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Leading while playing: How leader fun pursuit affects leadership perceptions and evaluations

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Abstract

Although pursuing fun seems contradictory to work, it may yield beneficial outcomes for not only employees but also leaders in the workplace. The present paper aims to bridge the gap between the workplace fun/play literature and leadership research by introducing the concept of leader fun pursuit and examining its influence on followers' evaluations. Moreover, drawing on the dual perspective model of social evaluation and expectancy violation theory, we examine the effects of leader fun pursuit on followers' perceptions of leader attributes and evaluations of leadership, and posit a gender-contingent boundary condition. We conducted three studies to develop a scale and examine our hypotheses. Study 1 (four samples, total $N = 734$) developed a four-item scale to measure leader fun pursuit and established its reliability and validity. Study 2 ($N = 309$) used a multi-wave design to examine the full model. Study 3 ($N = 279$) used a vignette-based experiment to strengthen the internal validity of our conceptual model. We found that leader fun pursuit generally enhances followers' evaluations of the leader, and this effect was especially pronounced for female leaders. Overall, we introduce a novel approach to effective leadership and examine the gender differences therein.

Shuai Yuan, Lu (Lucy) Xing, Yan Shao, Yingxin Deng, and Peikai Li contributed equally to this article.

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KEYWORDS

expectancy violation, leader agency, leader communion, leader fun pursuit, leadership evaluations

INTRODUCTION

> "Play energizes us and enlivens us."
> —— Brown and Vaughan (2009)

In recent years, an increasing number of organizations (e.g., Disney, Google, and Marriott) have begun to embrace the power of fun at work (e.g., gamification, playful work design, and fun activities) for facilitating employee productivity and creativity (Collins & Porras, 1997; Michel et al., 2019; Petelczyc et al., 2018; Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014). As an emerging topic in management research, accumulated evidence found that workplace fun enhances numerous functional outcomes, such as creativity, job satisfaction, thriving, and social connection (Han et al., 2024; Petelczyc et al., 2018; Shen & Masek, 2024). Moreover, some leaders have long adopted fun-oriented behaviors (e.g., play) in the workplace (Boyle, 2018). For instance, David Gann, the author of *The Playful Entrepreneur*, highlighted that "play ... was a crucial component that led to his success, and it encourages exploration, experimentation and curiosity" (Gourani, 2019). Furthermore, Herb Kelleher, co-founder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines, exhibited funny behaviors within the organization, such as dressing up as Elvis Presley or an Easter bunny (Brier, 2019). These salient examples highlight the underexplored potential of leaders' fun-oriented behaviors in the workplace.

Despite these compelling examples of leaders embracing fun in practice, leadership literature offers very few insights into the nature and consequences of leaders' fun-oriented behaviors (hereafter as *leader fun pursuit*) - as exemplified by leaders like Herb Kellerher (Bunea et al., 2023). This oversight is particularly concerning mainly because it may risk missing a crucial opportunity to critically reevaluate the stereotype of leaders as solely serious, structured, and goal-oriented actors. This traditional view, as noted by Kleshinski et al. (2021), restricts leader roles only to classical leadership behaviors, aligning with the longstanding beliefs that effective leadership should only involve goal attainment (i.e., task-oriented), interpersonal support (i.e., relationship-oriented), and change endorsement (i.e., change-oriented) (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Yukl, 2012). However, the pervasive examples of leaders embracing fun in their roles raise a critical question of whether playful behaviors, contradictory to those serious behaviors ascribed to traditional leadership roles, contribute to leadership effectiveness at all.

Moreover, insufficient research into the leader's fun at work and its functionality may perpetuate negative perceptions, portraying it as frivolous or detrimental to leadership effectiveness (Butler & Spoelstra, 2024). For instance, leader's fun-oriented behavior (e.g., playing golf) can be seen as escaping from manager duty and disengagement in work (Biggerstaff et al., 2017). On the contrary, engaging in fun-oriented behaviors can be also intrinsically motivating for leaders, potentially fostering their proactivity and creativity in addressing complex challenges that occur at work (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). This juxtaposition presents leaders with a critical dilemma: whether to embrace fun to leverage their potential benefits or to avoid them in favor of adhering to more traditional and serious leadership models. Exploring the functional

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side of leader fun pursuit for leadership effectiveness may enable leaders to better approach this dilemma, reframing fun pursuit and traditional leadership roles as complementary rather than contradictory elements of effective leadership.

Hence, we believe that investigating leader fun pursuit can provide significant insights into its effects. Leaders who proactively engage in fun-oriented behaviors may foster a more inclusive, open, and innovative climate. For example, playful behaviors can break down hierarchical barriers, promote open communication, and encourage risk-taking among employees (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Such an environment and climate can further enhance employee well-being and foster a strong sense of community and safety, leading to higher retention rates and increased organizational commitment and performance (Carr et al., 2003; Clarke, 2010). By exploring the influence of leader fun pursuit on these aspects of employee outcomes, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how fun-oriented leader behaviors directly impact leadership effectiveness and employee outcomes.

In sum, this research aims at bridging leadership literature and workplace fun/play literature by conceptualizing leader fun pursuit and examining its impact. We argue that leader fun pursuit transcends beyond the conventional leadership paradigm and facilitates a series of positive outcomes. As such, we aim to address the call for a comprehensive integration of fun features into leadership processes and explore whether leaders can benefit from fun-oriented actions at work (Bunea et al., 2023). Our research begins by formalizing and conceptualizing leader fun pursuit, developing and validating an instrument for measuring this novel construct. We further examine the influence of leader fun pursuit on followers' evaluations of the leader and identify its underlying mechanisms as well as the boundary condition.

Based on previous literature on play and fun at work (e.g., adult playfulness, activity-based play at work, workplace fun, and leisureship) (Bunea et al., 2023; Celestine & Yeo, 2021; Michel et al., 2019; Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015), we define *leader fun pursuit* as leader's proactive behavioral engagement in activities at work that are carried out with the goal of personal amusement, enjoyment, and fun. Research on the dual perspective model (DPM; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014) suggests that individuals can form their impression of others based on targets' behaviors for further interpretations and predictions. Based on the DPM, we posit that leader fun pursuit is likely to be viewed by followers as a behavioral signal indicating task competence and interpersonal approachability even though such leaders pursue fun for themselves rather than for followers, which shape followers' perceptions of the leader's agency and communion, and further enhance their identification with the leader and evaluations of leader effectiveness (Bunea et al., 2023; Kark, 2011).

Furthermore, given that agency and communion evaluations are often gendered (i.e., female leaders are viewed as more communal while male leaders are viewed as more agentic, Hsu et al., 2021), we posit that the perception of leader's playful behaviors may depend on the leader gender. Expectancy violation theory (EVT, Jussim et al., 1987) indicates that behaviors counter to leader stereotype result in "more extreme in the direction of the expectancy violation" (Jussim et al., 1987, p. 537). Since fun pursuit is often assumed as contrary to the work role of leaders but may nonetheless create a positive impression (Smith et al., 2022; Statler et al., 2011), we argue that leader fun pursuit, as a counter-expectancy behavior, can positively alter followers' assessments of leadership via agency and communion perceptions. These effects may vary depending on the leader's gender. Specifically, a male (versus female) leader engaging in fun activities would be more likely to be perceived as more agentic, while a female leader (versus male leader) with more playful behaviors is more likely to be perceived as more communal (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Koenig et al., 2011). Thus, we argue that leader fun pursuit

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at work positively violates agency expectations more for male leaders and communion expectations more for female leaders, resulting in higher evaluations of agency and communion, respectively.

Our research makes three theoretical contributions. First, we extend the focus of fun/play at work from employees to leaders by conceptualizing leader fun pursuit. Although a burgeoning body of studies on workplace fun and play emerged in the past decade, scholarly attention has largely focused on the fun-oriented behaviors of employees rather than those of leaders (Celestine & Yeo, 2021; Michel et al., 2019; Petelczyc et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022). We introduce the conceptualization of leader fun pursuit into the literature and provide a systematic development and validation of a new measurement (i.e., the leader fun pursuit scale) to better quantify the extent to which leaders proactively engage in fun-oriented behaviors. By doing this, we advance the workplace fun and play literature by shifting focus from employees to leaders. Second, this research contributes to leadership literature by exploring why leader fun pursuit, a behavior not directly related to classical leadership functions (e.g., task-, relationship-, or morality-focus), can positively influence leadership evaluations. Existing studies on effective leadership consistently indicate that task- and relationship-focused behaviors as well as moral behaviors of leaders yield desirable outcomes (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Judge et al., 2004). Unfortunately, the concept related to leader's fun orientation beyond traditional leadership paradigms received rare attention. Contrary to traditional notions that positively appraised leaders must be serious at work (Sturm et al., 2021), we argue that effective leaders can also be playful and fun-oriented, contributing to followers' identification. This supplements existing literature that emphasizes task- and relational-focuses for effective leadership (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Petelczyc et al., 2018). Adding this line of research, our work offers an alternative approach (i.e., leader fun pursuit) contributing to effective leadership. Finally, we empirically examine *how* and *for whom* leader fun pursuit can relate to employees' positive perceptions and evaluations, further enhancing the gendered understanding of this new concept. Specifically, by applying DPM and EVT, we highlight a gender-contingent mechanism (i.e., agency and communion perceptions) that specifies the distinct benefit of leader fun pursuit for male and female leaders in the workplace.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

Leader fun pursuit: background, conceptual definition, and construct distinctiveness

Scholars and practitioners have increasingly acknowledged the power of play in organizations, suggesting that fun-oriented practices sow potential seeds for leaders to engage in play-related behaviors (Smith et al., 2022). Based on extant research on fun and play at work, we posit that leaders may choose to proactively engage in fun-oriented behaviors to benefit themselves for the following reasons. First, workplace fun can create opportunities to facilitate desirable social interactions and make leaders more approachable to followers (Michel et al., 2019). Pursuing and supporting fun may make leaders more approachable, friendly, and easy-going, facilitating potentially positive interaction between leaders and followers (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). While pursuing fun by playing together, leaders and followers may interact more within a context of less hierarchy and therefore build strong and lasting relationships (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Leaders can also adopt fun-oriented behaviors to develop positive connections and alleviate

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tension arising from relational obstacles or conflicts (Scharp et al., 2021). Second, leaders can facilitate their intrinsic motivation and engagement by pursuing fun at work (Scharp et al., 2019; Scharp, Bakker, & Breevaart, 2022). Fun pursuit provides motivational benefits and could promote long-term task engagement (Starbuck & Webster, 1991). In this sense, when being intrinsically driven to complete tasks, leaders may experience a higher level of psychological flow and feel deeply immersed and absorbed in work (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Third, fun pursuit can aid leaders in psychologically recovering and detaching from work demands (Chan et al., 2022). Engaging in fun allows for temporary separation from task completion, which could help recover the drained psychological resources and energy. When feeling fatigued, leaders can strategically use fun-oriented actions as an on-the-job recovery tactic (Chan et al., 2022).

Although leadership roles provide motivation and opportunities for leaders to engage in fun activities, existing research is unclear about what leader fun pursuit may entail. Current research on workplace fun mainly divides into three categories: (1) fun as a personal trait (e.g., playfulness, Brauer et al., 2021; trait fun-seeking, Carver & White, 1994); (2) fun as a work characteristic (e.g., gamification; Suh et al., 2017) or an organizational characteristic (e.g., workplace fun; Michel et al., 2019); (3) fun as a behavior/activity (e.g., activity-based play, Celestine & Yeo, 2021) or behavioral strategy (e.g., playful work design, Scharp et al., 2019, 2023).

In the current research, we focus on the behavioral/activity-based view for the following reasons. First, although previous research has accumulated important insights into individual differences in exhibiting fun inclinations, it has neglected the context in which fun occurs to leaders (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). As leadership constitutes an important context in which fun is embedded within this broader setting (Van Vugt et al., 2008), this context of leadership becomes indispensable to conceptualizing fun pursuits. Second, playful work design, which refers to "the proactive cognitive-behavioral orientation aimed at fostering fun and challenge during work activities through creating, seeking, and resolving surprises and complexities" (Scharp et al., 2023, p. 7), is not directly applicable to leadership, as followers cannot observe leaders' internal orientation when performing their tasks (Scharp et al., 2019). As such, considering that leadership involves social influences, a leader's observable fun-oriented behaviors are the most appropriate way to constitute our conceptualization (Pfeffer, 1977).

Drawing on the literature on workplace fun (Michel et al., 2019) and activity-based play at work (Celestine & Yeo, 2021), we conceptualize leader fun pursuit as a leader's proactive behavioral engagement in fun activities in a working context. This definition incorporates five key features. First, leader fun pursuit entails observable behaviors. That is, the leader's actual or self-reported attitudes, motivations, and inclinations toward workplace fun are not considered because they are invisible to followers. Second, leader fun pursuit occurs only in the workplace context, excluding playful behaviors outside the work. For instance, a leader playing with LEGO (i.e., a toy brick game) in the office belongs to the connotation of leader fun pursuit, while playing with LEGO at home does not. Third, leader fun pursuit refers to a leader's proactive (vs. reactive) behavioral engagement in fun activities. In other words, fun-pursuing leaders create fun opportunities by themselves rather than merely partaking in fun at work. Fourth, the goal of leader fun pursuit is to achieve personal amusement, enjoyment, and fun, instead of using playful activities to perform instrumental purposes (e.g., pretending to play to amuse others). Different from leader behaviors that aim to amuse others (e.g., leader humor) or facilitate a playful work climate for employees (e.g., manager support for fun/ebullient leadership), leader fun pursuit captures behaviors that aim to serve only the leader's playful goals. Fifth, we

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conceptualize leader fun pursuit as a uni-dimensional construct. The core feature of leader fun pursuit is that it revolves around the work, either directly connected to work tasks (i.e., work-embedded fun) or unrelated but occurring during working hours (i.e., diversionary fun), which creates an overall impression of leader fun-oriented behaviors in followers' eyes regardless the specific fun activities (Celestine & Yeo, 2021). In the case of work-embedded fun, leaders proactively craft their work with playful elements, enhancing their enjoyment and engagement. Akin to the clearance process of a game, leaders approach task completion as a "leveling-up" process, which is designed with playful purposes and has the potential to increase their engagement at work (Scharp et al., 2023). In the case of diversionary fun, leaders participate in fun activities unrelated to work tasks, such as simple board games or physical sports (e.g., frisbee) during work hours (Blake et al., 2023; Bunea et al., 2023). Both cases exemplify the behavioral manifestation of leader fun.

Next, we differentiate leader fun pursuit conceptually from other related constructs, including leader humor, manager support for fun/manager-initiated fun, leisureship, and (leader) playful work design.

Leader humor

Humor is a form of social communication aimed at amusement, which can lead to numerous positive work outcomes (Cooper, 2005). Leaders' sense of humor (i.e., a trait-like aspect) and humor expression (i.e., a behavior-like aspect) involve intentional communication with subordinates for amusement (Cooper, 2005; Cooper et al., 2018; Yam et al., 2018). Although both leader humor and leader fun pursuit share an amusement-oriented goal, they possess notable differences. First, leader humor is a communication "directed toward a subordinate" (Cooper et al., 2018, p. 772), but leader fun pursuit is enacted merely for leaders themselves, which may not necessarily involve subordinates or communication. For instance, telling jokes as a specific form of humor requires receivers (e.g., subordinates), but engaging in playful activities can be enacted only by a leader without targets. Second, leader humor is a type of social communication with an emphasis on delivering information that can amuse subordinates (Cooper, 2005). However, leader fun pursuit does not involve communication since it mainly incorporates behaviors that make leaders feel personal enjoyment, amusement, and fun from fun activities. Third, the action of a leader humor expression is typically fleeting once humorous speaking is finished, but fun pursuit can last for a while because behavioral engagement in playful activities is not a one-moment process, thus enabling leaders to continuously feel engaged.

Manager support for fun/manager-initiated fun

Leader fun pursuit focuses on leaders' own engagement in fun activities, while manager support for fun pertains to "the extent to which managers allow and encourage employees to have fun on the job" (Tews et al., 2013, p. 371). Apparently, manager support for fun targets employees rather than leaders. Similarly, manager-initiated fun stems from managerial initiatives or management practices that facilitate employees' engagement in playful activities (Celestine & Yeo, 2021). Despite the common initiator of fun engagement, the intended participants differ between the leader own fun pursuit (i.e., for leaders) and other manager-related fun-supporting constructs (i.e., for followers).

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Leisureship

As conceptualized by Bunea et al. (2023), leisureship refers to the combination of leader role and serious leisure (i.e., "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for participants to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience") (Stebbins, 1982, p. 3). While both leader fun pursuit and leisureship involve fun activities, the contexts in which leaders participate vary. Based on our conceptualization, leader fun pursuit occurs only within the workplace and could be observable by followers. Conversely, leisureship typically happens outside the workplace, remaining unseen by followers unless the leader invites them after work (Bunea et al., 2023).

(Leader) playful work design

As developed by Scharp et al. (2019, 2021, 2023), playful work design refers to "a specific individual work design strategy that builds on play as a cognitive-behavioral orientation and the duality of play" (Scharp et al., 2023, p. 515). Specifically, playful work design incorporates two dimensions: designing fun (i.e., approaching and performing work with a ludic mindset using humor and imagination) and designing competition (i.e., approaching and performing work with an agonistic mindset by formulating objectives and rules). Leader fun pursuit does not involve competition orientation. Despite the conceptual overlap between leader fun pursuit and leader playful work design in leaders' pursuit of fun at work, we argue that both concepts differ in the referent perspective (i.e., followers vs leaders). Specifically, the construct of leader fun pursuit focuses on leaders' explicit observable behaviors, whereas leader playful work design focuses on leaders' internal and unobservable orientation and strategy.

Dual perspective model of Follower's perception of leader fun pursuit

Next, we theorize how leader fun pursuit affects followers' perception and evaluation of the leader. Research on DPM offers valuable insights into how followers perceive and respond to their leaders' behavior (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014; Abele et al., 2021). Social cognition literature posits that social evaluation serves as a cognitive foundation for individuals to socially interact with others, which determines their subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Abele et al., 2021). Among existing theoretical frameworks of social evaluation (e.g., stereotype content model, Fiske et al., 2002; see a review, Abele et al., 2021), DPM serves as a suitable theoretical base to explore the individual-oriented evaluation "in considering self and specific others" (Abele et al., 2021, p. 292). As our research focuses on employees' perception specifically of their leader in the interpersonal context, it is appropriate to draw on DPM to develop our theorizing on how leader fun pursuit is evaluated by followers. Particularly, DPM posits that social perception and evaluation of specific others can be distinguished by two main dimensions: (a) agency, which emphasizes "goal achievement and task functioning (e.g., competence, assertiveness, and decisiveness)"; (b) communion, which refers to the "maintenance of relationships and social functioning (e.g., helpfulness, benevolence, and trustworthiness)" (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, p. 197). The categories of agency and communion have been widely applied in leadership perception research (e.g., Koenig et al., 2011). In this research, we propose that followers perceive,

process, and interpret the leader fun pursuit and develop perceptions of the leader's agency and communion.

Based on DPM, followers tend to interpret leader fun pursuit as a social signal of leader agency for three reasons. First, engaging in fun-focused actions can be viewed as extra-role behavior that goes beyond traditional job requirements, leading to perceptions of a proactive and agentic leader. Individuals who engage in playful activities are viewed as more intelligent and they perform better than those who play less (Proyer, 2011). From the observer's (e.g., employees) perspective, people who play at work may signal their completion of tasks and perhaps overqualification because completing tasks in advance points out the possibility they finish the work ahead of the mean efficiency (Zhang et al., 2016). For example, if a leader engages in sports or dancing activities in the workplace, followers may infer that the leader has accomplished daily task requirements in advance. Otherwise, they should be fully occupied with busy work with no time for playful activities. Second, personal fun engagement is highly independent and self-fulfilling, which signals the leader's inner drive rather than only completing task-related and bottom-line goals (Petelczyc et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022). In this case, followers are more likely to perceive their leaders as highly agentic and proactive. Third, leader fun pursuit implicitly represents the leader's competence in fulfilling task demands and exhibiting high performance because fun-oriented behavior at work probably involves extra-role crafting, which can be interpreted as the completion of focal in-role tasks (Bakker et al., 2012). If a leader fails to meet task requirements, they may be less likely to engage in playful activities because it may threaten their performance, power, and status in leadership positions (Williams, 2014). For instance, when a leader identifies and conveys funny aspects of difficult tasks, it may signal that this leader can handle them well. Thus, we propose:

H1a. : Leader fun pursuit is positively associated with follower perception of leader agency.

Followers may also interpret a leader's fun-oriented behavior as a cue of communion. First, playful behavior is likely to elicit expressed positive emotions that can spread from the leader to followers (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006) through emotional contagion processes (Cooper et al., 2018; Tee, 2015; Visser et al., 2013). Recognizing the emotional benefits, followers are likely to view the leader as warm and friendly. Compared to interacting with a serious leader, followers may view a leader exhibiting playful enjoyment at work as more easy-going, especially when a leader initiates the fun with them. Second, leader fun pursuit can signal to followers that the leader cares about his/her well-being and personal enjoyment rather than focusing solely on task performance (Baptiste, 2009; Chan, 2010) or meeting the bottom-line, which further strengthens followers' perception of leader communion (Judge et al., 2004). Third, leader fun pursuit, as an interpersonal phenomenon, can reduce the organizational hierarchy perceived by followers, making the leader appear more approachable (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Especially when followers join the play, they would perceive a state of relative status equity because games or matches usually require equal rivalry (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). Unlike the conventional leader-follower relationships embedded in organizational hierarchy characterized by asymmetry, the fun pursuit may narrow the hierarchical difference between the leader and followers. Thus, followers may perceive the leader as more communal when he/she engages in high levels of fun-oriented behaviors. We further propose:

H1b. : Leader fun pursuit is positively associated with follower perception of leader communion.

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The downstream influence of follower perceptions on leader effectiveness and leader identification

Furthermore, we propose that followers' perception of leader fun pursuit can influence their evaluations of the leader's effectiveness and relational qualities. In terms of work-related evaluations, a leader's primary responsibility is to fulfill their leadership duties, which are typically assessed as leader effectiveness (Hogan et al., 1994). Specifically, leadership mainly involves social influencing and teamwork (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Therefore, we use leader effectiveness as the outcome to indicate a leader's major fulfillment in a leadership role.

As previously illustrated, leader fun pursuit facilitates followers' perception of the leader's agency, which further serves as the foundation of perceived leader effectiveness. Typically, agentic content is highly aligned with the prototypical impression of a leader (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Specifically, on the one hand, leader fun pursuit can be perceived as highly assertive, competent, capable, and proactive, because fun activities require the manifestation of these agentic attributes. On the other hand, a typical leader is also viewed as assertive, competent, efficient, and confident (Abele & Hauke, 2020). Thus, the high overlap in perception between leader fun pursuit and the prototypical leader role reveals the potential high rating on leader effectiveness because such a fun-oriented leader significantly represents a qualified leader in terms of social perception. Thus, we propose:

> **H2a.** : The positive relationship between leader fun pursuit and leader effectiveness is mediated by follower perception of leader agency.

Besides, we use leader identification to indicate followers' relational attitude toward the leader because it captures the overall followership (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Similar to agentic leadership, prototypical leadership also contains communal and relational concerns (Bor, 2020). Effective leadership not only requires initiating structure but also highlights the importance of interpersonal consideration (Yukl, 2012). Leaders should "show concern and respect for followers, look out for their welfare, and express appreciation and support" (Judge et al., 2004, p. 36). As described above, leader fun pursuit serves as a relational implication for the communal perception of the leader. Such a communal perception is likely to increase followers' relational identification because the leader is viewed as meeting the relational role expectations and requirements (Qu et al., 2015). When a leader is perceived as more likely to enact relational concern toward followers through leader's fun-oriented behaviors, they tend to follow them willingly, thus enhancing leader identification.

> **H2b.** : The positive relationship between leader fun pursuit and leader identification is mediated by the follower's perception of leader communion.

Gender-contingent influence of leader fun pursuit

Given that the general perceptions of agency and communion are highly intertwined with gender (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014), we further propose that the impacts of leader fun pursuit on follower perceptions are contingent on the leader's gender. Specifically, agency is more related to masculinity traits (e.g., decisive, dominant, and aggressive), whereas communion is more related to femininity traits (e.g., empathic, emotional, and dependent) (Powell et al., 2002). In

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this case, the effects of leader fun pursuit on agency and communion perceptions may be different for male leaders and female leaders, according to EVT. EVT posits that behaviors violating stereotype-based expectations would be perceived more extremely in the direction consistent with the expectation (Jussim et al., 1987). In other words, individuals who show constructive deviant behaviors are more likely to be viewed as more positive (Anderson et al., 2006; Dahling et al., 2012; Warren, 2003). We suggest that leader fun pursuit is perceived by followers as a constructive deviant behavior that violates traditional stereotypes of leadership while, as argued above, potentially leading to a more favorable evaluation in both agentic and communion perspectives (Dahling et al., 2012; Vadera et al., 2013; Warren, 2003).

We hence propose that the effects of leader fun pursuit on agency and communion perceptions depend on leader's gender: the effect of leader fun pursuit has distinct paths for male and female leaders, respectively (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). As argued by Jussim et al. (1987), a playful leader exhibits more favorable features than a non-playful leader, which in turn constitutes a constructive expectancy violation and makes the leader be evaluated more positively based upon the corresponding stereotypes (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). Since a male leader is generally viewed as more agentic, the leader's engagement in fun positively violates followers' expectations of the leader and thus makes followers perceive their leader as more agentic. Similarly, a female leader's fun pursuit positively violates the expectations of the leader and then makes followers evaluate the leader as more communal because female leaders are supposed to be communal (Koenig et al., 2011). In other words, a typical agentic person (i.e., a male leader who plays at work) is seen as more agentic because he violates the expectancy toward his formal position, and a typical communal person (i.e., a female leader who plays at work) is seen as more communal because she goes beyond the tradition toward her job responsibility. In summary, as a positive anti-stereotype behavior, leader fun pursuit can alter followers' perception of agency and communion, depending on the leader's gender. Thus, we propose:

H3a. : The relationship between leader fun pursuit and follower perception of leader agency is moderated by leader gender, such that the relationship is stronger when the leader is male.

H3b. : The relationship between leader fun pursuit and follower perception of leader communion is moderated by leader gender, such that the relationship is stronger when the leader is female.

We extend the gender-contingent effect to leader effectiveness and identification. Fun-oriented behavior is viewed as more agentic because it violates the expectancy of male leaders. This higher level of agentic perception is further linked to followers' higher evaluation of the leader effectiveness. Conversely, female leaders who engage in fun at work can be viewed as more communal, leading to a higher level of communal perception, as well as greater identification. In summary, as an effective anti-stereotype behavior, leader fun pursuit can enhance followers' perception of the male leader's agency and further leader effectiveness as well as the female leader's communion and further leader identification. Consequently, we propose:

H4a. : The indirect effect of leader fun pursuit on leader effectiveness via the mediating role of agency perception is moderated by leader gender, such that the indirect effect is stronger when the leader is male.

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H4b. : The indirect effect of leader fun pursuit on leader identification via the mediating role of communion perception is moderated by leader gender, such that the indirect effect is stronger when the leader is female.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted three studies to develop a measure and test our hypothesized model as presented in Figure 1. In Study 1, we developed a scale using 5 different phases for measuring leader fun pursuit and examined its validity and reliability. Specifically, we generated initial items in Phase 1, examined the content validity in Phase 2, examined the factor structure in Phase 3, established convergent and divergent validity in Phase 4, and examined incremental validity and test–retest reliability in Phase 5. In Study 2, we conducted a three-wave field study using a working sample in China to examine our main hypotheses regarding leader fun pursuit at work and its influence on follower perceptions and evaluations of the leader, which provides an ecologically valid test of our hypotheses. In Study 3, we conducted a between-subject randomized pre-registered experiment (https://aspredicted.org/L11_8QP) using another working sample in the UK to establish causality and obtain higher internal validity.

STUDY 1: SCALE DEVELOPMENT

We developed and validated the scale of leader fun pursuit across five main phases using four independent samples, following the measurement development procedures outlined by Hinkin (1998). In Phase 1, we generated an initial set of items with a deductive approach based on our conceptualization (Hinkin, 1995). In Phase 2, we examined the content validity of leader fun pursuit by engaging 20 subject-matter experts in our domain to evaluate how well our scale reflects the theoretical construct we aim to capture (Hinkin & Tracey, 1999). In Phase 3, we examined the factor structure of our scale. In Phase 4, we established its convergent and discriminant validity. In Phase 5, we examined the incremental validity of our scale over and beyond related constructs as well as the test–retest reliability.

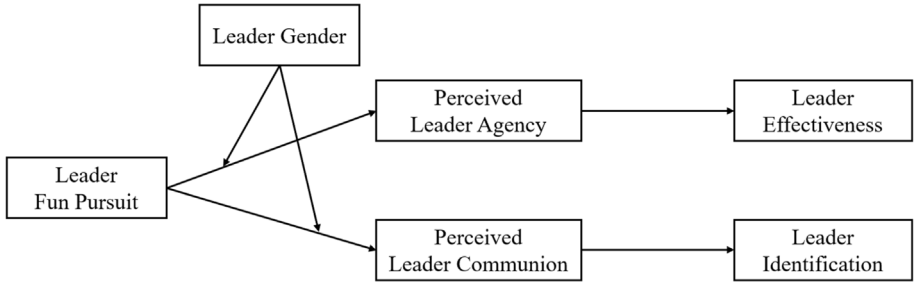

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

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Phase 1: item generation

To begin, each member of the author team independently generated several items based on the conceptual definition. The items were crafted to capture actions (e.g., 'engage', 'pursue', 'arrange'), purposes (e.g., 'have fun'; 'in a playful way'), and work-relevance (e.g., 'during work'; 'at work'), aligning with the core features of our definition. Since our conceptualization does not differentiate work-embedded and diversionary fun, our items contain both forms of leader fun pursuit. Also, we formatted these items to resemble commonly used scales for assessing leader behaviors by followers (e.g., humble leadership, Owens et al., 2013; servant leadership, Liden et al., 2008). Moreover, we ensured that all items met Hinkin's (1998) recommended standards by avoiding (1) ambiguity and confusion, (2) excessive length, (3) double-barreled descriptions, and (4) common biases. The modification results in 11 preliminary items.

Phase 2: content validation and item refinement

To determine whether these items appropriately reflected our conceptualization, following the procedure recommended in Hinkin and Tracey (1999), we invited 20 subject matter experts (SMEs) – doctoral candidates or academic faculty members in industrial/organizational psychology and organizational behavior – to evaluate the extent to which each of the 11 preliminary items and 3 orbiting items accurately reflected the conceptual definition of leader fun pursuit at work using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "*This item does an EXTREMELY BAD job of measuring the concept*", 7 = "*This item does an EXTREMELY GOOD job of measuring the concept*"). The conceptual definition was presented as "a leader's behavior that is carried out with the goal of amusement, enjoyment, and fun at work". To minimize the ordering effect, we presented all items in a random order across SMEs.

The mean of the 11 intended items was 5.56 ($SD = 0.63$). We excluded 3 items[1] with ratings lower than 5.56 due to their relatively low correspondence, resulting in 8 items for further analysis ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 0.55$). As recommended by Colquitt et al. (2019), we used the Hinkin–Tracey correspondence index (*htc*) and Hinkin–Tracey distinctiveness index (*htd*) to examine the definitional correspondence and distinctiveness of the measure. The *htc* and *htd* of this scale were 0.87 and 0.51, respectively, indicating "Strong" evidence of definitional correspondence and "Very Strong" evidence of definitional distinctiveness. These results suggest a good indication of content validity of 8 items. Furthermore, to refine the items for aligning with our conceptualization focusing on followers' observation of the leader fun pursuit, we excluded 4 items[2] that involved unobservable orientation of the leader. Eventually, the final scale consists of 4 items.

Phase 3: confirmation of factor structure

To verify the single underlying factor, we collected data from full-time Chinese employees through Credamo.[3] To qualify for the survey, participants were required to have full-time employment status and a historical approval rate above 90% in Credamo. Out of 253 recruited participants, 29 were excluded because they failed an attention check item, leaving a final sample of 224 employees for factor analysis. The final sample comprised 77 (34.4%) females, with an average age of 33.44 years ($SD = 7.56$) and an average working tenure of 5.74 years ($SD = 6.66$).

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The participants were asked to rate their leader's behaviors with regards to promoting fun at work using the 8-item initial scale developed in Phase 2 on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "*strongly disagree*", 7 = "*strongly agree*"). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was then conducted using a principal component approach without rotation to test the factor structure of the items. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and initial EFA results for the 8 initial items. Following the criteria of item retainment (i.e., factor loading > 0.40, communality > 0.60, Hinkin, 1998), we removed one item due to its low communality value (see Table 1). The revised EFA for the 4-item scale revealed a single-factor structure, explaining 68.60% of the total variance explained, with factor loadings ranging from 0.78 to 0.85. The scale also demonstrated great reliability (Cronbach's α = .87), and no second component was extracted.

Phase 4: convergent and discriminant validation

To assess the convergent and discriminant validity of leader fun pursuit in relation to conceptually related constructs, we collected data from another full-time Chinese employee sample on Credamo, recruiting 273 respondents with the same requirements as in Phase 3. After excluding 25 participants for failing the attention check item, we obtained a final sample of 248 employees for further analysis. The sample included 99 (39.9%) females, with an average age of 34 years (*SD* = 6.97) and an average working tenure of 7.13 years (*SD* = 6.00).

In addition to the developed 4-item scale of leader fun pursuit, we also included measures of (1) leader-expressed humor, (2) leader sense of humor, and (3) manager support for fun. *Leader expressed humor* was measured using a 3-item scale from Cooper et al. (2018). A sample item was "I've seen my leader inject humor into many types of situations when interacting with me". *Leader sense of humor* was measured using a 7-item scale by Yam et al. (2018). A sample item was "My leader can ease a tense situation by saying something funny". *Manager support*

TABLE 1 Content validity (Phase 2), and factor loadings and communality (Phase 3) in Study 1.

Item	*Mean*	*SD*	Factor loading	Communality
1. My leader identifies interesting aspects of his/her job.	5.81	1.09	0.816	0.666
2. My leader seeks opportunities for having fun at work.	5.78	1.12	0.813	0.661
3. My leader proactively crafts his/her job in order to have fun at work. #	5.63	1.27	0.833	0.693
4. My leader pursues fun when he/she is doing his/her job.	5.39	1.29	0.819	0.670
5. My leader enjoys his/her work like playing a game. #	5.11	1.65	0.811	0.658
6. My leader achieves his/her work goals in a playful way. #	5.65	1.32	0.831	0.691
7. My leader engages in activities that he/she can enjoy during work.	5.30	1.36	0.858	0.736
8. My leader engages in playful activities during work.*	5.09	1.50	0.664	0.441

Note: *Mean* and *SD* indicate the ratings of content validation (1 = "*This item does an EXTREMELY BAD job of measuring the concept*", 7 = "*This item does an EXTREMELY GOOD job of measuring the concept*") in Phase 2 (*N* = 20). EFA results were analyzed in Phase 3 (*N* = 224).

*Item 8 was removed because its communality value was lower than the criteria of 0.60 (Hinkin, 1998). # Items 3, 5, and 6 were removed because of misalignment between item frame and conceptualization. The final scale includes 4 items (Items 1, 2, 4, 7).

for fun was measured using a 5-item scale from Tews et al. (2013). A sample item was "My leader encourages employees to have fun on the job". All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 ("*strongly disagree*") to 7 ("*strongly agree*").

We first tested the single-factor structure of our measure of leader fun pursuit using confirmative factor analysis (CFA). The results exhibited a good model fit ($\chi^2[14] = 33.56$, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.03), supporting the uni-dimensionality of leader fun pursuit. We next assessed convergent validity using correlation analysis. As shown in Table 2, leader fun pursuit was significantly correlated with leader-expressed humor ($r = 0.48$, $p < .001$), leader sense of humor ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), and manager support for fun ($r = 0.54$, $p < .001$), indicating strong convergent validity.

Furthermore, we examined discriminant validity through model comparisons of our scale against other related constructs using multiple CFAs (Hinkin, 1998). Specifically, we compared the baseline 4-factor model with alternative models combining various factors. As shown in Table 3, the 4-factor model exhibited a good fit ($\chi^2[203] = 348.11$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.04), which significantly outperformed all alternative models ($\Delta\chi^2[\Delta df \geq 3] \geq 41.37$, all *p*s < .001), thus indicating robust discriminant validity.

Phase 5: incremental validity and test–retest reliability

To examine the incremental validity of leader fun pursuit over and beyond related constructs, we collected two-wave data from full-time U.S. employees in Prolific Academic. We recruited 300 employees at Time 1 (T1) to obtain sufficient responses at Time 2 (T2). After matching the two-wave data, we obtained a final sample of 242 employees for further analysis. The sample included 126 (52.1%) females, with an average age of 40.68 years ($SD = 11.13$) and an average working tenure of 19.83 years ($SD = 10.88$).

We measured several key employee outcomes at T2 (i.e., work engagement, fun work environment, proactive behavior, playful work design, and cynicism) as criteria to evaluate the contribution of each predictor.[4] We also measured the following predictors: leader fun pursuit, manager support for fun, leader expressed humor, leader sense of humor, leader playfulness, and leader playful work design. Detailed information on our measurement is listed in Table 4. Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 5. Additionally, we estimated the measurement invariance of our developed scale, shown in Appendix C.

As shown in Table 6, we conducted regression analyses to examine whether leader fun pursuit could show significant incremental prediction. Among all outcomes, only employees' work engagement ($b = .38$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$) and designing competition ($b = .22$, $SE = .11$,

TABLE 2 Correlations, reliabilities, and descriptive statistics among related constructs in Phase 4 in Study 1.

Construct	*Mean*	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Leader fun pursuit	5.78	0.88	(0.89)			
2. Leader expressed humor	5.95	0.93	0.48***	(0.81)		
3. Leader sense of humor	5.87	0.85	0.43***	0.78***	(0.88)	
4. Manager support for fun	5.73	1.00	0.54***	0.83***	0.74***	(0.87)

Note: $N = 248$.
***$p < .001$.

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TABLE 3 Confirmative factor analysis for discriminant validity in Phase 4 in Study 1.

Model	χ^2	*Df*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)
4-factor model: LFP, LEH, LSH, MSF	348.105	203	0.959	0.953	0.054	0.038	
3-factor model: LFP + LEH, LSH, MSF	476.702	206	0.923	0.913	0.073	0.044	128.597 ($\Delta 3$)***
3-factor model: LFP + LSH, LEH, MSF	488.067	206	0.919	0.910	0.074	0.046	139.962 ($\Delta 3$)***
3-factor model: LFP + MSF, LSH, LEH	389.475	206	0.948	0.941	0.060	0.040	41.37($\Delta 3$)***
2-factor model: LFP + LEH + LSH, MSF	492.145	208	0.919	0.910	0.074	0.045	144.04($\Delta 3$)***
2-factor model: LFP + LEH + MSF, LSH	491.956	208	0.919	0.910	0.074	0.044	143.851 ($\Delta 3$)***
2-factor model: LFP + LSH + MSF, LEH	511.865	208	0.913	0.904	0.077	0.045	163.76($\Delta 3$)***
1-factor model: LFP + LEH + LSH + MSF	513.690	209	0.913	0.904	0.077	0.045	165.585 ($\Delta 3$)***

Note: $N = 248$. LFP = Leader Fun Pursuit; LEH = Leader Expressed Humor; LSH = Leader Sense of Humor; MSF = Manager Support for Fun.
***$p < .001$.

$p < .05$) were significantly predicted by leader fun pursuit, beyond other related constructs. Moreover, we conducted a relative weight analysis to determine the relative importance of our predictors, using the web app (i.e., RWA web) developed by Tonidandel and LeBreton (2015). Results found that leader fun pursuit served as the strongest predictor (relative weight: 24.64%) in predicting employee work engagement over and beyond other related variables.

However, leader fun pursuit did not show the significant additive effect on other outcomes beyond related constructs. In this regard, we think the predictive power of leader fun pursuit may only apply to limited aspects of employee outcomes. Especially, we noticed that leader fun pursuit could significantly predict employee work engagement but not proactive behavior, which are highly interrelated as important outcomes. This may imply the diverse impacts of leader fun pursuit on various employee consequences. In addition, we also examined the test–retest reliability of leader fun pursuit at two waves. The correlation was .76 ($p < .001$), supporting the good test–retest reliability of our scale.

STUDY 2

Participants

To mitigate common method bias, we collected data across three waves with a one-month time lag in between (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We initially invited 400 full-time employees in China to participate in our study in exchange for approximately 4.5 USD as compensation via online advertising. To ensure data quality, we recruited the participants by setting three recruiting criteria: (1) full-time working status, (2) working under the supervision of a direct leader, and (3) working in-office, allowing sufficient interactions with their leaders. After matching datasets

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TABLE 4 Variables and measures in Phase 5 in Study 1.

Variable	Wave	N_{Items}	Source	Sample item	α
Leader fun pursuit	T1/T2	4	The present paper	"My leader identifies interesting aspects of his/her job."	.92/ .91
Related constructs					
Leader playful work design	T1	12	(Scharp et al., 2023)	"My leader uses his/her imagination to make his/her job more interesting."	.95
Manager support for fun	T1	5	(Tews et al., 2013)	"My leader cares about employees having fun on the job."	.94
Leader expressed humor	T1	3	(Cooper et al., 2018)	"My leader jokes around with me,"	.97
Leader sense of humor	T1	7	(Yam et al., 2018)	"My leader says clever things that amuse others"	.98
Leader playfulness	T1	15	(Barnett., 2007)	"My leader is cheerful."	.93
Employee outcomes					
Employee playful work design	T2	12	(Scharp et al., 2023)	"I use my imagination to make my job more interesting."	.93
Employee work engagement	T2	9	(Schaufeli et al., 2006)	"At my work, I feel bursting with energy."	.95
Employee proactive behavior	T2	8	(Parker et al., 2006)	"I suggest ideas for improvements to colleagues."	.95
Employee cynicism	T2	5	(Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003)	"I believe that my organization always does what it says it will do."	.78
Fun work environment	T2	5	(Tews et al., 2014)	"Social events (e.g., holiday parties and picnics) occurred in the place I work."	.90

Note: $N = 242$.

from the three waves and removing careless responses that failed the attention check item, we obtained a final example of 309 participants, with a 77.3% response rate. The final sample consisted of 202 females (65.4%), with an average age of 31.82 ($SD = 6.76$), average organizational tenure of 4.83 years ($SD = 4.88$), and average tenure with a focal leader of 3.63 ($SD = 3.28$). Of the final sample, 111 participants (35.9%) reported to female leaders.

We measured leader variables (i.e., leader fun pursuit, leader gender) and control variables (i.e., age, gender, organizational tenure, tenure with the focal leader, gender authority attitude, and transformational leadership) at Time 1 (T1), perceptions of leader attributes (i.e., perceived leader agency and communion) at Time 2 (T2), and leader outcomes (i.e., leader effectiveness, leader identification) at Time 3 (T3). Since all participants were Chinese, we followed Brislin's (1970) procedures to translate all measurement items into Chinese. Apart from gender variables, all variables were rated by participants on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "*strongly disagree*", 7 = "*strongly agree*"). All items are shown in Appendix A.

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TABLE 5 Descriptive statistics and correlations in Phase 5 in Study 1.

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Leader fun pursuit (time 1)	4.82	1.49													
2. Leader fun pursuit (time 2)	4.79	1.39	.76***												
3. Leader's designing fun	4.43	1.63	.80***	.75***											
4. Leader's designing competition	4.00	1.49	.58***	.56***	.68***										
5. Manager support for fun	4.48	1.61	.79***	.69***	.85***	.52***									
6. Leader expressed humor	4.90	1.69	.71***	.64***	.79***	.52***	.82***								
7. Leader sense of humor	4.47	1.68	.77***	.72***	.86***	.62***	.81***	.88***							
8. Leader playfulness	4.67	1.16	.79***	.73***	.79***	.54***	.78***	.81***	.86***						
9. Employee's designing fun	4.97	1.35	.39***	.46***	.45***	.35***	.43***	.35***	.34***	.35***					
10. Employee's designing competition	4.39	1.51	.37***	.44***	.37***	.54***	.31***	.26***	.31***	.26***	.58***				
11. Employee work engagement	4.77	1.43	.50***	.60***	.45***	.44***	.42***	.37***	.43***	.44***	.49***	.56***			
12. Employee proactive behavior	4.96	1.35	.31***	.36***	.39***	.42***	.32***	.31***	.32***	.29***	.40***	.41***	.50***		
13. Employee cynicism	3.60	1.32	−.24***	−.27***	−.21***	−.10	−.24***	−.22***	−.24***	−.25***	−.14*	−.15*	−.42***	−.11	
14. Employees' fun work environment	2.99	1.34	.40***	.43***	.43***	.38***	.42***	.37***	.42***	.35***	.35***	.44***	.42***	.33***	−.16*

Note: $N = 242$.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

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TABLE 6 Regression results of incremental validation in Phase 5 in Study 1.

Predictor	Employee work engagement		Employee's fun work environment		Employee proactive behavior		Employee's designing fun		Employee's designing competition		Employee cynicism	
	.13 (.11)	.01 (.11)	.18 (.10)	.14 (.11)	.01 (.11)	.01 (.11)	.20 (.10)	.18 (.11)	.16 (.11)	.10 (.12)	−.09 (.11)	−.05 (.12)
Manager support for fun	**[15.06%]**	**[10.93%]**	**[19.62%]**	**[16.17%]**	**[10.62%]**	**[9.15%]**	**[24.51%]**	**[20.94%]**	**[8.01%]**	**[6.36%]**	**[22.17%]**	**[17.08%]**
Leader expressed humor	−.13 (.11) [9.07%]	−.10 (.11) [7.02%]	−.05 (.11) [12.17%]	−.04 (.11) [10.56%]	.10 (.11) [9.92%]	.10 (.11) [8.94%]	.01 (.11) [10.77%]	.01 (.11) [9.4%]	−.08 (.11) [4.31%]	−.06 (.11) [3.73%]	.06 (.11) [14.75%]	.04 (.11) [12.12%]
Leader sense of humor	−.00 (.13) [13.03%]	−.02 (.13) [10.03%]	.18 (.13) [17.53%]	.17 (.13) [15.17%]	−.14 (.13) [9.45%]	−.14 (.13) [8.35%]	−.26* (.13) [10.12%]	−.27* (.13) [8.73%]	−.04 (.14) [7.13%]	−.05 (.14) [6.15%]	−.07 (.14) [19.04%]	−.06 (.14) [15.54%]
Leader playfulness	.35* (.14) [18.94%]	.20 (.15) [13.47%]	−.15 (.14) [9.47%]	−.20 (.15) [8%]	−.06 (.14) [7.36%]	−.06 (.15) [6.3%]	.09 (.14) [11.31%]	.06 (.15) [9.38%]	−.11 (.15) [4.59%]	−.20 (.15) [4.22%]	−.24 (.15) [26.5%]	−.18 (.15) [20.32%]
Leader's designing fun	.04 (.12) [15.26%]	−.05 (.12) [11.43%]	.08 (.12) [18.93%]	.05 (.12) [15.75%]	.22 (.12) [20.67%]	.22 (.12) [18.37%]	.31** (.12) [26.07%]	.30* (.12) [22.5%]	.02 (.13) [12.44%]	−.03 (.13) [10.28%]	.01 (.13) [13.73%]	.04 (.13) [10.85%]
Leader's designing competition	.24** (.07) [28.63%]	.20** (.07) [22.48%]	.15* (.07) [22.29%]	.14 (.07) [19.69%]	.27*** (.07) [41.98%]	.27*** (.08) [39.7%]	.11 (.07) [17.22%]	.10 (.07) [15.4%]	.56*** (.08) [63.52%]	.54*** (.08) [57.19%]	.08 (.08) [3.82%]	.10 (.08) [3.8%]
Leader fun pursuit		.38*** (.10) [24.64%]		.12 (.10) [14.66%]		.002 (.10) [9.21%]		.07 (.07) [13.65%]		.22* (.11) [12.07%]		−.15 (.11) [20.28%]
Model R^2	.26***	.30***	.22***	.22***	.20***	.20***	.23***	.23***	.30***	.31***	.07**	.08**
Δ *model* R^2		.04***		.004		.00		.00		.01*		.01

Note: $N = 242$. Unstandardized coefficients are reported, with standard errors listed within the parentheses. Results of relative weight analysis are shown in the brackets (α = .05, bootstrapping sample size = 10,000). All predictors were measured at Time 1. All outcomes were measured at Time 2. Designing fun and designing competition are two dimensions of playful work design.

*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

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Measures

Leader fun pursuit

We measured leader fun pursuit using the 4-item scale developed in Study 1. We asked employees to rate their leaders' explicit fun-oriented behaviors at work ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Leader gender

We employed a dummy variable to indicate the gender of the direct leader of the employees, with female leaders coded as "0" and male leaders as "1".

Perceived leader agency

We measured perceived leader agency using a 4-item scale adapted from Wojciszke et al. (2009). It was developed for measuring social perceptions of social targets' agency. The original scale contains 5 initial items. Specifically, we removed one item ("My leader is full of energy") due to the conceptual overlap with leader fun pursuit, eventually leaving 4 items ($\alpha = 0.74$). A sample item is "My leader is clever".

Perceived leader communion

We measured perceived leader communion using a 10-item scale integrated by 5 items of morality from Wojciszke et al. (2009) and 5 items of warmth from Goodwin et al. (2014). Echoing recent progress in social cognition literatures (Abele et al., 2021), we included both warmth and morality in our communion measure ($\alpha = 0.92$). A sample item is "My leader is easy-going".

Leader effectiveness

We measured leader effectiveness using a 3-item scale from Douglas and Ammeter (2004). Employees were asked to rate the degree to which their leaders fulfill responsibilities in leadership positions ($\alpha = 0.72$). A sample item is "My leader is effective in meeting the needs of the organization".

Leader identification

We measured employees' identification with their leader using a 7-item scale from Shamir et al. (1998). This scale measured the degree to which employees trust, respect and willingly follow their leader ($\alpha = 0.87$). A sample item is "I respect my leader".

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Control variables

First, we controlled for *demographic variables* (i.e., gender, age, organizational tenure, and tenure with leader). Second, we controlled *gender authority attitude* because it captures participants' individual differences in their cognitive biases regarding the implicit relationship between gender and leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Biased gender authority attitudes may alter the evaluation of female leaders' fun pursuit due to the traditional stereotype of male leadership (Koenig et al., 2011). We used a 6-item scale ($\alpha = 0.85$) adapted from Rudman and Kilianski (2000) to measure attitudes toward female authority. A sample item is "In general, female make better leaders than men do". In addition, we controlled for *transformational leadership* because it represents an effective approach of leadership behavior and may directly influence how employees evaluate their leaders. We used a short measure of transformational leadership with 7 items ($\alpha = 0.82$) from Carless et al. (2000). A sample item is "My leader treats employees as individuals, supports and encourages their development".

Results and discussion

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 7.0 on all focal variables, including leader fun pursuit, perceived leader agency, perceived leader communion, leader effectiveness, and leader identification. The hypothesized five-factor model revealed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(340) = 751.25$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.06. Moreover, the fit indices of the five-factor model were significantly better than all other alternative models ($28.24 \leq \Delta\chi^2 \leq 551.82$, all ps $< .001$), indicating good discriminant validity.

Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations), correlations, and reliabilities of all variables. To test our hypotheses, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses both with and without the set of control variables (i.e., employees' gender, age, organizational tenure, tenure with the leader, gender authority attitude, and transformational leadership) to ensure the robustness of our findings, which are shown in Table 8. H1 predicted that leader fun pursuit was positively related to perceived leader agency and communion. As Models 2 and 4 showed, leader fun pursuit was significantly related to perceived leader communion ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), but not to perceived leader agency ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, $p > .05$). Thus, H1a was not supported, while H1b was supported. In addition, H3 predicted the moderating effect of leader gender. As Models 2 and 4 showed, the interaction between leader fun pursuit and leader gender was significantly related to perceived leader communion ($b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .05$), but not to perceived leader agency ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, $p > .05$). Thus, H3a was not supported, while H3b was supported. We further conducted a simple slope test to examine the moderation hypothesis (H3b). As Figure 2 shows, leader fun pursuit was more strongly related to perceived leader communion when the leader is female ($b = 0.24$, $p < .001$), whereas leader fun pursuit was not significantly related to perceived leader communion when the leader is male ($b = 0.09$, $p > .05$), further supporting H3b.

To examine the mediation and moderated mediation hypotheses, we used the PROCESS macro with bootstrapping procedures (resampling size = 5000) to estimate confidence intervals (CIs) (Hayes, 2017). H2 predicted that perceived leader agency mediated the relationship between leader fun pursuit and leader effectiveness and perceived leader communion mediated the relationship between leader fun pursuit and leader identification. The indirect effect of leader fun pursuit on leader effectiveness via perceived leader agency was not significant

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TABLE 7 Descriptive statistics and correlations in Study 2.

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Age	31.82	6.76												
2. Gender	0.35	0.48	−.08											
3. Organizational tenure	4.83	4.88	.04	.10										
4. Tenure with leader	3.63	3.28	−.03	.12*	.84***									
5. Gender authority attitude	4.17	1.21	−.01	.38***	.05	.08								
6. Transformational leadership	6.04	0.64	.04	.06	.09	.05	−.11							
7. Leader fun pursuit	5.59	0.96	.03	.04	.08	.08	−.16**	.59***						
8. Leader gender	0.64	0.48	−.05	.36***	−.04	.03	.45***	−.07	−.04					
9. Perceived leader agency	6.13	0.55	−.003	.06	.03	−.02	−.06	.57***	.30***	−.04				
10. Perceived leader communion	5.80	0.82	.04	.05	.15**	.13*	−.17**	.67***	.54***	−.10	.63***			
11. Leader effectiveness	5.98	0.65	−.06	.08	.10	.09	−.14*	.55***	.37***	−.08	.63***	.61***		
12. Leader identification	5.87	0.78	.03	.06	.16**	.14*	−.12*	.60***	.53***	−.08	.60***	.79***	.72***	

Note: $N = 309$. Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

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TABLE 8 Regression analytical results in Study 2.

Variable	Leader agency		Leader communion		Leader effectiveness		Leader identification	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Intercept	6.13***	6.16***	5.80***	5.87***	5.98***	6.09***	5.87***	5.80***
Control variable	(.03)	(.11)	(.04)	(.14)	(.03)	(.11)	(.03)	(.11)
Age		−.00 (.00)		.00 (.00)		−.00 (.00)		−.00 (.00)
Gender		.05 (.06)		.07 (.08)		.09 (.06)		.01 (.06)
Organizational tenure		.00 (.001)		.001 (.001)		.00 (.001)		.00 (.001)
Tenure with leader		−.001 (.001)		.001 (.002)		.001 (.001)		.001 (.001)
Gender authority attitude		−.01 (.03)		−.04 (.03)		−.04 (.03)		.004 (.03)
Transformational leadership		.33*** (.03)		.44*** (.04)		.10* (.04)		.01 (.04)
Independent variable								
Leader fun pursuit	.16*** (.03)	−.03 (.03)	.44*** (.04)	.16*** (.04)	.06 (.03)	.02 (.04)	.12*** (.03)	.12*** (.03)
Leader gender	−.02 (.03)	−.01 (.03)	−.07 (.04)	−.03 (.04)	−.02 (.03)	−.01 (.03)	−.01 (.03)	−.01 (.03)
Interaction term								
Leader fun pursuit × leader gender	.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)	−.09* (.04)	−.07* (.03)	−.04 (.03)	−.04 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.02 (.03)
Mediator								
Leader agency					.27*** (.04)	.25*** (.05)	.14*** (.03)	.15*** (.04)
Leader communion					.18*** (.04)	.14*** (.04)	.46*** (.04)	.45*** (.04)
Model R^2	.09***	.33***	.31***	.49***	.48***	.50***	.66***	.66***

Note: $N = 309$. Unstandardized coefficients (standard error) were reported.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

($Effect_{indirect} = -.02$, $SE = .02$, 95%CI = [−.06, .03]), as was the indirect effect of leader fun pursuit on leader identification via perceived leader communion ($Effect_{indirect} = .10$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI = [.01, .23]), supporting H2b but not H2a. H4 predicted that these mediation effects were moderated by leader gender. However, the index of moderated mediation for the effects on leader effectiveness was not significant (*Estimate* = .02, $SE = .04$, 95%CI = [−.08, .09]), not supporting H4a. Similarly, the index of moderated mediation for the effects on leader identification was not significant (*Estimate* = −.10, $SE = .09$, 95%CI = [−.27, 0.07]), failing to support H4b. Hence, the moderated mediation hypotheses were not supported in Study 2.

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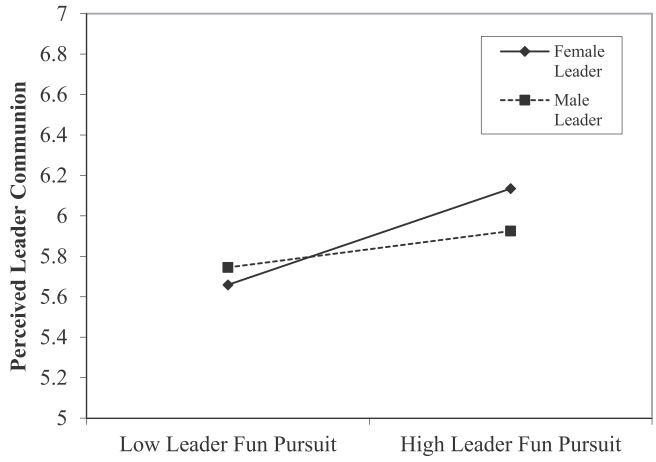

FIGURE 2 The moderating effect of leader gender in the relationship between leader fun pursuit and perceived leader communion in Study 2.

Our findings indicate that leader fun pursuit is perceived as more agentic and communal, and these beneficial effects can be further extended to employees' evaluation of leader effectiveness and their identification with leaders. Such results preliminarily supported our basic assumption that leader fun pursuit is viewed as a positive behavior in followers' eyes. We also found that the communion-enhancing effect was stronger for female leaders, revealing that leader fun pursuit has additional benefits for women.

Supplementary analysis

To further extend our findings and examine the employee implications of leader fun pursuit, we also measured several employee outcomes at T3 in addition to leadership outcomes in our hypotheses. Regression results indicated that, after controlling all variables included in previous analyses, leader fun pursuit was positively related to employee work engagement ($b = 0.24$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), employee proactive behavior ($b = 0.15$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), employee role performance ($b = 0.11$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), organizational citizenship behavior ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), and voice behavior ($b = 0.17$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), supporting the beneficial effects of leader fun pursuit on employees work behaviors.

STUDY 3: SCENARIO-BASED EXPERIMENT

Participants

We recruited 280 full-time working adults from the UK on Prolific Academic. Eligibility criteria for participation included (1) being full-time employed and (2) having a minimum 90% approval rate on Prolific. One participant was excluded for failing the attention check item. Thus, we obtained a final sample of 279 participants. The average age was 37.65 ($SD = 11.24$) and

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167 participants (59.9%) were females. Each participant received £2 as compensation for their participation. Prior to our data collection, we pre-registered this study on AsPredicted (https://aspredicted.org/L11_8QP).[5]

Procedures

To examine the interactive effect between leader fun pursuit and leader gender, we adopted a 2 (leader fun pursuit: high vs low) × 2 (leader gender: female vs male) between-subject experimental design. We used a scenario-based experimental design to provide causal evidence for our conceptual model, following the precedent set by extant studies testing leader behavior and employees' perceptions (e.g., Kim et al., 2021). The experiment consisted of two parts within a workplace simulation context. In Part 1, participants read text material that depicted the leader's behavior and potential interaction with others and were asked to imagine working under the supervision of this leader. In Part 2, participants were instructed to answer a series of questions encompassing our measures and one open-ended question probing their subjective impressions of the leader.

We originally developed our manipulation material for leader fun pursuits by creating text descriptions based on our conceptualization and the scale we developed in Study 1. Leader's gender was manipulated with both texts and avatars. The author team deliberated and refined the materials through numerous rounds to finalize the manipulation content. We conducted a pilot study on Prolific with another preliminary sample of 50 participants prior to data collection in Study 3, and its preliminary results confirmed the effectiveness of our manipulation, revealing a significant difference between leader fun pursuit between high and low conditions ($M_{low} = 2.23$, $SD_{low} = 1.32$, $M_{high} = 6.27$, $SD_{high} = 0.83$, $t[50] = 12.83$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.09$). Thus, we proceeded to use this manipulation material in our formal experiment (Study 3).

In the high leader fun pursuit condition, the text material was presented as follows:

> Please imagine that you have been working in a digital marketing team at an IT company for over a year, and your team leader is Ella/Sam. Ella/Sam is responsible for directing and guiding your team members to work on projects. Since you joined the team, you have noticed that she/he is a leader who enjoys pursuing fun at work. As a leader, Ella/Sam is good at seeking fun in her/his position. For instance, while completing tasks, Ella/Sam always approaches work goals in playful ways, and she/he seems to accomplish her/his work with a lot of fun. In addition, Ella/Sam always identifies interesting elements in her/his daily tasks. Consequently, your team members have concluded that Ella/Sam, as a leader, is capable of finding enjoyment in work, because she/he often appears to derive pleasure from her/his work as if she/he is playing.

In the low leader fun pursuit condition, the text material was presented as follows:

> Please imagine that you have been working in a digital marketing team at an IT company for over a year, and your team leader is Ella/Sam. Ella/Sam is responsible for directing and guiding your team members to work on projects. Since you joined the team, you have noticed that she/he is a leader who does not enjoy pursuing fun

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at work. As a leader, Ella/Sam is not good at seeking fun in her/his position. For instance, while completing tasks, Ella/Sam never approaches work goals in playful ways, and she/he does not seem to accomplish her/his work with a lot of fun. In addition, Ella/Sam never identifies interesting elements in her/his daily tasks. Consequently, your team members have concluded that Ella/Sam, as a leader, is not capable of finding enjoyment in work, because she/he rarely appears to derive pleasure from her/his work as if she/he is playing.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Our manipulation of leader gender varied across text descriptions in female vs male conditions, indicated by the leader's name (i.e., Ella vs Sam) and corresponding pronouns (i.e., his/her). We additionally used avatars to signify the leader's gender. We used the 4-item scale developed in Study 1 as a manipulation check. We measured all items on a 7-point Likert Scale as same in Study 2.

Measures

Perceived leader agency

We used the same 4-item scale in Study 2. To make the items more readable and understandable, we instructed participants to indicate their impression of their leader Ella/Sam with the format of "Based on the material, I think she/he is ...". Cronbach's α was 0.86.

Perceived leader communion

We used the same 10-item scale in Study 2. The instruction was identical to the measure of perceived leader agency. Cronbach's α was 0.90.

Leader identification

We measured participants' identification with their leader Ella/Sam using the same 7-item scale in Study 2. Cronbach's α was 0.94.

Leader effectiveness

We measured participants' evaluation of the leader effectiveness of Ella/Sam using the same 3-item scale in Study 2. Cronbach's α was 0.90.

Control variables

We controlled for participants' demographic variables (i.e., age, gender). To account for the potential influence of participants' inherent beliefs regarding the role of leader and gender bias of leader evaluation, we measured (1) belief in leader prototype and (2) attitude toward gender

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authority. *Belief in leader prototype* was measured using 10 items of agency ($\alpha = 0.75$) and communion measure ($\alpha = 0.79$) from Hoyt et al. (2012). Participants were asked to rate their personal beliefs regarding the extent to how much the items match the features of a leader. We instructed with the format of "I believe, an effective leader is ...". *Attitude toward gender authority* was measured using the same 6-item scale ($\alpha = 0.79$) in Study 2.

Supplementary measures and explorative analysis

Besides multiple-choice measures of leadership perceptions, as supplementary measures, we collected participants' responses to an open-ended question "Please describe your impression of Ella/Sam" with approximately 50 words. The details of its method and research findings are shown in Appendix B.

Results

Manipulation check

We conducted an independent sample *t*-test to examine the manipulation effectiveness of leader fun pursuit. Results showed that participants in the high leader fun pursuit condition rated their leader with a higher leader fun pursuit score ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 0.72$) than those in the low leader fun pursuit condition ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.02$). The difference in leader fun pursuit score between the two conditions was significant (t [277] $= 40.26$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 4.82$). Thus, our manipulation of the leader fun pursuit at work was effective.

Hypothesis testing

Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 9. We conducted a series of (M) ANCOVA including control variables to examine our main hypotheses. Regarding H1, we found that agency and communion perceptions were both rated significantly higher in high leader fun pursuit condition (vs low leader fun pursuit condition), $F(2, 269) = 300.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.69$, supporting H1. Specifically, agency perception was rated higher in high leader fun pursuit condition ($M = 5.60$, $SE = 0.07$) versus in low leader fun pursuit condition ($M = 5.28$, $SE = 0.07$). Communion perception was rated higher in high leader fun pursuit condition ($M = 5.90$, $SE = 0.07$) versus in low leader fun pursuit condition ($M = 3.44$, $SE = 0.07$). Regarding H2, we found that perceived agency mediated the relationship between leader fun pursuit and leader effectiveness ($Effect_{\text{indirect}} = 0.27$, $SE = 0.09$, 95%CI = [0.10, 0.45]), and that perceived communion mediated the relationship between leader fun pursuit and leader identification ($Effect_{\text{indirect}} = 1.67$, $SE = 0.20$, 95%CI = [1.28, 2.06]). Thus, H2a and H2b were supported.

Regarding H3, we found that the interactive effect between leader fun pursuit and leader gender was non-significant on agency perception (F[1, 270] $= 0.47$, $p = .41$, $\eta^2 = 0.003$) but significant on communion perception (F[1, 270] $= 6.88$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = 0.033$). We further conducted the simple effect analysis and presented the results in Figures 3 and 4. Our results showed no significant difference in agency perception between male ($M = 5.57$, $SE = 0.10$) and female leader ($M = 5.62$, $SE = 0.10$) in high leader fun pursuit conditions, as well as no

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TABLE 9 Descriptive statistics and correlations in Study 3.

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Age	37.65	11.24										
2. Gender	0.40	0.49	−.04									
3. Attitude toward gender authority	3.73	0.94	.13*	−.18**								
4. Belief in leader communion prototype	5.01	0.86	−.09	.04	.03							
5. Belief in leader agency prototype	5.90	0.65	−.07	.08	−.01	.51***						
6. Leader fun pursuit manipulation	0.50	0.50	.06	.02	.06	−.07	−.03					
7. Leader gender manipulation	0.50	0.50	.01	−.03	.01	−.10	−.06	−.004				
8. Perceived leader agency	5.44	0.87	.01	.06	−.09	.22***	.20***	.16**	−.01			
9. Perceived leader communion	4.69	1.51	−.004	.03	.02	.08	.08	.80***	.04	.38***		
10. Leader effectiveness	5.09	1.10	−.03	.06	−.01	.14*	.16**	.16**	.06	.68***	.39***	
11. Leader identification	4.82	1.16	−.03	.02	.08	.18**	.11	.40***	.07	.62***	.65***	.71***

Note: $N = 279$. Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1. Leader Fun Pursuit Manipulation: Low = 0, High = 1.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

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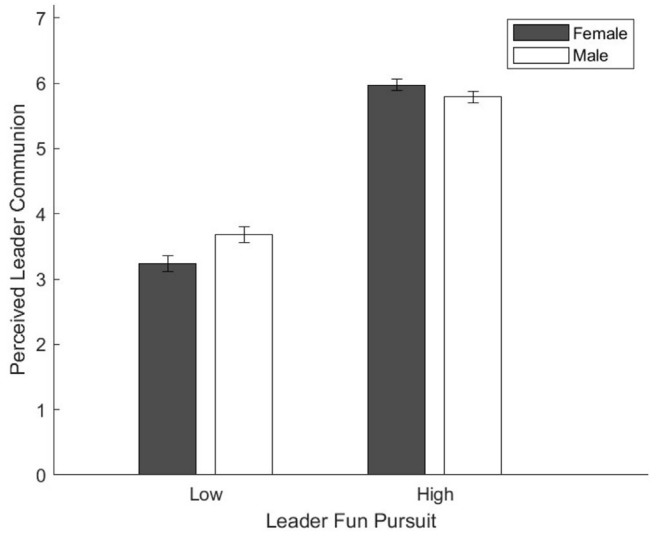

FIGURE 3 Interaction of leader fun pursuit and leader gender on communion perception in Study 3.

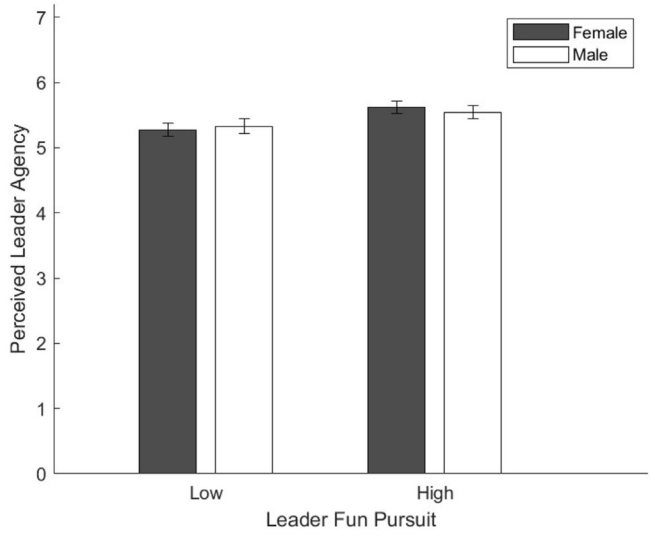

FIGURE 4 Interaction of leader fun pursuit and leader gender on agency perception in Study 3.

significant difference in agency perception between male ($M = 5.34$, $SE = 0.10$) and female ($M = 5.23$, $SE = 0.10$) leader in low fun pursuit conditions. However, communion perception was higher for female leaders ($M = 5.97$, $SE = 0.10$) than for male leader ($M = 5.83$, $SE = 0.10$) in high fun pursuit conditions, whereas it was lower for female leader ($M = 3.20$, $SE = 0.10$) than for male leaders ($M = 3.69$, $SE = 0.10$) in low fun pursuit conditions. Thus, H3a was not supported but H3b was supported. Regarding H4, we found that the index of moderated mediation for the effects on leader effectiveness was not significant ($Estimate = -0.14$, $SE = 0.18$, 95%CI = [−0.49, 0.21]), and that the index of moderated mediation for the effects on

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leader identification was significant (*Estimate* = −0.43, *SE* = 0.15, 95%CI = [−0.73, −0.15]). Thus, H4a was not supported but H4b was supported.

Through our experimental study, we replicated the overall research findings in Study 2. We found that leader fun pursuit had a significant impact in enhancing follower perceptions of leader agency and communion. Moreover, the communion-enhancing effect was stronger for female leader Ella, but the agency-enhancing effect was not found. Across Studies 2 and 3, which used different methods (multi-wave survey vs experiment) and different samples (China vs UK), the consistent findings reveal the beneficial impact of leader fun pursuit and its extra contribution to female leaders on communal perception.

DISCUSSION

Since fun-oriented practice has gradually become prevalent in organizations, understanding whether and how leaders fun pursuit results in beneficial effects are theoretically and practically important. Across three studies, we conceptualized leader fun pursuit and found its positive influences on followers' perceptions of leader attributes as well as its impacts on leader effectiveness and identification. Moreover, we identified a gender-contingent effect of leader fun pursuit such that female leaders benefit more from play for enhancing their communal impression in followers. Interestingly, this effect was not found for male leaders on the agentic perception, highlighting the specific benefits of fun pursuits for female leaders.

Furthermore, following the suggestions by Luoma and Hietanen (2024) of taking a reflexive approach toward quantitative research, we critically evaluate the alignment of our methodological choices, analytical approaches, and the potential (unintended) consequences of these choices. Mapping the different Desiderata for theoretical explanations (Luoma & Hietanen, 2024, p.9), the main purpose of our paper clearly falls into "edification" – i.e., deviating from common beliefs and prototypical leadership paradigms and exploring the novel and positive side of leader fun pursuit. The purpose of edification is further justified through the consideration of epistemic significance (Luoma & Hietanen, 2024, p.11) to the two-fold "stakeholders" of this research: to the management research community, we explore the novel idea of leader fun pursuit and its correlators; to leaders of organizations, we illuminate the potential consequences of them pursuing fun. Our main pursuit of edification leads to the extensive and systematic applications of exploratory methodology, especially in the first two studies: we developed the psychological scale from scratch, examined its properties through multiple exploratory tests, and identified a series of factors associated with our concept of leader fun pursuits. However, extending Luoma and Hietanen (2024)'s dichotomous classification for management research, we argue that one piece of management research may encompass multiple sub-studies that lean toward "predictive" purpose and "explorative" purpose, distinctively. In so doing, the hybrid approach moves beyond mere "edification" and could establish a novel and meaningful pattern that is unlikely to be a false positive or "hallucination" (Luoma & Hietanen, 2024, p.11). Reflecting on this point, our study 3 serves as a predictive-based, conceptual replication of study 2 to safeguard against our main findings being mere random or false patterns. With the purpose of accurate prediction and stakeholders being practitioners who want to utilize these findings in practice, a randomized, pre-registered experimental design offers a strong and conceptualized verification of the positive effect of signaling fun pursuits for leadership perceptions. We argue such a multi-study design serving the dual purpose of edification and prediction contributes to different purposes of quantitative research.

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Theoretical contributions

Our research primarily makes three important theoretical contributions. First, by introducing the concept of leader fun pursuit, we extend the workplace fun literature (e.g., Michel et al., 2019) and play-at-work literature (e.g., Petelczyc et al., 2018) by shifting the focus from employees to leaders. Extant research on play predominantly focused on employees' fun-oriented behaviors and identified its potential positive influence on their intrapersonal outcomes (Petelczyc et al., 2018). More broadly, research on workplace fun mainly emphasizes that fun events induce employees' positive emotions and appraisals, whereas the trickle-down effect of leader fun pursuit is neglected. Specifically, research has found that employee's experienced fun at work is positively associated with well-being and attitude outcomes (e.g., lower stress and burnout, higher job satisfaction and psychological safety) and work outcomes (e.g., creativity, learning, proactivity, and work engagement) (Michel et al., 2019; Petelczyc et al., 2018; Scharp, Bakker, & Breevaart, 2022).

In terms of leader's fun, conceptual work suggests that fun-oriented behavior can be regarded as an effective way of leadership development (Kark, 2011) and as an off-work serious leisure outside the workplace (Bunea et al., 2023). In contrast, empirical evidence found that leader's fun pursuit was also shown to undermine not only leader performance but also firm performance (Biggerstaff et al., 2017). Hence, previous research emphasized leader fun pursuit either before the formal work (i.e., leadership training and development) or after work (i.e., leisureship), whereas at-work fun pursuit that can be observed by followers and may convey interpersonal influence is yet to be examined. Our research thus advances workplace fun and play research by focusing on the interpersonal impact of leader fun pursuit. By developing the conceptualization and measure of leader fun pursuit, we also provide possibilities that future research can further explore how and when leader fun pursuit serves as an interpersonally beneficial behavior or detrimental behavior.

Second, by identifying fun-oriented behavior as a positive violation of leaders' image, we extend the leadership literature by identifying a novel set of leader behaviors focusing on fun-oriented goals that are not directly linked to formal work responsibilities. The notion of leader fun pursuit seems challenging to traditional leadership paradigms as it does not involve established effective leadership (i.e., task-, relationship-, and change-oriented) (Yukl, 2012). Despite fun at work being positioned out of the job scope of leaders, our findings reveal that leader fun pursuit is effective because it leads to followers' perceptions of higher leader agency and communion, which are generally recognized as prototypical leader attributes (Zheng et al., 2018).

In addition, we found that these perceptions further enhance followers' evaluation of leader effectiveness and their relational identification with the leader, pointing out the job and interpersonal benefits of leader fun pursuit. Specifically, leader fun pursuit enhances both relational outcome (i.e., leader identification) and task outcome (i.e., leader effectiveness), showing that it is generally positive in terms of interpersonal evaluation. Traditional leadership research mainly identifies task- and relationship-focused behaviors as effective leadership approaches, whereas leader behaviors outside these classical categories receive little attention (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Judge et al., 2004). Our findings not only provide empirical evidence to balance the negative view of leader fun pursuit by revealing its positive side (Biggerstaff et al., 2017), but also offer a novel approach to effective leadership even when leaders just have fun at work instead of facilitating task goals or building relationships with followers.

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Third, drawing on EVT, we shed light on a new behavioral approach for female and male leaders respectively by examining the gender-contingent effect of leader fun pursuit. Interestingly, we found leader fun pursuit is more beneficial for female leaders than male leaders though it is generally promising for both genders. Female leaders are inherently required to balance the potential tension between agency and communion in their leadership enactment (Koenig et al., 2011; Schock et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2018). Due to the deep social expectations of female leadership, demands of agency and communion constitute a salient paradox for female leaders (Kark et al., 2012).

Our research opens new opportunities to break down gender stereotypes in leadership. We argue that leader fun pursuit may have stronger benefits on leadership evaluations especially when exhibited by female leaders, and it can thus be seen as a potential way to mitigate positivity biases in favor of male leaders with regard to the prototypicality of effective leaders. In this case, our research offers a novel perspective to deal with this tension by introducing the fun-oriented behavioral approach at work, especially for female leaders. In doing so, female leaders can be recognized as more agentic and even more communal than male leaders, which further strengthens followers' evaluation of their effectiveness and leader identification. Hence, we contribute to female leadership literature by adding a new behavioral approach that can benefit female leaders.

Practical implications

Our research delivers some practical implications to organizations and leaders. In recent years, organizations gradually embrace fun and play in the workplace and facilitated top-down fun-oriented design for employee productivity and commitment (Celestine & Yeo, 2021; Petelczyc et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022; Tews et al., 2013, 2017). Literature on adult play also offered interesting perspectives that fun activities can "establish a safe and secure relationship context that is essential to building trust and a strong emotional connection" (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). Since fun pursuit involves actions related to children's spontaneous engagement, we believe that exerting fun at work can facilitate a positive spillover effect in the workplace as working adults can somewhat relate to their "inner child". As we found across our studies, leader fun pursuit facilitated positive outcomes for not only leaders themselves but also followers. Our findings suggest that organizations can encourage their leaders to achieve fun goals as an important way to develop their leadership skills (Kark, 2011). Since fun-oriented leaders can be perceived as more positive in followers' eyes, encouraging leader fun pursuit may serve as an economical way to enhance their leader potency and effectiveness. Particularly, as we emphasize that fun pursuit incorporates both work-embedded and diversionary aspects, a leader can initiate fun in various forms, including identifying fun aspects in work tasks and engaging in fun activities outside tasks (e.g., sports, games, dancing). To this end, organizations can regularly provide fun-oriented practices (e.g., LEGO; board games) or playful work (e.g., tasks with fun and amusing objectives) for leaders.

In addition to the organizational top-down external approach, leaders can also attempt to seek fun and joy in daily work by themselves intrinsically. By enacting fun behaviors, leaders can not only experience higher engagement at work but also leave more agentic and communal impressions on followers, which further promote followers' identification with leaders and their evaluation of leader effectiveness. Furthermore, female leaders could manifest more play at work because of the constructive expectancy violation. For instance, they may interact with

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some games or amusing elements at work when followers can observe their behaviors. By doing this, leaders can also instill a fun-oriented practice in their teams to facilitate employees' thriving and engagement (Han et al., 2024; Scharp et al., 2022).

Limitations

Despite the use of three complementary studies with different methodologies, our research has some potential drawbacks. First, we used followers' self-report to measure all variables in three studies. Despite our focus on how leader fun pursuit affects followers' perception, the exclusive self-report may induce common method bias problems (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). Although our study used a time-lagged design to reduce the concern of common method bias, we encourage future research to further examine the influences of leader fun pursuit through both leader's self-rating and followers' perception.

Second, our research only explored the social perception effect of leader fun pursuit, whereas other consequences were not investigated to fully capture its downstream impact. Future research may explore other underlying mechanisms and consequences of leader fun pursuit. For instance, leaders fun pursuit may facilitate employees' fun engagement at work via the trickle-down effects. In addition, it is worth investigating how and when leader fun pursuit would affect followers' extra-role behaviors, such as citizenship behaviors.

Third, although we conducted a scenario-based experiment to address the endogeneity problem and attempted to reveal the causality of our model, this type of experimental design has been criticized for several aspects (e.g., lacking external validity) (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Future research may adopt other empirical designs with higher external and ecological validity (e.g., lab experiment, quasi-experiment, experience sampling, observation, and qualitative methods) to reveal the phenomenon dynamics of leader fun pursuit at work.

Fourth, our conceptualization of leader agency only focuses on the overall effect, whereas the nuanced impacts of different facets of agency were not examined. Ma et al. (2022) proposed a six-dimension framework to differentiate the prescriptive and proscriptive agentic factors that may have different impacts on men and women leaders (Ma et al., 2022). Future research may have a closer look at how women and men leaders can benefit from fun in various forms of agency.

Fifth, our conceptualization of leader fun pursuit does not specify fun activities, which may have different forms and consequences. As Celestine and Yeo (2021) proposed the four-category framework of play at work, we thus call for future research to examine the differential effect of various forms of leader fun pursuit. For instance, leader's golf playing might be perceived negatively, but leader's playful work design could lead to positive evaluations (Biggerstaff et al., 2017; Scharp et al., 2023).

Future research directions

In conclusion, our research introduces the concept of leader fun pursuit and tests its positive influence on followers' perception, providing opportunities for scholars to investigate a wider variety of aspects related to this concept. First, we encourage scholars to explore the individual and organizational antecedents of leader fun pursuit. Here we examined its consequences, but another important question is why/when leaders choose to engage in fun

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activities at work, since leaders are usually occupied by overwhelming workloads and left with no energy and time for fun. Uncovering the antecedents of leader fun pursuit may help us understand the underpinnings of this concept better. For example, one potential reason is that leaders use fun to reconnect to their "inner child" (Sjöblom et al., 2018), which traces back to leaders' personalities and early life experiences. Future research could explore the impacts of leaders' attachment styles, openness to experience, and self-esteem on their fun engagement at work.

Second, we encourage scholars to explore the interaction between fun and task engagement to identify the optimal level of fun at work. Excessive playful engagement may harm work performance and distract leaders' attention from formal responsibilities. Based on the too-much-of-a-good-thing effect (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), the moderate level of leader fun pursuit may exert the best influence. Thus, future scholars may investigate when and how incorporating fun into leadership brings benefits and harms.

Third, echoing Tews et al. (2013)'s research on manager support for fun, our research also implies the positive influences of leader fun pursuit may promote a pleasant work environment. Given leaders' influential roles in workplaces, whose behaviors are closely followed by the employees of the organizations (Sturm et al., 2021), their engagement in fun activities may potentially set a cultural tone that encourages employee enjoyment at work and reduces their stress levels. Future research can further examine whether and how leader fun pursuit benefits the outcomes of teams and individual employees.

Fourth, leader fun pursuit may represent various images across different jobs, industries, or sectors, which may affect the expectation violation process of followers' perception. In some fun-involved industries (e.g., art, game, film, and music), leader fun pursuit may induce weaker expectation violations compared to other industries. Similarly, employees in jobs with more maintenance goals (e.g., safety) may probably view leader fun as a dangerous signal as it may undermine goal accomplishment. Thus, future research can expand the focus on the contingency effect on leader fun pursuit. Furthermore, employees' perceptions may shift over time from initial surprise or disapproval to eventual internalization of leaders' playful behaviors. Future research could combine temporal factors with leader fun pursuit and explore employees' adaptive processes and their long-term effects on leadership effectiveness.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflict of financial or competing interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data are available upon reasonable request from the first author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All data collection procedures performed in the studies were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional and National Research Committees and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Participants were informed about the research and its content and voluntarily agreed to participate prior to providing their consent.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The three excluded items due to lower correspondence ratings are: (1) "My leader has his/her ways to amuse himself/herself at work regardless of work-related progress" ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.69$); (2) "My leader deals with pleasant tasks rather than boring tasks at work" ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.73$); (3) "My leader plays PC/phone games in the workplace" ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.94$).

[2] We excluded these four items during the review process. In this case, we kept 8 items in Phase 3 for analytical transparency, and we further used revised 4-item scale in Phase 4 and 5.

[3] Credamo is an online research platform in China similar to Prolific and Amazon MTurk, known for its reliable participant data quality (e.g., Hsee & Li, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022)

[4] We tried to collect multi-source data in Phase 5. Due to the rules in Prolific, we eventually collected multi-source data from 25 leader-employee dyads. More details and results are shown in Appendix D.

[5] We claim one discrepancy between our pre-registration and the present article: the concept labeling. During the review process, we change the label from "leader play" to "leader fun pursuit" because our measurement reflects more accurately upon fun-oriented behaviors rather than merely playful behaviors. As indicated by Michel et al. (2019, p. 100), "humor and play are specific tactics for fostering fun and are more narrowly focused constructs". We gratefully concurred with this perspective suggested by one reviewer and thus altered our labeling in this article.

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