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How does leader–subordinate construal fit affect task performance of subordinates? The role of emotional exhaustion and adaptive expertise

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Introduction: Work efficiency can be enhanced through effective communication among organizational members. According to construal level theory and ego-depletion theory, leader–subordinate construal unfit can complicate communication, deplete subordinates' cognitive resources and lower productivity at work. The current article explores the relationship between leader–subordinate construal fit and subordinates' task performance, as well as the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of subordinates' adaptive expertise.

Methods: A total of 313 Chinese employees were participated the experiment at two time points. The response surface analysis was used to analyze how the leader–subordinate construal level fit impact the task performance.

Results: Results revealed that leader–subordinate construal unfit led to emotional exhaustion of subordinates. When subordinate's construal level is high and the leader's is low, the subordinate experiences more emotional exhaustion compared with the reverse condition that subordinate's has low construal level and leader is high. The relationship between leader–subordinate construal fit and task performance is mediated by subordinates' emotional exhaustion. In addition, subordinates' adaptive expertise moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and task performance.

Discussion: This research enhances understanding of leader–subordinate fit and its impact on subordinates' work task performance. Moreover, this study combines CLT and ego-depletion theory to examine how leader–subordinate construal fit influences task performance, enriching existing research. The implications and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS

leader-subordinate construal fit, emotional exhaustion, adaptive expertise, task performance, construal level theory

1 Introduction

With the rapid external condition transformation, internal organizational micro-level subsystems' communication is central to preserve efficiency. The changes confronting organizations and the adjustments to the organizational framework amplify the importance of organizational communication for overall functioning. The behavior of individuals in organizations is best understood from a communication point of view (Rogers and Agarwala-Rogers, 1976). However, many subordinates are dissatisfied with the leadership's communication style or unclear task assignments. Given that communication

necessitates the processing of cognitive resources from both sides, differences in psychological cognitive patterns and thinking representations may be the key reason for leader–subordinate understanding variance. If so, organizations must contemplate how to remodel the communication and working modes of their members to adapt to these changes and enhance work efficiency.

The cognitive and psychological thinking patterns of organizational members (Healey and Hodgkinson, 2009; Walsh, 1995) and the cognitive competence of managers or employees, such as attention orientation, causal attribution and organizational identity (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Meindl et al., 1985) have garnered extensive attention. Recently, scholars have explored the alterations in individuals' psychological thinking patterns in different situations from the perspective of construal level theory (CLT). This theory defines construal level as a psychological and cognitive way of processing information. Construal level refers to the degree of abstraction or concreteness in people's mental representations of external things, encompassing the ways individuals encode and retrieve information (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). This level provides a systematic and clear framework for understanding essential concepts related to mental representation and cognition, such as strategy and tactics, vision and implementation (Reyt et al., 2016). Construal Level of individual can be viewed as a stable personality trait, with some individuals tending to think abstractly (high construal level) and others more concretely (low construal level) (Vallacher and Wegner, 1989). High construal level focuses on long-term goals, overall perspectives, ethics, and values, while low construal level centers on short-term objectives, concrete behaviors, and immediate decisions. Researchers found that some employees tend to construct an understanding of work-related activities at a high construal level and employ abstract statements in business communication. By contrast, other employees understand work behavior through straightforward statements when communicating. The construal levels of employees and superiors are stable, subtly affecting the information processing methods, working approaches or workplace behaviors. Most previous studies have examined the impact of cognition on organizational performance from the unilateral perspective of managers or employees. The influence of leader–subordinate fit in cognition on organization or work performance remains under-explored.

A growing number of researchers recognize the importance of subordinates in achieving organizational goals (Reyt and Wiesenfeld, 2015; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The concept of “construal fit” between leaders and subordinates describes the degree of matching between the leader's communication behavior and the psychological distance between the leader and subordinate. Leader-subordinate construal level inconsistency normally exists in information processing during work communication. When subordinates exhibit power dependence on their leaders, they choose to obey their leaders (Berson and Halevy, 2014). Consequently, inconsistency can lead to psychological changes in subordinates, which impact their work attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, subordinates may expend resources to adjust their construal levels to align with their leaders which in turn affect their work performance.

In this article, we build on this core insight to develop and test a mismatch perspective on leader-subordinate construal level.

Drawing on construal level theory and self-depletion theory, we propose that employees may experience job burnout when their construal level does not match that of their leaders. One two-lag survey and response surface analysis provide support for the proposed mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between leader-subordinate construal unfit and performance, demonstrating a leader-subordinate unfit in predicting higher level of emotional exhaustion and lower task performance. Findings advance existing knowledge about information processing underlying communication between subordinates and their leaders and extend construal level theory through the lens of construal fit between communicators.

2 Theory and hypothesis development

2.1 Construal level theory

The core principle of CLT suggests that psychological distance initiates a high construal level, which, in turn, further expands the psychological distance (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Construal level can vary across contexts due to changes in social roles, aiding self-regulation and adaptation. It also shapes social cognition, including behaviors like communication. Reyt and Wiesenfeld (2015) found that people can express their construal level through communication and thus influence others' responses.

In organizations, communication is of utmost importance, and construal level can affect communication via cognition. It shapes the way humans think, subsequently influencing the way they express themselves automatically. During leader–subordinate communication, leaders' construal level can express their power distance. Past studies demonstrate that leadership influences employees' thinking and behaviors during communication. Using a high construal level or abstract way of communicating enhances employees' positive behaviors when the hierarchical distance between leaders and followers is large; when the hierarchical distance is small, using a low construal level or a concrete way can motivate employees (Berson and Halevy, 2014).

2.2 Ego-depletion theory

Self-control is a finite resource that determines capacity for exerting effortful control over dominant responses. Ego-depletion occurs when an individual's acts of volition draw on a limited resource, akin to strength or energy, impairing subsequent volitional actions. Once self-control resources are expended, it leads to ego-depletion (Baumeister et al., 1998; Hagger et al., 2010). Ego-depletion experienced at one stage can diminish the individual's ability to control and regulate in the next stage, leading to subsequent failures in self-control. Moreover, as different volitional activities require the same resources, various seemingly unrelated activities share these resources. Therefore, if resources are depleted in one volitional activity, the availability of resources for another activity decreases (Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister and Vohs, 2007). Research indicates that controlling impulses, cognitive processes (such as attention and thinking), managing emotions, making rational decisions, resisting temptations, and overcoming laziness all consume energy and resources for self-control.

The construal level influences an individual's willingness for self-control. High-level construal leads to greater self-control (e.g., Fujita et al., 2006). In organizational circumstances, ego-depletion among members is an invisible phenomenon. Employees with a high construal level are more likely to display organizational citizenship behavior after experiencing disrespectful treatment, even though it can expend self-control resources (Rosen et al., 2016).

2.3 Hypothesis development

2.3.1 Leader–subordinate construal fit and emotional exhaustion

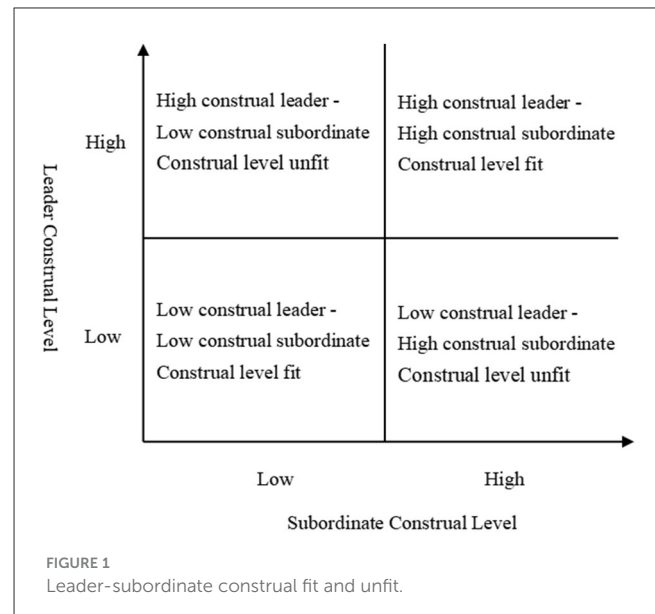
The concept of construal fit was first introduced to evaluate whether a leader's communication aligns with the psychological distance between the leader and followers (Berson and Halevy, 2014). Construal fit explains the effect of the abstractness of communication information on employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, and social bonding based on the psychological distance between communicators. It also considers construal level as a stable mental representation. For the same situation, external individuals tend to express abstractly at a high construal level, whereas internal ones tend to express concretely at a low construal level (Lanaj et al., 2012). And individuals with a high construal level are likely to have overly positive perceptions of future events, sometimes overlooking actual or specific problems. On the contrary, individuals with a low construal level tend to focus on the narrow and immediate issues, disregarding the bigger picture, overall context, and future implications (Marguc et al., 2011; Smith and Trope, 2006). In essence, the construal level between leaders and employees is quite stable and can influence the work style.

Drawing on ego-depletion theory, in the case of the same construal level, the same psychological representation of job content cognition can promote processing fluency, improve the perceived credibility of information and expand the emotional response to information. Subordinates can easily understand the leader's perspectives on work tasks and objectives (Hansen and Wänke, 2010; Kim et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2010). When a leader with a high construal level conveys work tasks abstractly, high-construal subordinates quickly grasp the meaning, leading to aligned feedback and making the leader view subordinates as capable. Conversely, when a low-construal leader communicates tasks specifically, low-construal subordinates swiftly understand the message, resulting in feedback that meets expectations and earns a high evaluation from the leader. Besides, when the leader and subordinates share the same construal level, the latter do not need to alter their thinking. They thus consume fewer self-control resources and attention. This alignment enables subordinates to better understand the leader's perspective, feel supported, and experience less emotional exhaustion.

H1: The more fit the construal levels of the leader and subordinates are, the less emotional exhaustion subordinates feel.

2.3.2 Leader–subordinate construal unfit

We predict a difference between two unfit circumstances, as illustrated in Figure 1. Two scenarios are considered: a leader with



a high construal level and a subordinate with a low one, and vice versa. These scenarios can lead to different levels of emotional exhaustion. Construal level influences perceptions of job roles and tasks. For example, leaders and employees with different construal levels may have distinct cognitive frameworks for understanding the roles of “leader” and “employee.”

Leaders with a low construal level focus on details, measures, feasibility, and processes, making their communication more specific. This can create inconsistencies in information processing with subordinates who have a high construal level. The greater the hierarchy difference, the more abstract the information conveyed by the leader (Berson and Halevy, 2014). Subordinates with a high construal level expect more abstract information from leaders. Thus, a leader with a low construal level may not meet the expectations of subordinates with a high construal level.

In addition, subordinates with a high construal level have the characteristics of de-contextualization, and they stick to their original cognition and work views (Trope and Liberman, 2003). When forced to adapt to a leader's construal level, subordinates must expend more self-control resources to align their thinking. This shift in thinking style can cause ego-depletion and increase emotional exhaustion. Individuals with a high construal level are likely to generalize their emotions and intensify their emotional responses to negative emotional events (Watkins et al., 2008). Subordinates with high construal level may also tend to adopt emotional focus strategies to stay away from stressors (Han et al., 2016). A leader with a high construal level focuses on big-picture elements like goals and future expectations, making their communication more abstract than that of subordinates with a low construal level. They are also more inclined to adhere to their original views and are less likely to change their construal level to accommodate their subordinates' expectations (Daniels et al., 2014; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). This situation is in line with the concept that leaders should convey information with a high construal level (Berson and Halevy, 2014). Subordinates with a low construal level are characterized by contextualization, and their psychological cognition and information processing methods are easy to change

to meet the needs of the leader (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). They can adjust their self-state and accept the leader's construal level. Thus, the depletion of self-control resources expended by changing their original construal to contextualization is relatively small, resulting in less ego-depletion than in the combination of low construal leader–high construal subordinate.

H2: When the leader-subordinate construal is unfit, subordinates in the combination of low construal leader–high construal subordinate feel more emotional exhaustion than subordinates in the combination of high construal leader–low construal subordinate.

2.4 Mediating effect of emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion refers to the physical, cognitive, and emotional exhaustion of individuals. It is also an important factor affecting work burnout. As per ego-depletion theory, the depletion of self-control is accompanied by the mediation effects of mental fatigue, motivation and negative affect. Emotional exhaustion is an aftereffect of self-control resource depletion or energy expenditure (Hagger et al., 2010) and work task performance also consumes resources. The inconsistency of leader–subordinate construal level causes emotional exhaustion, which expends numerous self-control resources. In the following work, volitional activities, the self-control resources owned by the individual are reduced.

As mentioned above, the consistency of the construal level of leaders and subordinates facilitates mutual understanding in terms of work cognition and communication content. Conversely, inconsistent construal level can lead to job-related cognitive biases and difficulties in comprehension, impacting subordinates' task performance. Hypotheses 1 and 2 discuss the influence of leader–subordinate construal fit on subordinate emotional exhaustion. Combined with the negative correlation hypothesis of emotional exhaustion on task performance, we posit that emotional exhaustion has a mediating effect on the relationship between leader–subordinate construal fit and subordinate task performance.

H3: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between leader–subordinate construal fit and subordinate task performance.

2.5 Moderated role of adaptive expertise

Adaptive expertise refers to the ability of individuals to understand and solve new problems and process information (Holyoak, 1991). It is closely related to self-regulation ability and requires multiple cognitive abilities to regulate and control information processing to solve situational problems (Smith et al., 1997). People's cognitive needs and approaches influence their different forms of individual experience, thereby shaping adaptive expertise, occupational diversity (Crossland et al., 2014) and breadth of experience (Mannor et al., 2017).

According to ego-depletion theory, engaging in volitional activities inevitably leads to ego-depletion. Nevertheless, such activities involve temporary resources, and resources can be replenished (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007; Baumeister et al., 1998).

Individual volition, self-control traits and motivation levels can enhance resistance to ego-depletion. Subordinates with high adaptive expertise, developed through work experiences, possess the capability to handle diverse cognitive demands and readjust cognitive methods to meet needs. They can adjust their cognitive methods to meet various needs, adopting different levels of interpretation based on situational requirements.

Therefore, subordinates with high adaptive expertise are better equipped to strengthen their willpower to resist ego-depletion and effectively cope with emotional exhaustion arising from inconsistency with the leader's construal level. Consequently, they can preserve more self-control resources for subsequent work activities, ultimately enhancing task completion. Thus, we put forward Hypothesis 4.

H4: Subordinates' adaptive expertise moderates the effect of emotional exhaustion on subordinate task performance. When subordinates have a high adaptive expertise, the effect of emotional exhaustion on subordinate task performance is decreased.

According to CLT and ego-depletion theory, the current study sorts out the relationship between variables and proposes a theoretical model for this study. The theoretical model is visually represented in Figure 2.

3 Materials and methods

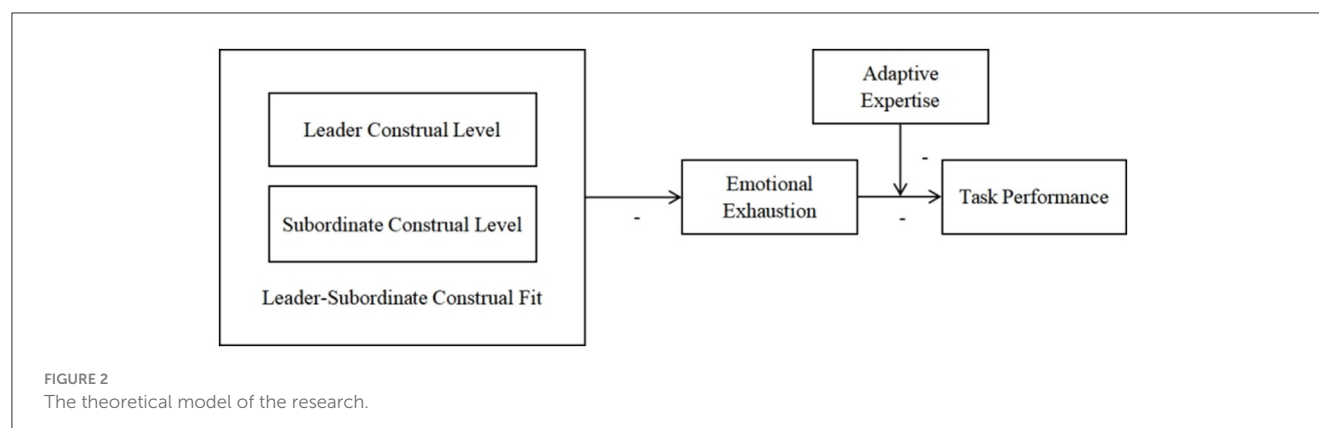
3.1 Procedure and sample

To observe the proposed impact of leader-subordinate construal fit and minimize common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012), we employed a multi-source and multi-phase approach, collecting time-lagged data via online survey. At Time 1, subordinates were invited to complete the first-round questionnaire about their self-reported construal level, their leaders' construal level, emotional exhaustion, and demographic information (i.e., gender, age, and occupation). At Time 2, 1 month after Time 1 (Dormann and Griffin, 2015), we collected the data on subordinates' adaptive expertise and task performance. Five months later, we conducted another survey to obtain more data and expand the applicability of the research. The final sample, which consisted of 313 individuals, was half male (50.8%), and the ages were mainly 25 to 35 (54.6%). Participants were subordinates working in organizations or government departments with a stable and clear hierarchical structure.

We conducted a *post hoc* test with G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) to test the sample effect. The results indicated that with $\alpha = 0.05$, a sample size of $N = 313$, and an effect size of $F^2 = 0.35$, the achieved power ($1 - \beta$) was 0.99, demonstrating a high level of statistical power in this study.

3.2 Measurement

The questionnaires were presented in Chinese. We followed the commonly used back-translation procedure to generate the Chinese measures (Brislin, 1986). Variables were measured with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree” unless otherwise specified.



3.3 Subordinate construal level

We asked subordinates to rate their work behavior construal level on a 6-point semantic differential scale adapted from [Berson et al. \(2015\)](#). The final version was 10 specific behaviors related to work scenarios. Each item provided a high and low construal level condition, and participants responded between these two conditions as to which description was more consistent with their initial perception of a specific task. For example, participants in the high-level construal condition would describe the activity “report preparation” as “show progress,” while those in low-level condition would describe it as “collect and organize information” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$).

3.4 Leader construal level

Subordinates assessed their leaders’ construal level on a 6-point semantic differential scale adapted from [Burrus and Roese \(2006\)](#). This scale has been used in previous studies to measure perceived construal level ([Burgoon et al., 2003](#); [Emirza and Katrinli, 2022](#); [Reyt et al., 2016](#)). The final version of this scale was 5 items. For example, the participants rate their leaders whether they are focused on long-term or short-term goals (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$ in this study).

3.5 Emotional exhaustion

Subordinates’ emotional exhaustion was adapted from [Aryee et al. \(2008\)](#). The scale consisted of 5 items, with a sample item being “I feel burned out from my work.” Before rating their emotional exhaustion, subordinates were asked to recall an incident in which they did not communicate well with their leader, thereby impeding task completion efficiency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$ in this study).

3.6 Task performance

Subordinates rated their task performance via the scale adapted from [Methot et al. \(2015\)](#). The task performance was based on

recalled task event results. The scale included 5 items, with a sample item was “Adequately completes assigned duties” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$ in this study).

3.7 Adaptive expertise

Subordinates rated their adaptive expertise by the scale adapted from [Bohle Carbonell et al. \(2015\)](#). The scale has two dimensions, domain skills and innovative skills, consisting of 8 items. A sample item in the domain skill was “During past projects, I gained a better understanding of concepts in my discipline.” A sample item in innovative was “During past projects, I showed that I am willing to keep on learning new aspects related to my discipline.” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$ in this study).

3.8 Control variables

As previous research has shown, similarities in demographic variables can influence the consistency between subordinates and leaders ([Liu et al., 2016](#); [Lu, 2024](#)), so we controlled for gender, age, education level, and work tenure in our analysis.

4 Results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the hypothesized measurement model of the self-rated variables. The hypothesized five-factor model, which included subordinate construal level, leader construal level, emotional exhaustion, adaptive expertise, and task performance, exhibited a good fit with the data, as indicated by the following fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 1.53$, CFI = 0.912, TLI = 0.901, SRMR = 0.075, RMSEA = 0.063. Additionally, this model demonstrated a significantly better fit than all other competing models, where the correlation coefficient between any two of the five variables was set to 1, indicating that the five variables were distinct from one another.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender	1.49	0.50								
2 Education level	2.75	0.66	−0.06							
3 Age	3.22	1.63	−0.26***	−0.16**						
4 Work tenure	3.73	1.43	−0.14*	−0.05	0.62***					
5 Subordinate construal level	4.16	1.11	0.06	−0.10	−0.24***	−0.10				
6 Leader construal level	4.43	0.81	−0.10	0.10	0.13*	0.04	−0.28***			
7 Emotional exhaustion	2.61	0.83	−0.07	0.14*	0.05	0.04	−0.22***	−0.15**		
8 Task performance	3.76	0.88	−0.08	−0.03	0.15**	0.10	0.11	0.14*	−0.38***	
9 Adaptive expertise	4.03	0.61	−0.10	0.12*	0.08	0.23**	−0.26**	−0.05	−0.25**	0.44***

N = 313. **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

4.2 Hypotheses tests

The descriptive statistics and correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1.

To explore the effect of leader-subordinate construal level consistency on subordinate emotional exhaustion and task performance, we utilized quadratic polynomial regression and response surface methodology for analysis. Quadratic polynomial regression compensates for the limitations of difference scores and allows for a comprehensive measure of the two measures themselves and the various relationships between them.

Response surface methodology involves analyzing features of surfaces that correspond to polynomial regression equations. Quadratic polynomial regression and response surface analysis could compare multiple combinations of leaders' and subordinates' construal level (High-High, High-Low, Low-High, Low-Low). By combining quadratic polynomial and response surface analysis (Edwards and Cable, 2009), we constructed the quadratic polynomial regression equation:

$$Z = b_0 + b_1L + b_2F + b_3L^2 + b_4(F^*L) + b_5F^2 + e$$

In the equation, *Z* represents the predictor of the model, that is, emotional exhaustion. *F* refers to subordinates' construal level, *L* indicates leaders' construal level, *F*² is the square of subordinates' construal level, *L*² is the square of leaders' construal level, and *F*^{*}*L* is the multiplication term of subordinates' and leaders' construal level. The coefficients *b*₀, *b*₁, and others are regression coefficients, and *e* represents the error term.

4.3 The effect of leader-subordinate construal fit on subordinate emotional exhaustion

We applied SPSS to conduct quadratic polynomial regression analysis. First, *F* and *L* were added to the regression equation to test their linear relationship with *Z*. Multicollinearity between terms (*F* = 1.11, *L* = 1.11, *F*² = 1.09, *L*² = 1.12, and *F* × *L* = 1.03) was well below the conservative threshold of 5 (O'Brien, 2007). Second, *F*², *L*², and *F*^{*}*L* were added to examine the curvilinear

relationships and interaction effects. Then, a response surface analysis was conducted.

On the surface of the *F* = −*L* line, which means the construal level of leaders and subordinates was not consistent, the slope (*b*₁ − *b*₂) was used to examine the results of the “high-low” and “low-high” cases when inconsistent. The curvature of the surface along the *F* = −*L* line equals *b*₃ − *b*₄ + *b*₅, which was used to compare the consistent and inconsistent cases. The curvature of the surface along the *F* = *L* line equals *b*₃ + *b*₄ + *b*₅, which was used to test the existence of the curvilinear relationship in the case that the construal level between leaders and subordinates was consistent.

Table 2 shows the results of quadratic polynomial regression and response surface analysis. Along the *F* = −*L* line, the curved surface is curved downward (curvature = −0.19, *p* < 0.05), indicating an inverted U-shaped. However, the curved surface along the *F* = *L* line curvature is not significant (curvature = 0.11, n.s.), suggesting that subordinates experience more emotional exhaustion when the leader-subordinate construal level is inconsistent than when they are consistent.

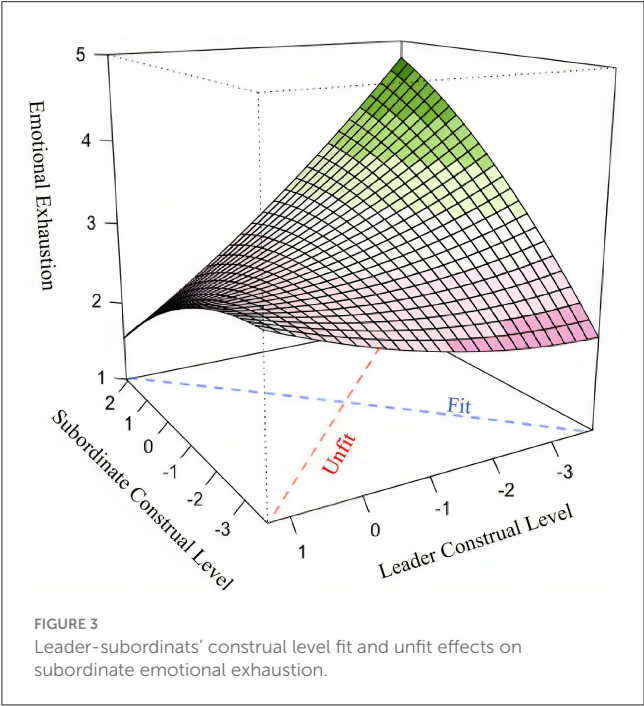
After the quadratic polynomial regression analysis, we established a three-dimensional image (Figure 3) to show the regression results. The subordinate construal level is on the X-axis, the leader construal level is on the Y-axis, and subordinate emotional exhaustion is on the Z-axis. The consistent line from the right side (*F* = *L* = 1) to the left side (*F* = *L* = 3), the inconsistent line from the front (*F* = −3, *L* = 1) to the back side (*F* = 2, *L* = 3). Along the consistent line (*F* = *L*) is almost a straight line, but along the inconsistent line (*F* = −*L*) is a U-shaped line, which indicates that subordinates will generate more emotional exhaustion when the leader-subordinate construal level is inconsistent. This supports hypothesis 1.

Besides, when the leader-subordinate construal level is inconsistent, the result of the slope test was significant (slope = −0.39, *p* < 0.001). This indicates that “high leader construal level and low subordinate construal level” have a significant difference from “low leader construal level and high subordinate construal level.” Hence, low leader construal level and high subordinate construal level result in more emotional exhaustion in subordinates than high leader construal level and low subordinate construal level, thus supporting hypothesis 2. The result can also be seen

TABLE 2 The results of quadratic polynomial regression and response surface analysis.

Variables	Emotional exhaustion					
	M1		M2		M3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	2.11***	(0.31)	2.10***	(0.30)	2.22***	(0.31)
Subordinate gender	−0.07	(0.09)	−0.09	(0.10)	−0.12	(0.10)
Subordinate education level	0.19**	(0.07)	0.21**	(0.04)	0.19**	(0.07)
Subordinate age	0.03	(0.04)	0.03	(0.04)	0.02	(0.04)
Subordinate work tenure	−0.01	(0.04)	−0.01	(0.04)	−0.01	(0.04)
Subordinate construal level (<i>F</i>)			−0.09	(0.05)	0.11*	(0.05)
Leader construal level (<i>L</i>)			−0.30***	(0.06)	−0.28***	(0.06)
The square of subordinate construal level (<i>F</i> ²)					0.02	(0.03)
The square of leader construal level (<i>L</i> ²)					−0.06	(0.05)
Leader × subordinate construal level (<i>L</i> × <i>F</i>)					0.15*	(0.07)
Response surface analysis						
Slope (<i>F</i> = <i>L</i>) (<i>b</i> ₁ + <i>b</i> ₂)					−0.17*	(0.08)
Curvature (<i>F</i> = <i>L</i>) (<i>b</i> ₃ + <i>b</i> ₄ + <i>b</i> ₅)					0.11	(0.09)
Slope (<i>F</i> = − <i>L</i>) (<i>b</i> ₁ − <i>b</i> ₂)					−0.39***	(0.08)
Curvature (<i>F</i> = − <i>L</i>) (<i>b</i> ₃ − <i>b</i> ₄ + <i>b</i> ₅)					−0.19*	(0.09)
<i>R</i>	0.17		0.33		0.35	
Δ <i>R</i> ²			0.08***		0.02*	

p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, * *p* < 0.001, *B* = standardized coefficients, *SE* = standardized errors.



in Figure 3, the point (low leader and high subordinate construal level, *F* = 2, *L* = −3) is higher than the point (high leader and low subordinate construal level, *F* = −3, *L* = 1).

4.4 The mediating effect of emotional exhaustion

This study follows the block variable calculation method proposed by Edwards and Cable (2009) to test the mediating effect. The consistent construal level block variable was calculated by the original value of *F*, *L*, *F*², *L*², and *F* × *L*, multiplying the polynomial regression coefficients in M3 and then summed.

We conducted a bootstrapping method with 5,000 samples using SPSS to examine the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion on task performance. The PROCESS method was applied for bootstrapping. The results show that the effect of the block variable on emotional exhaustion is −0.923, with a 95% confidence interval [0.556, 1.290], which excludes zero. And the effect of emotional exhaustion on task performance is −0.373, with a 95% confidence interval [−0.487, −0.260], excluding zero. That means paths *a* and *b* are significant. The indirect effect of the block variable on task performance via emotional exhaustion was 0.345, with a 95% confidence interval [0.157, 0.617], excluding zero, confirming that path *c* is significant. These results support hypothesis 3, suggesting that leader-subordinate construal level consistency has a positive and significant effect on task performance via emotional exhaustion. Table 3 shows the results of the bootstrapping method.

We hypothesized that subordinates' adaptive expertise could moderate the effect of emotional exhaustion on task performance. To test this moderated effect, we applied the PROCESS method

TABLE 3 The mediating effect of emotional exhaustion.

Path	<i>B</i>	SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
BV → EE (<i>a</i>)	−0.923	0.187	0.556	1.290
EE → TP (<i>b</i>)	−0.373	0.058	−0.487	−0.260
BV → EE→ TP (indirect)	0.345	0.115	0.157	0.617
BV → TP (direct)	0.096	0.105	−0.111	0.304

BV, the Block Variable; EE, Emotional Exhaustion; TP, Task Performance.

TABLE 4 The moderated effect of adaptive expertise.

Variable	Task performance			
	<i>B</i>	SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Intercept	0.091	0.979	−1.838	2.019
Subordinate gender	0.081	0.076	−0.069	0.231
Subordinate education level	−0.071	0.057	−0.184	0.042
Subordinate age	−0.038	0.026	−0.089	0.013
Subordinate work tenure	0.009	0.038	0.066	0.084
Emotional exhaustion	0.583	0.258	0.075	1.091
Adaptive expertise	0.763	0.217	0.336	1.189
EE × AE	−0.161	0.065	−0.289	−0.032

EE, Emotional Exhaustion; AE, Adaptive Expertise.

with bootstrapping and converted the leader-subordinate construal fit into a block variable, which served as an independent variable. The results, as shown in Table 4, revealed a negative and significant effect of the interaction between emotional exhaustion and adaptive expertise on task performance ($B = -0.161$, $CI\ 95\% = [-0.289, -0.032]$). This indicates that subordinates' adaptive expertise can mitigate the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on task performance, thereby supporting the hypothesis.

We conducted a bootstrapping method to examine the moderated mediating effect, and the results are displayed in Table 5. Subordinates with high adaptive expertise enhance their willpower to resist ego-depletion, allowing them to compensate for emotional exhaustion resulting from the inconsistency with leaders' construal level, and obtain restoration of self-control resources in the following volitional activities at work and facilitating the achievement of subsequent work tasks. That means subordinates with high adaptive expertise can reduce the effect of emotional exhaustion generated from the inconsistency with leaders' construal level on task performance ($B = -0.157$, $CI\ 95\% = [-0.341, -0.028]$, excluding zero). While for the subordinates with low adaptive expertise, task performance remains at a low level irrespective of the level of emotional exhaustion ($B = 0.110$, $CI\ 95\% = [-0.049, 0.304]$, including zero). Thus, hypothesis 5 is partly supported. Accordingly, we plotted the moderating effect diagram, as presented in Figure 4.

TABLE 5 The moderated mediating effect.

Variable	Adaptive expertise	<i>B</i>	SE	95%CI	
				Lower	Upper
Emotional exhaustion	High	−0.157	0.079	−0.341	−0.028
	Low	0.110	0.088	−0.049	0.304

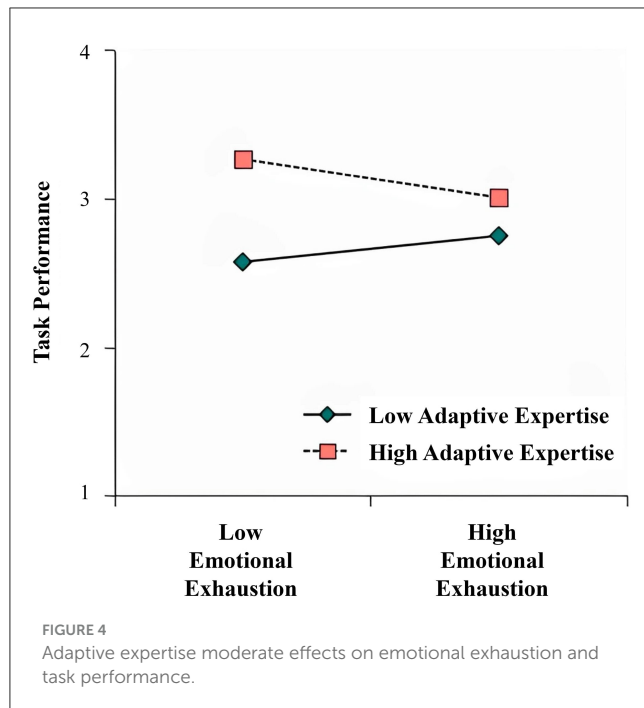
5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implication

This study enhances understanding of leader-subordinate fit and its impact on subordinates' work task performance. By exploring various combinations of leaders' and subordinates' construal levels, it also adds to the research on the antecedents of task performance. Moreover, this study combines CLT and ego-depletion theory to examine how leader-subordinate construal fit influences task performance, enriching existing research.

Previous research has shown that construal fit can increase processing fluency (Kim et al., 2009), enhance the perceived credibility of information (Hansen and Wänke, 2010) and intensify emotional reactions to messages (Lee et al., 2010). But when the leader-subordinate construal is unfit, it depletes employees. In our study, we found that the leader-subordinate construal unfit will lead to subordinates' emotional exhaustion and thus impact their task performance. The results align with the work of Liu et al. (2016), who found that the power distance value inconsistency between leaders and subordinates will lead to emotional exhaustion. In leader-subordinate level unfit situations, leaders, and employees process information differently. Due to the power dynamics and organizational hierarchy, subordinates often comply with their leaders' decisions and instructions. This compliance can influence their work attitudes and behaviors, potentially leading to adjustments in how they approach their tasks and interact within the team. Moreover, our evidence showed that subordinates with high construal level result in more emotional exhaustion when they work with a low construal level leader. It seems more difficult for high construal level employees to make concessions when considering backward compatibility. The inconsistency in construal level may not bring much actual increase in the workload to followers, but it would cause negative emotional reactions, such as negative emotional exhaustion, and the long-term accumulation of emotional exhaustion would eventually lead to follower's low performance. Li et al. (2017) and Wan et al. (2022) found that mindfulness, as a form of adaptive expertise, can mitigate the adverse effects of emotional exhaustion. Evidence here also suggests the buffering role of adaptive expertise of emotionally exhausted employee during communication. Communication friction is a temporary consumption of resources, and these resources can be replenished through adjustments. Adaptive expertise from work experience, personality and ability can help employees adjust cognition and identify the appropriate approach under different communication circumstance.

Aryee et al. (2008) found that emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role between abusive supervision and employees' contextual performance. This further confirms the mediating role



of emotional exhaustion in the communication between leaders and subordinates. In sum, this study shifts the focus of emotional labor by examining emotional exhaustion as a mediating variable in leader–subordinate communication to organizational formal and informal communication. It illuminates emotional exhaustion as a critical intermediary process in leader–subordinate interactions, thereby offering novel insights into the communication dynamics between leaders and subordinates.

5.2 Practical implications

For employee training, managers should acknowledge the variations in cognition style—construal level of mutual communicators in organization. Managers can take positive measures to alleviate the potential problems arising from these differences (Emirza and Katrinli, 2022). Training can also enable employees to better capture others' perspectives and make timely adjustments. Effective training can further help employees develop environmental adaptability and perception, reducing the maladaptive consequences of emotional exhaustion and improving work efficiency.

For leadership, leaders may adapt their task delivery methods and communication approaches to adapt to employees' information needs. For employees with a low construal level, leaders should provide specific feedback, decomposable short-term goals, and task guidance. For those with a high construal level, leaders can assign long-term goals and tasks to encourage growth. This tailored approach optimizes performance and fosters a productive work environment.

In complex work situations, leaders and followers need to adapt their thinking and communication methods to suit the work context. Despite construal level being a subconscious and stable way of thinking, this study emphasizes flexibility's

importance in fast-paced environments with cross-departmental and cross-disciplinary collaboration. A rigid thinking style can cause emotional exhaustion, affecting behavior and performance. Effective communication hinges on recipients understanding the content, which depends on their cognitive abilities and how information is encoded and decoded. Inefficient work completion can result if communicators don't consider each other's information acceptance and understanding abilities. When collaborating across departments, individuals with different construal levels are inevitable. Leaders and employees should choose communication and thinking approaches based on work requirements to foster effective collaboration and better outcomes. Overall, flexible communication and information processing can promote harmonious and productive work relationships in changing environments.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

Despite the theoretical and practical implications of this study, it comes with certain limitations, which open opportunities for fruitful future research. One limitation is that we investigate only from the subordinates' perspective of work task performance. To comprehensively understand the mechanism of leader–subordinate construal fit on work task performance, future leader–subordinate fit research should consider the perspective of leaders and explore other relevant characteristics of subordinates.

Another potential limitation lies in our measurement approach, which relies on the self-report method through questionnaires. This approach may introduce subjective biases, with respondents potentially providing socially desirable answers or meeting certain expectations. Besides, the research variable questionnaires are collected at only two time points, so establishing causality is challenging. Future research can collect questionnaires at multiple time points or design experiments to further verify theoretical models and research hypotheses and improve research quality. Moreover, this study adopts a direct measurement method for matching research, although this approach is practical, it may be less accurate than directly measuring leaders' construal level through self-reported measures. In future studies, directly measuring leaders' construal level can provide precise and comprehensive insights into the leader–subordinate fit dynamics.

Lastly, construal level is challenging to manipulate in practical settings, given its long-term stability. It is difficult to alter because it represents a subconscious mindset that is not easily perceived and detected by individuals. Leaders must possess strong adaptability and flexibility to adjust their thinking and expression methods when facing subordinates with different construal levels. In a complex working environment, people often struggle to realize their construal level and thinking habits, so implementing changes requires great effort. To address this issue, future research can consider using situational experiments to manipulate participants' construal level. Providing participants with a certain background and situation improves the authenticity of the situation and the sense of participation of the sample, thereby ultimately strengthening the persuasiveness of the findings.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee on Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee of Jinan University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

HX: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. XC: Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. RH: Data curation, Methodology, Supervision, Formal analysis, Validation, Funding acquisition, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. FC: Writing – review & editing. XZ: Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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