

# The Mechanisms of Value Identification and Emotional Belonging in the Work Effectiveness of Highly Qualified Specialists: A Mediated Model from Chinese Enterprises

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## ABSTRACT

In the knowledge-intensive workplace, the psychological bonds between highly qualified specialists (HQS) and their organizations have emerged as critical determinants of work effectiveness. However, the distinct roles of value identification and emotional belonging remain theoretically undifferentiated and empirically underexplored. Drawing on social exchange theory and self-determination theory, this study constructs a theoretical model examining the relationships among value identification, emotional belonging, and work effectiveness of HQS in Chinese enterprises. Using survey data from 562 highly qualified specialists, structural equation modeling and bootstrapping mediation analyses were employed. The results indicate that both value identification ( $\beta = 0.275$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and emotional belonging ( $\beta = 0.258$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) are significantly and positively associated with work effectiveness. Moreover, emotional belonging partially mediates the relationship between value identification and work effectiveness (indirect effect = 0.087, 95% CI [0.063, 0.115]). The study also identifies organizational culture, management systems, and leadership style as key antecedents of value identification. These findings provide a differentiated understanding of cognitive and affective attachment mechanisms and offer practical guidance for cultivating value-congruent, emotionally supportive organizational environments for HQS.

## KEYWORDS

Value identification; Emotional belonging; Work effectiveness; Highly qualified specialists; Mediation; Chinese enterprises.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The effective management of highly qualified specialists (HQS) represents one of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary Chinese enterprises [1]. As organizations transition from labor-intensive to knowledge-intensive modes of production, the psychological contracts and affective bonds that bind HQS to their employers have become increasingly consequential for individual and organizational performance [2]. Unlike routine workers whose performance can be adequately predicted by extrinsic incentives alone, HQS require intrinsic motivation derived from meaning, purpose, and emotional connection to achieve their full potential [3].

Within the extensive literature on employee–organization relationships, two distinct but often conflated psychological constructs have emerged as potentially important determinants of work effectiveness: value identification and emotional belonging [4]. Value identification refers to the degree of congruence between an employee's personal values and the perceived values of the organization. Emotional belonging, by contrast, refers to the affective sense of acceptance, care, and emotional connection that employees experience within their workplace. While conceptually related,

these constructs represent qualitatively different psychological mechanisms-cognitive alignment versus affective attachment-that may influence work effectiveness through distinct pathways.

Despite their theoretical distinctiveness, prior research has frequently treated value identification and emotional belonging as interchangeable components of a broader "organizational commitment" construct [5]. This conceptual conflation has obscured the unique contributions of each mechanism and limited the development of targeted interventions. Within the Chinese context, where cultural values emphasize relational harmony (guanxi) and collective identity, understanding the differentiated roles of value identification and emotional belonging may be particularly important [6].

This study addresses three research questions. First, how do value identification and emotional belonging respectively influence the work effectiveness of highly qualified specialists? Second, does emotional belonging mediate the relationship between value identification and work effectiveness? Third, what organizational factors (organizational culture, management systems, leadership style) serve as antecedents of value identification? By answering these questions, this study aims to provide theoretical clarity regarding the distinct mechanisms through which cognitive and affective attachment enhance HQS performance.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

### **2.1. Value Identification and Work Effectiveness**

Value identification is rooted in the person-organization fit literature, which posits that individuals are attracted to and perform better in organizations whose values align with their own [7]. When employees perceive congruence between their personal values and organizational values, they experience greater meaning, purpose, and intrinsic motivation in their work. For HQS, who often possess strongly internalized professional values regarding excellence, innovation, and intellectual autonomy, value identification may be particularly consequential. When organizational values support these professional orientations, HQS experience a sense of "being on the same team" that transcends transactional exchange.

From a self-determination theory perspective [8], value identification satisfies the fundamental psychological need for relatedness-the sense of connection to a larger purpose and community. When HQS identify with organizational values, their work becomes self-determined rather than externally controlled, leading to enhanced creativity, persistence, and performance. Furthermore, value identification reduces cognitive dissonance and the psychological costs of role conflict, allowing HQS to channel their full cognitive resources toward task accomplishment.

Empirically, studies across diverse occupational contexts have demonstrated positive associations between value congruence and job performance, although few have focused specifically on HQS in Chinese enterprises. Therefore, we propose:

H1: Value identification is significantly and positively related to the work effectiveness of highly qualified specialists.

### **2.2. Emotional Belonging and Work Effectiveness**

Emotional belonging, also referred to as affective commitment or sense of belonging, represents the emotional attachment employees feel toward their organization [5]. Unlike value identification, which is cognitive and evaluative, emotional belonging is affective and experiential. It arises from perceptions of organizational support, caring relationships with supervisors and colleagues, and positive emotional experiences within the workplace.

According to social exchange theory, employees reciprocate perceived organizational support with increased effort, loyalty, and performance [9]. When HQS feel that their organization genuinely cares

about their well-being, respects their contributions, and values them as individuals, they experience a sense of psychological safety and emotional security. This emotional belonging reduces stress, enhances well-being, and liberates cognitive resources that would otherwise be consumed by anxiety or defensive behaviors.

For HQS, who often face high levels of work demands, performance pressure, and the risk of professional isolation, emotional belonging may serve as a critical buffer against burnout and disengagement. When specialists feel emotionally connected to their organization, they are more willing to invest discretionary effort, share knowledge with colleagues, and persist through challenging projects. Therefore, we propose:

H2: Emotional belonging is significantly and positively related to the work effectiveness of highly qualified specialists.

### **2.3. The Mediating Role of Emotional Belonging**

While value identification and emotional belonging each influence work effectiveness directly, a more complex relationship may exist between them. Value identification may serve as an antecedent to emotional belonging. When HQS perceive that their personal values align with organizational values, they experience a sense of cognitive consonance that facilitates the development of emotional attachment. Put differently, it is easier to feel emotionally connected to an organization whose values one respects and shares.

This proposition is consistent with attitude formation theories, which suggest that cognitive evaluations often precede and shape affective responses. An HQS who identifies with organizational values is more likely to interpret organizational actions benevolently, feel proud of organizational achievements, and experience positive emotions in the workplace. Over time, these cognitive appraisals crystallize into enduring emotional bonds. Thus, value identification may enhance work effectiveness not only directly but also indirectly by fostering emotional belonging.

Furthermore, once established, emotional belonging may amplify the behavioral consequences of value identification. An HQS who both shares organizational values and feels emotionally connected is likely to be more resilient, more willing to sacrifice personal convenience for organizational goals, and more proactive in contributing to organizational success. Therefore, we propose:

H3: Emotional belonging mediates the positive relationship between value identification and work effectiveness.

### **2.4. Antecedents of Value Identification**

To provide a more complete understanding of how organizations can foster value identification among HQS, this study also examines three organizational antecedents identified in the preliminary qualitative work underlying this research: organizational culture, management systems, and leadership style.

Organizational culture represents the shared assumptions, values, and norms that guide behavior within an enterprise. A culture that emphasizes innovation, excellence, learning, and respect for professional expertise is likely to attract and retain HQS who share these values. Management systems, including performance appraisal, reward distribution, and career development processes, signal what the organization truly values. When these systems are perceived as fair, transparent, and aligned with espoused values, HQS are more likely to identify with organizational values. Leadership style, particularly the extent to which leaders demonstrate value-congruent behaviors and provide value-based inspiration, also shapes value identification. Leaders who "walk the talk" serve as credible role models, reinforcing the authenticity and desirability of organizational values.

Thus, we propose:

H4a: Organizational culture is positively related to value identification among HQS.

H4b: Management systems are positively related to value identification among HQS.

H4c: Leadership style is positively related to value identification among HQS.

Figure 1 presents the integrated conceptual model guiding this study.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Sample and Procedure**

This study shares the same sample as described in Paper 1. Data were collected from 562 highly qualified specialists employed in Chinese enterprises across technology, finance, and manufacturing sectors. The sample characteristics are as follows: 46.09% male, 53.91% female; age distribution spanning 21 to over 46 years; educational attainment ranging from college (23.84%) to doctorate (25.98%); and work experience from less than 5 years (15.48%) to over 20 years (17.79%). A detailed description of the sampling procedure and data collection methods is provided in Paper 1.

#### **3.2. Measures**

All constructs were measured using validated scales with established psychometric properties. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Value identification was assessed using a 4-item scale adapted from Kristof-Brown et al. [7] and contextualized for the Chinese enterprise setting. Sample items include: "I like the culture of my company" and "The work I do is rewarding." The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.658$ ).

Emotional belonging was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Meyer and Allen's [5] affective commitment scale. Sample items include: "I have a good relationship with my leaders and colleagues" and "I rarely consider 'job hopping' and am loyal to my organization." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.632, meeting acceptable thresholds.

Work effectiveness was measured using the 17-item comprehensive scale described in Paper 1 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.886$ ).

Organizational culture was assessed using a single item ("I like the culture of my company") that served as both a component of the value identification scale and a separate antecedent indicator in the antecedent analysis.

Management systems were measured using an item from the value identification scale ("My organization has a good management system").

Leadership style was assessed using an item from the value identification scale ("My organization has a unique leadership style").

While the use of single-item measures for antecedents is a limitation (discussed in Section 5.3), it is justified in this exploratory context given the constraints of survey length and the preliminary nature of the antecedent analysis.

#### **3.3. Data Analysis Strategy**

As detailed in Paper 1, data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the discriminant validity of value identification and emotional belonging. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships (H1–H3). Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the antecedent relationships

(H4a–H4c). The mediation hypothesis (H3) was tested using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to examine the distinctiveness of value identification and emotional belonging. The two-factor model (value identification and emotional belonging as separate but correlated constructs) demonstrated acceptable fit:  $\chi^2/df = 2.18$ , GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.058. This model fit significantly better than a single-factor model in which all items loaded onto a single "attachment" factor ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 156.34$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting the discriminant validity of the two constructs.

The KMO measure was 0.940, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 2818.340$ ,  $df = 136$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis.

### 4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Value identification was significantly positively correlated with work effectiveness ( $r = 0.871$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Emotional belonging was also significantly positively correlated with work effectiveness ( $r = 0.823$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The correlation between value identification and emotional belonging was positive and significant ( $r = 0.69$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but sufficiently below 0.85 to suggest that multicollinearity is not a serious concern.

**Table 1.** Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Value Identification	17.11	3.75	(0.658)		
2. Emotional Belonging	17.46	3.82	0.69**	(0.632)	
3. Work Effectiveness	74.23	15.20	0.871**	0.823**	(0.886)

\*Note: Diagonal values are Cronbach's alpha coefficients. \* $p < 0.01$ .

### 4.3. Hypothesis Testing

**Table 2.** Structural Model Results for Direct Effects

Path	$\beta$	SE	t-value	p-value
Value Identification → Work Effectiveness (H1)	0.275	0.002	131.79	< 0.001
Emotional Belonging → Work Effectiveness (H2)	0.258	0.002	137.31	< 0.001

Note:  $\beta$  = standardized regression coefficient.

Direct effects (H1 and H2). Structural equation modeling was employed to test the direct relationships. As shown in Table 2, value identification was significantly positively related to work effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.275$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H1. Emotional belonging was also significantly positively related to work effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.258$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H2. The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in work effectiveness ( $R^2 = 0.78$ ).

Mediation effect (H3). The bootstrapping procedure (5,000 resamples) was used to test the indirect effect of value identification on work effectiveness through emotional belonging. The indirect effect was 0.087 (95% bias-corrected CI [0.063, 0.115]). Since the confidence interval does not include zero, the indirect effect is statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ . The direct effect of value identification on work effectiveness remained significant when emotional belonging was included in the model ( $\beta = 0.188$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating partial mediation. Thus, H3 is supported.

Antecedent effects (H4a–H4c). Multiple regression analysis was conducted with organizational culture, management systems, and leadership style as predictors and value identification as the dependent variable. As shown in Table 3, all three antecedents were significantly positively related to value identification. Organizational culture had the strongest effect ( $\beta = 0.416$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by management systems ( $\beta = 0.293$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and leadership style ( $\beta = 0.185$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The model explained 52.4% of the variance in value identification (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.521$ ). Thus, H4a, H4b, and H4c are supported.

**Table 3.** Regression Results for Antecedents of Value Identification

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	t-value	p-value
Organizational Culture	0.416	0.042	9.91	< 0.001
Management Systems	0.293	0.038	7.71	< 0.001
Leadership Style	0.185	0.036	5.14	< 0.001

\*Note: Dependent variable = Value Identification;  $F(3, 558) = 206.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.521$ .\*

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence that both value identification and emotional belonging are significant positive predictors of work effectiveness among HQS in Chinese enterprises. Furthermore, emotional belonging partially mediates the relationship between value identification and work effectiveness. The findings also identify organizational culture, management systems, and leadership style as meaningful antecedents of value identification.

### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, by demonstrating that value identification and emotional belonging have significant but distinct effects on work effectiveness, the study provides empirical support for differentiating between cognitive and affective attachment mechanisms. Prior research has often conflated these constructs within broader commitment frameworks [5], obscuring their unique contributions. The finding that both remain significant when entered simultaneously in the same model suggests that value identification and emotional belonging operate through partially independent pathways.

Second, the partial mediation finding reveals that value identification enhances work effectiveness both directly and indirectly by fostering emotional belonging. This suggests a temporal or processual ordering: cognitive value alignment may serve as a foundation upon which affective attachment is built. For HQS, who are often cognitively oriented and professionally socialized, establishing value congruence may be an essential first step before emotional bonds can develop. This insight has important implications for the sequencing of organizational socialization and engagement interventions.

Third, the identification of organizational culture, management systems, and leadership style as antecedents of value identification provides a more complete picture of how organizations can actively shape the psychological attachment of HQS. The finding that organizational culture had the strongest effect ( $\beta = 0.416$ ) aligns with the proposition that deeply embedded, authentic values are more influential than formal systems or individual leaders in shaping value identification [1].

## **5.2. Practical Implications**

For Chinese enterprises seeking to enhance the work effectiveness of their highly qualified specialists, the findings suggest several actionable strategies.

First, organizations should invest in articulating and demonstrating authentic organizational values. Value identification arises from perceived congruence, not simply from the existence of espoused values. Enterprises must ensure that stated values are reflected in daily practices, resource allocation decisions, and strategic priorities. Hypocrisy or value-behavior gaps will undermine identification.

Second, management systems-particularly performance appraisal, reward distribution, and career development processes-should be designed to be transparent, fair, and value-congruent. When HQS observe that the systems which determine their career outcomes embody organizational values, their identification with those values strengthens.

Third, leaders at all levels should model value-congruent behaviors. Leadership style matters not only for direct motivational effects but also for shaping the organizational climate that influences value identification. Leaders who demonstrate integrity, authenticity, and commitment to organizational values serve as credible exemplars.

Fourth, while value identification is important, emotional belonging is not reducible to value congruence and requires independent attention. Enterprises should foster emotional belonging through supportive interpersonal relationships, recognition of individual contributions, work-life balance initiatives, and the creation of psychologically safe work environments.

## **5.3. Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the direction of effects. Although our theoretical model posits that value identification precedes emotional belonging, the reverse relationship is plausible. Longitudinal research examining how these constructs evolve over time, particularly during organizational entry and socialization, is needed.

Second, the use of single-item measures for antecedent variables (organizational culture, management systems, leadership style) limits the reliability and validity of those estimates. Future research should employ multi-item scales for each antecedent to provide more robust tests.

Third, the sample was drawn exclusively from Chinese enterprises, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Chinese cultural characteristics such as high collectivism and power distance may amplify the importance of organizational culture and leadership style as antecedents of identification. Cross-cultural replication studies are needed.

Fourth, while this study focused on value identification and emotional belonging as independent variables, other psychological constructs such as psychological empowerment, perceived organizational support, and trust may also play important roles. Future research should integrate these constructs into a more comprehensive model.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that value identification and emotional belonging are significant positive predictors of work effectiveness among highly qualified specialists in Chinese enterprises. Emotional belonging partially mediates the relationship between value identification and work effectiveness, suggesting that cognitive value alignment facilitates the development of affective attachment, which in turn enhances performance. Organizational culture, management systems, and leadership style serve as important antecedents of value identification. These findings advance theoretical understanding of the distinct mechanisms through which cognitive and affective attachment enhance HQS performance and provide practical guidance for cultivating value-congruent, emotionally supportive organizational environments.

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