6.688$, $p = 0.000$, $f^2 = 0.391$), Extrinsic Motivations ($\beta = 0.507$, $t = 6.737$, $p = 0.000$, $f^2 = 0.354$), Job Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.351$, $t = 3.032$, $p = 0.002$, $f^2 = 0.200$), and Employee Recruitment ($\beta = 0.471$, $t = 6.473$, $p = 0.000$, $f^2 = 0.285$) which supported the significances of H_{a1} , H_{a2} , H_{a3} , and H_{a16} . In addition, Intrinsic Motivation ($\beta = 0.311$, $t = 2.761$, $p = 0.006$, $f^2 = 0.113$) and Extrinsic Motivation ($\beta = 0.240$, $t = 2.072$, $p = 0.038$, $f^2 = 0.081$) were positively linked to Employee Retention, which supported hypotheses H_{a10} and H_{a11} , respectively. Job Satisfaction showed a positive effect on Employee Retention ($\beta = 0.333$, $t = 3.214$, $p = 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.125$), reflecting that hypothesis H_{a8} was supported. However, the moderation of Hong Kong Cultural Identity (CUL) on the relationship between Empathetic Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation ($\beta = -0.064$, $t = 0.652$, $p = 0.515$, $f^2 = 0.006$) was rejected, as the p-value was higher than 0.05 and f^2 was extremely low compared with the threshold of 0.02 for a weak effect. Therefore, H_{a17} was rejected. The moderation of Hong Kong Cultural Identity on the relationship between Empathetic Leadership and Extrinsic Motivation ($\beta = -0.144$, $t = 2.177$, $p = 0.03$, $f^2 = 0.032$) was significant but weakly supported and negatively correlated. Therefore, H_{a18} was supported. Chinese cultural influence in a Chinese-majority Hong Kong is pervasive and tends to favor power distance, with notable Confucian influences. Employers are profit-driven and control extrinsic rewards. Thus, cultural identity negatively moderates the relationship between Empathetic Leadership and Extrinsic Motivation, resulting in an inverse relationship as reflected by a negative path coefficient.

Simple Slope Analysis was used, and it illustrated that a higher Hong Kong Cultural Identity level (+1 standard deviation, s.d., above the mean) has a weaker relationship with Empathetic Leadership and Extrinsic Motivation than a lower Hong Kong Cultural Identity level (-1 s.d. below the mean). The flatter slope of the +1 s.d. line implies a reduction in the effect on Hong Kong Cultural Identity when Empathetic Leadership increases. Since the p-value of $EmLead \times CUL \rightarrow ExMot$ was lower than the threshold, H_{a18} was supported. In comparison, the plot of Simple Slope Analysis for Empathetic Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation, with Hong Kong Cultural Identity moderating in a similar pattern as the plot for Extrinsic Motivation, the difference between +1 s.d. to mean and -1 s.d. to mean was narrower, implying a weaker moderating effect. As the p-value was larger than the threshold, H_{a17} was not supported.

The model was examined using the Goodness-of-fit Index (GFI) (Jia et al., 2023; Tenenhaus et al., 2005). The GFI was 0.533, which exceeded the threshold value of 0.36 used by Jia et al. (2023). Therefore, the large effect size of R^2 was confirmed as a good model fit.

Construct Cross-Validated Redundancy (Q^2) confirmed predictive relevance by a blindfolding test (Stone-Geisser's Q^2), in which every seventh data point in the dependent variables (endogenous constructs) was omitted. The Hong Kong Cultural Identity construct had a Q^2 value of zero, showing no predictive relevance. Empathetic Leadership was an independent variable (exogenous construct); hence, it was not included in this blindfolding test.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) determines the intensity of the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables under the regression model. Jia et al. (2023), Purwanto (2021), and Wasim and Rehman (2022) interpret predictiveness quantitatively as substantial, moderate, and weak, with values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19, respectively. All the R^2 values were in the range of 0.222 to 0.626 and considered moderate. The Q^2 values of the other constructs were all larger than zero, in the range of 0.149-0.380.

Hence, the rest of the hypothesized model had sufficient predictive relevance (Abdul Basit et al., 2021; Akbari et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2023; Mohammad et al., 2018; Ohana et al., 2022).

4.1.3.3.2 Indirect Effect. For the mediating effect, an independent variable (exogenous construct) that has no formulaic or direct relationship with other variables is examined to determine if influences a dependent variable (endogenous construct). A third variable is then introduced, which mediates the relationship between the original two constructs (Hair et al., 2021; Memon et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2010). In this case, the mediating (indirect) effect was shown in the relationships in this research framework: H_{a4}: EmLead → InMot → JbSat; H_{a5}: EmLead → ExMot → JbSat; H_{a6}: InMot → JbSat → Retain; H_{a7}: ExMot → JbSat → Retain; H_{a9}: EmLead → JbSat → Retain; H_{a12}: EmLead → InMot → Retain; and H_{a13}: EmLead → ExMot → Retain. All direct effects (one-to-one constructs) were significant, except H_{a9} as the p-value was 0.058 slightly above the threshold of 0.05. By adopting the Mediation Analysis Procedure (Hair & Alamer, 2022), H_{a4}, H_{a5}, H_{a6}, H_{a7}, H_{a12}, and H_{a13} had complementary partial mediation. H_{a9} was not supported as p-value was slightly above the threshold. As indicated earlier, H_{a3}–H_{a5} had addressed RQ2. H_{a3} was supported under the direct effect in Section 4.1.3.2.1, and H_{a4} and H_{a5} were supported under the indirect effect for the mediating effect. With these positive results, Empathetic Leadership encourages Job Satisfaction among pink-collar employees in Hong Kong, and both Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation mediate this relationship. Given the supportive employers' Empathetic Leadership and employees' Job Satisfaction, there is no gap between the perceptions of employers and employees of Job Satisfaction under Empathetic Leadership in Hong Kong's pink-collar SMEs during the current labor shortage. With the addition of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations separately into the above relationship, there would be four constructs in a chain. It was observed that their path coefficients and p-values were significant for each direct path, covering all possible paths. With the results obtained using

PLS-SEM 4.0 for the total path, the p-values for H_a14 and H_a15 were 0.026 and 0.04, respectively, below 0.05. Therefore, they had complementary partial mediation.

H_a8, H_a10, and H_a11 were supported under the direct effect. H_a6, H_a7, H_a12-H_a15 were supported under the indirect/mediating effect. H_a9 was not supported, slightly above the threshold p-value. The findings of H_a6-H_a15 had predominantly answered RQ3. The positive results of alternative hypotheses indicated that Job Satisfaction, Intrinsic, and Extrinsic Motivations affected employers' ability to retain employees in the pink-collar SMEs.

Bootstrapping confirms the statistical significance of the sample data, such as path coefficients, Cronbach's alpha, HTMT, and R² results from PLS-SEM (Fithri et al., 2024; Gimenez-Nadal et al., 2019; Michelucci et al., 2021; Purwanto, 2021). Bootstrapping was used to confirm relationships under a 95% confidence interval. All these relationships were statistically significant.

In conclusion, the moderating effect of Hong Kong Cultural Identity (CUL) applied only to Extrinsic Motivation, but the low f² value indicated a weak relationship. The results did not support the relationship between CUL and Intrinsic Motivation. The remaining linkages among the other constructs in the alternative hypotheses were supported by several significances, reliabilities, and validity tests, except H_a9 and H_a17. The p-value of H_a9 was 0.058, slightly above the threshold of 0.05. Therefore, it was not supported. The p-value of H_a17 was 0.515, well above the threshold, therefore it was not supported. For H_a18, it was supported but the β was negative and p < 0.3, therefore it was weak.

4.2 Case Studies - Interviews

4.2.1 Background of the Interviewed Companies

Seven small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were selected, each representing a different sub-sector within the pink-collar industry.

4.2.2 Qualitative Findings Through Interviews

The interviews were conducted inductively from December 2023 to June 2024 with employers and employees, each lasting for approximately an hour. Employers interviewed were owners, board chairpersons, or heads of management, with decision-making powers in labor matters. Employees were randomly selected from the seven employers. Eighteen themes were developed from the interviews for grouping and coding of the analyses. The interviews highlighted the relationship between Empathetic Leadership and other constructs, the moderating effect of Hong Kong Cultural Identity on Intrinsic Motivation was minimal, and its effect on Extrinsic Motivation was weak. The outcomes of the eighteen hypotheses after conducting these case studies were supported except H_a17 (CUL x EmLead → InMot). H_a13, 14 and 15 were supported to a stronger extent whereas Moderating Effect: CUL x EmLead and H_a18 were weakly supported.

4.3 Research Findings and Significance

The quantitative samples were from the larger-sized employee questionnaire, which was the key study for the framework. In addition, results from qualitative, quantitative, employers, and employees were cross-checked as set out in Table 4.14. Results of differences between perspectives of employees and employers are concluded in Table 4.14, where all alternative hypotheses were accepted except H_a17 (CUL x EmLead → InMot). H_a18 was weakly supported by both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Case studies collated from employers and employees verified the quantitative results from the questionnaire but showed that Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation, and Job Satisfaction, yielded a stronger mediating impact between Empathetic Leadership and Employee Retention of SMEs in the pink-collar industry in Hong Kong.

Table 4.14*Summary of Outcomes of Testing Hypotheses for Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses*

	Alternative hypothesis	Conclusion
H _{a1}	EmLead → InMot	Verified as supported
H _{a2}	EmLead → ExMot	Verified as Supported
H _{a3}	EmLead → JbSat	Verified as supported
H _{a4}	EmLead → InMot → JbSat	Verified as supported
H _{a5}	EmLead → ExMot → JbSat	Verified as supported
H _{a6}	InMot → JbSat → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a7}	ExMot → JbSat → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a8}	JbSat → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a9}	EmLead → JbSat → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a10}	InMot → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a11}	ExMot → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a12}	EmLead → InMot → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a13}	EmLead → ExMot → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a14}	EmLead → InMot → JbSat → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a15}	EmLead → ExMot → JbSat → Retain	Verified as supported
H _{a16}	EmLead → Recruit	Verified as supported
H _{a17}	CUL x EmLead → InMot	Verified as rejected
H _{a18}	CUL x EmLead → ExMot	Verified as weak and negatively moderated

Note. The researcher developed the table above for this research.

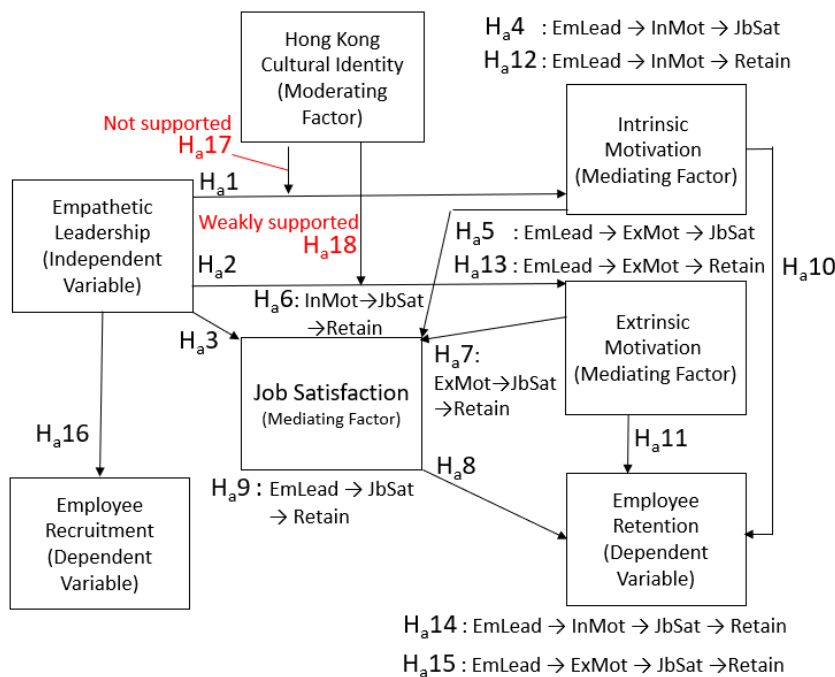
5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Research Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative findings supported all research hypotheses, Figure 5.1, except the moderating effect of Hong Kong Cultural Identity on the relationship between Empathetic Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation. This study offers new insights to encourage employers' empathetic treatment of employees to boost job satisfaction and labor retention, enhance company reputation, and facilitate easier recruitment. These measures can ensure the survival of companies in the business world in the pink-collar industry in Hong Kong's SMEs. This research examined cultural factors peripherally through two hypotheses, H17 and H18. These results unexpectedly revealed the influence of cultural factors. The rejection of H_a17 (EmLead and InMot) and the acceptance of a weak negative effect for H_a18 (EmLead and ExMot) suggest that cultural influence is more complicated and subjective.

Figure 5.1

Final Outcomes of the Research



Note. The researcher developed the figure above for this research.

5.2 Challenges, Limitations, and Future Studies

Identifying SMEs to fulfil the requirements for participation was challenging due to the general criteria in the questionnaire. In Hong Kong, a significant number of existing SMEs are not within the Stage 2 and 3 of the Growth Model and were excluded as they did not fall within the research criteria. Secondly, another limitation of this study is the demographic profile of the respondents, including the educational profiles and ethnic origins of employees, and the establishment details of the company. A third limitation is the lack of statistics or research from the Hong Kong Census Department or researchers regarding the number of bi-cultural, Sino-centric, or Western-centric groups in Hong Kong.

5.3 Applications of Theories and Practical Use for Businesses

With the theories and supporting findings, employers and their supervisors are encouraged to be more understanding and empathetic of their employees by actively listening and addressing concerns speedily to achieve Job Satisfaction. By fostering an open communication environment, employees gain Intrinsic Motivation and positive team spirit with greater mutual support. Empathetic Leadership resonates with a younger workforce who value employer support of work-life balance. Such leadership values inspire employees to be committed and loyal. For Extrinsic Motivation, regular benchmarking with peers can help formulate an attractive, competitive employment package. Secondly, this research showed that the moderating role of Hong Kong culture could not be identified due to the lack of a distinct Hong Kong Cultural Identity that unifies its people. Intrinsic Motivation cannot be easily embedded internally and is more varied, subjective, and elusive for employers to grasp. The Hong Kong government and its citizens should cultivate and instill a unified and distinct Hong Kong Cultural Identity. In contrast, Extrinsic Motivation, such as higher salaries, benefits, and compensation, was more highly valued than Intrinsic Motivation consistent with the perception that Hong Kong people have short-term and materialistic outlook. In addition,

generational differences show that young people rate work-life balance and employer empathy highly, while older individuals are more likely to value extrinsic rewards and accept high power distance. Thirdly, cultural differences between local Hong Kong people and immigrants from Mainland China undermine the formation of a unique Hong Kong Cultural Identity (Law & Lee, 2006). Developing practical tools for a harmonious and united community helps build trust and cooperation, leading to greater teamwork and goodwill among employees, and boosts resilience in the work environment. While Intrinsic Motivation stimulates Job Satisfaction and Employee Retention, Extrinsic Motivation, which has a stronger effect in the pink industry, should work in tandem with Intrinsic Motivation to either directly motivate employees or be routed through Job Satisfaction, for a stronger retention effect. Other external factors, such as higher salary offers from competitors, career stagnation, and intolerable working environments, should be monitored.

This research demonstrates that Empathetic Leadership drives Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Job Satisfaction. Employers should strike a balance between Empathetic Leadership and Extrinsic Motivation through understanding and caring for employees and providing performance incentives. Employees motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically gain Job Satisfaction, driving them to work hard, stay loyal, and encouraging them to remain. Concurrently, Empathetic Leadership helps build the company's prestige and reputation, which attracts potential talent and reduces recruitment difficulties.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Although Hong Kong has undergone significant transformations after the handover in 1997, uncertainties persist regarding its culture and behavior. It would be worthwhile to conduct future studies on the impact of culture, the job nature, different generations and the behavior differences of local Hong Kong Chinese and immigrants from Mainland China on manpower in Hong Kong.

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