



# Interest incongruence and employee thriving at work: the roles of job crafting and servant leadership

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## Abstract

Based on the conservation of resource theory, this study investigated whether and how misfit at work (i.e., interest incongruence) results in positive outcomes (i.e., thriving at work). We examined our hypotheses with three-wave survey data collected from 308 Chinese participants, finding that interest incongruence was positively related to job crafting towards interests (JC-interests), and JC-interests was positively related to employee thriving at work. Furthermore, servant leadership positively moderated the effect of interest incongruence on JC-interests and the indirect effect of interest incongruence on thriving at work through JC-interests. We concluded that by crafting their jobs towards their interests, individuals can proactively optimize their person-environment fit and as a consequence experience thriving at work, especially under conditions of high levels of servant leadership.

**Keywords** Interest incongruence · Job crafting towards interests · Thriving at work · Servant leadership

Recently, there has been a revival in vocational interest research in the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology (Su et al., 2019; Wille & De Fruyt, 2023) in light of burgeoning evidence on the predictive validity of interest for predicting job satisfaction (Wiegand et al., 2021) and job performance (Nye et al., 2018a), and evidence on the incremental validity of interest for predicting life outcomes (Banov et al., 2023) and job performance (Iliescu et al., 2015; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011) over cognitive ability or the big five personality traits. The most prominent and frequently investigated theoretical framework for vocational interest is Holland's (1973, 1997) RIASEC model. Although not without criticism, Holland's theory "seems to have attained about the same status in the interest literature that the five-factor model has attained in the personality literature" (Van Iddekinge et al., 2011, p.14). Interests are relatively stable individual differences that reflect preferences for certain types of work activities and contexts (Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Holland posits that individuals can be categorized into six interest types: Realistic (R),

Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E), and Conventional (C), which was often represented by their acronym, RIASEC. Specifically, individuals with *Realistic* interest are drawn to manual tasks, working with machines or in the outdoors; *Investigative* individuals enjoy scientific or scholarly activities and value critical thinking; *Artistic* individuals are interested in creative, unsystematic, and ambiguous activities; *Social* individuals prefer interacting with, helping and teaching people; Individuals with *Enterprising* interest like leading, persuading and influencing others; *Conventional* individuals tend to gravitate toward well-structured and routine activities. Following the assertion that "the people make the place" (Schneider, 1987), Holland (1997) also stated that individuals with the same occupations tend to show similar interests and reported six types of occupational environments that corresponds to the individual RIASEC interests. The congruence between individual interests and environment could predict more persistence, better performance and more satisfaction.

However, the phenomenon of interest incongruence is prevalent in organizations. That is because individuals' choices to apply for a given are influenced by various factors (e.g., pay, location, and short-term family needs) other than personal interests (Nye et al., 2021). Li et al. (2021) pointed out that because of the inaccurate subjective perceptions, job applicants may be attracted to organizations that are not

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what they expect actually. Recently, researchers (Rasheed & Robie, 2023; Wegmeyer & Speer, 2022) indicated that it is common that applicants actively fake on the interest measures in selection contexts, which would increase the prevalence of interest incongruence at workplace. Therefore, finding and recruiting the right and sufficient employees with “zest” has been considered as a key challenge for employers and current organizations (Wille & De Fruyt, 2023). With a few exceptions (Iliescu et al., 2015; Li et al., 2022), existing studies emphasize the positive effects of interest congruence and have overlooked the differential effects of incongruence (Su, 2020). Scholars have recently advocated that the experience of interest incongruence warrants further search and calls the research field toward greater attentions to how employees respond to it (Li et al., 2021, 2022). Thus, the first question we aim to address is what employees do in response to interest incongruence. Employees tend to be highly motivated to resolve incongruence-induced tension (Follmer et al., 2017; Vleugels et al., 2023). Holland (1997) stated that employees could resolve interest incongruence through changing their environments. Particularly, one way that employees changed their environment was job crafting (JC; Follmer et al., 2017), which refers to the self-initiated changes individuals make in the task and relational boundaries of their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). While task crafting involves employees actively change the number, scope and form of job tasks, relational crafting refers to initiating changes in their interpersonal relationships and interactions. Recent scholars argued that employees who experience misfit might have varying personal goals when engaging in JC behaviors (Kooij et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021a). Therefore, we focused on a special type of JC: JC-interests, which was defined as the self-initiated changes aimed at aligning the job to their interests (Kooij et al., 2017).

Although misfit was generally portrayed an unpleasant condition, some coping strategies can be used to channel misfit into positive outcomes. For example, Follmer et al. (2017) found that when employees experienced misfit, they would use social buffering strategies-focusing on the positive interpersonal relationships at workplace-to reduce the attention they paid to misfit in job or organization, which then facilitates workplace relations. Therefore, the second question we seek to answer was whether interest incongruence could result in positive consequences (i.e., personal growth) via JC-interests. When employees grow at work, they would feel energized and experience well psychologically and socially functioning-they thrive (Niessen et al., 2017). Thriving at work was defined as “the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p.538), with vitality (the affective component) emphasizing employees’ subjective experience of energization and

aliveness and learning (the cognitive component) concerning the acquiring and applying knowledge and skills (Spreitzer et al., 2012). Given the importance of thriving at work on individual functioning and organizational success, research interest has been stimulated to examine the enablers of employee thriving (Farid et al., 2023; Niessen et al., 2017; Ozcan et al., 2023). Based on the conservation of resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we attempt to explain why interest incongruence is positively relate to thriving at work via JC-interests. The threat of resource loss caused by interest incongruence motivates employees to circumvent negative outcomes or compensate for resource loss by developing adequate resource-gaining strategies. We anticipated that the resource gains (e.g., positive job meaning, positive affective, relational resource and knowledge) that come with JC-interests ultimately protect employee against the pertinent resource losses due to interest incongruence, spurring a positive resource spiral in the form of a simultaneous sense of vitality and learning (thriving at work).

Furthermore, this study extends our model of interest incongruence and JC-interests by identifying servant leadership as a key boundary condition of our presumed causal sequence. Servant leadership, an employee-centric leadership style, was defined as “an understanding and leadership practice that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader, emphasizing leader behaviors that ultimately focus on follower development, and de-emphasizing glorification of the leader” (Hale & Fields, 2007, p.397). Liden et al. (2008) identified seven behaviors of servant leaders: provide emotional healing, create value for the community, display conceptual skills, empower employees, help employees grow and succeed, prioritize employees and behave ethically. Although JC is a form of self-initiated proactive behavior, leadership style is a vital contextual factor influencing the extent that employee feel confident to craft their jobs (Naeem et al., 2020; Oprea et al., 2022). Yang et al. (2017) argued that servant leadership and JC have a common theoretical basis, that is they are both employee-centered. Though still scant, there is accumulating evidence indicating the usefulness of servant leadership in prompting employee JC actions (Al-Azab & Al-Romeedy, 2023; Khan et al., 2020). According to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), if employees can access ample resources for their resource pool, they have the inclination to take a proactive strategy to invest existing resources to achieve resource gain spirals. In situations in which there is high servant leadership, servant leaders help employees build resource pool (e.g., emotional healing and autonomy support). In this scenario, employees experiencing interest incongruence are inclined to invest current resources to acquire new ones, thereby leading to increased JC actions.

In sum, our research aims to make several theoretical contributions. Firstly, research on interest incongruence

has drawn exclusively on the resource conservation tenet of COR theory to explore the negative consequence of interest incongruence (Li et al., 2021). Our work represents one of the first attempts to investigate the positive outcomes of interest incongruence according to the resource investment tenet of COR theory. Furthermore, our study seeks to shed light on why interest incongruence is positively related to thriving at work by examining the mediating influence of JC-interests. JC-interests might represent a win–win strategy to this unfavorable situation as it not only offers a way of career development for employees but it could avoid potential loss of human capital for organizations (Wang et al., 2020). Finally, this study echoes the research call to examine the effect of organizational factors on JC-interests (Zhang et al., 2021a) by examining servant leadership as a boundary condition, which also contributes to our understanding of when interest incongruence is more effective in facilitating positive coping strategies (i.e., JC-interests) and subsequent subjective experiences (i.e., thriving at work).

## Theoretical background and hypotheses development

### Interest incongruence and JC-interests

The COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) postulates that the initial resource loss caused by adverse working condition might make employees vulnerable to further resource depletion. Prior research had found that if interest incongruence was experienced, a lack of satisfaction (Li et al., 2021; Wiegand et al., 2021) and an affective experience of frustration (Iliescu et al., 2015) would begin to exist. Li et al. (2022) also stated that interest incongruence may be experienced as a stressor and even have a reciprocal relationship with additional resource loss. Therefore, if no action is taken, individuals who experienced interest incongruence would ultimately fall into a resource “loss spiral” (Li et al., 2022).

Holland (1997) postulated three processes of accommodation to increase interest congruence: moving to a new working environment that fits with individual interest (quitting), changing individual interest to adapt to the environments (reactive adjustment), and reshaping or changing current working environment (active adjustment). Follmer et al. (2017) pointed out that, although some employees use leaving strategies to quickly resolve their misfit, leaving or turnover was still used as a last resort for most employees. That is because whether leaving their organizations or not is a complex decision involving many factors and is not just due to misfit. Employees might acknowledge the fact that their current jobs do not fulfill interests but still accept, because current jobs provide them a source of income and a sense

of security (Iliescu et al., 2015). In addition, based on the resource conservation tenet of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), employees may use distancing strategies to alleviate interest incongruence, such as disengaging themselves from their work, increasing job absenteeism (Li et al., 2022) and decreasing job performance (Li et al., 2021). However, employees using distancing strategies are not able to resolve or mitigate misfit and continue to experience the strain of misfit (i.e., feelings of isolation, Follmer et al., 2017).

The reactive and active adjustments to interest incongruence proposed by Holland (1997) are consistent with resolution strategies of change the self and change the environment in Follmer et al.’s study (2017). Changing the self and changing the environment are two related approaches that resolve misfit by addressing underlying sources of misfit (Follmer et al., 2017). Due to interests are relatively stable (Sackett et al., 2017; Su, 2020), personal change to resolve incongruence might require significant effort and time (Hanna et al., 2021). Hence, our study focused on how employees resolved interest incongruence through crafting environments towards their interests. According to prior research (Nye et al., 2012; Su et al., 2019), interests could serve as a source of intrinsic motivations that drives the direction and effort of JC behaviors. Firstly, individual interests could steer the direction of JC behaviors. Strong (1943, p17) once analogized individual interests as the rudder of a motorboat that determines the direction, whereas individual abilities, like the motor of the motorboat, determine the speed in the chosen direction (Su, 2020). Thus, interests may inspire individuals to perform the work activities they prefer (task crafting) and build stronger relationships with colleagues who share similar interest (relational crafting). Secondly, interest energizes individuals’ efforts to craft the job boundaries. Su (2020) stated that the strength of interests is reflected in the amount of involvement or vigor in individuals’ striving. For example, if an individual is interested in designing engines, the greater amount of time and effort he/she will put in reading related books. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

Hypothesis 1: interest incongruence is positively associated with JC-interests.

### JC-interests and thriving at work

Spreitzer et al. (2005) stated that resources generated in the doing of work, such as positive meaning, positive affective, relational resources and knowledge would shape the experience of thriving. Therefore, based on the resource investment tenet of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we speculated that employee could utilize JC-interests as a resource investment strategy and then obtain new resources to enable thriving at work.

Firstly, aligning work tasks to personal interests allows employees to shape more personally meaningful work, which results in more intrinsic enjoyment (Kuijpers et al., 2020). The experiences of meaning attached to work had been demonstrated to foster employees' thriving (Guan & Frenkel, 2021). In addition, Spreitzer et al. (2005) argued that employees who thought that they have little autonomy to act agentically would prematurely slacken their task focus and experience less thriving at work. However, the process of interest incongruence could enhance employees' perceptions of control over their tasks (Zhang et al., 2021a). When crafting their jobs towards interests, employees could focus on more preferred tasks, which in turn increased work engagement (Kuijpers et al., 2020) and the experience of vitality.

Secondly, JC-interests can help employees to build positive social connection at work, thereby enhancing their relational resource. Employees who engage in interest crafting would add or intensify existing relationships with coworkers that share similar interests (Kooij et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021a). When employees relate heedfully, they would feel connected and experience more frequent positive moods (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Moreover, as employees interact, they could glean more information and learn more from their coworkers (Paterson et al., 2014). Researchers have demonstrated that high-quality interpersonal relationships, including leader-member exchange relationship (Guan & Frenkel, 2021; Xu et al., 2019) and supportive coworker behavior (Kleine et al., 2019), contributed to the experiences of thriving at work.

Finally, JC-interests promotes exploratory activities. Job crafters might engage in seeking challenges behaviors that match their personal interests (Tims et al., 2016). The exposure to challenges is likely to pique crafters' curiosity and increases vitality. Moreover, interests influence the way employees behave at work through the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills (Su et al., 2019; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Crafting job towards interests might inspire employee to learn and increase the level and depth of knowledge on their preferred tasks, enhancing their knowledge resource. Thus, we propose that:

Hypothesis 2: JC-interests is positively related to thriving at work.

### The mediating role of JC-interests

The combination of the first two hypotheses suggests that JC-interests can function as an effective mechanism linking interest incongruence and employee thriving at work. Individuals have the basic psychological needs (i.e., the need for competence and relatedness) that they are motivated to fulfill (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Due to interest

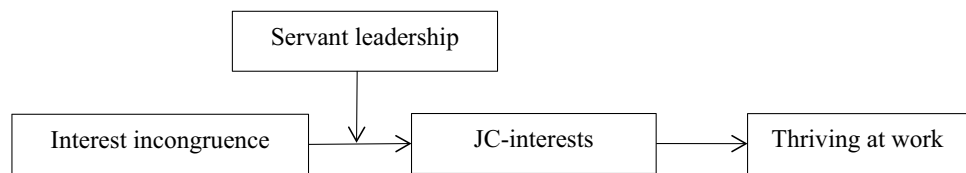
preferences fall within the broad definition of individuals' needs (Van Iddekinge et al., 2011), Wiegand (2018) argued that interest congruence was better categorized as a special form of need-supplies fit (Nye et al., 2021). If individuals' environments do not satisfy their interests, they needs would not be fulfilled. Therefore, scholars regarded interest incongruence as an adverse working condition that resulted in resource drain (Li et al., 2022). According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), the threat of resource loss caused by adverse work conditions motivates employees to circumvent negative outcomes or compensate for resource loss by developing adequate resource-gaining strategies. Existing research has identified JC as a resource gain strategy to cope with career dissatisfaction (Wang et al., 2020) and job insecurity (Wang et al., 2018a). We expected that the resource gains (e.g., positive job meaning, positive affective, relational resource and knowledge) they anticipate achieving with JC-interests ultimately protect employee against the pertinent resource losses due to the interest incongruence, leading to positive energy resource spirals in the form of a simultaneous sense of vitality and learning. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3: JC-interests mediates the positive relationship between interest incongruence and thriving at work.

### The moderating role of servant leadership

Servant leadership serves as a powerful organizational resource (Liden et al., 2014). We conjecture that, exposed to this source of resources, employees are inclined to proactively reshape the boundaries of their work. Firstly, the potential risky nature of JC necessitates the need for support from workplace. While JC behavior helps to foster a sense of meaningfulness at workplace (Lan et al., 2022), it also entails the risk of failure. Servant leaderships' conceptual skills requirement (Liden et al., 2008, 2014) could increase the feasibility of JC by assisting employees in solving the difficulties they may encounter during job crafting. Tang et al. (2016) found that before successfully redesigning their works, job crafters are likely to experience adverse feelings (e.g., burnout and disappointment). Servant leaders provide their employees with emotional healing, which could replenish their emotional resources and help them recover quickly from emotional pain (Liden et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2016). In addition, Wang et al. (2018b) stated that job crafters might undermine the interests of their leaders and impair the quality of LMX relationships. Servant leaders serve the overall community, place the benefits of their employees above their own (Liden et al., 2015) and interact with employees in a fair and transparent manner (behaving ethically; Liden et al., 2008). In the presence of servant leadership, employees

**Fig. 1** Hypothesized model. JC-interests = job crafting towards interests



are able to proactively craft their jobs without worrying about the offend their leaders' interests. Secondly, JC is a form of self-initiated proactive behavior (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), therefore, autonomy has been regarded as an essential precondition toward employee JC actions (Khan et al., 2020). Servant leaders empower employees and provide the latitude or autonomy to them (Liden et al., 2008). The autonomy support from servant leaders would free up cognitive restraints in employees about the task or relational boundaries (Slemp et al., 2021), and provide them more opportunities to take up extra tasks in which they are most interested. Prior studies have demonstrated that employee JC behaviors increase when they perceive high levels of leader autonomy support (Li et al., 2021). Particularly, as a people-oriented leadership styles, servant leadership recognizes that each employee is a unique individual (Eva et al., 2019) and has different needs, goals and limitations (Song et al., 2021). The individualized consideration behaviors of servant leaders (e.g., one-to-one communications with employees) allow them to quickly sense what employees need and then provide tailored resources to employees (Liden et al., 2008). Employees can obtain assistance from servant leaders to craft their jobs to fit their preferences, thereby increasing JC-interests.

According to COR theory, we propose that servant leadership strengthen the positive relationship between interest incongruence and JC-interests. The COR theory posits that when possessing ample resources, individuals are prone to use a proactive resource invest strategy to acquire additional resource, rather than a defensive resource conservation strategy. Under conditions of high levels of servant leadership, employees are equipped with added resources. They are more inclined to invest current resource in JC-interests to obtain new resources and recover from resource loss caused by interest incongruence. However, in a scenario with low levels of servant leadership, employees experiencing interest incongruence are less likely to take in proactive JC actions as not taking these actions helps them protect remaining resources and avoid falling into a “loss spiral” (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4:** servant leadership moderates the positive relationship between interest incongruence and JC-interests, such that interest incongruence is more strongly and positively related to JC-interests when servant leadership is high.

The resource caravan principle of COR theory states that resources can transfer from one form (e.g., organizational resource) to another (e.g., personal well-being). Servant leadership is a people-oriented leadership style that emphasizes their employees' growth and development (Liden et al., 2015). In situations in which there is high servant leadership, ample resources (e.g., emotional healing and autonomy support) from servant leaders activate the reciprocal transfer of resources, which motivates employees to proactively craft their jobs to cope with interest incongruence and further experiences senses of learning and vitality. Thus, this study proposes:

**Hypothesis 5:** servant leadership moderates the indirect effect of interest incongruence on employee thriving at work via JC-interests, such that the indirect effect is stronger when servant leadership is high.

Figure 1 summarizes above hypotheses and depicts our theoretical framework.

## Method

### Sample and procedure

Given the fact that employee interest incongruence is prevalent in China (Li et al., 2021), this makes an appropriate context to examine interest incongruence in this country. Previous research on JC also showed the popularity of JC in China (Miao et al., 2023). Moreover, Zhang et al. (2021b) have empirically demonstrated that JC-interests mediated the positive relation between person-job misfit and vitality in China. Thus, to continue this research stream, we aimed to test whether interest incongruence could positively affect thriving at work via JC-interests in the Chinese context. Noteworthy, participants were from a wide range of industries including information technology, energy, educational services, food, retail trade, construction, finance, chemical and health care. To reach a broad spectrum of the participants, we designed three online questionnaires and posted links to them on online alumni communities (i.e., virtual chat groups) via QQ and WeChat, two widely-used instant communication in China (Wang et al., 2021). Attached to each questionnaire was a cover letter that outlines the purpose of our research, the voluntary nature of participation, the details and anonymity of

their responses. To reduce common method bias, we distributed questionnaires at three time points. Participants provided information pertaining to demographics variables (including power distance) and vocational interests in the first wave. Two weeks later, participants were invited to report servant leadership and JC-interests. Another two weeks later, participants were asked to assess thriving at work in the third-wave survey. A coding scheme (last 4 digits of an 11-digit mobile phone number as well as participants' age) was used to match responses from the three waves.

We obtain 516 responses in phase 1, 431 in phase 2, 375 in phase 3. After eliminating questionnaires with missing data and unmatched responses, our final sample comprised 308 participants who completed all measures. Of the 308 participants, 40.3% were female, had an average job tenure of 2.633. In terms of their education, 66.9% held a bachelor's degree or higher. As regards position, 50.3% were employees, 33.4% were front-line managers, 13.6% were middle-level managers.

## Measures

With the exception of the demographic variables, items were scored on 5-point Likert-type scale. Appendix shows all the study constructs and items of questionnaires.

### Vocational interests

Rounds et al.'s (2010) 60-item scale was developed to measure individual vocational interests, which was based on the extent to which respondents prefer to do the types of work activities. Sample items were "Repair household appliances" (R), "Develop a new medicine" (I), "Play a musical instrument" (A), "Give career guidance to people" (S), "Manage a retail store" (E), and "Record recent payments" (C). The Cronbach's alpha computed for the six scales were 0.888 for R, 0.902 for I, 0.930 for A, 0.821 for S, 0.827 for E and 0.847 for C.

The relations between the six interest types could be displayed using a hexagonal structure, with each angle represents one interest type (in the R-I-A-S-E-C ordering). In this hexagon, the distance between two angles is inversely proportional to the similarity between the respective interest types (Holland, 1997). For example, adjacent interests (e.g., Realistic and Investigative) are more related, alternate interests (e.g., Realistic and Artistic) have an intermediate relationship, and the opposite interests (e.g., Realistic and Social) show small or negative relations.

Particularly, the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) provides ratings for each occupation on each of the six RIASEC types, which is also considered to be applicable in China (Li et al., 2021, 2022). Thus, we operationalized the occupational environment based on participant's declared occupation and O\*NET occupational database, and used

the O\*NET data to obtain RIASEC code for each occupation. Based on prior studies, we used the first letter hexagon distance (Holland, 1973) approach to calculate incongruence index. Specifically, we compared the first-letter (i.e., the highest interest score) in RIASEC profiles of each employee and his or her occupations and assigned an integer value from 1 to 4 to reflect the degree of incongruence according to the distance of these two first-letter code on the RIASEC hexagon (4 = opposite, 3 = alternate, 2 = adjacent, and 1 = identical).

### JC-interests

We measured JC-interests using a five-item scale developed by Kooij et al. (2017). An example item was "I actively look for tasks that match my own interests." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.766.

### Servant leadership

We assessed servant leadership using Liden et al.'s (2015) seven-item scale. A sample item was "My leader makes my career development a priority." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.820.

### Thriving at work

We used ten-items adopted from Porath et al. (2012) to assess employee thriving at work. Sample items were "I feel myself learning often," and "I feel alive and vital." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.817.

### Control variables

Prior research has noted that individual demographics (i.e., gender, age, education and job position) are likely to influence the focal relations we are testing (e.g., Liu et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021a). On the basis, these variables were controlled in our hypothesis testing. In addition, Zhang et al. (2021b) found employee power distance orientation might buffer the positive outcomes of servant leadership. Thus, we also controlled power distance in this study. We measured power distance using a six-item scale developed by Farh et al. (2007). An example item was "Employees should not disagree with management decisions." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.820.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

As shown in Table 1, interest incongruence was positively associated with JC-interests ( $r = 0.192$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.400	0.491	–								
2. Age	1.825	0.486	.037	–							
3. Education	2.800	0.633	–.078	–.060	–						
4. Position	1.690	0.804	–.074	.058	.236***	–					
5. Organizational tenure	2.633	2.982	–.030	.394***	–.018	.055	–				
6. Power distance	3.272	1.111	.047	–.073	.021	.017	–.045	–			
7. Interest incongruence	2.552	1.089	–.021	–.050	–.006	.043	–.025	–.008	–		
8. JC-interests	2.349	0.777	–.038	–.093	–.066	–.090	.042	–.155**	.192***	–	
9. Servant leadership	2.339	0.660	.010	–.077	–.029	–.046	–.079	–.119*	.320***	.313***	–
10. Thriving at work	3.306	0.828	–.013	–.100	–.083	–.101	–.076	–.044	.114*	.197***	.169**

$N=308$

*JC-interests* Job crafting towards interests

Gender was coded 1 = male, 2 = female

Age was coded 1 = 25 or below, 2 = 26–36, 3 = 37–55, 4 = 56 or above

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$

thriving at work ( $r=0.114$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). JC-interests positively related to employee thriving at work ( $r=0.197$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, servant leadership was positively correlated with thriving at work ( $r=0.169$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Factor analysis

To ensure the construct validity of the used measurement instrument, factor analysis was conducted in a two-stage process. Firstly, exploratory factor analysis (with a varimax rotation procedure) was performed to identify the underlying antecedents of thriving at work based on an eigenvalue cut-off one. The results of component factor analysis revealed the underlying structure of all items and identified four components: component one with five items “JC-interests” (eigenvalue = 5.062, extracted variance = 20.246), component two with seven items “servant leadership” (eigenvalue = 3.989, extracted variance = 15.955), component three with six items “power distance orientation” (eigenvalue = 3.386, extracted variance = 13.543) and component four with ten items “thriving at work” (eigenvalue = 2.029, extracted variance = 8.115). We also used Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and the Bartlett’s test to examine the appropriateness of our factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin overall measure was 0.851, falling within the significant level ( $p < 0.001$ ). Bartlett’s test of sphericity of 3709.689 with 300° of freedom also suggested a significant correlation among the question items at  $p < 0.001$ . Thus, the four components could be used for subsequent analysis.

Secondly, we further conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using AMOS 28 to examine the distinctiveness of our focal variables. The CFA results in Table 2 suggested that four-factor model fit the data well ( $\chi^2=540.114$ ,

$df=269$ ,  $\chi^2 / df=2.008$ , IFI = 0.924, TLI = 0.907, CFI = 0.923, RMSEA = 0.033) and exhibited a better fit than other alternative measurement models. Therefore, it was reasonable to treat the four current study variables as distinct constructs. In addition, the fit indices of one-factor model help rule out the presence of common method variance in current study. Of the one-factor model, none of the accepted criteria was met, addressing the concern of common method variances in our empirical results.

## Hypothesis testing

This study conducted hierarchical regression analyses using SPSS 27 to test the mediating effect and moderation hypotheses (see Table 3). The Model 6 confirmed Hypothesis 1, that is, interest incongruence was positively related to JC-interests ( $\beta=0.135$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $M_6$ ). Similarly, Model 3 supported Hypothesis 2 by showing the significantly positive effect of JC-interests on employee thriving at work ( $\beta=0.192$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

For Hypothesis 3, the relationship between interest incongruence and thriving at work ( $\beta=0.061$ , *ns*,  $M_4$ ) became decreased and insignificant when entering JC-interests into analysis, while JC-interests was positively correlated with employee thriving at work ( $\beta=0.192$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $M_4$ ). Thus, it appears that JC-interests fully mediates the relationship between interest incongruence and thriving at work, supporting Hypothesis 3. To provide further evidence on the mediating role of JC-interests, we used SPSS 27 PROCESS macro (PROCESS Model 4) to test the indirect effect. The bootstrapping showed the partial mediating effect of JC-interests underlying between interest incongruence and thriving at work was positive and significant (Indirect Effect = 0.023,

**Table 2** Confirmatory factor analysis and model comparison

Model test	Descriptions	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2 / df$	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	Four factors: JC-interests, servant leadership, thriving at work, and power distance	540.114	269	2.008	.924	.907	.923	.033
Model 2	Three factors: thriving at work and power distance were combined into one factor	1712.044	272	6.294	.596	.509	.589	.075
Model 3	Two factors: JC-interests and servant leadership were combined into one factor; thriving at work and power distance were combined into one factor	1965.602	274	7.714	.525	.428	.518	.081
Model 4	Two factors: servant leadership, thriving at work and power distance were combined into one factor	2294.228	274	8.373	.432	.317	.424	.088
Model 5	One factor: JC-interests, servant leadership, thriving at work, and power distance were combined into one factor	2615.851	275	9.512	.342	.211	.333	.095

N = 308

JC-interests Job crafting towards interests

**Table 3** Hierarchical regression analysis

Variable	Thriving at work				JC-interests			
	$M_1$	$M_2$	$M_3$	$M_4$	$M_5$	$M_6$	$M_7$	$M_8$
Gender	-.033	-.030	-.023	-.022	-.051	-.046	.038	-.042
Age	-.146	-.136	-.103	-.100	-.221**	-.206**	.007	-.196
Education	-.093	-.090	-.080	-.079	-.067	-.062	.013	-.058
Position	-.079	-.085	-.066	-.071	-.071	-.080	-.001	-.052
Organizational tenure	-.012	-.012	-.016	-.016	.024	-.024	-.018	.028
Power distance	-.036	-.035	-.015	-.016	-.110**	-.108**	-.144***	-.080*
Interest incongruence		.085*		.061		.135***		.095*
JC-interests			.192**	.175**				
Servant leadership							.040*	.240***
Interest Incongruence × Servant Leadership								.150***
$R^2$	.028	.040	.037	.065	.052	.088	.170	.177
F	1.430	1.788	2.665	2.586	2.777	4.141	9.456	7.114

N = 308

JC-interests Job crafting towards interests

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$

SE = 0.012), with the 95% confidence interval [0.004, 0.051]. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 received full support.

In relation to Hypothesis 4, the interaction of interest incongruence and servant leadership was positively associated with JC-interests ( $\beta = 0.150, p < 0.001, M_8$ ). To clarify the nature of the moderating effect, we drew an interaction plot. As shown in Fig. 2, the simple slope test results indicated that the positive relationship between interest incongruence and JC-interest was more pronounced when perceived servant leadership was high ( $\beta_{\text{simple}} = 0.194, p < 0.001$ ) rather than low ( $\beta_{\text{simple}} = -0.004, ns$ ), thereby supporting Hypothesis 4 (Fig. 2).

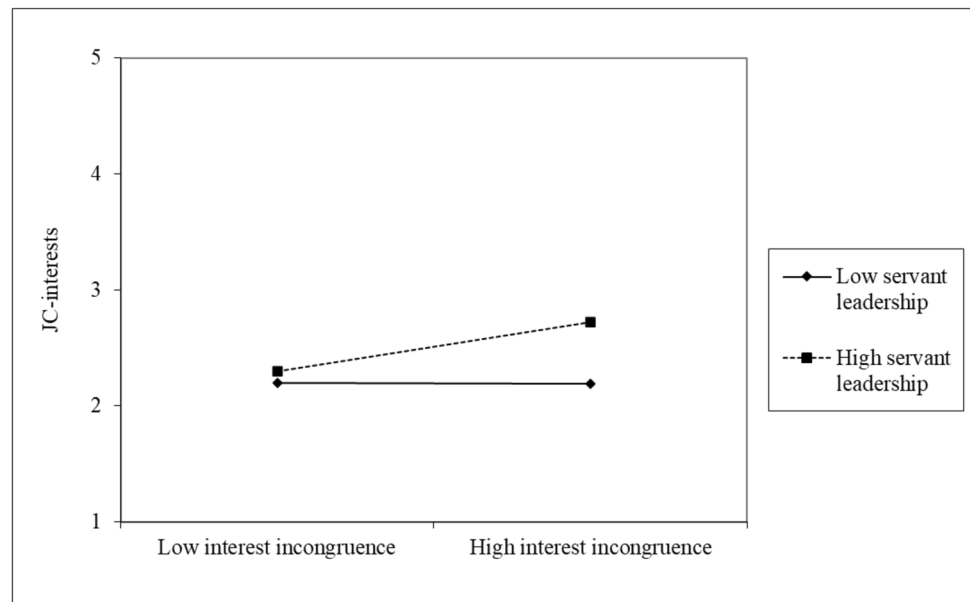
For Hypothesis 5, we used SPSS 27 PROCESS macro (PROCESS Model 7) to test the moderated mediation effect. The results showed that the moderated mediation index was positive, and bootstrapping interval excluded zero (conditional indirect effects = 0.037, SE = 0.016, 95%

CI (0.009, 0.071)), which provides support for Hypothesis 5. Moreover, the indirect effect of interest incongruence via JC-interests on thriving at work differ significantly when the servant leadership was high (+ 1 SD) versus low (-1 SD) levels [difference between conditional indirect effects = 0.048, SE = 0.002, 95% CI (0.012, 0.093)].

### Discussion

As predicted, interest incongruence positively associated with JC-interests. JC-interests positively associated with thriving at work. The results showed that JC-interests mediated the relation between interest incongruence and employee thriving at work, that servant leadership moderated the relation between interest incongruence and JC-interests, and the indirect effect of interest incongruence on

**Fig. 2** Moderating effect of servant leadership on the relationship between interest incongruence and JC-interests. JC-interests = job crafting towards interests



thriving at work (via JC-interests) was stronger when servant leadership was high.

In particular, our findings bear some similarities and differences compared with relevant research. Firstly, Zhang et al. (2021b) demonstrated the positive influence of perceived overqualification (person-job misfit) on JC-interests and subsequent subjective vitality. Our work focused on interest incongruence (person-vocation misfit) and investigated the potential positive impact of interest incongruence on employee JC-interests and thriving at work, which broadened the research scope and further added the theoretical framework of P-E misfit (Follmer et al., 2017). In addition, while Zhang et al. (2021b) demonstrated that individual factor (i.e., organizational identification) would strengthen the relationship between overqualification and JC-interests, we found a contextual factor (i.e., servant leadership) that positively moderated the effect of interest incongruence on JC-interests. Secondly, our research departs from prior research in that it examined JC a consequence of interest incongruence rather than a moderator of interest incongruence effect (Li et al., 2021, 2022). Li et al. (2021, 2022) found that JC could weaken the negative impact of interest incongruence. However, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) pointed out that JC is driven by an employee's need for control and connection with others. If these basis psychological needs are not met on his/her job (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005), he/she would be motivated to engage in JC. Consistent with this notion, extant empirical research has revealed that negative work experiences, such as career dissatisfaction (Wang et al., 2020), job insecurity (Wang et al., 2018a) and job person-job misfit (Zhang et al., 2021a) might result in JC directly by employees. Thus, we argued that interest incongruence would be directly related to employee JC-interests.

## Theoretical implications

Firstly, we contribute to the burgeoning literature of interest incongruence. While previous research has explored the positive effects of interest congruence (Wiegand et al., 2021) and the negative effects of interest incongruence (Iliescu et al., 2015; Li et al., 2021), whether interest incongruence could result in positive outcomes through inducing proactive coping strategies remains insufficiently explored (Follmer et al., 2017). Wheeler et al. (2013) stated that the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) could be used as a theoretical framework to elaborate how to cope with P-E misfit. Thus, according to the resource acquisition tenet of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we revealed that employees who experienced interest incongruence were more likely to respond to this adverse working condition with active adjustments. We further found that JC-interests as a response to interest incongruence could generate additional resource advantage (Wang et al., 2018a, 2020), in the form of higher levels of thriving at work. Therefore, this study has advanced our understanding of interest incongruence by revealing its positive outcomes, responding the call for a comprehensive investigation into the positive side of incongruence (Follmer et al., 2017).

Secondly, our study also advances understanding of JC literature. Existing conceptualizations of JC have predominantly focused on the forms of crafting (e.g., task, relational and cognitive crafting; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) or the specific job characteristics that are crafted (e.g., job demands and job resources). Answering the call for incorporating employees' goals in their JC actions, we focused on a new type of JC that aimed at adapting job tasks to match crafters' interests, namely JC-interests (Kooij et al., 2017), which is

still understudied (Kuijpers et al., 2020). Our results highlighted the essential role of resources in facilitating employees' JC, which indicated that employees' JC depended on their motivations to prevent resource loss (e.g., interest incongruence) and the available resources that they could mobilize (e.g., servant leadership). Consistent with prior research (Wang et al., 2020), we also found that employee JC was sparked by a combination of distinct motivational states. Based on the model of proactive model (Parker et al., 2010), Interest incongruence represents a "reason to" motivation for employees' JC, while servant leadership can represent the "can to" motivation.

Thirdly, this study expands the scope of socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005) by confirming that interest incongruence serves as the antecedent of thriving at work. Spreitzer et al.'s (2005) socially embedded model of thriving proposed that when situated in positive work environments (e.g., climate of trust and respect), employees are more likely to perform agentic behaviors that promote a sense of thriving. However, the potential of adverse work context is ignored. Adverse work contexts are also prevailed in the workplace (Xu et al., 2019). Researchers argued that it is equally important to explore the potential impact of adverse work context on employee thriving at work (Niessen et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2019). Moreover, Zhang et al. (2021b) found that overqualification, a misfit situation, is positively associated with a series of positive outcomes (e.g., vitality and task performance) through job crafting strategies. In addition, Liu et al. (2022) found that less attention has been paid to the effects of correspondence between individuals and work contexts in thriving literature. We focused on the incongruence between employee interests and the characteristics (interests) of their work contexts, bridging the gap in P-E interactional predictors in thriving literature.

Finally, this study demonstrated the moderating role of servant leadership. The theoretical perspectives for prior empirical evidence on servant leadership predominately is based on social-based theories (e.g., social learning theory and social exchange theory; Eva et al., 2019). We address calls for research to utilize the COR theory to explore the consequence of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019). These findings corroborate the view that positive leadership styles play an essential role in stimulating proactive work behaviors within workplaces (Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, while some studies found the effects of servant leadership varied across cultures (Zhang et al., 2021b), this study confirmed the effectiveness of servant leadership in a collectivistic and high-power distance cultural context.

## Practical implications

This study also makes several important practical implications. Firstly, we are by no means implying that managers

should hire more employees with high incongruence. Our findings can guide managers engaged with employees experiencing interest incongruence and provided some helps to them. Managers could conduct series JC intervention to improve employees' JC awareness and ability, such as cultivating an autonomy supportive atmosphere in the design of jobs, implementing JC training program and providing timely feedback or support. Particularly, managers also should pay attention to the goals (i.e., individual interests) in guiding employees' specific JC actions (Kooij et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021a). Additionally, even though employees may be aware of their interests, it also always is difficult to incorporate personal interests into job tasks, which requires creativity and divergent thinking (Kuijpers et al., 2020). Thus, JC workshops or training program should provide elaborate interventions that helps employees to have clear insights in their interests, understand how to deconstruct job tasks, and then find ways to align their jobs tasks with interests (Kooij et al., 2017).

Secondly, to take advantage of the benefits of employee thriving, managers should monitor employee thriving at work and devote considerable effort to promote it. Thriving does not happen in a vacuum. Xu et al. (2019) stated that it is vital to create an environment where employees are inclined to experience thriving. Organizations should realize that creating opportunities for employees to learn and develop also serves the organizations, and facilitate thriving through exercising decision-making authority, minimizing incivility, supporting broad information sharing, developing climates of trust and respect and providing performance feedback (Spreitzer et al., 2012).

Thirdly, organizations should strive to foster servant leadership. When selecting and recruiting managers, organizations should utilize various techniques or tools (e.g., personality tests, focus group, etc.) to identify whether manager applicants present the characteristics of a servant leader (i.e., behaving ethically, high service orientation and conceptual skills) or have the potential to become servant leaders (Wang et al., 2019). In addition, organizations should design some targeted training programs to cultivate current managers into servant leaders. Organizations could adjust performance appraisal and incentive systems so as to include the core characteristics of servant leaders as important evaluation indicators (Liden et al., 2008).

## Limitations and future directions

Firstly, environment interest scores were generated based on the O\*NET occupation data. Following the assertion that "the people make the place" (Schneider, 1987), the environment interest scores also could be assessed by aggregating the incumbents' interest scores within a particular environment (Bai & Liao, 2019) in future research. In addition,

Nye et al. (2017) found the predictive validity of interest congruence depended on the computation of this index. We encourage future research to operate different interest incongruence indices to replicate our finding and examine the effect of perceived interest incongruence on JC-interests and thriving at work. However, some researchers proposed that (in)congruence indices ignore important information about the actual standings of the interest types in the person and environment interest profiles (Nye et al., 2018b), and mask potentially differential relationships between the six RIASEC dimensions and the criteria (Iliescu et al., 2015), thus resulting in suboptimal prediction. To address the limitations (Wiegand et al., 2021), future researches are needed to test the utility of interest incongruence using polynomial regression and response surface methodology.

Secondly, given our time-lagged design, we cannot rule out the possibility of reversed or reciprocal causality. Spreitzer et al. (2005) propose that thriving at work functions as an internal gauge for discern whether employees are on a positive direction—that is, whether they are moving toward increased learning and vitality. Those who do not experience thriving at work might initiate self-adaptive processes and seek ways to craft their jobs to reinstate thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2012). Therefore, future longitudinal research is need to further clarify the directionality of the relationship between JC-interests and thriving at work. In addition, following prior research (Niessen et al., 2012), employees' JC and state of thriving at work are more likely vary from day to day. Therefore, in addition to ordinary surveys, daily diary studies are also needed to capture these day-to-day dynamics for employees experiencing interest incongruence.

Thirdly, Kuijpers et al. (2020) incorporated employees' goals in the JC concept and developed three types of JC: JC-strengths, JC-interests and JC-development. Given that these three JC actions have been found to share the same predictors (Kuijpers et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021a), future research should examine JC-strengths and JC-development as potential mediating mechanisms on the hypothesized relations. In addition, Zhang et al. (2021a) found crafting jobs towards interests might benefit crafters themselves but not necessarily their organizations. We encourage future research to investigate the effect of JC-interests as a response to interest incongruence on organizations (i.e., organizational citizenship behavior).

Fourthly, future studies should consider the role of employee role as it directly related to employees' subjective experiences.<sup>1</sup> While we demonstrated the moderating effect of organization factor (i.e., servant leadership) on the relationship between interest incongruence and JC-interests, future studies could investigate the moderating

effect of employ's role. For example, role overload depletes massive personal resources, thereby resulting in less effort in JC-interests (Chen & Du, 2022). In addition, Spreitzer et al. (2005) pointed out employees' agentic work behavior (i.e., task focus, exploration, and heedfully relating) as the engine of thriving. Future studies could explicitly examine whether interest incongruence positively correlated with thriving at work where JC-interests and role behaviors (i.e., work engagement and innovative behavior) played chain-mediating roles in above relationship.

Finally, while our study included participants from various occupations and industries, we only conducted this research in the Chinese context, raising concerns about the replicability and generalizability of our conclusions. For example, Tsabari et al. (2005) demonstrated that interest congruence exerted greater influence on job satisfaction in more individualistic (rather than collectivistic) cultures. Therefore, future studies should collect data from various cultures to investigate whether our results could be generalized.

## Conclusions

Based on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), we provide initial evidence that interest incongruence is positively related to employee thriving at work via JC-interests. Moreover, servant leadership plays a moderating role, whereby it strengthens the relation that interest incongruence has with JC-interests. This study has advanced our understanding by revealing the JC-interests mechanism through which interest incongruence results in positive outcomes, responding the call for an investigation into the positive side of incongruence.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer on this point.

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