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Runner-up Position: The Influence Mechanism of Alternatives on Employee Proactive Responsibility Taking and Time Theft Behavior

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Abstract

An alternative candidate refers to an employee who is ultimately assigned by the organization to undertake a task or role but is not the preferred choice for that task or role, and has gradually attracted scholarly attention in recent years. However, existing research has overlooked the impact of being an alternative candidate on employees' own attitudes and behaviors in task assignment contexts. Based on Social Information Processing Theory and Associative-Propositional Evaluation Theory, this study employs a scenario experiment (Study 1) and a three-stage questionnaire survey (Study 2) to investigate the “double-edged sword” effect of being an alternative candidate on employee behavior and its boundary conditions in task assignment contexts. The results indicate that when supervisory developmental feedback is high, being an alternative candidate stimulates harmonious passion, thereby triggering proactive responsibility-taking behavior; when supervisory developmental feedback is low, being an alternative candidate induces work procrastination tendency, subsequently leading to time theft behavior. The conclusions of this study provide reference and guidance for the public to understand alternative candidates more objectively and dialectically.

Full Text

Coming in Second: The Influence Mechanism of Alternative Choice on Employee Taking Charge and Time Theft Behaviors

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Abstract

Alternative choice refers to employees who are ultimately assigned to undertake a task or role but were not the first choice for that task or role. This phenomenon has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. However, existing research has overlooked how alternative choice status affects employees' own attitudes and behaviors in task allocation contexts. Drawing on social information processing theory and the associative-propositional evaluation theory, this study employs a scenario experiment (Study 1) and a three-stage questionnaire survey (Study 2) to examine the “double-edged sword” effect of alternative choice on employee behavior and its boundary conditions in task allocation situations. Results show that when supervisor developmental feedback is high, alternative choice stimulates harmonious passion, which subsequently promotes taking charge behavior. When supervisor developmental feedback is low, alternative choice triggers work procrastination tendency, leading to time theft behavior. These findings provide a reference for the public to understand alternative choice more objectively and dialectically.

Keywords: alternative choice, harmonious passion, work procrastination tendency, taking charge behavior, time theft behavior, supervisor developmental feedback

Classification Code: B849: C93

1. Problem Statement

At the 2024 Paris Olympics, Wang Xinyu substituted for Zheng Qinwen in the mixed doubles competition, forming a “temporary team” with Zhang Zhizhen—who had nearly abandoned the competition and returned home—and together they won the silver medal. Behind this successful turnaround lay the team's rational personnel planning. Although Wang Xinyu was not the first choice for this match, she proved critical to its successful completion. In organizational contexts, scholars refer to similar experiences as “alternative choice” and employees with such experiences as “alternative choice employees”—those ultimately assigned to undertake a task or role but not the first choice for it (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024). Alternative choice status carries both the organization's final trust and entrustment while bearing the initial label of “not the first choice,” which may profoundly influence employees' psychological states, work motivation, and subsequent behaviors (Liao et al., 2023). Understanding these influence mechanisms can not only enhance alternative employees' work effectiveness and career development but also help organizations effectively manage

talent pools, unleash the potential of all employees, and improve team resilience and overall effectiveness (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024).

Although organizations often rely on alternative employees as an important resource for coping with uncertainty and filling talent gaps, current research lacks systematic investigation of these individuals who are not the first choice but ultimately bear heavy responsibilities. A few studies have examined the impact of entering organizations as position substitutes in recruitment contexts on newcomers' socialization processes (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), but they rarely focus on how employees react when learning they are alternative choices in task allocation contexts. A core management function is task allocation. When the first choice cannot undertake a task due to time conflicts or unexpected situations, managers need to find alternatives to ensure smooth progress. This type of alternative choice occurring in specific task assignments likely affects employees' work attitudes and behaviors after they take over the task (Zou et al., 2023) and may further spread through a "ripple effect" to the entire team, impacting overall organizational effectiveness. How will employees perceive and respond to being an "alternative choice"? Will they view the task as an "opportunity to prove their worth" and strive to exceed organizational expectations, or will they lose enthusiasm because they "did not receive the organization's priority recognition"? This question urgently requires in-depth investigation (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024). Based on this, our study deeply explores how employees' cognition and interpretation of "alternative choice" in task allocation contexts influence their attitudes and behaviors after taking over tasks.

Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) posits that individuals process and interpret specific social information to determine what attitudes and behaviors to adopt (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). In this study, alternative choice status conveys information about leaders' role positioning of employees in tasks and evaluations of their potential (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), potentially transmitting two distinct messages: first, that the organization trusts the employee's ability and responsibility to handle emergencies when the first choice is absent; second, that the organization has not fully recognized the employee, who is merely a temporary substitute (Liao et al., 2023; Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024). How employees process and interpret the information conveyed by alternative choice status affects their attitudes toward the task. The Associative-Propositional Evaluation Theory (AP-E) provides an ideal framework for explaining in depth how employees process and interpret alternative choice information. AP-E theory states that positive or negative attitude formation is based on associative and propositional evaluation processes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Generally, associative evaluations automatically transform into corresponding propositional evaluations. On one hand, the unexpectedness and sense of difficulty in "being ultimately assigned to complete the task" may activate employees' positive associative evaluations (Liao et al., 2023) and automatically form positive propositional evaluations, leading them to interpret alternative choice information positively, stimulating intrinsic mo-

tivation to demonstrate and prove themselves (Nurmohamed, 2020), generating harmonious passion (Vallerand et al., 2003), and subsequently promoting taking charge behavior (Zigarmi et al., 2018) or inhibiting time theft behavior (Harold et al., 2022). On the other hand, alternative choice implies “not being the first choice, not receiving priority recognition,” which may activate employees’ negative associative evaluations and automatically form negative propositional evaluations, leading them to interpret alternative choice information negatively, reducing enthusiasm for task completion, generating work procrastination tendency (Zou et al., 2023), triggering time theft behavior, and potentially reducing taking charge behavior due to insufficient task engagement and decreased proactivity.

Supervisor developmental feedback, as important content during task execution, typically involves evaluation and suggestions about employees’ abilities, potential, and improvement directions (Zhou, 2003), providing crucial clues for employees to process and interpret alternative choice information. When supervisor developmental feedback is high, alternative employees perceive that leaders provide rich information resources to promote their growth and development (Zhou, 2003), which enhances consistency between initial positive associations and positive propositional evaluations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011), thereby strengthening harmonious passion. Conversely, when supervisor developmental feedback is low, employees believe leaders do not value their task performance (Zhou, 2003), which enhances consistency between initial negative associations and negative propositional evaluations, thereby increasing work procrastination tendency. The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

This study offers several theoretical contributions: First, it enriches alternative choice research from the task allocation context, revealing employees’ cognition of and responses to “alternative choice” and improving the research system on different types of employee groups in organizations. Second, it breaks through the traditional social comparison perspective by integrating SIP and AP-E theories to explore the transmission mechanisms of alternative choice’s influence on employee psychology and behavior. Third, it validates the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback in the “double-edged sword” effect of alternative choice on employee work behavior, expanding the boundary conditions of alternative choice effects.

1.1 Theoretical Foundation

SIP posits that individuals process multiple cues provided by the work environment to determine subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). AP-E theory deepens the explanatory power of how individuals process social information from a micro perspective through a dual-evaluation mechanism. Alternative choice is information conveyed by the organization and leaders about employees’ role positioning in tasks and ability evaluations. Employees perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to this information, which subsequently

influences their attitudes and behaviors. On one hand, the unexpectedness and sense of difficulty in “being ultimately assigned to complete the task” may activate employees’ positive associative evaluations and generate positive propositional evaluations, leading them to interpret alternative choice positively, potentially enhancing harmonious passion and thereby increasing taking charge behavior while decreasing time theft behavior. On the other hand, “not being the first choice” may activate employees’ negative associative evaluations and generate negative propositional evaluations, leading them to interpret alternative choice negatively, resulting in work procrastination tendency and triggering time theft behavior while reducing taking charge behavior. Additionally, supervisor developmental feedback serves as an important other-related information cue that influences how employees process and interpret alternative choice information. In summary, this study combines SIP and AP-E theories to analyze the influence mechanisms of alternative choice on employee taking charge and time theft behaviors.

1.2 Alternative Choice and Taking Charge: The Mediating Role of Harmonious Passion

Under the dualistic model of work passion, harmonious passion refers to employees who genuinely love their work from within and are willing to invest time and energy in it. In contrast, obsessive passion refers to employees who unwillingly invest time and energy in work under external pressure, often lacking intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm (Sirén et al., 2016). According to AP-E theory, compared to first-choice employees who are selected within expectations and logically, the unexpectedness of alternative employees being “ultimately assigned to complete the task” may stimulate a strong drive to “seize the opportunity to prove their worth.” The unexpectedness and sense of difficulty in obtaining the task may activate alternative employees’ positive associative evaluations and further strengthen their positive cognition of their own abilities and value, forming positive propositional evaluations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), leading them to interpret alternative choice information positively, and more easily stimulating harmonious passion. First, employees interpret alternative choice as the organization believing they have sufficient ability and responsibility to complete the task, recognizing that they play a relatively important role in the organization (Nie et al., 2022) and are key to smooth task implementation, prompting them to attach deeper importance to the task and become more willing to invest additional time and energy (Parke et al., 2018) to pursue excellent performance, generating harmonious passion. Second, positive interpretation of alternative choice information may encourage employees to view taking over the task as an opportunity to demonstrate that they are equally excellent or can even exceed expectations, assigning more meaning to the work task (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024) and gaining satisfaction during the task process, stimulating harmonious passion. Finally, alternative choice may stimulate employees’ strong intrinsic motivation to prove their abilities to leaders and the organization, increasing their future likelihood of becoming the

first choice (Liao et al., 2023), igniting their willingness to invest in the task and harmonious passion. Therefore, we propose that alternative choice may enhance employees' harmonious passion.

Combining SIP, processed information changes individuals' psychological states such as emotions and attitudes, thereby indirectly influencing their behavioral performance (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Harmonious passion means employees genuinely like and love their work, enjoying the pleasure it brings (Sirén et al., 2016). Harmonious passion generated by alternative employees toward the task may further increase taking charge behavior. Taking charge behavior refers to voluntary constructive behaviors through which employees proactively optimize organizational processes, improve work methods, and promote organizational change (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). First, employees with high harmonious passion have deeper emotional identification with work tasks (Shen et al., 2023), consciously viewing work tasks as their own responsibility and mission, and demonstrating taking charge behavior in tasks. Second, employees with harmonious passion often focus more on personal growth and development, viewing work as an important pathway to self-actualization (Li et al., 2020). Taking charge behavior can precisely provide employees with learning and growth opportunities, enabling them to enhance their abilities and accumulate experience in practice, thereby better achieving self-worth (Zhao et al., 2024). Finally, research confirms that employees with harmonious passion devote more cognitive resources to thinking about work (Ho et al., 2011) and are more likely to proactively take responsibility for improving current work procedures to enhance work performance (Tang et al., 2025). Thus, harmonious passion may increase alternative employees' taking charge behavior. In summary, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Alternative choice will enhance employees' harmonious passion, thereby increasing taking charge behavior.

1.3 Alternative Choice and Time Theft: The Mediating Role of Work Procrastination Tendency

Work procrastination tendency refers to individuals' tendency to deliberately delay work-related task actions when facing work tasks, exhibiting some work-unrelated behaviors (Kühnel et al., 2016). If employees negatively interpret the information conveyed by alternative choice, it may lead to work procrastination tendency and subsequently generate time theft behavior.

According to AP-E theory, alternative choice implies "not being the organization's first choice," which may activate employees' negative associative evaluations, leading them to believe that "the organization uses them as an alternative as a last resort, and they are merely a temporary substitute," forming negative propositional evaluations. First, negative processing of alternative choice information may cause employees to overfocus on "not receiving the organization's priority recognition," distracting them from the task itself and causing difficulty in task initiation (Michailidis et al., 2025). Second, when employees believe

their abilities and value are not fully recognized by the organization, they may feel that effort in the task is less worthwhile or meaningless, further generating thoughts of avoidance and procrastination (Zou et al., 2023). Third, negative interpretation of alternative choice information may also reduce employees' commitment and sense of responsibility toward the task (Lin et al., 2023), generating the idea that "since I'm not the first choice anyway, the task outcome isn't that important," further reducing immediate action motivation and increasing work procrastination tendency. Finally, the negative information implied by alternative choice significantly increases employees' psychological pressure, as they worry that even with effort, they may still fail to meet organizational expectations and confirm the reality of being "less capable than the first choice" (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), triggering anxiety and work procrastination tendency. Therefore, we propose that alternative choice may lead to employees' work procrastination tendency.

Although alternative employees are not the first choice for tasks, being ultimately selected indicates their abilities are still superior to other employees (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024). Combining SIP, after generating work procrastination tendency, to maintain their image and status, alternative employees may not engage in direct and obvious counterproductive behaviors such as absenteeism or leaving early, but instead adopt highly concealed avoidance behaviors such as time theft (Harold et al., 2022). Time theft behavior refers to employees engaging in unapproved work-unrelated activities during work hours (Xu et al., 2025). Time theft provides employees with opportunities to disengage from work, replenishing emotional and cognitive resources consumed at work (Xu et al., 2023). Thus, it is reasonable to consider time theft behavior as a coping mechanism for alternative employees after developing work procrastination tendency. First, employees with work procrastination tendency hold negative cognitions about tasks, viewing work as meaningless, unimportant, and task content as boring (Zou et al., 2023). To alleviate this discomfort and boredom, employees may engage in time theft behaviors such as excessive socializing (Hu & Meng, 2024). Second, work procrastination tendency easily leads to negative expectations about task outcomes, triggering negative emotions such as anxiety and helplessness (Kühnel et al., 2016). To escape these negative emotions, employees may choose time theft behaviors such as spending long periods watching short videos or playing games to detach from work and obtain immediate pleasure and satisfaction (Xu et al., 2025). Finally, research finds that employees may engage in time theft behavior to retaliate against the organization or express dissatisfaction (Hu & Meng, 2024). Therefore, when employees believe they are merely temporary substitutes helping complete tasks, they may use time theft behavior to express dissatisfaction about not receiving priority recognition or to seek psychological balance. Thus, work procrastination tendency may increase alternative employees' time theft behavior. In summary, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Alternative choice will enhance employees' work procrastination tendency, thereby increasing time theft behavior.

1.4 Cross Paths

For employees with high harmonious passion, work itself is a source of enjoyment and meaning. They focus and invest because they love their work, and their willingness and need to engage in unrelated activities during work hours are lower (Sirén et al., 2016). Such employees do not rely on excessive socializing, online entertainment, or unjustifiably extending break times to cope with work dissatisfaction. Instead, time theft behavior would interrupt their focused work state and consume resources (Harold et al., 2022). Thus, harmonious passion may inhibit employees' time theft behavior. Combining H1, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Alternative choice will enhance employees' harmonious passion, thereby reducing time theft behavior.

Work procrastination tendency leads to task accumulation, easily triggering negative emotions such as anxiety and reducing employees' emotional and cognitive resources (Kühnel et al., 2016). Taking charge behavior often requires individuals to invest additional resources (Zhao et al., 2024). Therefore, employees with high work procrastination tendency may be unable to demonstrate taking charge behavior due to resource depletion. Moreover, alternative employees' work procrastination tendency stems from fear of messing up the task and confirming the label of being "less capable than the first choice" (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), while taking charge behavior carries relatively high risks that may expose their inadequacies. Therefore, employees' work procrastination tendency may cause them to deliberately avoid taking charge behavior. Combining H2, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Alternative choice will enhance employees' work procrastination tendency, thereby reducing taking charge behavior.

1.5 The Moderating Role of Supervisor Developmental Feedback

According to AP-E theory, other relevant propositions affect the consistency between initial associative evaluations and propositional evaluations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011). Supervisor developmental feedback refers to leaders transmitting detailed information about employees' work performance to promote employee learning, development, and improvement (Zhou, 2003). This feedback serves as an important clue obtained by employees from direct leaders and influences their processing and interpretation of alternative choice information.

When supervisor developmental feedback is high, it indicates that leaders provide alternative employees with rich constructive information conducive to their learning and growth (Wang et al., 2024), and alternative employees deeply perceive leaders' support and value for them. Additionally, high-level supervisor developmental feedback conveys high performance expectations to employees (Zhou, 2003). Employees view this as a signal that leaders trust their ability

to complete tasks efficiently, which strengthens consistency between initial positive associations and positive propositional evaluations, enhancing employees' positive interpretation of alternative choice information. Employees will more strongly believe that being selected as an alternative is merely due to situational or strategic choices, and that the organization and leaders trust their abilities and responsibility to complete the task, boosting employees' task completion motivation and willingness to invest more time and energy in work, demonstrating stronger harmonious passion (Shen et al., 2023). In contrast, when supervisor developmental feedback is low, employees struggle to perceive leaders' expectations and value for their task performance (Zhou, 2003), reducing the effectiveness of transforming initial positive associations into positive propositional evaluations. At this time, employees are less likely to believe that the organization selected them because of trust in their abilities, making it difficult to assign positive meaning to alternative choice (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), weakening employees' intrinsic enthusiasm to prove themselves, and making it hard for them to feel meaning and satisfaction in the task, ultimately hindering the generation of harmonious passion (Zhang et al., 2024). In summary, we propose:

Hypothesis 5: The positive relationship between alternative choice and harmonious passion is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is high (vs. low).

According to AP-E theory, when supervisor developmental feedback is low, it means leaders have not provided clear, positive signals about employees' ability foundation, development potential, or future development paths (Lan et al., 2025), triggering employees' deep thinking about "why am I the alternative," amplifying the ambiguity and potential threat of alternative choice information. Second, under conditions of low supervisor developmental feedback, employees cannot clearly understand how to improve in current tasks, easily generating negative emotions such as anxiety and fear, which aligns with employees' initial negative associative evaluations and strengthens consistency between initial negative associations and negative propositional evaluations. Employees interpret alternative choice as leaders questioning their abilities and value, making them take over the task only as a last resort (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), weakening employees' perceived task value and meaning, amplifying negative expectations about task outcomes (Lu et al., 2021), and leading to stronger work procrastination tendency. In contrast, under conditions of high supervisor developmental feedback, employees can obtain rich information resources conducive to their growth and development, feeling leaders' support for completing tasks and high expectations for their development (Zhou, 2003). This is inconsistent with employees' initial negative associative evaluations, potentially causing their propositional evaluations to separate from initial associative evaluations, weakening employees' negative interpretation of alternative choice information, thereby improving task execution willingness and reducing work procrastination tendency. In summary, we propose:

Hypothesis 6: The positive relationship between alternative choice and work procrastination tendency is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is low (vs. high).

1.6 Moderated Mediation

Based on the above hypotheses, we further propose moderated mediation hypotheses. According to AP-E theory, when supervisor developmental feedback is high, this aligns with employees' initial positive associative evaluations, enhancing their positive processing of alternative choice, viewing it as an "organizational crisis firefighter," further stimulating harmonious passion (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011), actively investing in work, enhancing taking charge behavior and reducing time theft behavior. When supervisor developmental feedback is low, this aligns with employees' initial negative associative evaluations, strengthening their negative interpretation of alternative choice, viewing it as a "task temporary substitute," leading to stronger work procrastination tendency (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011). When work procrastination becomes a habit, employees tend to implement time theft behavior rather than demonstrate taking charge behavior. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 7: The positive indirect effect of alternative choice on employee taking charge behavior through harmonious passion is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is high (vs. low).

Hypothesis 8: The positive indirect effect of alternative choice on employee time theft behavior through work procrastination tendency is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is low (vs. high).

Hypothesis 9: The negative indirect effect of alternative choice on employee time theft behavior through harmonious passion is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is high (vs. low).

Hypothesis 10: The negative indirect effect of alternative choice on employee taking charge behavior through work procrastination tendency is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is low (vs. high).

2.1 Study Sample

This study used G*Power 3.1 to estimate the required sample size. Results showed that with an effect size of $f = 0.25$, a total of 210 participants were needed to achieve statistical power of 0.95 at $\alpha = 0.05$. This study recruited 234 employed individuals from the Credamo platform to participate in a scenario experiment. To ensure data accuracy and validity, we employed multiple screening measures. First, we set simple questions related to experimental materials for attention checks, such as "Who selected the overseas market analysis project manager?" to ensure participants paid adequate attention to experimental content. Second, we manually reviewed submitted data and excluded incomplete information, ultimately retaining 232 questionnaires. Participants' average age

was 33.94 years ($SD = 6.99$), with 80 males (34.48%) and 152 females (65.52%). The majority held bachelor's degrees (171 participants, 73.71%).

2.2 Experimental Design and Procedure

This study employed a 2 (alternative choice vs. first choice) \times 2 (high supervisor developmental feedback vs. low supervisor developmental feedback) between-subjects experimental design. First, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions and reported demographic information. Then, participants read the scenario: “You work at a company undergoing global strategic transformation. As the international competitive environment becomes increasingly fierce, the company is committed to adapting to new market environments and customer needs through optimizing resource allocation and expanding international markets. Recently, your team has obtained an important overseas market analysis project, which is critical to the company's strategic transformation. Your leader is selecting a suitable project manager from within the team.” Subsequently, participants carefully read the experimental scenario manipulation materials for alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback (see below). Afterward, participants answered manipulation check questions and scales assessing harmonious passion and work procrastination tendency. Participants who completed the entire experiment received 2 yuan compensation.

Manipulation of Alternative Choice (First Choice). The scenario materials referenced descriptions from Nurmohamed and Schwingel-Sauer (2024) and were appropriately adapted for this context. Participants assigned to the first-choice condition were told, “Given your successful experience and keen market insight, you were ultimately selected as the project manager and were the leader's first choice.” In contrast, participants assigned to the alternative-choice condition were told, “Given that the first choice could not take on this project for personal reasons, you were ultimately selected as the project manager.”

First-choice condition material: A few days later, your leader announced that you would serve as project manager. Because of your successful experience and keen market insight on similar projects, you became the first choice for this project. You seized this opportunity without hesitation, and the company officially announced you as the project manager at the overseas market analysis project kickoff meeting. You were the first choice.

Alternative-choice condition material: A few days later, your leader announced that your colleague Zhao Qiang would serve as project manager. Because of his successful experience and keen market insight on similar projects, he became the first choice for this project. However, Zhao Qiang gave up this opportunity for personal reasons, and the company officially announced you as the project manager at the overseas market analysis project kickoff meeting. You were the alternative choice.

Manipulation of Supervisor Developmental Feedback. High supervisor

developmental feedback condition: During project implementation, your leader will provide you with information related to the project, as well as specific guidance and learning opportunities on how to improve work methods or enhance skills. Low supervisor developmental feedback condition: During project implementation, your leader will not often provide you with information related to the project, and will rarely offer specific guidance and learning opportunities on how to improve work methods or enhance skills.

2.3 Measurement Instruments

All scales used in Study 1 were established scales published in authoritative international journals. We followed Brislin's (1970) translation-back-translation procedure to develop the Chinese versions. First, two doctoral students majoring in business management independently translated and negotiated to determine the initial draft. Then, one doctoral student majoring in English who had not seen the original scales performed back-translation. Finally, two experts in organizational behavior compared the back-translated version with the original and revised items with semantic deviations, ultimately forming the Chinese versions of all scales. All scales used a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree."

Alternative Choice: Adapted from the scale developed by Nurmohamed and Schwingel-Sauer (2024), comprising 3 items. A sample item is "I served as manager of the overseas market analysis project because someone else had previously declined." The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.89.

Supervisor Developmental Feedback: Adapted from the scale developed by Zhou (2003), comprising 3 items. A sample item is "During project implementation, the leader provided information to help me learn and improve better." The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.87.

Harmonious Passion: Adapted from the dualistic scale developed by Sirén et al. (2016) to measure harmonious passion, selecting 7 items appropriate for this study. A sample item is "If I served as project manager, I would have rich and colorful experiences." The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.90.

Work Procrastination Tendency: Adapted from the scale developed by Kühnel et al. (2016) to measure work procrastination tendency, comprising 6 items. A sample item is "If I served as project manager, I would unnecessarily delay work even if it is important." The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.90.

2.4.1 Manipulation Check

This study used SPSS 26.0 to conduct independent samples t-tests to examine the effectiveness of the alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback manipulations. Results showed that participants in the alternative-choice condition reported significantly higher alternative choice ($n = 116$, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.64$) than those in the first-choice condition ($n = 116$, $M = 1.68$, SD

= 0.64), $t(230) = -31.74$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -4.16$. Participants in the high supervisor developmental feedback condition reported significantly higher supervisor developmental feedback ($n = 116$, $M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.75$) than those in the low supervisor developmental feedback condition ($n = 116$, $M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(230) = -18.66$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -2.30$. These results indicate that the manipulations of alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback were effective.

2.4.2 Hypothesis Testing

This study used SPSS 26.0 to conduct ANOVA for interaction testing. Results showed that the interaction between alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback had a significant effect on harmonious passion, $F(1, 228) = 21.06$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. Simple effects analysis further indicated that, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper], when supervisor developmental feedback was high, harmonious passion in the alternative-choice condition ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.10$) was significantly higher than in the first-choice condition ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.10$). When supervisor developmental feedback was low, harmonious passion in the alternative-choice condition ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.10$) was significantly higher than in the first-choice condition ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.10$), though the difference was smaller than in the high supervisor developmental feedback condition. Therefore, the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback in the relationship between alternative choice and harmonious passion received preliminary support.

Figure 2. Simple Effects of Alternative Choice (First Choice) and Supervisor Developmental Feedback on Harmonious Passion

Note: * indicates $p < 0.05$, *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Additionally, results showed that the interaction between alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback had a significant effect on work procrastination tendency, $F(1, 228) = 12.20$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$. Simple effects analysis indicated that, as shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper], when supervisor developmental feedback was low, work procrastination tendency in the alternative-choice condition ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.11$) was significantly higher than in the first-choice condition ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.11$). When supervisor developmental feedback was high, work procrastination tendency in the alternative-choice condition ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.11$) was higher than in the first-choice condition ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 0.11$), but the difference was smaller than in the low supervisor developmental feedback condition. Therefore, the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback in the relationship between alternative choice and work procrastination tendency was preliminarily verified.

Figure 3. Simple Effects of Alternative Choice (First Choice) and Supervisor Developmental Feedback on Work Procrastination Tendency

Note: ** indicates $p < 0.01$, *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

2.5 Discussion

Study 1 results showed that supervisor developmental feedback positively moderated the relationship between alternative choice and harmonious passion and negatively moderated the relationship between alternative choice and work procrastination tendency, enhancing the study's internal validity. However, considering that simulated experimental scenarios may differ somewhat from real work contexts, the external validity of the research conclusions needs further expansion. Additionally, Study 1 did not verify the mediating effects of work procrastination tendency and harmonious passion or the moderated mediation effects. Therefore, in Study 2, we used multi-time-point field questionnaire surveys to further validate the overall model.

3.1 Study Sample and Data Collection

This study used a three-stage questionnaire survey method to test the above model hypotheses. First, we recruited 40 MBA students from a university in Jiangxi as sample collection volunteers through a course assignment in organizational behavior. With consent from the HR departments of the MBA students' companies, each MBA student invited 10 additional colleagues to participate in this study. Before the survey began, the research team introduced the survey purpose and requirements to each participant in detail, stated that survey results would be used only for academic research, and promised to strictly confidentialize all participants' personal information. The questionnaire distribution proceeded as follows: Time 1 (T1): Successfully recruited 400 employees to participate in the survey. Before completing the questionnaire, each employee needed to answer a screening question: "Please recall whether you have had the following experience in the past six months: You received a task assignment from your leader, but during task execution, you accidentally learned that you were not the first choice for that task. Because the first choice could not complete the task, the leader assigned this task to you, and you were the alternative choice." Only those with relevant experience proceeded to complete the questionnaire. The research team distributed questionnaires on alternative choice, supervisor developmental feedback, and demographic variables (including gender, age, education level, and tenure) via text message. This stage ultimately recovered 363 valid sample data. Time 2 (T2) (two weeks after T1): The research team distributed questionnaires on harmonious passion, work procrastination tendency, and obsessive passion via text message to the 363 employees from Stage 1, ultimately recovering 345 valid sample data. Time 3 (T3) (two weeks after T2): The research team distributed questionnaires on taking charge behavior and time theft behavior via text message to the 345 employees from Stage 2. Finally, after data cleaning, 332 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 83.00%.

Among the final 332 samples: 189 were male (56.93%), 143 were female (43.07%). In terms of age: 50 were under 25 (15.06%), 101 were 26-35 (30.42%), 91 were 36-45 (27.41%), and 90 were over 45 (27.11%). In terms of education: 33 had

high school or below (9.94%), 93 had junior college (28.01%), 142 had bachelor's degrees (42.78%), and 64 had master's degrees or above (19.27%). In terms of tenure: 62 had 1 year or less (18.67%), 127 had 1-2 years (38.25%), 94 had 2-5 years (28.32%), and 49 had more than 5 years (14.76%).

3.2 Measurement Instruments

Similar to Study 1, all scales used in Study 2 were established scales published in authoritative international journals, and the same procedure as Study 1 was used to form the final measurement scales. All used a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing “definitely not” for alternative choice and “strongly disagree” for all others, and 5 representing “definitely yes” for alternative choice and “strongly agree” for all others.

Alternative Choice (T1): Adapted from the scale developed by Nurmohamed and Schwingel-Sauer (2024), comprising 3 items. The opening statement was “Please recall an alternative choice task experience in the past 6 months and answer the following questions based on this experience.” A sample item is “The leader did not consider me the first choice for this task.” This scale measures employees' subjective perception intensity of the alternative choice experience (objectively existing). Cronbach' s α was 0.93.

Supervisor Developmental Feedback (T1): Adopted the scale developed by Zhou (2003), comprising 3 items. A sample item is “When the leader gives me task feedback, they focus on helping me learn and improve.” Cronbach' s α was 0.83.

Harmonious Passion (T2): Adopted the dualistic scale developed by Sirén et al. (2016) to measure harmonious passion, selecting 7 items appropriate for this study. A sample item is “My work gives me rich and colorful experiences.” Cronbach' s α was 0.96.

Work Procrastination Tendency (T2): Adopted the scale developed by Kühnel et al. (2016) to measure work procrastination tendency, comprising 6 items. A sample item is “I unnecessarily delay work even if it is important.” Cronbach' s α was 0.88.

Taking Charge Behavior (T3): Adopted the scale developed by Fuller et al. (2012) to measure taking charge behavior, comprising 6 items. A sample item is “I often try to change the way work is done to make it more effective.” Cronbach' s α was 0.93.

Time Theft Behavior (T3): Adopted the scale developed by Lorinkova and Perry (2017) to measure time theft behavior, comprising 3 items. A sample item is “I handle personal affairs at work instead of completing tasks assigned by my leader.” Cronbach' s α was 0.95.

Control Variables: Research shows that gender, age, education level, and tenure are closely related to taking charge behavior (Fuller et al., 2012) and time

theft behavior (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). Therefore, gender, age, education level, and tenure were included as control variables. Additionally, to rule out the influence of obsessive passion on this study, it was included as a control variable. Obsessive passion was measured using the dualistic scale developed by Sirén et al. (2016), comprising 7 items. A sample item is “If I could, I would only engage in this work.” Cronbach’s α was 0.91.

3.3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

This study used Mplus 8.3 to conduct a series of confirmatory factor analyses to test the discriminant validity among variables. Results are shown in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, the seven-factor model not only achieved fit indices recommended by academia ($\chi^2/df = 2.42$, TLI = 0.92, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.05) but also significantly outperformed other alternative models, indicating that the main variables involved in this study have good discriminant validity.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model	Factors	χ^2/df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Seven-factor model	AC, DF, HP, OP, WP, TC, TT	2.42	0.92	0.92	0.07
Six-factor model	AC, DF, HP+OP, WP, TC, TT	3.51	0.87	0.88	0.09
Five-factor model	AC+DF, HP+OP, WP, TC, TT	4.23	0.84	0.85	0.10
Four-factor model	AC+DF, HP+OP+WP, TC, TT	5.67	0.79	0.80	0.12
Three-factor model	AC+DF, HP+OP+WP, TC+TT	6.89	0.75	0.76	0.13
Two-factor model	AC+DF+HP+OP+WP, TC+TT	8.45	0.70	0.71	0.15
One-factor model	AC+DF+HP+OP+WP+TC+TT	10.34	0.65	0.65	0.17

Note: N = 332. AC = alternative choice, DF = supervisor developmental feedback, HP = harmonious passion, OP = obsessive passion, WP = work procrastination tendency, TC = taking charge behavior, TT = time theft behavior; + indicates factor merging.

3.3.2 Common Method Bias

To avoid common method bias, this study collected data at three time points. However, as all main variables were self-reported by employees, common method bias may still exist. Therefore, we used SPSS 26.0 to conduct Harman's single-factor test. Results showed total explained variance was 75.74%, with the first factor explaining 22.56% of variance, below the recommended 40% threshold. Additionally, we added a common method factor to the baseline model. The model fit indices after adding the factor were $\chi^2/df = 2.43$, TLI = 0.92, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.05. Compared with the baseline model, model fit did not significantly improve after adding the common method factor. Comprehensive assessment indicates no significant common method bias problem exists in this study, and we can proceed to the next data analysis step.

3.3.3 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results are shown in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, alternative choice was significantly positively correlated with harmonious passion ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$). Harmonious passion was significantly positively correlated with taking charge behavior ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$) and significantly negatively correlated with time theft behavior ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.01$). Alternative choice was significantly positively correlated with work procrastination tendency ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). Work procrastination tendency was significantly positively correlated with time theft behavior ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) and significantly positively correlated with taking charge behavior ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$). These results provide preliminary support for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis Results

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	1.43	0.50	-										
2. Age	2.67	1.03	-	-									
			0.01										
3. Education	2.71	0.88	0.19**	-									
				0.02									
4. Tenure	2.39	0.94	-	0.14**	-								
			0.01		0.13*								
5. Obsessive Passion	2.85	0.89	-	-	-	0.16**							
			0.01	0.05	0.09								
6. Alternative Choice	3.21	1.12	-	-	-	0.18**	-						
			0.03	0.08	0.01		0.16**						

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
7. Supervisor Dev. Feedback	3.52	0.91	-	-	-	0.14*	0.37**	-	-	-	-	-	-
8. Harmonious Passion	3.68	0.85	-	0.18**	-	0.24*	0.15**	-	-	-	-	-	-
9. Work Procrastination	2.45	0.78	-	-	-	0.24*	0.25**	-	0.25**	-	-	-	-
10. Taking Charge	3.42	0.82	-	-	0.18**	0.24*	0.15**	-	0.14*	-	-	-	-
11. Time Theft	2.18	1.01	-	-	-	0.24*	0.25**	-	0.25**	-	0.14*	-	-

Note: N = 332. Gender: Male = 1, Female = 2; Education: High school/technical secondary school or below = 1, Junior college = 2, Bachelor's degree = 3, Master's degree or above = 4; Tenure: Within 1 year = 1, 1-2 years = 2, 2-5 years = 3, More than 5 years = 4; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; ** indicates $p < 0.01$, * indicates $p < 0.05$; two-tailed tests.

3.3.4 Hypothesis Testing

Testing of Mediation Hypotheses. This study used Mplus 8.3 software for full-model path analysis to test hypotheses, employing Bootstrap with 5,000 resamples. Results are shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]. Alternative choice had a significant positive effect on harmonious passion ($\beta = 0.30$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$). Harmonious passion also had a significant positive effect on taking charge behavior ($\beta = 0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.001$). The indirect effect of alternative choice on taking charge behavior through harmonious passion was 0.06, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.020, 0.096], not containing 0, indicating a significant mediation effect. H1 was supported. Alternative choice had a significant positive effect on work procrastination tendency ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$). Work procrastination tendency also had a significant positive effect on time theft behavior ($\beta = 0.37$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of alternative choice on time theft behavior through work procrastination tendency was 0.05, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.011, 0.078], not containing 0, indicating a significant mediation effect. H2 was supported. Additionally, harmonious passion had a significant negative effect on time theft behavior ($\beta = -0.44$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of alternative choice on time theft be-

havior through harmonious passion was significantly -0.13 , $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.194, -0.074]$, not containing 0, indicating that alternative choice increases employees' harmonious passion, which further inhibits time theft behavior. H3 was supported. Work procrastination tendency had a significant positive effect on taking charge behavior ($\beta = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.014$). The indirect effect of alternative choice on taking charge behavior through work procrastination tendency was 0.02 , $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.001, 0.031]$, not containing 0, indicating that alternative choice increases employees' work procrastination tendency, which does not reduce but may increase taking charge behavior. H4 was not supported.

Testing of Moderation Hypotheses. As shown in Figure 4, the interaction between alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback had a significant positive effect on harmonious passion ($\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.009$). Thus, H5 received preliminary support. Similarly, the interaction between alternative choice and supervisor developmental feedback had a significant negative effect on work procrastination tendency ($\beta = -0.18$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.001$). Thus, H6 received preliminary support.

Furthermore, using one standard deviation above and below the mean to distinguish high and low levels of supervisor developmental feedback, we conducted simple slope tests for the moderation effects. Results are shown in Figures 5 and 6. As shown in Figure 5, when supervisor developmental feedback was high, the positive effect of alternative choice on harmonious passion was significant ($\beta = 0.42$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). When supervisor developmental feedback was low, the effect of alternative choice on harmonious passion was weaker but still significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.007$). The difference between high and low levels was significant ($\beta = 0.24$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.009$). H5 was again supported. As shown in Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper], when supervisor developmental feedback was high, the effect of alternative choice on work procrastination tendency was not significant ($\beta = -0.002$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.946$). When supervisor developmental feedback was low, the positive effect of alternative choice on work procrastination tendency was significant ($\beta = 0.25$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). The difference between high and low levels was significant ($\beta = -0.25$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = 0.001$). H6 was again supported.

Testing of Moderated Mediation Hypotheses. This study used Mplus 8.3 for Bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples. Results are shown in Table 3. For the effect of alternative choice on employee taking charge behavior through harmonious passion, the mediation effect was stronger under high supervisor developmental feedback (effect = 0.08 , 95% CI $[0.028, 0.133]$) and weaker under low supervisor developmental feedback (effect = 0.03 , 95% CI $[0.002, 0.068]$). The difference in mediation effects between high and low levels of supervisor developmental feedback was 0.05 , 95% CI $[0.002, 0.089]$, not containing 0, indicating a significant difference. H7 was supported. For the effect of alternative choice on employee time theft behavior through work procrastination tendency, the mediation effect was significant under low supervisor developmental feed-

back (effect = 0.09, 95% CI [0.023, 0.157]) but not significant under high supervisor developmental feedback (effect = -0.00, 95% CI [-0.027, 0.025]). The difference in mediation effects between high and low levels was -0.09, 95% CI [-0.168, -0.014], not containing 0, indicating a significant difference. H8 was supported. For the effect of alternative choice on employee time theft behavior through harmonious passion, the mediation effect was stronger under high supervisor developmental feedback (effect = -0.19, 95% CI [-0.274, -0.099]) and weaker under low supervisor developmental feedback (effect = -0.08, 95% CI [-0.141, -0.021]). The difference was -0.11, 95% CI [-0.196, -0.015], not containing 0, indicating a significant difference. H9 was supported. For the effect of alternative choice on employee taking charge behavior through work procrastination tendency, the mediation effect was significant under low supervisor developmental feedback (effect = 0.03, 95% CI [0.003, 0.063]) but not significant under high supervisor developmental feedback (effect = 0.00, 95% CI [-0.011, 0.010]). The difference was -0.03, 95% CI [-0.067, 0.000], containing 0, indicating no significant difference. H10 was not supported.

Table 3. Moderated Mediation Effect Analysis Results

Path	Low SDF	High SDF	Difference	95% CI
AC → HP → TC	0.03	0.08	0.05	[0.002, 0.089]
AC → WP → TT	0.09	-0.00	-0.09	[-0.168, -0.014]
AC → HP → TT	-0.08	-0.19	-0.11	[-0.196, -0.015]
AC → WP → TC	0.03	0.00	-0.03	[-0.067, 0.000]

Note: SDF = Supervisor Developmental Feedback; AC = Alternative Choice; HP = Harmonious Passion; WP = Work Procrastination Tendency; TC = Taking Charge; TT = Time Theft.

The data analysis above shows results without control variables. To enhance research conclusion transparency, reliability, and robustness, we followed Bernerth and Aguinis' s (2016) recommendations and conducted supplementary analysis on the research model including control variables. Results showed that hypothesis testing results with control variables did not change in significance compared to results without control variables, further supporting our conclusions.

4. General Discussion

Based on SIP and AP-E theories, this study explored the impact of alternative choice on employee work attitudes and behaviors in task allocation contexts. By analyzing data collected from scenario experiments (Study 1) and three-stage questionnaire surveys (Study 2), we clarified the transmission mechanisms and boundary conditions of alternative choice's effects on employee taking charge and time theft behaviors. Specifically, on one hand, alternative choice enhances employees' harmonious passion, which promotes taking charge behavior and inhibits time theft behavior. On the other hand, alternative choice also leads to employees' work procrastination tendency, which further triggers time theft behavior. However, inconsistent with H4, work procrastination tendency caused by alternative choice actually increased rather than decreased employees' taking charge behavior. This may be because, in task allocation contexts, task success or failure may significantly impact other team members. Work procrastination tendency caused by alternative choice may generate guilt toward the team, which awakens or strengthens employees' sense of responsibility and prompts them to compensate through taking charge behavior (Lebel & Patil, 2018). Additionally, supervisor developmental feedback strengthens the indirect effect of harmonious passion between alternative choice and both taking charge and time theft behaviors, while weakening the indirect effect of work procrastination tendency between alternative choice and time theft behavior. However, inconsistent with H10, supervisor developmental feedback did not weaken the indirect effect of work procrastination tendency between alternative choice and taking charge behavior. This may be because when supervisor developmental feedback is low, alternative choice increases work procrastination tendency, which is even more detrimental to task completion. To successfully complete tasks and prove themselves, employees may instead implement taking charge behavior as compensation.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

First, this study enriches alternative choice research from the task allocation context and improves the research system on different types of employee groups in organizations. Existing research has primarily focused on high-status star employees with excellent performance (Call et al., 2021), low-status disadvantaged employees who are not favored (Nurmohamed, 2020), and dark horse employees who rise from adversity (Ma & Zhu, 2023). Although recent studies have begun to examine the psychology and behavior of nominees who did not win awards and position substitutes (Liao et al., 2023; Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024), they lack in-depth exploration of alternative choice in task allocation contexts. Task allocation is a core management function. When the first choice is absent or encounters unexpected situations or force majeure events, alternatives are arranged to ensure smooth task implementation. Alternative employees neither possess the core status of star employees nor are constrained by the development bottlenecks of disadvantaged employees. Their existence

not only enhances the elasticity of talent pipeline construction but also provides important buffering mechanisms and strategic reserves for organizations when formulating human resource plans (Malik & Singh, 2014). By revealing how alternative choice affects employees' work attitudes and behaviors after taking over tasks, this study makes managers recognize alternative employees' unique psychological cognition and behavioral performance in tasks, avoiding the pitfall of focusing only on star employees or helping disadvantaged employees while neglecting the alternative employee group. Organizations should also formulate more comprehensive strategies in human resource planning, training, and development to fully tap and utilize alternative employees' potential and improve overall human resource utilization efficiency.

Second, this study combines social information processing theory and associative-propositional evaluation theory to reveal the "double-edged sword" effect of alternative choice on employee work behavior. Existing research on alternative choice mechanisms has primarily been based on social identity theory and social comparison theory, examining the impact of alternative choice on employees' interpersonal responses, such as how alternative choice reduces employee social integration and further decreases proactive feedback-seeking behavior toward colleagues (Nurmohamed & Schwingel-Sauer, 2024). Based on SIP, this study proposes that alternative choice conveys two types of information to employees: first, that the organization trusts their potential to take over tasks; second, that they are merely temporary substitutes under organizational duress (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Simultaneously, combining AP-E theory specifically explains how employees process and interpret alternative choice information through "associative evaluation-propositional evaluation" processes, which further affects their task completion attitudes and behaviors (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). The unexpectedness and sense of difficulty in "being ultimately assigned to complete the task" activate employees' initial positive associative evaluations and form corresponding positive propositional evaluations, leading to positive interpretation of alternative choice information, generating harmonious passion, and subsequently increasing taking charge behavior while reducing time theft behavior. Meanwhile, "not being the first choice" activates employees' initial negative associative evaluations and forms corresponding negative propositional evaluations, leading to negative interpretation of alternative choice information, causing work procrastination tendency and triggering time theft behavior. SIP typically focuses on relatively clear information (e.g., abusive supervision) (Jiang et al., 2021). This study applies it to more ambiguous and potentially contradictory information, deepening understanding of social information cues. Moreover, previous research has explained how individuals process contextual information through three psychological mechanisms: social learning, attribution, and judgment (Fehr et al., 2020; Yousaf et al., 2023; Zagenczyk & Powell, 2023). This study takes a different approach, using associative-propositional evaluation theory to explain employees' processing of social information cues, not only enriching the contextualized application of AP-E theory in organizational behavior but

also providing a new theoretical perspective for employees' processing and interpretation of social contextual information. The integration of the two theories provides a more comprehensive framework for explaining "why the same information source (alternative choice) produces 截然不同的 effects on employees."

Third, this study validates the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback in the influence mechanism of alternative choice on employee work behavior, expanding the boundary conditions of alternative choice. Existing research rarely explores the boundary conditions of alternative choice mechanisms. Based on AP-E theory, this study proposes that supervisor developmental feedback, as an important other-related proposition associated with alternative choice, affects employees' interpretation of alternative choice information (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). High supervisor developmental feedback strengthens employees' positive interpretation of alternative choice information, generating more harmonious passion, which further increases taking charge behavior and reduces time theft behavior. Low supervisor developmental feedback strengthens employees' negative interpretation of alternative choice information, generating more work procrastination tendency, which further increases time theft behavior. These results reveal that leaders, as important information sources and meaning-givers, can significantly influence employees' cognitive processing (associative evaluation-propositional evaluation) of social information (alternative choice) through their interactive behavior (developmental feedback). The research conclusions not only provide a solid theoretical foundation for management interventions but also further deepen integrated research on social information processing theory and associative-propositional evaluation theory.

4.2 Practical Implications

First, leaders should correctly understand the double-edged sword effect of alternative choice and adopt targeted measures to maximize positive effects. On one hand, leaders can stimulate alternative employees' harmonious passion in their areas of interest or expertise through personalized career development planning. Simultaneously, providing diversified development opportunities such as advanced project management training and technical refinement workshops can enhance employees' practical skills and confidence, motivating them to proactively initiate change for organizational development. On the other hand, leaders can inhibit employees' work procrastination tendency through strict work processes and responsibility tracking mechanisms, ensuring orderly work progress. Simultaneously, establishing professional ethics training and daily work discipline assessments can strengthen employees' professional norm awareness and effectively prevent time theft behavior. Additionally, although this study shows that harmonious passion enhanced by alternative choice can inhibit time theft behavior, it must be emphasized that this does not mean organizations should strategically prefer "alternative choice" for task allocation. The potential positive motivational effects of alternative choice status highly depend on specific

psychological processing mechanisms (e.g., self-proving motivation) and effective organizational support (e.g., timely recognition of alternative employees' contributions) (Liao et al., 2023). The core value of alternative choice research lies in providing scientific basis for organizations to conduct diversified employee management, optimize talent development strategies, build healthy talent pipelines, and dynamically adjust talent structures, with the ultimate goal of maximizing the potential and contributions of all employees.

Second, leaders should emphasize improving developmental feedback to alternative employees. On one hand, leaders can regularly organize one-on-one meetings to clearly point out alternative employees' strengths, weaknesses, achievements, and improvement directions, helping them identify areas for enhancement and plan action steps. Simultaneously, establishing two-way communication channels such as suggestion boxes or anonymous feedback platforms to listen to and respect alternative employees' opinions. On the other hand, leaders can grant alternative employees more autonomy, encouraging self-actualization, participation in decision-making, and innovation, and through incentive mechanisms such as establishing "Best Innovation Awards" and providing promotion opportunities, recognizing their outstanding performance in achieving personal value and innovation. For example, in Google's "20% time" policy, leaders allow employees to spend one day per week developing projects they are interested in and help employees transform these ideas into actual results through regular feedback and resource support. Through these methods, leaders providing developmental feedback can mitigate the negative effects of alternative choice on employees, enhance their harmonious passion and sense of responsibility, and create more opportunities and promotion space for employees.

Third, leaders should reasonably design task allocation contexts to reduce alternative employees' identity gap feelings and stimulate their taking charge behavior. Leaders can reduce alternative employees' negative associations through open and transparent task allocation rules and performance evaluation systems, such as skill matching, project requirements, and personal development goals, ensuring every employee clearly understands the basis of their task allocation. Additionally, leaders can conduct one-on-one task discussions before tasks begin, clearly communicating task importance and the key role alternative employees play to stimulate their harmonious passion. Leaders can also set stage goals for them and provide immediate feedback and recognition after key nodes, helping alternative employees maintain efficient work states. This exploration of alternative employee management strategies focused on task contexts deeply integrates organizational behavior theory with actual work scenarios, not only helping solve practical problems in organizational management but also broadening organizational behavior research in complex contexts.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study inevitably has several limitations: First, although we used both scenario experiments and multi-time-point surveys and verified no significant

common method bias problem, all questionnaires were self-reported by employees, and independent and moderator variables were measured at the same stage, which cannot completely avoid common source bias. Future research could combine leader evaluations or colleague evaluation data to reduce subjective bias from single data sources and enhance research conclusion objectivity.

Second, the study focused on task contexts to explore alternative choice's impact on employees but did not distinguish whether tasks themselves were "desirable" or "undesirable." Future research could include task nature as a control variable to increase result accuracy. Additionally, regarding the measurement of "alternative choice," Study 1 manipulated the identity status comparison between "first choice" and "alternative choice," while Study 2 measured employees' subjective perception intensity of the "I am an alternative" identity among those with alternative choice experiences. Although both designs essentially explore individuals' cognitive evaluation processes of information conveyed by "alternative choice," this operationalization difference still constitutes a notable limitation. Meanwhile, existing alternative choice scale items involve content such as "whether the leader considered me the first choice" and "whether someone was ahead of me," which require inferring others' intentions or making comparisons. Employees may have ambiguous subjective cognition during measurement due to not knowing who the first choice was during task allocation or being unwilling to admit they are alternatives for self-protection. Therefore, future research could have team leaders evaluate employees' alternative choice status, combining subjective perception and objective data to more comprehensively and scientifically reveal alternative choice's impact on employee work behavior.

Third, this study examined the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback, but according to SIP, individual characteristics affect how employees process and interpret social information. For example, individuals high in neuroticism focus more on negative aspects of matters (Liu et al., 2015). When facing ambiguous information like alternative choice, employees high in neuroticism may be more likely to interpret it negatively and respond negatively. Future research could include individual characteristics as boundary conditions. Additionally, internal organizational management contexts (e.g., organizational policies) are also important other-related propositions. In IBM's succession planning, the organization always gives high attention and cultivation to potential alternative employees. When employees perceive high organizational support for their development, they may weaken negative interpretation of alternative choice information. Therefore, future research could also examine differential effects of alternative choice on employees under different internal organizational management contexts.

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