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Digital Empowerment's Impact on Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism in China's Smart Hotels

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of digital transformation, the inherent correlation between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms in China's smart hotels has become a research focus, yet the psychological and cognitive transmission paths between them remain insufficiently verified. Based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, this study adopts a quantitative research method and uses structural equation modeling and the Bootstrap resampling method to empirically test the impact of Digital Empowerment on Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms and explore the mediating roles of Work Commitment and Digital Self-Efficacy. The results demonstrate that Digital Empowerment directly enhances Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms. In addition, Digital Empowerment significantly increases both Work Commitment and Digital Self-Efficacy. These two variables partially mediate the relationship between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms. Specifically, two mediating pathways are identified: the first pathway proceeds from Digital Empowerment to Work Commitment and then to Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms, while the second pathway proceeds from Digital Empowerment to Digital Self-Efficacy and then to Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms. These findings extend value co creation theory and provide practical implications for incentive strategy design in smart hotels.

Keywords: Digital Empowerment; Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism; Work Commitment; Digital Self-Efficacy; JD-R Model; Sustainable Growth

1. Introduction

Amid the global wave of digitalization, the application of technologies such as AI, IoT and big data is driving China's hotel industry to accelerate its transformation from traditional to smart hotels. Digitalization has become a core driving force for hotels to improve operational efficiency, optimize guest experience and gain a competitive edge in the fierce market [1]. However, despite the increasing prevalence of various digital tools and platforms in the hotel industry, a key bottleneck is becoming increasingly prominent: frontline staff lack sufficient digital skills and have limited practical application capabilities of digital tools [2,3]. Given the accelerated digital transformation of China's hotel industry and the strategic significance of employees' digital capabilities for customer satisfaction and business performance, exploring the intrinsic relationship between Digital Empowerment and incentive design has become a research direction with both urgent practical needs and

significant academic value [4,5]. This study aims to fill this theoretical gap by using smart hotels in China as a research scenario to deeply analyze the mechanism by which Digital Empowerment affects incentive design through psychological and cognitive pathways, providing practically guiding research conclusions and action suggestions for improving value co-creation in the hotel industry under the digital context.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the impact of Digital Empowerment on Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism through the mediating roles of Work Commitment and Digital Self-Efficacy, using a smart hotel in China as the empirical research scenario. Specific research objectives are as follows:

- 1) To examine the direct relationship between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.
- 2) To examine the direct relationship between Digital Empowerment and Work Commitment.
- 3) To examine the direct relationship between Digital Empowerment and Digital Self-Efficacy.
- 4) To examine the mediating role of Work Commitment in the relationship between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.
- 5) To examine the mediating role of Digital Self-Efficacy in the relationship between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory Model

The JD-R model (Job Demands-Resources Model), as shown in **Figure 1**, was proposed by Demerouti et al. in 2001. It is a core framework in organizational behavior for explaining employee well-being, motivation and performance. Its core logic is based on two dimensions: "job demands" (stressors requiring employee resource investment, such as workload and skill update requirements) and "job resources" (factors supporting employee stress management and development, such as incentives, training and support). These dimensions are explored through a health protection path (excessive demands and lack of resources easily lead to burnout) and an incentive path (sufficient resources stimulate work engagement). This systematically explains the intrinsic relationship between the work environment and employee psychological and behavioral outcomes. Meanwhile, the latest developments in JD-R theory further incorporate personal resources, multi-level situational factors and crisis situations (such as remote and high-pressure work during the pandemic) into the model, pointing out that the interaction of resources and demands at the individual, family, team and organizational levels jointly shapes employees' well-being and functional status, highlighting the explanatory power and applicability of JD-R as a "unified job design theory" that integrates the two major research traditions of stress and motivation [6].

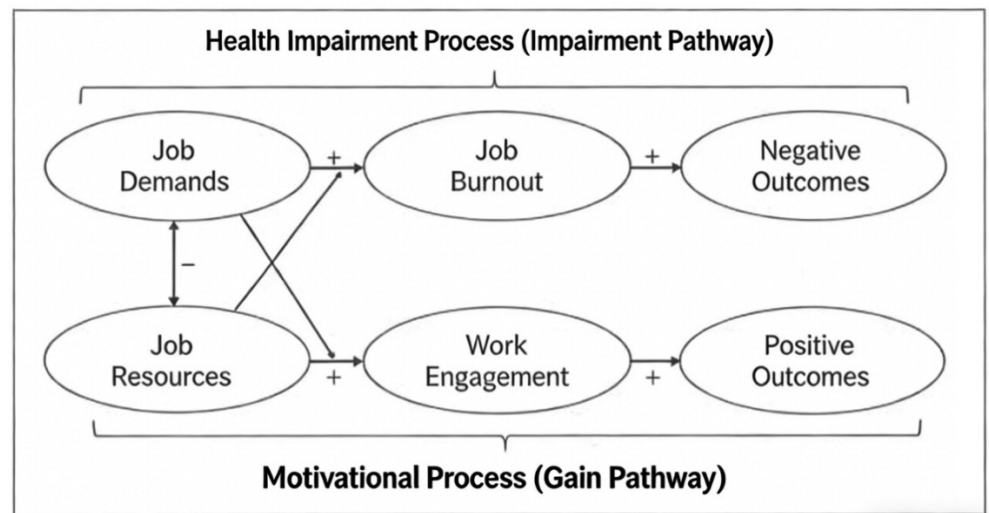


Figure 1

2.2. Dependent and Independent Variables

This study uses Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism as the dependent variable and Digital Empowerment as the independent variable. Work Commitment and Digital Self-Efficacy will be used as mediating variables.

2.2.1 Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism

Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms refer to HRM practices that condition employee rewards and career advancement on customer satisfaction and value creation. This aligns closely with the service profit chain's logic of "driving external customer outcomes through internal incentives" [7]. In service-intensive industries like hotels, performance management and incentive systems have proven effective in significantly improving employee satisfaction, service quality and employee service behavior through integrated HR practices encompassing recruitment, training, performance appraisal and compensation, thereby enhancing customer perceived quality and satisfaction [8]. Advancing digital transformation enables service hotels to embed real-time customer feedback into incentive systems, where linking service quality and satisfaction metrics to performance evaluation, training and rewards generates a dynamic customer-centered learning and incentive loop. This allows for more precise guidance of employees to continuously focus on and respond to customer needs, achieving the dual goals of improved service experience and optimized organizational performance [9].

2.2.2 Digital Empowerment

Digital Empowerment is viewed as a systematic process by which organizations leverage digital technologies to restructure resource allocation, processes and structures, thereby stimulating the intrinsic initiative, adaptability and innovation of both the organization and its employees, rather than merely remaining at the tool level of "buying equipment and implementing systems" [10]. Research indicates that digital technologies, through datafication and networking, can significantly improve the efficiency and motivation of frontline employees and reduce transaction costs by reorganizing enterprise resources and management models, creating structural conditions for employees to be "empowered" [11]. Research has found that knowledge sharing based on artificial intelligence and information systems in hotels can significantly improve employee service quality and customer satisfaction, indicating that digital technology platforms provide employees with a higher level of

decision-making participation and collaboration [12].

2.2.3 Work Commitment

Work Commitment refers to the positive psychological state exhibited by hotel employees during interactions with customers and in providing services, characterized by energy, high focus and a strong sense of identification with their professional role. This definition aligns with the classic three-dimensional classification of Work Commitment: "energy, dedication and focus" [13]. Work Commitment increases customer-oriented behaviors, which then improve business performance. [14] Based on the job demand-resource theory framework, this paper positions it as a key psychological transmission mechanism by which employees' Digital Empowerment influences Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.

2.2.4 Digital Self-Efficacy

Digital Self-Efficacy reflects individuals' self-perceived proficiency in digital tool application, which is strongly correlated with their capacity to adapt to technological changes. This construct is deeply integrated into the "motivation-psychology-empowerment" theoretical path constructed in this study: On the one hand, Digital Empowerment fosters employees' Digital Self-Efficacy by providing clear goal feedback and successful experiences (e.g., rewards for positive customer reviews on digital services), which in turn strengthens the effectiveness of Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms. On the other hand, Self-Efficacy plays a key mediating role between digital competence and innovative behavior. Individuals with high Self-Efficacy exhibit greater initiative, persistence and adaptability in digital situations [15].

2.2.5 Proposed Research Framework

As shown in **Figure 2**, this path is the hypothetical framework of this study.

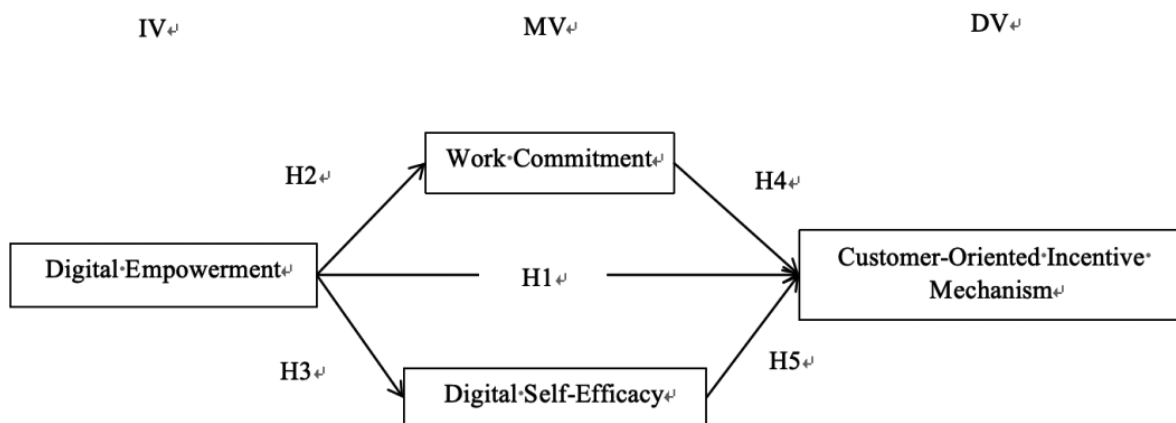


Figure 2

2.2.6 Hypotheses Development

H1: Digital Empowerment has a significant direct positive effect on the dependent variable, Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.

H2: Digital Empowerment has a significant positive effect on the mediating variable, Work Commitment.

H3: Digital Empowerment has a significant positive effect on the mediating variable, Digital Self-Efficacy.

H4: Work Commitment has a significant positive effect on the dependent variable, Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism and mediates the relationship between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.

H5: Digital Self-Efficacy has a significant positive effect on the dependent variable Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism and mediates the relationship between Digital Empowerment and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism.

3. Methodology

This study employed quantitative analysis to examine the relationships between hotel employees' Digital Empowerment (as an independent variable), Work Commitment and Digital Self-Efficacy (as mediating variables) and Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism (as a dependent variable). Each variable was quantified using a maturity scale and all items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale. The questionnaire aimed to achieve the three core objectives of this study and was divided into four parts: Part A (demographic and organizational background information), Part B (independent variables), Part C (mediating variables) and Part D (dependent variable).

Part A collected seven demographic and hotel background variables, including gender, age, education, position, tenure, hotel star rating and group type.

Part B contained twelve questions measuring the independent variable—Digital Empowerment. This part was revised based on Spreitzer's Psychological Empowerment Scale, measuring employees' perceived psychological empowerment in digital work situations [16]. The scale consists of four dimensions: Meaning, Self-efficacy, Autonomy and Influence, each measured by three items assessing employees' perceived value of digital work, confidence in using digital tools, decision-making autonomy and perceived impact on the team and business, respectively.

Part C contains 21 questions to measure two mediating variables. Work Commitment is measured using the Utrecht Work Commitment Scale-9 (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al., which includes three dimensions: Energy, Engagement and Focus, with a total of 9 items [17]. Digital Self-Efficacy is measured using a computerized self-efficacy scale adapted from Compeau and Higgins, with 12 items covering three sub-dimensions: Basic Operational Efficacy, Problem-Solving Efficacy and Learning and Innovation Efficacy, used to comprehensively assess employees' confidence in mastering and using hotel digital tools [18].

Part D contains 10 questions to measure the dependent variable—Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism. This part uses a simplified version of the SOCO scale [19] comprising two dimensions: customer orientation (5 items) and sales orientation (5 items). In this study, the customer orientation and sales orientation dimension score will serve as a positive measure of Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism, assessing employees' behavioral tendencies centered on meeting long-term customer needs. This operationalization is consistent with prior service management literature that conceptualizes customer-oriented employee behavior as an outcome of organizational climate, managerial support and customer-focused HRM practices.

All survey tools in this study are based on established academic scales and have undergone a standard translation-back-translation process to ensure cultural equivalence. Their reliability and validity in the Chinese hotel industry context were validated in a pre-test. All questions were answered using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

This study employs a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. The target population is frontline employees from smart hotels in Chinese cities, defined as star-rated hotels with formally deployed core intelligent technologies. Based on general sample size requirements for structural equation modeling and referring to the sample size determination table of Krejcie & Morgan

(1970), the target sample size is set as $N \geq 300$ to ensure sufficient statistical power and meet the requirements of multivariate analysis. The collected data are analyzed using SPSS 27.0 and Smart-PLS4 software. The analytical steps include data cleaning and descriptive statistics, reliability and validity testing (Cronbach's α , confirmatory factor analysis) and finally, structural equation modeling path analysis to test the direct and mediating effects proposed in the research hypotheses.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Respondents' Demographics Analysis

According to **Table 1**, 59.6% of the sample consisted of females. 38.6% of respondents were aged 26-35 years and approximately 35.0% were aged 36-45 years. With 40.4% of the respondents having an associate degree and 38.6% holding a bachelor's degree. Over 54.4% of respondents were frontline employees and 40.4% had 1-3 years of tenure at their current hotel. 45.6% of the respondents worked in 5-star hotels and 40.4% were employed in independent hotels. Most respondents (40.4%) were from domestic chain group hotels and 22.8% worked in international chain group hotels.

Table 1. Demographic Information(N = 557)

Variable	Category	Expanded Frequency ($n = 557$)	Expanded Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	225	40.4
	Female	332	59.6
Age Range	18-25 years	107	19.2
	26-35 years	215	38.6
	36-45 years	195	35.0
	46 years and above	40	7.20
Education Level	High school or below	97	17.4
	Associate degree	225	40.4
	Bachelor's degree	215	38.6
	Master's degree or above	20	3.60
Job Position Level	Frontline employee	303	54.4
	Junior management	166	29.8
	Middle management	88	15.8
	Senior management	0	0.0
Tenure at Current Hotel	Less than 1 year	117	21.0
	1-3 years	225	40.4
	4-6 years	137	24.6
Hotel Star Rating	7 years or more	78	14.0
	3 stars or below	147	26.4
	4 stars	156	28.0
	5 stars	254	45.6

Continuation Table:

Variable	Category	Expanded Frequency ($n = 557$)	Expanded Percentage (%)
Hotel Group Type	Independent hotel	225	40.4
	Domestic chain group	205	36.8
	International chain group	127	22.8

4.2. Evaluation of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The measurement model (outer model) was evaluated by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to determine the validity and reliability of latent components. The findings of the outer model evaluation in this study are detailed below.

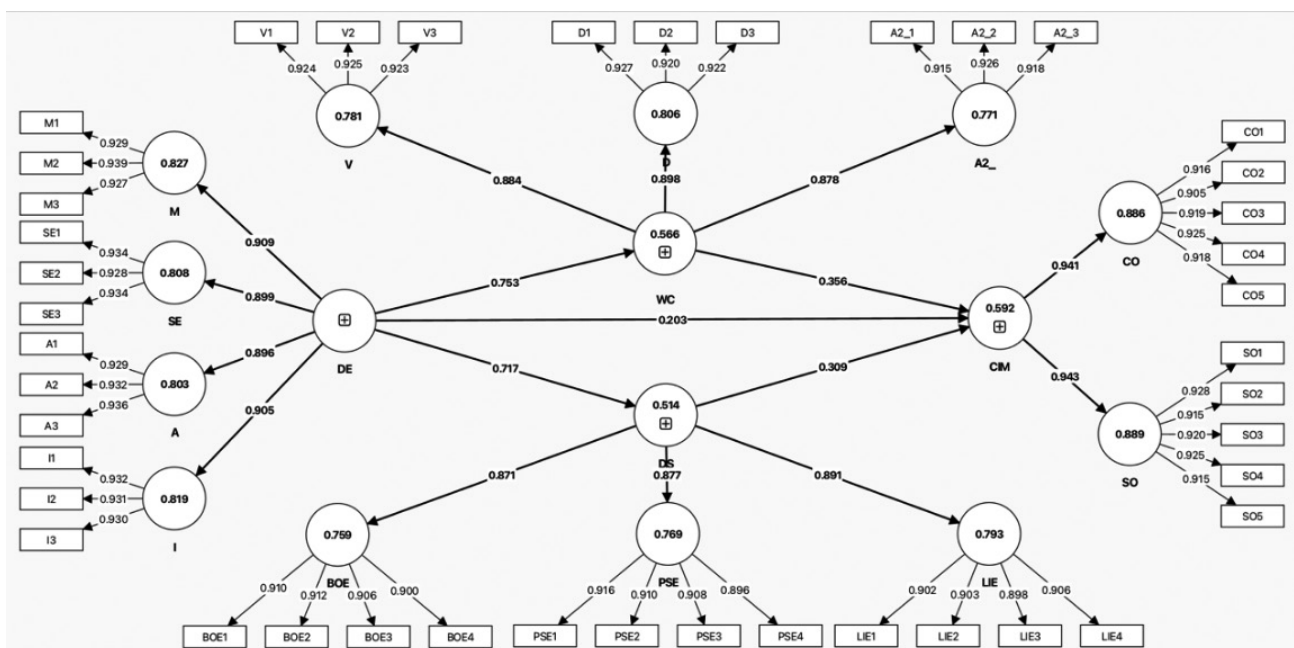


Figure 3

4.2.1 Convergent Validity

Figure 3 illustrates that all loading factor values surpassed the threshold of 0.7, signifying the validity of each indicator in this investigation. Therefore, these indicators are suitable for assessing the research variables.

4.2.2 Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

This study used the Fornell-Larcker criterion to test the discriminant validity of the latent variables. The Fornell-Larcker analysis results for each variable are shown in Table 2. The square roots of the AVE for the four latent variables (CIM, DE, DS, WC) are 0.865, 0.841, 0.797 and 0.818, respectively, all greater than the correlation coefficients (range 0.585–0.753) among all latent variables in their respective rows and columns. These results satisfy the Fornell-Larcker criterion, confirming good discriminant validity among the latent variables.

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Analysis for Checking Discriminant Validity

	CIM	DE	DS	WC
CIM	0.865			

Continuation Table:

	CIM	DE	DS	WC
DE	0.693	0.841		
DS	0.663	0.717	0.797	
WC	0.69	0.753	0.585	0.818

4.2.3 Reliability Test

According to **Table 3**, the Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable are : DE at 0.962, WC at 0.938, DS at 0.948 and CIM at 0.963. These results imply that all indicators exhibited dependability when assessing their corresponding latent variables. All composite reliability values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7 and all AVE values are above 0.5, confirming the measurement model's strong reliability and convergent validity.

Table 3. Calculation of AVE, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability and Outer Loadings

Constructs	Items	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
DE	M1	0.842	0.962	0.967	0.707
	M2	0.854			
	M3	0.846			
	SE1	0.847			
	SE2	0.822			
	SE3	0.844			
	A1	0.829			
	A2	0.837			
	A3	0.840			
	I1	0.844			
	I2	0.848			
	I3	0.836			
	V1	0.817		0.948	0.669
WC	V2	0.816			
	V3	0.817			
	D1	0.835			
	D2	0.827			
	D3	0.824			
	A2_1	0.798			
	A2_2	0.802			
	A2_3	0.822			

Continuation Table:

Constructs	Items	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
DS	BOE1	0.791	0.948	0.954	0.635
	BOE2	0.791			
	BOE3	0.791			
	BOE4	0.790			
	PSE1	0.795			
	PSE2	0.799			
	PSE3	0.800			
	PSE4	0.790			
	LIE1	0.788			
	LIE2	0.818			
	LIE3	0.791			
	LIE4	0.817			
CIM	CO1	0.860	0.963	0.968	0.749
	CO2	0.856			
	CO3	0.880			
	CO4	0.858			
	CO5	0.860			
	SO1	0.874			
	SO2	0.865			
	SO3	0.863			
	SO4	0.869			
	SO5	0.870			

4.3. Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

4.3.1 R-square results

According to the bootstrapping results shown in **Table 4**, the R^2 value for WC is 0.566. This indicates that WC is influenced by DE by 56.6%. The R^2 value DS is 0.513, indicating that it is influenced by DE by 51.3%. The R^2 value for CIM is 0.590, indicating that it is influenced by the DE variable by 59.0%.

Table 4. Correlation Value (R^2)

	R^2
Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanism (CIM)	0.590
Work Commitment (WC)	0.566
Digital Self-Efficacy (DS)	0.513

4.3.2 Path Coefficients

Based on the test results in **Table 5**, the structural model's path coefficients, significance levels, confidence intervals and effect sizes (f^2) were analyzed comprehensively to verify the proposed hypotheses.

First, regarding the direct effect, the path coefficient of DE on CIM was 0.203 ($p < 0.001$), with a T-statistic of 32.158, which far exceeds the critical value of 1.96. The 95% confidence interval (CI) ranges from 0.110 to 0.298, excluding zero and the effect size (f^2) is 0.032, indicating a small but statistically significant effect. This confirms that DE exerts a significant direct positive impact on CIM even after controlling for the mediating variables and thus Hypothesis H1 is supported.

Second, for the antecedent effects on mediating variables: The path coefficient of DE on WC was 0.753 ($p < 0.001$), with a T-statistic of 40.891. The 95% CI for this path is 0.715 to 0.787 (zero excluded) and the effect size (f^2) reaches 1.306, representing a large effect. This result fully supports Hypothesis H2. Similarly, DE had a significant positive effect on DS, with a path coefficient of 0.717 ($p < 0.001$), a T-statistic of 38.144, a 95% CI of 0.679 to 0.753 and an f^2 value of 1.059 (also a large effect). This finding supports Hypothesis H3.

Third, for the effects of mediating variables on the dependent variable: WC demonstrated a significant positive impact on CIM, with a path coefficient of 0.356 ($p < 0.001$) and a T-statistic of 8.046. The 95% CI spans from 0.268 to 0.443 (zero excluded) and the effect size (f^2) is 0.133, indicating a moderate effect. This validates WC's key mediating role in the DE→CIM relationship and supports Hypothesis H4.

DS also had a significant positive effect on CIM, with a path coefficient of 0.309 ($p < 0.001$), a T-statistic of 7.975, a 95% CI of 0.281 to 0.384 and an f^2 value of 0.113 (a moderate effect). This confirms its mediating function and supports Hypothesis H5.

In summary, all path coefficients are statistically significant at the 0.001 level and their T-statistics are substantially higher than the 1.96 critical value. The 95% confidence intervals for all paths exclude zero, further confirming the robustness of the results. The effect size analysis reveals that DE has a dominant large effect on the two mediating variables, while the mediators exert moderate effects on CIM and the direct effect of DE on CIM is small. All path coefficients are positive, consistent with theoretical expectations. These results confirm that DE not only directly drives CIM but also indirectly influences CIM through the dual mediating pathways of WC and DS. Collectively, the findings provide strong empirical support for the study's theoretical framework, demonstrating the structural model's sound predictive validity and explanatory power.

Table 5. Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	β	(M)	STDEV	T-Value	P	CILL	CIHL	F^2	VIF
H1	DE → CIM	0.203	0.203	0.022	32.158	0.000	0.110	0.298	0.032	3.155
H2	DE → WC	0.753	0.752	0.018	40.891	0.000	0.715	0.787	1.306	1.000
H3	DE → DS	0.717	0.717	0.019	38.144	0.000	0.679	0.753	1.059	1.000
H4	WC → CIM	0.356	0.459	0.044	8.046	0.000	0.268	0.443	0.133	2.328
H5	DS → CIM	0.309	0.395	0.039	7.975	0.000	0.231	0.384	0.113	2.079

4.3.3 Indirect Effect Testing

This study used Bootstrap resampling (5000 samples) to test the indirect effect

of DE on the dependent variable CIM through the mediating variables WC and DS. The results are shown in **Table 6**: The indirect effect of DE on CIM through WC was 0.268 ($p < 0.001$) and the T-statistic was 7.863, indicating that this indirect effect was significantly positive at the 0.1% statistical level. This demonstrates that DE can have a positive indirect impact on CIM by driving WC, providing strong empirical support for the existence of the mediating path $DE \rightarrow WC \rightarrow CIM$. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) value of this mediating path was 39%, confirming that WC exerts a significant partial mediating effect in the relationship between DE and CIM, with moderate explanatory power for the total effect. This result also supports H4.

The indirect effect of DE on CIM via DS was 0.222 ($p < 0.001$), with a T-statistic of 7.808, indicating that this indirect effect was also significantly positive at the 0.1% statistical level. This result validates that DE can have a significant indirect positive impact on CIM by activating DS, supporting the validity of the mediation path $DE \rightarrow DS \rightarrow CIM$. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) value of this mediating path was 32%, confirming that DS exerts a significant partial mediating effect in the relationship between DE and CIM, with moderate explanatory power for the total effect. This result also supports H5.

These results indicate that the indirect effects of both mediation paths are highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and the direction of the effect is consistent with theoretical expectations. Based on previous tests of the direct effect ($DE \rightarrow CIM$, $\beta = 0.203$, $p < 0.001$), the structural model in this study presents a partially mediated model: the effect of DE on CIM is achieved through both a significant direct path and two significant indirect paths, WC and DS.

Table 6. Indirect Effect

Hypothesis	Path	β	(M)	STDEV	T-Value	P	VAF
H4	DE->WC->CIM	0.268	0.268	0.034	7.863	0.000	39%
H5	DE->DS->CIM	0.222	0.221	0.028	7.808	0.000	32%

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms that Digital Empowerment positively influences Customer-Oriented Incentive Mechanisms in smart hotels, with Work Commitment and Digital Self-Efficacy acting as important mediators. The findings extend the JD-R model by explaining both affective and cognitive pathways through which digital empowerment enhances customer-oriented behaviors and service incentives. [20] study showed that agricultural IoT, smart community services, and e-commerce platforms empower rural governance and enhance villagers' subjectivity and governance effectiveness.

Practically, smart hotels should treat Digital Empowerment as a strategic HR function by strengthening employees' digital skills, operational support and decision-making autonomy. Providing tiered digital training, reliable technological infrastructure and greater service discretion can enhance employees' self-efficacy, work commitment and overall service capability.

Two limitations are noted. First, the cross-sectional design captures only static relationships, which precludes inferences about the dynamic evolution among Digital Empowerment, Work Commitment, Digital Self-efficacy and Customer Oriented incentive mechanisms. Second, the omission of potential moderators including organizational support, digital transformation maturity and employee personality traits leaves the boundary conditions of this mechanism unexplored.

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