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Benefit or cost? The “double-edged sword” effect of multiple team membership on creativity

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, many organizations adopt multiple team membership (MTM) as a job model. However, this remains a relatively new management topic. Therefore, further theoretical studies are urgently needed. First, after theoretical analysis, our study proposes that there may be a “double-edged” mediation effect and a mediated moderation model between MTM and creativity. Second, our study confirms the above hypotheses by adopting data-matched empirical research in the two waves. These results of the data analysis show that MTM brings both benefits and costs to creativity, and thriving at work and emotional exhaustion are the two “key drivers” for MTM’s employees to stimulate creativity. On the one hand, MTM enhances creativity by positively affecting thriving at work. By contrast, MTM reduces creativity by increasing emotional exhaustion. In addition, this study further tests the boundary mechanism of the MTM. Specifically, polychronicity positively moderates the relationship between MTM and thriving at work, and it further moderates the benefit-mediating path of thriving at work. Meanwhile, polychronicity significantly moderates the relationship between MTM and emotional exhaustion and further moderates the cost-mediating path of emotional exhaustion. This empirical study focuses on the complex mechanism of how and when MTM effectively affects creativity, responds to scholars’ calls for further exploration of the effects of MTM, and provides a theoretical reference for organizations to enhance creativity.

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Introduction

In the digital age, the job model of multiple team membership (MTM) is becoming increasingly prevalent in organizations (Rishani et al., 2023; van de Brake et al., 2020). MTM refers to the status of an employee who simultaneously works as a formal member of two or more teams over some time (Margolis, 2020; O’Leary et al., 2011). Previous studies have shown that nearly 65 %–95 % of knowledge workers simultaneously perform MTM roles (Chan et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2019), and more than 80 % experience MTM as a work status (Bertolotti et al., 2015). MTM is a widely adopted job model (Lee et al., 2023). However, MTM is still a relatively new topic in management (Margolis, 2020), which does not match the development needs of organizations (Berger et al., 2022; van de Brake & Berger, 2022). Therefore, investigating the relationship between MTM and creativity is of practical importance.

Creativity is a novel and practical behavioral process or idea, a key competency in enhancing organizational competitiveness (Bingqian et al., 2020). Digitalization increases the dynamics and uncertainty of the organizational environment (W. L. Chen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022), which requires employees to be more creative in meeting the increasingly complex competitive environment (Shao et al., 2021). However, whether MTM, popular in the digital age, facilitates or hinders creativity remains unexplored. Therefore, organizations must clarify how MTM affects employee creativity.

One study has suggested that psychological mechanisms may be key drivers of employee creativity (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). The literature reveals that previous empirical research has focused on the effect of MTM on psychology and attitude (rather than the behavioral process) (Pluut et al., 2014), the direct association of MTM with positive outcomes of performance (without considering psychological mechanisms and adverse effects) (van de Brake et al., 2018), the indirect association of MTM with job performance and absenteeism through dual parallel paths (van de Brake et al., 2020). Few empirical studies have focused on the relationship between MTM and creativity, and even fewer have examined the impact of MTM on creativity

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through underlying psychological factors. Therefore, previous studies are insufficient to fully reveal the “key driver”, in other words, the psychological driving mechanisms of MTM affecting creativity. In addition, van de Brake et al. (2018) have called for research on the “double-edged” effect of MTM, as it may induce both gains and losses. Accordingly, this study responds to the above call. It attempts to investigate the “double-edged” mediating mechanism and boundary condition of MTM on creativity through different psychological drivers, hoping to provide new insights for organizations to effectively enhance their core competitiveness in the digital era.

Previous studies have proposed that, on the one hand, MTM implies a broader social network size (Pluut et al., 2014) with more opportunities for learning exchanges (O’Leary et al., 2011), which will increase self-confidence and positivity (Berger & Bruch, 2021), increasing motivation and energization at work. Thriving at work is a psychological state in which individuals simultaneously experience learning and vitality (Spreitzer et al., 2005), which can effectively stimulate creativity (Yang et al., 2021). Therefore, this study proposes that thriving at work may be a gain mediator for the MTM to stimulate employee creativity. On the other hand, owing to limited individual attentional resources (O’Leary et al., 2011), MTM employees need to cope with a large number of work demands, which may generate role stress and strain (Chen et al., 2021), which in turn induce emotional exhaustion. One study has confirmed that emotional exhaustion is negatively related to creativity (Opoku et al., 2022). Therefore, this study proposes that emotional exhaustion is a harmful mediating pathway by which MTM undermines creativity. Accordingly, this study resorts to thriving at work and emotional exhaustion to investigate the positive and negative effects of MTM on creativity based on the job demand-resource model.

Research has confirmed that the two psychological states of thriving at work and emotional exhaustion can co-exist (Shirom, 2011). Empirical studies have also shown that negative and positive emotions are more likely to co-occur when individuals’ transient psychological states are measured (Russell & Carroll, 1999). Therefore, this study introduces thriving at work and emotional exhaustion into the model. Moreover, this new insight may uncover the black box of the double-edged mediating effect of MTM in terms of psychological drivers.

Furthermore, based on theories such as person-job fit, this study suggests that polychronicity may be a boundary condition for MTM. As a key competency required for simultaneous multitasking (Kantrowitz et al., 2012), polychronicity refers to an individual’s preference, attitude, or trait of focusing on and handling multiple tasks simultaneously (Bluedorn et al., 1992), which fits well work situations where multitasking and multi-team switching are required for MTM. Therefore, polychronicity may be an adequate boundary condition for the double-edged sword effect.

Based on the above introduction, this study uses the following path to analyze the “double-edged” effect. First, regarding the theme of the MTM, this study proposes several relevant theoretical hypotheses through a literature review. Second, before analyzing the data, this study introduces the “Methodology” and the measurement scales of each variable. Third, it examines the reliability and validity of the data and tests the proposed hypotheses. Finally, the study summarizes the conclusions, analyzes the theoretical and practical implications, and proposes limitations and future perspectives.

Literature review and theoretical hypotheses

Multiple team membership and creativity: a beneficial path of thriving at work

Thriving at work is a psychological state in which individuals experience both learning and vitality during work (Spreitzer et al., 2021). It is considered a key positive psychological, work attitude, or

motivational state (Liu et al., 2021). Previous research suggests that thriving at work is influenced by factors such as work context, work resources, and individual characteristics (Spreitzer et al., 2005), such as MTM.

First, MTM provides formal opportunities to learn and communicate with different teams (O’Leary et al., 2011), creating diverse collaborative relationships for employees, that benefit individual expertise learning. Research shows that hands-on experience is necessary for understanding and perceiving tacit knowledge, and practice across different teams facilitates rich learning from internal knowledge from a unique perspective (van de Brake et al., 2020). In addition, as the membership number increases, it implies a broader social network size (Pluut et al., 2014), which is more likely to access novel and diverse knowledge and information (Fang & Luan, 2022). One study suggests that crossover in multiple teams leads to more learning and knowledge (Salem et al., 2018). Therefore, this study proposes that MTM may promote employee learning, which in turn enhances thriving at work.

Second, multiple identities within multiple teams can generate unique status enhancement opportunities (Margolis, 2020; Zaccaro et al., 2020) and access various resources across multiple teams, such as instrumental social support and relational resources (Berger & Bruch, 2021). According to the job demand-resource model, when individuals own resources that go beyond the role requirements of their identity (Margolis, 2020; Zaccaro et al., 2020), individual self-confidence and positive affect dramatically increase (Berger & Bruch, 2021), promoting individual motivation and vitality at work. In addition, some scholars have proposed that MTM employees (a particular form of boundary crosser) can experience a richer sense of vitality and freshness in the interaction process of self-control and transition (Dimitrova, 2020). Vitality is another dimension of thriving at work.

In summary, MTM may enhance the two dimensions of thriving at work (learning and vitality). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. MTM has a positive relationship with thriving at work.

Previous studies have shown that thriving at work is positively associated with individual innovative behaviors and creativity. Grover et al. (2022) confirm that paradoxical thinking enhances employees’ innovative behavior by increasing their thriving at work. Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009) suggest that thriving at work can increase innovative behavior. Based on empirical research, Yang et al. (2021) propose that thriving at work and creativity are significantly positive. Based on the above logical analysis combined with hypothesis H1, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Thriving at work mediates the relationship between MTM and creativity.

Multiple team membership and creativity: a harmful path of emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the mental representation or perception of the depletion of emotional resources resulting from an individual experiencing a high level of stress (Opoku et al., 2022; Welsh et al., 2020). Emotional exhaustion is easily affected by the work context or job characteristics (Welsh et al., 2020), such as a job context similar to MTM. Based on the job demand-resource model, MTM simultaneously plays the role of multiple work team members and, due to the limited resources of individual attention (O’Leary et al., 2011), coping with a large number of role requirements may lead to resource strain on employees and eventually to role stress and strain (Chen et al., 2021). Second, owing to the scarcity of individual time, MTM employees may be “overwhelmed” by the tasks of multiple teams. Previous research has revealed that time pressure is significantly and positively related to emotional exhaustion (Maas et al., 2021). Finally, researchers propose that different teams may have

varied expectations (Chen et al., 2019, 2021), and individuals may be unable to adapt to each team's work styles and expectations. They may be overwhelmed by high work demands (van de Brake et al., 2020). Therefore, emotional exhaustion may be triggered as the number of MTM increases. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3. MTM has a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion.

Previous studies suggest that emotional exhaustion is positively associated with depression and anxiety (Maria et al., 2018), and knowledge hiding (Yao et al., 2020), while depression and anxiety and knowledge hiding weaken employees' creativity (Bogilovic et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2020). Empirical studies confirm that emotional exhaustion is negatively related to job satisfaction (Opoku et al., 2021), and that job satisfaction can effectively enhance employee creativity (Miao et al., 2020). In an empirical study of 451 employees, Liu et al. (2020) confirm that emotional exhaustion negatively affects creativity. Gong et al. (2021) suggest that emotional exhaustion is negatively associated with creativity among knowledge-intensive employees in high-tech firms. Based on the job demand-resource model, Opoku et al. (2022) reveal that high job demands generate emotional exhaustion, which reduces employees' creativity. Based on the above logic, combined with hypothesis 3, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4. MTM weakens employee creativity by increasing emotional exhaustion.

Moderating effect of polychronicity

Polychronicity, or multitasking time orientation, refers to the preference for simultaneously concentrating on and handling multiple tasks (Bluedorn et al., 1992). Polychronicity is the individual differences in attitudes, values, beliefs, and traits in the temporal dimension (Robinson & Kalafatis, 2017; Shipp & Cole, 2015). Some scholars have proposed that polychronicity is a key competency required to manage multiple tasks simultaneously (Kantrowitz et al., 2012). Coincidentally, the MTM work model is required to meet the work demands of multiple teams and handle multiple tasks simultaneously (Jonathon et al., 2012; van de Brake et al., 2020). Therefore, MTM and polychronicity may have complementary matching relationships (Berger & Bruch, 2021). According to the person-job fit theory, this approach is more conducive to motivating capacity and generating more positive outcomes when individual abilities, knowledge, or traits match job requirements (Edwards, 1991; Kantrowitz et al., 2012).

First, Schell and Conte (2008) confirm that individuals with high polychronicity have a higher learning goal orientation, whereas MTM has the job resources to learn and communicate with different teams (O'Leary et al., 2011). A match between the two approaches can effectively improve individual learning. In addition, individuals with high polychronicity are more likely to derive resources and associated benefit states from MTM's work status, such as learning and vitality, because individual preferences for simultaneous multitasking combined with the cross-role job demands of MTM can complement time, energy, or skills and subtly meet individual needs (Berger & Bruch, 2021).

Second, based on person-job fit theory, some scholars suggest that a good fit of individual preferences (polychronicity) and job requirements (multitasking status) will increase employee self-esteem, which reflects higher job competency perception and self-confidence (Hui et al., 2010). Meanwhile, individuals with high polychronicity have better cognitive abilities, and multiple identities in multiple teams can generate unique opportunities for status advancement (Berger & Bruch, 2021). Individuals who control more resources, significantly increase their self-confidence and positive emotions

(Berger & Bruch, 2021). All these aspects may encourage employees to be more energetic at work, and increase their thriving at work.

Based on the above logical analysis, polychronicity may be beneficial for improving the learning and vitality of MTM individuals (two dimensions of thriving at work). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5. Polychronicity reinforces the positive relationship between MTM and thriving at work. The higher the polychronicity, the stronger the positive effect of MTM on thriving at work.

Combining H2 and H5, this study further proposes the following hypothesis:

H6. Polychronicity enhances the positive effect of MTM on thriving at work, then stimulates employee creativity. That is, the higher the polychronicity, the stronger the positive relationship between MTM and employee creativity through thriving at work.

Person-job fit theory states that an individual's psychological evaluation of a particular work situation primarily depends on the degree of match between internal preferences and external job requirements (Edwards, 1991; Edwards & Van Harrison, 1993). A high person-job fit can effectively reduce the influence of negative aspects on an individual (Conte et al., 2019). For example, employees with high polychronicity have more personal resources. They are more flexible at work than those with low polychronicity, which can reduce role conflict caused by MTM (Berger & Bruch, 2021; Conte et al., 2019), reducing employees' emotional exhaustion (Berger & Bruch, 2021). In hierarchical multitasking, characterized by simultaneity and fragmentation, employees with high polychronicity exhibit higher job satisfaction (Agypt & Rubin, 2012). Studies have revealed a negative relationship between job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion (Opoku et al., 2021). Employees with high polychronicity believe that it is interesting to handle multiple tasks simultaneously or switch tasks in multiple teams and do not feel it is a burden (Bluedorn et al., 1992). Similarly, Bluedorn et al. (1999) conclude that polychronicity is "productive" and "energetic" and do not perceive role expectations across multiple teams as conflicting or burdensome. Therefore, individuals with high polychronicity may manage potential work demands and task conflicts associated with MTM, alleviating emotional exhaustion. Based on the above logical analysis, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H7. Polychronicity weakens the positive relationship between MTM and emotional exhaustion. The higher the polychronicity, the weaker the positive effect of MTM on emotional exhaustion.

Combining H4 and H7, this study further proposes the following hypothesis:

H8. Polychronicity weakens the positive effects of MTM on emotional exhaustion and employee creativity. That is, the higher the polychronicity, the weaker the positive relationship between MTM and employee creativity through emotional exhaustion.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the research model shown in Fig. 1.

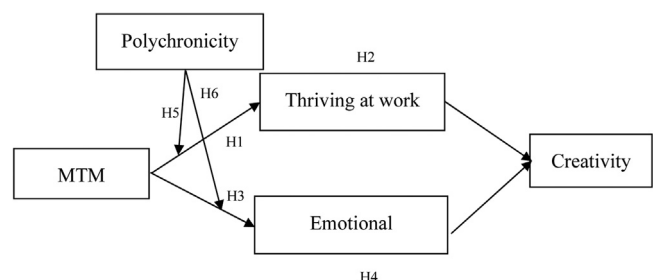


Fig. 1. Research conceptual model.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The data in this study were sourced from Internet platform companies in coastal China, and the research subjects had typical knowledge-intensive characteristics. The main considerations are as follows. First, MTM is widely adopted in knowledge-intensive companies (O’Leary et al., 2011), and the research subjects fit the bill. Second, this group of employees often works in multitasking and multi-team formats, which is a good fit for this study. Finally, creativity is critical to the survival and growth of companies in this region, where the market is highly competitive and digital iterations are evolving more rapidly. Therefore, the study of creativity has a practical value.

Subjects were asked to first answer whether they had been involved in two or more teams simultaneously in the last three months. In the case of a positive answer, the subject indicated the number of teams involved simultaneously. If not, the survey was terminated. The questionnaire provided a uniform definition for each team. A team is a group of interdependent individuals who share the responsibility for the outcome to achieve a goal, with no less than three members per team.

To reduce common method bias, this study adopted two time-point intervals (about one month) to collect data. It was explicitly stated that the data were for academic research only and that there were no right or wrong answers. At Time 1, participants completed questionnaires on variables such as the number of MTM, thriving at work, emotional exhaustion, polychronicity, and basic personal information. Referring to the previous approach, employees reported the number of MTM in which they have been simultaneously involved and active in the last three months to obtain more correlated research data (Berger & Bruch, 2021). At Time 2, participants completed a creativity questionnaire. Self-reported creativity can better reflect MTM’s combined creativity. Previous research has shown that subjects can accurately self-assess their job characteristics (Berger & Bruch, 2021). Therefore, it is feasible for employees to self-report. After coding, matching, and eliminating invalid questionnaires, 253 valid questionnaires were obtained. The effective recall rate was 73.12 %.

In the valid sample, 47.9 % were female, and 52.1 % were male. Regarding age, 13.8 % were 25 years old or below, 24.5 % were 26–30 years old, 36.7 % were 31–35 years old, 18.2 % were 36–40 years old, and 6.8 % were over 40 years old. Regarding education, 11 % were specialists or below, 48.6 % were a bachelor’s degree, 28.9 % were a master’s degree, and 11.5 % were doctors.

Measurement and variables

This study adopted mature scales from previous studies. It followed the standard “translation-back translation” procedure for the original scales to ensure that the original meaning was not omitted during translation (W. Chen et al., 2023). All scales were scored on a five-point Likert scale, except for the number of MTM.

MTM. This study adopted Berger and Bruch (2021) approach of measuring MTM using the number of teams that individuals formally join simultaneously. This method has been widely used. To ensure comparability, subjects are given a uniform definition of the term “team” before being interviewed. A team is a group of interdependent individuals who share responsibility for achieving a goal (Berger & Bruch, 2021). The number of MTM is defined as the number of teams in which individuals are active and participate simultaneously with no fewer than three members per team (van de Brake et al., 2018).

Thriving at work. This study adopted a ten-item scale developed by Porath et al. (2012) to measure thriving at work. The scale comprises two dimensions. The learning dimension includes five items, such as “I am learning more and more over time” and “I see myself

improving.” The vitality dimension consists of five items, such as “I am full of energy and vitality” and “I feel alive.”

Emotional exhaustion. This study adopted the emotional exhaustion scale including five-item developed by Maslach et al. (1996). The scale was tested in Chinese cultural contexts and deemed reliable and valid. The scale items include “I feel very tired both physically and mentally.” “I feel exhausted at the end of every day.” And so on.

Polychronicity. The four-item measurement scale from Bluedorn et al. (1992) was adopted in this study. The scale is widely used by scholars and is well-represented (Bertolotti et al., 2019). Some scales include “I like to handle multiple activities at the same time.” “When I sit in my office, I like to juggle multiple activities at the same time.” “I am happy to do multiple activities at the same time.” among others.

Employee creativity. This study adopted the four-item scale developed by Farmer et al. (2003). The results of the empirical research show that the scale has good reliability and validity and is commonly used for employee creativity. The scale items include “I will try new ideas or methods at work first.” “I often generate pioneering ideas at work.” “I am an innovative role model in my team.” and “I try to find new ways to solve problems at work.”

Control variables. Referring to previous studies, the control variables included gender, age, education, and tenure. This study focused on junior employees and did not include middle and senior managers; therefore, rank was not included as a control variable. Tenure refers to the number of years the subject has worked at the company.

Data analysis and empirical results

Data reliability and validity

This study adopts Cronbach’s α to test the reliability of each variable. The results show that Cronbach’s α of thriving at work, emotional exhaustion, creativity, and polychronicity in this study are 0.869, 0.986, 0.883, and 0.915, respectively, all of which are higher than 0.70, indicating that the variables have good reliability (Chen et al., 2022).

Further, referring to the previous comparative analysis of the model’s fit validity, this study resorts to AMOS 24.0, and adopts confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to include the four indicators of thriving at work, emotional exhaustion, creativity, and polychronicity in the analysis, and compares the fit indices with other nested models, which could effectively test the model’s discriminant validity. The previous study addresses that a smaller RMSEA indicates better fit, as an RMSEA less than 0.08 indicates good fit; cardinality freedom ratio χ^2/df between one and three indicates acceptable model fit; and TLI or CFI between 0.90 and one indicates good fit (W. Chen et al., 2023). The results of the validated factor analyses are presented in Table 1. According to the table, the fit index of the four-factor model is better than that of the one-, two-, or three-factor models. The fit index of the four-factor model ($\chi^2/df=2.421$, $RMSEA=0.075$, $TLI=0.950$, $CFI=0.956$) is good, indicating that the model has good discriminant validity.

Table 1
Differentiation validity test of different source scales.

Model	Factor	χ^2	χ^2/df	RMSEA	TLI	CFI
Single-factor	EE+PO+EC+TW	4964.458	21.585	0.286	0.271	0.337
Two-factor	EE+PO+TW,EC	2367.644	10.430	0.186	0.666	0.700
Two-factor	EE+PO+EC,TW	1872.392	8.429	0.172	0.737	0.764
Three-factor	EE+TW,PO,EC	1563.512	6.949	0.146	0.789	0.813
Three-factor	EE+PO,EC,TW	1340.862	5.986	0.141	0.823	0.844
Four-factor	EE,PO,EC,TW	535.103	2.421	0.075	0.950	0.956

Note: EE=emotional exhaustion, PO=polychronicity, EC=employee creativity, TW=thriving at work. Abbreviations are the same as in other tables.
Source: Author’s calculations.

Common method bias

This study adopts an integrated method to reduce the common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). First, prior notice is given that data will be collected anonymously. Second, assessment questions are reduced by emphasizing that there are no right or wrong answers and that the questionnaire results will be only used for research needs. Third, Harman's single-factor test is used as the post-test tool. The results show that the percentage of variance explained by the first factor without rotating the factors is 24.356 %, below the recommended maximum of 50 % of the total variance, indicating that common method bias in this study is not serious and lies within an acceptable range.

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses are performed using SPSS 24.0, and the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the variables are shown in Table 2. The results show that MTM is not significantly related to employee creativity ($r = 0.039, p > 0.05$), but MTM is significantly and positively related to thriving at work ($r = 0.231, p < 0.01$) and emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.293, p < 0.01$). Thriving at work is significantly and positively related to employee creativity ($r = 0.271, p < 0.01$). Emotional exhaustion negatively correlated with employee creativity ($r = -0.217, p < 0.01$). Correlation analysis among the variables provides essential support for the subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 2
Means, SD, and correlation of the variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1								
2. Age	0.021	1							
3. Education	-0.002	0.074	1						
4. Tenure	0.002	0.512**	-0.103	1					
5. MTM	0.046	-0.055	0.096	0.034	1				
6. TW	0.031	-0.059	0.020	0.062	0.231**	1			
7. EE	0.090	-0.033	0.058	-0.021	0.293**	0.011	1		
8. PO	-0.035	0.025	0.011	-0.070	0.097	-0.123	0.006	1	
9. EC	0.013	-0.052	0.010	0.053	0.039	0.271**	-0.217**	-0.018	1
10. Means	1.48	2.79	2.41	2.31	3.62	3.57	2.42	3.24	3.68
11. SD	0.50	1.10	0.83	1.07	0.78	0.43	0.67	0.69	0.45

Note:.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Author's calculations.

Table 3
Results of regression analysis.

Variable	Dependent Variable							
	Thriving at Work		Emotional Exhaustion		Creativity			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Gender	0.028	0.019	0.122	0.103	0.014	0.012	0.024	0.024
Age	-0.051	-0.041	-0.027	-0.006	-0.046	-0.045	-0.036	-0.035
Education	0.022	0.009	0.050	0.023	0.016	0.015	0.018	0.016
Tenure	0.054	0.044	0.005	-0.015	0.048	0.047	0.034	0.033
Independent variable								
MTM		0.120**		0.248***		0.015		0.022
Mediator								
TW							0.277***	0.268***
EE							-0.152***	-0.159***
R ²	0.018	0.064	0.013	0.093	0.012	0.013	0.130	0.131
ΔR ²		0.047**		0.080***		0.001	0.117***	0.118***
F	1.133	3.405**	0.819	5.090***	0.776	0.652	6.105***	5.270***

Note:.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Author's calculations.

Mediation effect analyses

This study draws on Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Wen and Ye (2014) to test these mediating effects. This procedure differs from the classical three-step method for testing mediating effects. It suggests that the total effect coefficient (c) is not a prerequisite for the mediating effect to hold. First, c is tested. If c is not significant, there may be a covered effect or other exceptional circumstances. We then test a (the coefficient of correlation between the independent and mediating variables) and b (the correlation coefficient between the mediating and dependent variables). If both are significant, we report the significance of $a*b$, indicating that the mediating effect holds. If at least one is not significant, the Bootstrap or Sobel method is adopted to determine whether the mediating effect holds. Finally, we test whether the direct effect (c') is significant to determine the type of mediation. Otherwise, it implies complete mediation; if c' is significant and has the same sign as $a*b$, it means partial mediation; if it is different, it indicates that there is a special covered effect (Wen & Ye, 2014).

Beneficial mediation effect test

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are presented in Table 3. As Model 2 shows, MTM has a positive relationship with thriving at work ($\beta = 0.120, p < 0.01$). Therefore, H1 is supported. As

Table 4
Bootstrapping results for the mediating effect (thriving at work).

	Bootstrapping		95 % Confidence Interval	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	LLCI	ULCI
Direct Effect	−0.0189	0.0369	−0.0916	0.0538
Indirect Effect	0.0341	0.0143	0.0090	0.0654

Note: Bootstrapping=5000.

Source: Author's calculations.

Model 7 shows, thriving at work has a positive relationship with creativity ($\beta = 0.277, p < 0.001$). To control for possible intercorrelations between the two mediators, Model 8 includes both thriving at work and emotional exhaustion (Qin et al., 2020). As Model 8 shows, when MTM and thriving at work simultaneously predict creativity, the relationship between thriving at work and creativity is significantly positive ($\beta = 0.268, p < 0.001$). The Sobel method is used to test the robustness of the mediating effect. The results show that the Z-value is 2.71 (> 1.96), meaning that the coefficient ($a*b$) is significant. These results support a mediating effect. Therefore, H2 is supported.

To further test the robustness of the mediating effect, this study adopts a bias-corrected percentile Bootstrap method for 5000 repetitions of the sampling test (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results are shown in Table 4. The direct effect of MTM on creativity is -0.0189 (95 % CI = $[-0.0916, 0.0538]$, including zero). The indirect effect of MTM on creativity is 0.0341 (95 % CI = $[0.0090, 0.0654]$, excluding zero). Therefore, thriving at work is a positive mediator. H2 is supported.

Cost-mediation effect test

The testing process for the cost-mediating effect is similar to that for the benefit. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3. As Model 4 shows, MTM is positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.248, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3 is supported. As Model 7 shows, emotional exhaustion is negatively related to creativity ($\beta = -0.152, p < 0.001$). Model 8 shows that when MTM and emotional exhaustion simultaneously predict creativity, a significant and negative relationship exists between emotional exhaustion and employee creativity ($\beta = -0.159, p < 0.001$). The Sobel method is used to test the robustness of the mediating effect. The results show that the Z-value is -3 (< -1.96), that is, the coefficient ($a*b$) is significant. Therefore, H4 is supported.

To further test the robustness of the mediation of emotional exhaustion, this study adopts the Bootstrap method for 5000 repetitions of the sampling test (Hayes, 2013). The results are reported in Table 5. The results show that the direct effect of MTM on creativity is 0.0574 (95 % CI = $[-0.0171, 0.1318]$, including zero). The indirect effect of MTM on creativity is -0.0422 (95 % CI = $[-0.0665, -0.0190]$, excluding zero). Therefore, H4 is supported.

Moderation effect analyses

To reduce the multicollinearity problem, this study first centralizes the two variables of MTM and polychronicity to obtain the interaction term, and then tests the moderating effect.

Table 5
Bootstrapping results for the mediating effect (emotional exhaustion).

	Bootstrapping		95 % Confidence Interval	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	LLCI	ULCI
Direct Effect	0.0574	0.0378	−0.0171	0.1318
Indirect Effect	−0.0422	0.0121	−0.0665	−0.0190

Note: Bootstrapping=5000.

Source: Author's calculations.

Beneficial moderation effect test

Table 6 presents the results of hierarchical regression analyses of the moderating effects. As shown in Model 3, after controlling for the main impact of MTM and polychronicity, the interaction of the independent and moderating variables remains positively related to thriving at work ($\beta = 0.169, p < 0.001$), which means the moderating effect is significant. Therefore, H5 is supported.

In addition, Fig. 2 reports the moderating chart according to the mean ± 1 SD of the moderating variables to show the moderating effect more clearly. As shown in the figure, the slope of the relationship between MTM and thriving at work is greater under high polychronicity, indicating that the positive effect is stronger. Therefore, H5 is supported.

Further, this study adopts the Bootstrap method for 5000 repetitions of the sampling test to measure the beneficial moderating effect, according to the mean ± 1 SD of the moderator. The results indicate that when polychronicity is low, the indirect impact is 0.0042 (95 % CI = $[-0.0320, 0.0383]$, including zero). When polychronicity is high, the mediating effect significantly increases to 0.0684 (95 % CI = $[0.0297, 0.1161]$, excluding zero). Meanwhile, the high- and low-effect differences with 95 % confidence interval (CI) = $[0.0214, 0.1264]$, excluding zero. Therefore, polychronicity strengthens the beneficial mediating effect. H6 is supported.

Table 6
Results for moderating effects.

Variable	Dependent variable					
	Thriving at work			Emotional exhaustion		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Gender	0.028	0.019	0.013	0.122	0.103	0.104
Age	−0.051	−0.041	−0.027	−0.027	−0.006	−0.014
Education	0.022	0.009	0.016	0.05	0.023	0.015
Tenure	0.054	0.044	0.041	0.005	−0.015	−0.02
Independent Variable						
MTM		0.120**	0.128***		0.248***	0.251***
Moderator						
PO			−0.092			−0.017
Interaction						
MTM \times PO			0.169***			−0.175*
R ²	0.018	0.064	0.132	0.013	0.093	0.115
ΔR^2		0.047**	0.067***		0.080***	0.022*
F	1.133	3.405**	5.320***	0.819	5.090***	4.558***

Note:.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Author's calculations.

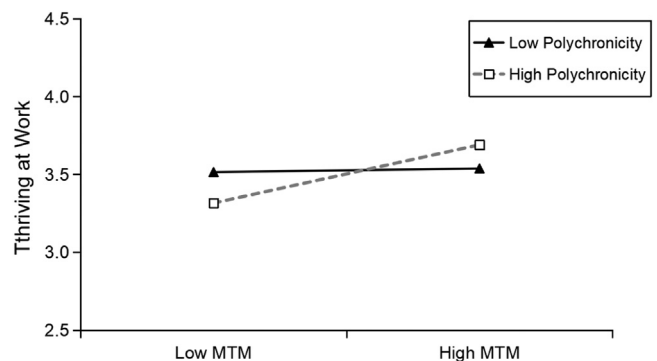


Fig. 2. Moderating effect (thriving at work).

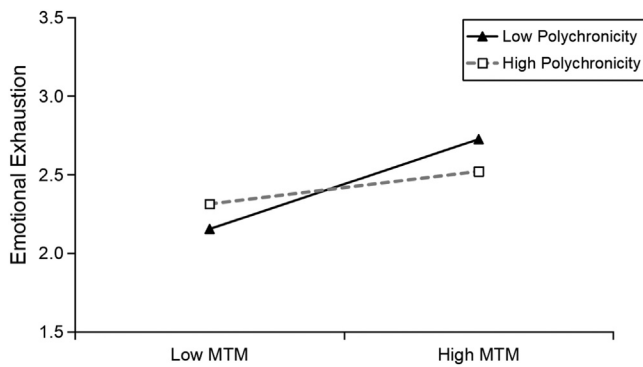


Fig. 3. Moderating effect (emotional exhaustion).

Cost-moderation effect test

The testing process for the cost-moderation effect is similar to that for the benefits. Table 6 presents the results of the hierarchical regression. As shown in Model 6, after controlling for the main impact of MTM and polychronicity, the interaction of the independent and moderating variables remains negatively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.175$, $p < 0.05$), which means the moderating effect is significant. Therefore, H7 is supported.

In addition, Fig. 3 reports the moderating chart according to the mean ± 1 SD of the moderating variables to show the moderating effect more clearly. The slope of the relationship between MTM and emotional exhaustion is less steep under high polychronicity, indicating that the positive impact is weaker. Therefore, H7 is supported.

Further, this study adopts the Bootstrap method for 5000 repetitions of the sampling test to measure the moderating effect, according to the mean ± 1 SD of the moderator. The results indicate that when polychronicity is low, the indirect impact is -0.0626 (95 % CI = $[-0.1065, -0.0255]$, excluding zero). When polychronicity is higher, the mediating effect becomes significant at -0.0227 (95 % CI = $[-0.0525, 0.0124]$, including zero). Meanwhile, the high- and low-effect differences with a 95 % confidence interval (CI) = $[0.0030, 0.0779]$, excluding zero. Therefore, polychronicity weakens this mediating effect. H8 is supported.

Research conclusion and discussion

Conclusion

This study constructs a “double-edged sword” theoretical model of MTM that affects employees’ creativity. The empirical results show that, on the one hand, MTM promotes employee creativity by positively influencing thriving at work, representing the model’s beneficial mediation path. On the other hand, MTM also reduces employee creativity by enhancing emotional exhaustion, representing the model’s cost-mediation path. This result confirms the possible “double-edged” effect of MTM suggested by previous scholars (Pluut et al., 2014).

Further, hypothesis testing indicates that polychronicity is a valid boundary condition for this “double-edged” effect. Specifically, polychronicity enhances the positive relationship between MTM and thriving at work. Meanwhile, the beneficial moderated mediating effect of polychronicity on thriving at work also holds. Polychronicity also mitigates the positive relationship between MTM and emotional exhaustion, and the cost-moderated mediating effect of polychronicity on emotional exhaustion holds. Polychronicity, “a key competency required for preferring to multitask simultaneously” (Kantrowitz et al., 2012), is compatible with a multitasking work state that requires multitasking as part of the MTM (Berger & Bruch, 2021). This empirical study further confirms that polychronicity is an adequate

boundary condition for the MTM, indicating that polychronicity can both promote beneficial effects and mitigate cost effects.

Theoretical implications

First, this study enriches theoretical research on the MTM. The relationship between MTM and creativity remains a new topic, and psychological mechanisms are essential drivers of employee creativity (Margolis, 2020; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). However, few empirical studies have explored the “double-edged” mechanism by which MTM affects employee creativity through different psychological factors. Therefore, van de Brake et al. (2018) have called for more studies on “double-edged” effects. This study adopts an empirical approach to unravel the black box of whether MTM is both beneficial and negative for creativity, exploring the impact of MTM from a new perspective. Therefore, organizations should take a dialectical view of the benefits of MTM to avoid this vulnerability from evolving into organizational attrition, which undermines creativity (Margolis, 2020).

Second, this study provides new insights into research on the MTM’s double-edged mediation in terms of psychological drivers. Based on the job demand-resource model, this study incorporates thriving at work and emotional exhaustion into the overall research model, further uncovering a new “double-edged” transmission pathway through which MTM affects creativity. Our empirical results confirm that these two psychological factors are “key drivers” of MTM employees’ creativity. This finding contributes to a deeper understanding of the beneficial or cost-effective mechanisms of MTM on creativity (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Further, they extend further extends the theoretical model of MTM affecting creativity.

Third, this study clarifies the adequate boundary conditions of MTM that affect employee creativity. Edwards and Van Harrison (1993) argue that individuals’ psychological evaluations of a particular job state depend primarily on the match between their internal preferences and external job demands. Based on theories such as person-job fit, this study confirms that polychronicity is an adequate boundary condition for MTM that affects creativity through both beneficial-mediated and cost-mediated paths. This result further supports the theory proposed by Kantrowitz et al. (2012) that individual competencies, knowledge, and traits are conducive to motivating individuals and exhibit positive outcomes when matched with job demands.

Finally, current empirical research on polychronicity mainly focuses on organizational contexts in developed Western countries. Some scholars have called for more studies in other organizational contexts, such as developing countries and Chinese organizations (Shipp & Cole, 2015). This study responds to this call by adding polychronicity to the management field in the Chinese organizational context, further broadening the external effects of the boundary condition of polychronicity in different organizational contexts.

Management practice inspiration

First, managers should effectively balance the “double-edged” effect of MTM. On the one hand, managers should focus on special work models such as MTM and create favorable conditions for MTM employees, especially knowledge-intensive employees, because MTM provides positive effects for organizations to address issues such as the scarcity of knowledge resources (Margolis, 2020) and enhance employee creativity. On the other hand, organizations should pay special attention to and effectively balance the number of MTM and not constantly increase the utilization of knowledge employees because of the pursuit of organizational efficiency (Bedwell et al., 2014), which may have counterproductive adverse effects on individuals and organizations through excessive utilization and increased employee burden, ultimately reducing their creativity.

Second, organizations should focus on the psychological states of individuals with MTM. Our empirical results confirm that the two psychological mechanisms of MTM have opposite effects. One is the enhancement of creativity, whereas the other is not conducive to stimulating creativity. Therefore, directing the beneficial psychological path and avoiding the costly psychological path are crucial issues that organizations need to address, and they are also the key to the “willingness” of employees with MTM to stimulate creativity.

Third, organizations that adopt a work model with MTM should focus on assessing and examining employees' characteristics, such as polychronicity, when making job assignments or selecting new employees. A match between competencies, knowledge, traits, and job requirements motivates employees (Kantrowitz et al., 2012). Our study also shows that employees with high polychronicity are better suited to the job status of the MTM. Therefore, in human resources practice, creating a “person-job fit” is an integral part of stimulating creativity.

Finally, managers should shape the organizational climate, corporate culture, and management model that support the MTM job state. This study suggests that polychronicity is an adequate boundary condition for the MTM to stimulate creativity. Previous research has shown that factors such as the organizational ethical climate (Daskin, 2019), and corporate social responsibility (Shao et al., 2022) can positively influence the level of employees' polychronicity. Therefore, creating a good organizational climate and culture that fits MTM is crucial for effectively enhancing MTM creativity.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations. First, this study's results may suffer from common method bias (CMB). This study adopts an integrated approach and two-wave time lags in the data collection process to reduce CMB in empirical studies. However, a certain degree of CMB remains. Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches (W. Chen et al., 2023). Second, the moderator in this study mainly focuses on individual characteristics without considering leadership or organization-level factors, which are crucial for individual motivation, emotion, and behavior. Therefore, future research could explore these mechanisms from a leadership or organizational perspective. Third, the current research on MTM is mainly based on the Western cultural context, with less consideration of Chinese cultural factors. Future studies should explore the influence of Chinese cultural factors, such as the “Guanxi climate” and power distance, on the relationship between MTM and creativity.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Weilong Chen: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Jing Zhang:** Funding acquisition, Software, Writing – review & editing. **Yuchun Xiao:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology. **Baohua Wang:** Funding acquisition, Resources. **Xiao Gu:** Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Resources. **Zhongxian Bai:** Funding acquisition.

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