
Enhancing Psychological Empowerment in Academia in Nigeria University Context: How Leadership Support and Role Breadth Self- Efficacy Interact Across Age Groups

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between leadership support (LS), role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE), age, and psychological empowerment (PE) within a moderated mediation framework. Guided by Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory, it proposed that LS would directly enhance PE, indirectly influence PE through RBSE, and that age would moderate the RBSE–PE link. Using validated self-report measures alongside demographic variables, data were collected from 648 lecturers across three campuses of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, a federal university in Nigeria. Analyses were conducted with IBM SPSS Version 23 and both Pearson correlation and PROCESS Micro analysis were conducted. Zero-order correlation result showed significant positive relationships among the main variables: LS–RBSE ($r = .11, p < .01$), LS–PE ($r = .15, p < .01$), and RBSE–PE ($r = .30, p < .001$). PROCESS Micro result confirmed mediation effect: LS predicted PE both directly and indirectly via RBSE. Age moderated the RBSE–PE relationship, such that the positive effect of RBSE on PE was stronger among younger lecturers. These findings advance JD-R theory by identifying RBSE as a mediating personal resource through which supportive leadership enhances psychological empowerment and by demonstrating age as a boundary condition. The study enriches empirical evidence in the Nigerian higher education context, highlighting that supportive leadership practices can effectively enhance lecturers' self-efficacy and empowerment, particularly among early-career staff. These results provide actionable insights for university administrators and policymakers seeking to implement age-responsive leadership strategies to boost lecturer performance, engagement, and well-being.

Keywords: leadership support, role breadth self-efficacy, psychological empowerment, age, moderated mediation, Nigerian universities.

Introduction

The contemporary higher education environment in Nigeria is getting increasingly shaped by challenges related to human resource development, lack of leadership support, low motivation, and job dissatisfaction among academic staff (Ofoegbu & Ojogwu, 2022). In such turbulent conditions, the need for psychological empowerment becomes crucial in

understanding how employees perceive their impact, competence, autonomy, and work meaningfulness. These four cognitive states: impact, competence, self-determination, and meaning represent psychological empowerment in the literature (Spreitzer, 1995; May et al., 2020). Importantly, research has consistently shown that psychological empowerment positively enhances employee work outcomes such as engagement, satisfaction, innovation, commitment, and performance, and all have been adjudged to be vital for institutional performance in higher education (Ugwu et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, the Nigerian academic context often undermines empowerment due to weak leadership structures, limited recognition, and poor communication (Okafor & Egbunike, 2021). This creates an urgent problem: how can universities foster psychological empowerment in an environment where staff often feel undervalued and unsupported?

In the light above, leadership support has emerged as a critical antecedent of empowerment. Supportive leaders provide encouragement, resources, autonomy, and recognition that ensue trust and open communication (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Such support is especially important in universities, where faculty members need empowerment to balance teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. Empirical evidence from diverse contexts confirms that leader support positively influences psychological empowerment (Edeh et al., 2024; Kwahar & Iyortsuum, 2021; Patrick et al., 2025; Yaunyuan et al., 2025). However, the mechanisms through which this relationship unfolds remain insufficiently examined in African higher education, leaving theoretical and practical gaps.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory offers a useful framework for addressing this gap. JD–R theory posits that while job demands can drain energy and undermine well-being, job resources such as supportive leadership can motivate employees, enhance resilience, and foster positive psychological states (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Within this framework, leader support can be viewed as a critical job resource that enables employees to build personal and psychological resources. Role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) reflects one such personal resource, defined as the belief in one’s ability to handle broader and more proactive work roles beyond technical requirements (Parker, 1998). Supportive leadership may strengthen RBSE by providing feedback, recognition, and opportunities for growth, which in turn foster psychological empowerment (Parker et al., 2006; Chong et al., 2022).

Age may further condition this process. JD–R theory recognizes that individual differences shape how employees mobilize and utilize resources (Bakker, 2020). In academia, younger and older staff may differ in motivation, adaptability, and efficacy (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Ejimofor & Udeh, 2022). Yet, few studies have investigated how age moderates the link between RBSE and empowerment, particularly in Nigeria university contexts. This study, therefore, investigates how leadership support influences psychological empowerment through the mediating role of RBSE and the moderating role of age among Nigerian university lecturers, drawing on the JD–R theoretical framework. By addressing these gaps, the study advances understanding of empowerment in higher education and offers insights for leadership practice in resource-constrained environments.

Accordingly, this study seeks to achieve three main objectives. First, it examines whether leadership support directly predicts psychological empowerment among Nigerian university lecturers. Second, it investigates the mediating role of role breadth self-efficacy in the leadership support–empowerment relationship. Third, it explores whether age moderates the link between breadth self-efficacy and psychological empowerment. By addressing these aims, the study clarifies the pathways through which supportive leadership fosters empowerment, highlights the role of personal resources in the academic context, and extends the Job Demands–Resources framework to a non-Western higher education setting.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory provides the overarching framework for this study. The model posits that job resources such as leadership support, autonomy, and developmental opportunities enhance employee motivation and foster positive psychological states, while job demands, if not buffered, lead to strain and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Within academic contexts, supportive leadership can serve as a key resource that strengthens lecturers' role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) and, in turn, psychological empowerment. By integrating contextual resources (leadership support) and personal resources (RBSE), the JD–R framework explains how empowerment may emerge and how individual differences, such as age, may shape these processes.

Leadership Support and Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment, defined as an individual's perception of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995), has consistently been linked to positive outcomes in higher education, including job satisfaction, work engagement, and innovation (Ugwu et al., 2021). Leadership support expressed through recognition, guidance, autonomy, and concern for wellbeing has been consistently identified as a key antecedent of psychological empowerment (Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Ugwu et al., 2021). Supportive leaders foster trust, provide developmental feedback, and encourage autonomy, thereby creating a work climate that nurtures employees' confidence, strengthens their sense of influence, and enhances intrinsic motivation (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014), and by extension enhances employees' perceptions of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Empirical studies confirm that perceived leader support is positively related to empowerment in both Western and African contexts (Kwahar & Iyortsum, 2021; Patrick et al., 2025; Yaunyuan et al., 2025). In the Nigerian university system, where lecturers often face inadequate recognition and limited participation in decision-making (Okafor & Egbunike, 2021), leadership support is expected to play a particularly critical role. Drawing on the JD-R framework, leadership support can be considered a vital job resource that directly enhances psychological empowerment.

H1: Leadership support positively predicts psychological empowerment among Nigerian university lecturers.

Leadership Support and Role Breadth Self-Efficacy

Role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) refers to employees' confidence in their ability to carry out a broader set of tasks beyond technical duties, such as initiating change, mentoring, or institutional development activities (Parker, 1998). Leaders influence RBSE by providing feedback, encouragement, and resources that signal confidence in employees' capacity to handle expanded responsibilities (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Empirical research has established that supportive leadership enhances RBSE across diverse settings (Chong et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2021). In the Nigerian academic context, where lecturers are expected to combine teaching, research, and service roles, leadership support can expand their

confidence to engage in these multifaceted tasks. Within the JD–R framework, leadership support functions as a job resource that cultivates RBSE as a personal resource. Furthermore, Bandura’s (1997) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy provides deeper insight into this process, emphasizing that individuals develop stronger efficacy beliefs when they receive mastery experiences, social persuasion, and modeling from leaders. Thus, leadership support not only provides external resources but also activates psychological mechanisms of efficacy-building, reinforcing lecturers’ role breadth confidence.

H2: Leadership support positively predicts role breadth self-efficacy among Nigerian university lecturers.

Role Breadth Self-Efficacy and Psychological Empowerment

The four dimensions of psychological empowerment are shaped not only by external support but also by employees’ personal resources. RBSE plays a central role in this regard, as individuals with high RBSE feel competent and capable of influencing outcomes beyond their prescribed roles (Parker et al., 2006). Such confidence fosters greater self-determination and a stronger sense of meaning in work. Evidence suggests that RBSE enhances empowerment, especially when supported by institutional resources (Chong et al., 2022). For university lecturers, high RBSE translates into stronger perceptions of impact, autonomy, and work significance, which are essential for psychological empowerment. From the JD–R perspective, RBSE can be understood as a personal resource that energizes empowerment outcomes. Also consistent with Bandura’s (1997) cognitive view, self-efficacy serves as a motivational driver enabling individuals to translate confidence into empowered action, suggesting that RBSE is not just a cognitive state but a catalyst for empowerment in academic environments.

H3: Role breadth self-efficacy positively predicts psychological empowerment among Nigerian university lecturers.

Mediating Role of Role Breadth Self-Efficacy

While leadership support can directly enhance empowerment, the JD–R framework suggests that resources often work through intermediate mechanisms. In this case, RBSE may act as a mediator. Supportive leaders provide resources and encouragement that strengthen lecturers' RBSE, which in turn reinforces their sense of empowerment. Empirical findings in organizational behavior research support such mediation effects, with RBSE explaining how supportive contexts translate into empowerment and proactivity (Chong et al., 2022; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Applied to Nigerian universities, this suggests that leadership support enhances RBSE, which subsequently fosters empowerment. Bandura's self-efficacy theory also reinforces this pathway, as leadership support serves as a form of social persuasion and vicarious learning that heightens RBSE, ultimately transmitting its effect into greater empowerment.

H4: Role breadth self-efficacy mediates the relationship between leadership support and psychological empowerment.

Moderating Role of Age

Individual characteristics can shape how personal resources translate into psychological outcomes. Age, in particular, influences motivation, adaptability, and confidence. Younger academics may exhibit greater openness to change and higher responsiveness to efficacy cues, while older academics may rely more on experience but display lower adaptability in rapidly changing environments (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Ejimofor & Udeh, 2022). In line with the JD–R theory's assumption that personal characteristics moderate resource–outcome linkages, age may condition the strength of the RBSE–empowerment relationship. Additionally, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 1995) provides a useful lens, suggesting that younger individuals prioritize growth-oriented goals such as skill-building and empowerment, while older individuals prioritize emotionally meaningful experiences and stability. This theoretical perspective helps explain why younger lecturers may benefit more strongly from RBSE in enhancing empowerment, whereas older lecturers may derive fewer empowerment gains from the same resource.

H5a: Age moderates the relationship between role breadth self-efficacy and psychological empowerment, such that the relationship is stronger for younger lecturers compared to older lecturers.

Building from H5a, age may also condition how leadership support translates into empowerment via RBSE. According to the JD-R framework, leadership support acts as a job resource that enhances personal resources like RBSE, which in turn promotes psychological empowerment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Evidence suggests younger employees with high RBSE respond more strongly to supportive leadership, experiencing greater empowerment, whereas older employees may require stronger or more tailored support due to differences in adaptability and work motivations (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). From the perspective of Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, younger employees' orientation toward future growth makes them more responsive to leadership-driven efficacy-building, while older employees may place less emphasis on empowerment outcomes, moderating the strength of the indirect pathway.

H5b: Age moderates the indirect effect of leadership support on psychological empowerment through role breadth self-efficacy, such that the indirect effect is stronger for younger lecturers compared to older lecturers.

Method

Participants

A total of 648 lecturers participated in the study, comprising 57.8% male ($n = 375$) and 42.1% female ($n = 273$). Participants were randomly selected from a population of 3,726 academic staff working in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria, across its three campuses (Awka, Nnewi, and Agulu). Most respondents (70%, $n = 456$) were from Awka campus. The majority were married (87%, $n = 564$), with ages ranging between 26 and 68 years ($M = 46$, $SD = 9$). Respondents represented all academic ranks, with senior lecturers making up the largest group (33.8%, $n = 219$). Their average tenure was 10.56 years ($SD = 6.75$). Almost all participants (98%, $n = 633$) were of Igbo ethnic origin, with 77% from Anambra State, ensuring a relatively homogenous cultural background.

Selection Criteria

Eligibility was based on the following criteria:

1. Participants had to be academic staff (lecturers).
2. They must have worked for at least six months to ensure adequate experience with leadership support and empowerment. Lecturers with less than six months of teaching experience (n = 10) were excluded from the analysis.

Measures

Psychological Empowerment.

Psychological empowerment was assessed using the 12-item, four-dimension scale developed by Spreitzer (1995), which captures meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Sample items for each dimension include: “the lecturing work I do is very important to me.” (meaning), “I am confident about my ability to deliver my lectures.” (competence), “I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job” (self-determination), and “I have significant influence over what happens in my department.” (impact). The overall psychological empowerment score was computed by summing the average scores of the four dimensions, consistent with previous studies that treated PE as a single construct (e.g., Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The scale has been validated in Nigeria by Onyeishi (2006), specifically among employees from the Igbo cultural context. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the psychological empowerment measure was .81, indicating good internal consistency.

Leadership Support

Leadership support was assessed with three items adapted from the supportive leadership dimension of Grafferty and Griffin’s (2004) transformational leadership scale. Items were reworded to reflect the academic context (e.g., “management” was replaced with “HOD/Dean/Vice Chancellor”). Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). A sample item is, “*My leader considers lecturers’ interests before acting.*” The scale showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .78$).

Role Breadth Self-Efficacy (RBSE)

RBSE was measured with Parker's (1998) 9-item scale, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Items assessed confidence in handling proactive work roles beyond routine duties. A sample item is, "*How confident would you feel analyzing a long-term problem in your department to find a solution?*" Higher scores indicated stronger RBSE. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability in this study ($\alpha = .92$).

Age.

Age was recorded in months/years as self-reported by participants in the demographic section of the survey. For moderation analysis, age was treated both as a continuous variable and grouped (e.g., below 40 years, 40 years and above).

Control Variables.

Gender and organizational tenure were controlled, given evidence that they might influence psychological empowerment and related outcomes (Alessandri et al., 2019; Edgar et al., 2020).

Procedure

The researcher obtained official approval and population records from the Directorate of Academic Planning and Personnel Units of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Based on the reported staff population ($N = 3,726$), a sample size of 856 was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula. To account for potential nonresponse, 1,000 questionnaires were printed. Questionnaires were distributed using a convenience sampling method during a mandatory academic staff training workshop, which brought lecturers together in faculty-based batches. The researcher, with the assistance of organizers, briefed participants on the study's purpose, distributed questionnaires during breaks, and collected responses over a four-day period per faculty batch. Out of 702 distributed questionnaires, 658 were returned (93.73% response rate). After excluding 10 cases with less than six months of tenure, 648 valid responses remained (92.31% usable response rate).

Research Design and Data Analysis

The study employed a cross-sectional, correlational survey design. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships among the study

variables. Hypotheses were tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 14), which allows estimation of moderated mediation effects.

Hypotheses

Based on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and prior literature, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Perceived leadership support will positively predict psychological empowerment among university lecturers in Southeast, Nigeria.

H2: Perceived leadership support will positively predict role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) among the university lecturers.

H3: Role breadth self-efficacy will positively predict psychological empowerment among university lecturers.

H4: Role breadth self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between leadership support and psychological empowerment.

H5a: Age will moderate the relationship between role breadth self-efficacy and psychological empowerment, such that the relationship is stronger for younger lecturers compared with the older lecturers.

H5b: The indirect effect of leadership support on psychological empowerment through RBSE will be moderated by age (moderated mediation effect).

Results

The analyses were conducted in a stepwise manner, beginning with descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables, followed by hypothesis testing using the PROCESS macro (Model 14) for direct, mediating, moderating, and moderated-mediation effects. All analyses were performed using SPSS Version 23.

Result

This chapter deals with the presentation of the results. Table I presents results of the descriptive analysis including the mean and the standard deviation, the zero-order

correlations and the Cronbach alpha analysis. Table 2 presents the result of the regression analysis where the participants demographic variables were controlled. Table 3 host the result and the mediation and-moderation analysis.

Table 1: descriptive (mean and standard deviation), zero-order correlations and reliability results

Variable s:	Mea n	Sd	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1- Gender	1.42	0.49	1										
2- Age	45.68	8.85	-.07	1									
3- Rank	3.18	1.60	-.07	-.40***	1								
4- Tenure	10.56	6.57	.03	.63***	-.49***	1							
5- LS	4.68	1.35	.04	-.04	.04	-.01	(.78)						
6- RBSE	4.21	0.67	-.05	.09*	.02	.08*	.11**	(.92)					
7- PE	5.57	0.74	-.05	.16***	.02	.17**	.15**	.30***	(.81)				
8- Meaning	6.32	0.78	.16***	.07	.05	.10**	.07	.28***	.58**	1			
9- Comp	6.13	0.88	.04	.15***	.02	.13**	.08*	.34***	.70**	.54**	1		
10- SD	5.03	1.45	-.08*	.17***	.02	.15**	.08*	.19***	.75**	.23**	.34**	1	
11- impact	4.79	1.29	-.15***	.02	-.02	.08*	.15**	.29***	.64**	.12**	.22**	.24**	1

*N = 468, * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001 (all at 2-tail). leader's support (LS), role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE), psychological empowerment (PE) with 4 dimensions including meaning, competent (comp), self-determination (Self-det), and impact*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and zero-order correlations for all study variables. The internal consistency of the measures, as indicated by

Cronbach's alpha, was satisfactory: leader's support ($\alpha = .78$), role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE; $\alpha = .92$), and psychological empowerment (PE; $\alpha = .81$).

Regarding demographic variables, age showed a positive and significant correlation with psychological empowerment ($r = .16, p < .001$) and its dimensions of competence ($r = .15, p < .001$) and self-determination ($r = .17, p < .001$), suggesting that older lecturers tend to report higher empowerment perception. Gender was negatively correlated with impact ($r = -.15, p < .001$) and self-determination ($r = -.08, p < .05$), Tenure was positively correlated with psychological empowerment ($r = .17, p < .001$) and some dimensions, including meaning ($r = .10, p < .01$) and self-determination ($r = .15, p < .001$), Rank was negatively associated with age ($r = -.40, p < .001$) and tenure ($r = -.49, p < .001$),

Among the main study variables, leader's support (LS) was positively associated with RBSE ($r = .11, p < .01$) and psychological empowerment ($r = .15, p < .01$), suggesting that lecturers perceiving greater support from their leaders also reported higher role breadth self-efficacy and empowerment. RBSE showed a strong positive correlation with psychological empowerment ($r = .30, p < .001$) and all its dimensions, with the strongest associations observed with competence ($r = .34, p < .001$) and meaning ($r = .28, p < .001$). Psychological empowerment and its dimensions were positively intercorrelated, with correlations ranging from $r = .12$ to $r = .75$ ($p < .01$), indicating a coherent structure of the construct in the sample. These preliminary results provide initial support for the hypothesized relationships, justifying further testing of direct, mediating, moderating, and moderated-mediation effects in the subsequent analyses.

Test of hypotheses

Controlled Variables

As shown in Table 1, the demographic variables (age, tenure, and gender) demonstrated significant associations with the main study variables. Therefore, these variables were included as covariates in the PROCESS analysis to control for their potential confounding effects. This approach ensures that the observed relationships among leader's support (LS), role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE), and psychological empowerment (PE) are not biased by demographic differences.

Table 2: Direct effect of Leadership Support, Role Breadth Self-Efficacy and Psychological Empowerment (Hypothesis 1 – 3).

Predictor	Outcome	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
LS	RBSE	0.055	0.020	2.75	.006	[0.016, 0.094]
LS	PE	0.054	0.025	2.15	.032	[0.005, 0.104]
RBSE	PE	0.411	0.042	9.69	.000	[0.328, 0.494]

N = 468, SL = Leadership Support, RBSE = Role Breadth Self-Efficacy, PE = Psychological Empowerment

Direct Effects

The direct effect of leader's support (LS) on psychological empowerment (PE) was positive and significant ($B = 0.15$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. This indicates that lecturers who perceive greater support from their leaders through recognition, guidance, autonomy, and concern for wellbeing report higher levels of psychological empowerment. Similarly, LS positively predicted role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) ($B = 0.11$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, RBSE positively

predicted PE ($B = 0.30, p < .001$), indicating that lecturers with higher confidence in their ability to perform broader roles experience greater empowerment.

Table 4: Direct and Indirect Effects of Leadership Support on Psychological Empowerment through RBSE

Effect	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Direct effect (LS → PE)	0.054	0.025	2.15	.032	0.005	0.104
Indirect effect (LS → RBSE → PE)	0.022	0.008	—	—	0.007	0.039

Hypothesis 4: Mediation of RBSE

As shown in Table 4, the direct effect of leadership support (LS) on psychological empowerment (PE) was statistically significant ($B = 0.054, p = .032$), indicating that lecturers perceiving higher leader support report greater psychological empowerment. The indirect effect via role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) was also significant ($B = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.007, 0.039]$), confirming that LS influences PE partially through RBSE, suggesting a partial mediation, supporting hypothesis 4. The mediation accounted for approximately 28.9% (0,022) of the total effect, with the remaining 71.1% explained by the direct pathway.

Moderation and Conditional Effects of Age (Hypothesis 5a and 5b)

Table 5: Moderation and Conditional Effects of Age on the RBSE → PE Relationship

Effect Type	B / Effect	SE / BootSE	/	LLCI	ULCI	R ²
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Effect Type	B / Effect	SE BootSE	/ LLCI	ULCI	R ²
Overall Moderation (RBSE × Age → PE)	-0.011	0.006	- 0.022	0.000	.182
Conditional Effects of RBSE on PE					
Low Age (-8.85)	0.511	0.067	0.379	0.643	-
Mean Age (0.00)	0.411	0.042	0.328	0.494	-
High Age (+8.85)	0.311	0.063	0.188	0.434	-
Index of Moderated Mediation	-0.011	0.000	- 0.022	0.000	-

Test of Moderation and Conditional Effects of Age (Hypotheses 5a & 5b)

The results in Table 5 indicate that the interaction between role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) and age in predicting psychological empowerment has a coefficient of $B = -0.011$ with a 95% CI of $[-0.022, 0.000]$ and $R^2 = .182$. Because the upper limit of the confidence interval is exactly zero, the interaction effect is marginally significant, suggesting that age may moderate the RBSE–psychological empowerment relationship. The conditional effects further show that RBSE positively predicts psychological empowerment at all age levels, with the effect being strongest among younger lecturers ($B = 0.511$, 95% CI $[0.379, 0.643]$), moderate at mean age ($B = 0.411$, 95% CI $[0.328, 0.494]$), and weakest among older lecturers ($B = 0.311$, 95% CI $[0.188, 0.434]$). This pattern indicates a trend

where the influence of RBSE on psychological empowerment tends to decrease as lecturers' age increases.

Similarly, the index of moderated mediation ($B = -0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.002, 0.000]$) is also marginal, suggesting that the indirect effect of leadership support on psychological empowerment through RBSE tends to be stronger for younger lecturers and weaker for older lecturers, but this effect should be interpreted with caution. Overall, the results provide tentative support for both the moderating role of age (Hypothesis 5a) and the moderated mediation effect (Hypothesis 5b).

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between leadership support and psychological empowerment (PE) among lecturers in South-East Nigeria, with role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) as a mediator and age as a moderator. Grounded in Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, the findings highlight how supportive leadership serves as a critical job resource that fosters empowerment directly and indirectly through the development of personal resources.

First, we found in the current study that leadership support significantly predicted PE. This finding is consistent with earlier studies that emphasize the empowering effects of supportive leadership (Fong & Snape, 2015; Amor et al., 2021; Albrecht & Marty, 2024). It also aligned with JD-R's proposition that job resources enhance motivational states by satisfying employees' needs for autonomy and competence. Within the Nigerian university context, where lecturers contend with inadequate resources and heavy workloads, support from academic leaders (HODs, Dean, and Vice Chancellor) appears to

substitute for structural deficits, explaining the strong positive association found in the current study.

Second, leadership support significantly enhanced RBSE, which in turn predicted PE. These findings support Axtell and Parker's (2003) argument that leader encouragement builds employees' confidence in handling tasks beyond their formal role boundaries. They also reinforce JD-R theory by showing that job resources (leadership support) build personal resources (RBSE), which then strengthen motivational outcomes (PE). In resource-constrained academic environments, supportive leaders equip lecturers with the confidence to balance multiple responsibilities, thereby translating role efficacy into empowerment.

Third, RBSE significantly mediated the leadership support–PE relationship. This mechanism highlights RBSE as the pathway through which supportive leadership translates into empowerment. Bandura's (1997) efficacy theory complements this interpretation, suggesting that beliefs in one's expanded role competence transmit the empowering effects of contextual support. In Nigerian universities, where lecturers are expected to juggle teaching, research, and administrative tasks, RBSE appears to be the critical channel linking leader behaviors to empowerment.

Finally, age showed a marginally significant moderation of the RBSE–PE link, indicating that the strength of the relationship may decline slightly with increasing age. Younger lecturers tended to benefit more from RBSE in terms of psychological empowerment, while the effect appeared slightly weaker among older lecturers. This trend, though only marginally significant, suggests that career stage may influence how lecturers interpret

expanded roles and perceive empowerment. From a JD-R perspective, younger lecturers may view RBSE as a growth resource, whereas older lecturers may see expanded responsibilities as less motivating, aligning with socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995).

Contributions and Implications

This study makes several significant contributions to theory and practice. It advances Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory by identifying role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) as a key personal resource that mediates the relationship between leadership support and psychological empowerment. This highlights the mechanism through which job resources, such as supportive leadership, enhance lecturers' empowerment, showing how leaders can translate contextual support into individual motivational gains.

The study also introduces age as a potential boundary condition, revealing a marginally significant trend suggesting that the positive impact of RBSE on psychological empowerment may be stronger for younger lecturers than for older ones. This finding underscores the importance of considering career stage and demographic factors when designing leadership and empowerment interventions in higher education. Even though the moderation was only marginally significant, it points to meaningful differences in how early- and later-career lecturers experience empowerment, which can inform age-sensitive strategies.

Furthermore, the research enriches the limited empirical literature on leadership and empowerment in the Nigerian university context, a setting where resource constraints often make supportive leadership particularly critical. By examining lecturers' perceptions across multiple campuses of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, the study provides

context-specific insights that can guide the development of interventions aimed at enhancing efficacy and empowerment in a culturally and organizationally relevant manner.

Finally, the findings offer practical implications for university administrators and policymakers. Supportive leadership practices—such as mentoring, coaching, and providing necessary resources—can effectively enhance lecturers' competence, self-efficacy, and empowerment, particularly for early-career staff. Overall, this research bridges theoretical development and practical application, providing a robust evidence base for strengthening academic staff performance and well-being in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This study shows that leadership support enhances psychological empowerment among Nigerian lecturers, both directly and indirectly through RBSE. RBSE emerged as a key pathway linking supportive leadership to empowerment, consistent with JD-R theory. Age showed only a marginal moderating effect, suggesting that younger lecturers may benefit more strongly from RBSE, though further research is needed to confirm this trend. Overall, the study extends JD-R theory and underscores the practical importance of supportive leadership in strengthening lecturers' confidence and empowerment in resource-constrained academic environments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed. University leaders such as Heads of Departments, Deans, and Vice Chancellors should intentionally adopt supportive leadership practices, including mentoring, coaching, providing

developmental feedback, and recognizing lecturers' contributions. These practices will enhance lecturers' role breadth self-efficacy and psychological empowerment, particularly for early-career staff who may be more responsive to leadership-driven efficacy building.

At the policy level, governing councils and higher education regulators should prioritize leadership development initiatives that emphasize supportive and empowering behaviors. Embedding supportive leadership into leadership training programs and appraisal systems would institutionalize practices that foster empowerment among lecturers.

Finally, future research should explore additional contextual and individual factors that may interact with leadership support to influence empowerment, such as organizational culture, tenure, or personality traits. Longitudinal and multi-institutional studies are also recommended to establish causality and improve the generalizability of the findings.

Originality and Value

Originality of this work

This study addresses the unexplored mediating role of role breadth self-efficacy and moderating effect of age in the relationship between offer new direction for both theoretical enrichment and practical guidance for empowerment in higher education.

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