

Job Autonomy and Innovative Behavior among High School Teachers: The Mediating Role of Intrinsic Motivation

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ABSTRACT

Background: Innovation in education is a key factor in improving learning quality. Despite numerous studies, the precise mechanism of the relationship between job autonomy and teachers' innovative behavior and the mediating role of intrinsic motivation remains unclear. This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between job autonomy and innovative behavior among high school teachers in Zahedan.

Materials and Methods: This descriptive-correlational study employed structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of 516 high school teachers in District 2 of Zahedan during the 2022-2023 academic year, from which 220 participants were selected using stratified random sampling based on gender. Instruments included Amabile's Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (1994), Deci's Job Autonomy Scale (2014), and Janssen's Innovative Behavior Scale (2000). Data were analyzed using SPSS 22 and LISREL 8.80.

Results: Job autonomy had no significant direct effect on innovative behavior ($\beta=0.11$, $T=1.37$). Job autonomy significantly and positively affected intrinsic motivation ($\beta=0.29$, $T=3.87$), and intrinsic motivation significantly and positively affected innovative behavior ($\beta=0.36$, $T=4.75$). Intrinsic motivation played a significant mediating role in the relationship between job autonomy and innovative behavior ($\beta=0.10$, $T=3.06$).

Conclusion: Job autonomy has an indirect effect on innovative behavior through intrinsic motivation. Educational administrators are recommended to focus not only on providing job autonomy but also on strengthening teachers' intrinsic motivation through creating supportive environments, constructive feedback, and professional development opportunities.

Introduction

In the current era, where organizations face rapid environmental changes and competitive pressures, employee innovative behavior is recognized as one of the key factors for organizational success and survival (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010; Janssen, 2000). Employee innovative behavior refers to a set of activities that include the generation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas aimed at improving



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organizational processes, products, or services ([Bos-Nehles et al., 2017](#)). This type of behavior is of high importance not only for private organizations but also for public organizations ([Srirahayu et al., 2023](#)). In the field of education, teachers play a vital role in advancing the goals of the educational system, and their innovative behavior can have a direct impact on the quality of learning and student achievement ([Baharuddin et al., 2020](#)). Teachers' innovative behavior includes the use of new teaching methods, development of creative educational materials, and continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes ([Scott & Bruce, 1994](#)). The importance of innovative behavior in educational systems has been emphasized due to its vital role in adapting to rapid technological and social changes, improving teaching methods, and enhancing student learning outcomes. Innovative teachers are capable of creating dynamic and adaptable learning environments that not only increase student motivation and engagement but also help develop 21st-century skills in them. Furthermore, teachers' innovative behavior is recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for organizational success and maintaining competitive advantage in educational systems ([Shanker et al., 2017](#); [Karadeniz et al., 2021](#)).

Given that schools, as public organizations, face specific constraints and regulations, understanding the factors affecting teachers' innovative behavior is of particular importance. Numerous studies have shown that teachers' innovative behavior is influenced by various individual and organizational factors. One of the important variables that has been proposed in the research literature as a predictor of innovative behavior is job autonomy ([Hackman & Oldham, 1976](#)). Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom, independence, and decision-making authority employees have in performing their job tasks ([Morgeson et al., 2005](#)). In work environments where employees enjoy high autonomy, they can experiment with new methods and implement their innovative ideas ([Hughes & Morgan, 2007](#)). Research indicates that job autonomy plays an important role in stimulating innovative behavior. The study by Venkatesamy and Lew ([2024](#)) on knowledge workers in South Africa showed that job autonomy has a positive and significant relationship with innovative behavior. Additionally, research by Dara et al. ([2022](#)) on university faculty in Indonesia demonstrated that job autonomy has a positive and significant effect on innovative behavior. The study by Frate and Bido ([2024](#)) showed that work autonomy acts as an important factor in strengthening the relationship between individual absorptive capacity and innovative behavior, such that with increased work autonomy, the positive effect of absorptive capacity on innovative behavior is enhanced. Furthermore, Karimi and Karimi ([2020](#)) in examining the effect of job autonomy on innovative work behavior among employees of Shahroud city municipalities, confirmed the positive and significant role of autonomy in predicting innovative behaviors.

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is recognized as one of the most important psychological factors influencing innovative behavior ([Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)). Intrinsic motivation refers to individuals' tendency to engage in activities that are inherently attractive and enjoyable and originate from internal sources within the person ([Gagné & Deci, 2005](#)). Intrinsic motivation, as one of the most prominent concepts in motivation psychology, refers to humans' natural tendency to seek novelty, accept challenges, and learn without the presence of external rewards ([Deci & Ryan, 2017](#)). Employees with high intrinsic motivation have a greater tendency to seek creative and innovative solutions and adopt a more active approach when facing challenges ([Brock et al., 2005](#)). Individuals with high intrinsic motivation show greater tendency toward risk-taking, facing challenges, and continuous effort for improvement and innovation. Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is associated with increased creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, all of which are considered important components of innovative behavior ([Frate & Bido, 2024](#)).

Various studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and innovative behavior. Susanti ([2021](#)) stated in her research that intrinsic motivation affects employees' innovative behavior, meaning that the higher the work motivation, the more innovative behavior is generated. This finding is consistent with the theory proposed by Filgona et al. ([2020](#)), which states that motivation is a set of processes that arouse, direct, and maintain human behavior to achieve goals. The study by Bin Saeed et al. ([2019](#)) showed that intrinsic motivation plays an important mediating role in the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior. Additionally, Devloo et al.

(2015) stated that intrinsic motivation plays an important role in maintaining employees' innovative behavior and can act as a mediator between environmental factors and innovative behavior.

The study by Srirahayu et al. (2023) in a systematic review of innovative behavior literature in public organizations showed that personal, organizational, and team factors can influence innovative behavior. This study also emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation and job autonomy as key factors in shaping innovative behavior. Research by Jahangiri et al. (2016) in examining the effect of work engagement on teachers' innovative behavior confirmed the positive role of intrinsic motivational factors. Furthermore, the study by Sohrabi et al. (2018) showed that psychological characteristics of jobs, including autonomy, are associated with stress reduction and improvement of constructive behaviors among educational employees.

Despite the extensive literature on the relationship between job autonomy and intrinsic motivation with innovative behavior, significant research gaps exist that justify the necessity of conducting this research. Although previous studies have confirmed the direct relationship between job autonomy and intrinsic motivation with innovative behavior, the precise mechanism and psychological mediating processes through which job autonomy affects innovative behavior have not been fully clarified (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Self-Determination Theory, job autonomy can influence innovative behavior through strengthening intrinsic motivation, but this mediating path has been less examined among high school teachers. This issue becomes more important because most conducted research has been performed in the private, industrial, or academic sectors (Dara et al., 2022; Venketsamy & Lew, 2024), while high schools have unique characteristics such as rigid bureaucratic structures, standardized and predetermined curricula, and resource constraints that may differently affect the impact of these variables.

Furthermore, a comprehensive model that simultaneously examines the role of job autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and innovative behavior within an integrated conceptual framework has been less tested. This research, by integrating Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), presents a more comprehensive model that can help explain contradictions in previous studies, as some research has shown that the relationship between job autonomy and innovative behavior is not always direct and strong and may be influenced by mediating variables.

Considering these research gaps and the importance of promoting teachers' innovative behavior in Iran's educational system, this study aims to investigate the mediating role of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between job autonomy and innovative behavior among high school teachers in Zahedan. Therefore, the fundamental question of this research is: Does intrinsic motivation play a significant mediating role in the relationship between job autonomy and teachers' innovative behavior?

Conceptual Model of the Research

Based on what was discussed in the theoretical foundations and research background, the following model has been extracted for job autonomy (with three components: empowerment, self-regulation, and self-determination) and innovative behavior (with three components: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realization) along with the mediating role of intrinsic motivation (with six components: self-determination, competence, task accomplishment, curiosity, enjoyment, and interest).

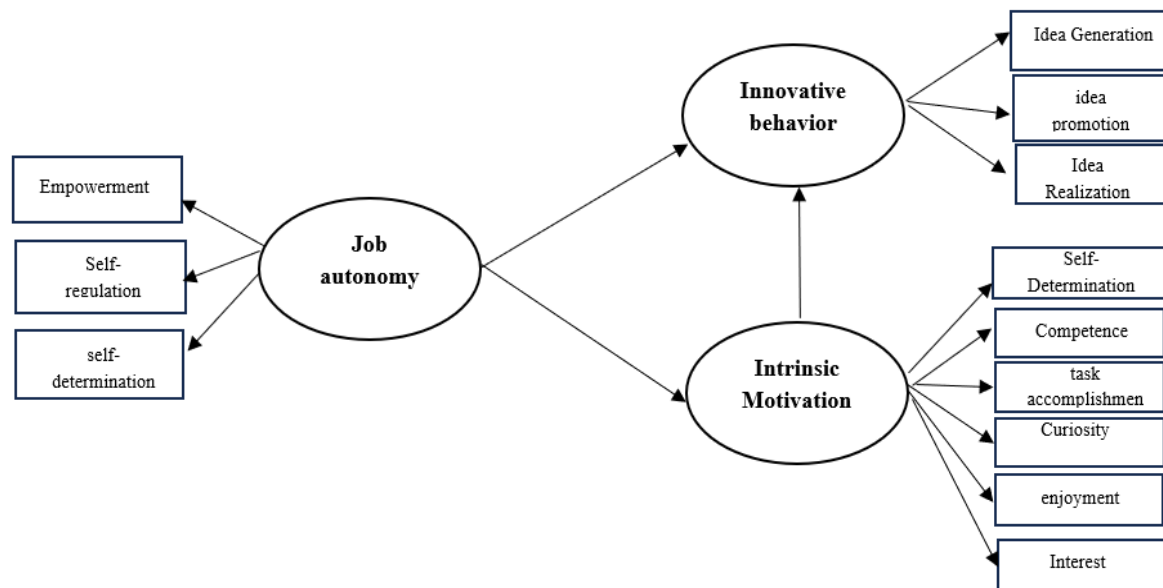


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model

Within the framework of the proposed model of this research, the following hypotheses have been extracted:

Hypothesis 1: Job autonomy has a significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Job autonomy has a significant effect on teachers' intrinsic motivation.

Hypothesis 3: Intrinsic motivation has a significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior.

Hypothesis 4: Job autonomy has a significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior through the mediating effect of intrinsic motivation.

Research Methodology

The research method was descriptive-correlational based on structural equation modeling (SEM), which enables the researcher to simultaneously test the complex relationships among research variables within a comprehensive model. The statistical population of this study included all high school teachers working in schools of District Two of Zahedan city in the academic year 2022-2023, totaling 516 individuals. Cochran's formula was used to determine the sample size, and accordingly, 220 individuals were selected as the research sample. The sampling method employed was stratified random sampling proportional to size, in which the statistical population was divided into two strata based on gender, and a random sample was selected from each stratum proportional to its ratio in the population to increase sample representativeness and generalizability of findings. Research data were collected online, and for this purpose, research questionnaires were designed in the form of electronic forms and made available to teachers through online platforms, with their links distributed through official communication channels of the Department of Education and teachers' virtual groups. This method, in addition to saving time and cost, facilitated easier access for participants to research instruments and increased accuracy in recording responses. To observe ethical principles in the research, participants were informed of the research objectives before completing the questionnaires, and their informed consent to participate in the research was obtained. Each participant had a specific code, and the principles of confidentiality and privacy of information were fully observed, and the collected data were used solely for research purposes.

The data collection instruments of this research included three standard questionnaires as follows:

Intrinsic Motivation Questionnaire

To assess intrinsic motivation, the Work Preference Inventory tool by Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe (1994) was utilized, where intrinsic motivation is considered one of the subscales of this instrument and contains 15 items. This measurement tool encompasses 6 components: autonomy (3 items), competence (3 items), task performance (2 items), sense of curiosity (2 items), sense of enjoyment (3 items), and interest (2 items). This questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (Never=1; Sometimes=2; Often=3; Almost always=4; and Always=5). The validity of this instrument has been previously confirmed by experts and researchers. In the original research conducted on 1,323 adults, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the intrinsic motivation section was calculated as 0.79 (Amabile et al. 1994). In a study conducted by Mahmoudi (2022), the reliability of this questionnaire was reported as 0.73 via Cronbach's alpha. Additionally, the reliability of this questionnaire in the current study was estimated at 0.76.

Autonomy with Job Independence Questionnaire

To measure autonomy with job independence, David's (2014) standard questionnaire was used. This instrument includes 9 items that measure three components: empowerment (items 1, 2, and 3), self-regulation (items 4, 5, and 6), and self-discovery (items 7, 8, and 9). The scoring of this questionnaire is based on a five-point Likert scale from very low to very high (from score 1 to 5). Given that this instrument is considered a valid and standard tool, its validity has been previously confirmed by specialists and other researchers. Its internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha index in Andam and Asadi's research (2015) was 0.81. Also, in the study by Fathi et al. (2019), the Cronbach's alpha value was reported as 0.8 (hasani, 2021). The reliability coefficient of this questionnaire in the present research was estimated at 0.84 using Cronbach's alpha.

Innovative Behavior Questionnaire

This questionnaire was designed by Janssen (2000). This questionnaire includes 9 closed-ended items based on a 5-point Likert scale (completely disagree to completely agree) comprising three dimensions: generation of new ideas, promotion of new ideas, and implementation of new ideas. This instrument contains 9 items. The validity of this questionnaire was confirmed in the research by Ahmadi et al. (2016), and its reliability based on Cronbach's alpha values was 0.81. The reliability of the instrument in the present research was also estimated at 0.86.

In this research, data were analyzed using SPSS 22 and LISREL 8.80 software in two sections: descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential, including Pearson correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling.

Results

Before conducting the main analysis, a number of preliminary analyses were performed on the data. The results of descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient matrix of variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Coefficients Between Research Variables

Research Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3
1. Job Autonomy	28.46	5.08	1		
2. Intrinsic Motivation	45.91	8.61	.26*	1	
3. Innovative Behavior	34.42	5.21	.18*	.35*	1

*P<0.01

As can be observed, the correlation between job autonomy and intrinsic motivation is 0.26, the correlation between innovative behavior and job autonomy is 0.18, and the correlation coefficient between

intrinsic motivation and innovative behavior is 0.35, all of which are significant at the 99% confidence level.

In this section, the general characteristics of the respondents to the present research scales, including gender and educational level, were described. The results are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

The results from Table 2 indicate that out of the total sample of 220 research participants, 78 individuals (35.5%) were male, and the other 142 individuals (64.5%) were female.

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Individuals by Gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	78	35.5
Female	142	64.5
Total	220	100

The results from Table 3 indicate that out of the total sample of 220 research participants, 152 individuals held a Bachelor's degree, 61 held a Master's degree, and 7 held a Doctoral degree.

Table 3: Number and Percentage of Individuals by Education Level

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor's	152	69.1
Master's	61	27.7
Doctoral	7	3.2
Total	220	100

Examining the Structural Model (Research Path Analysis)

Figures 2 and 3 show the structural model of the research in standardized estimation and significance states.

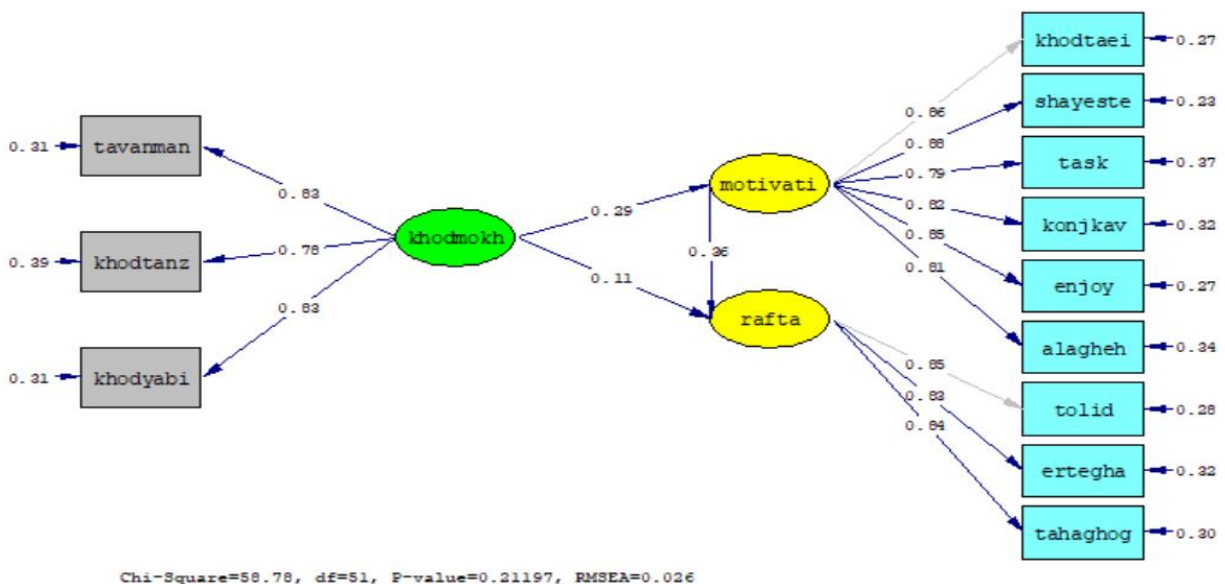


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model in Standardized Estimation State

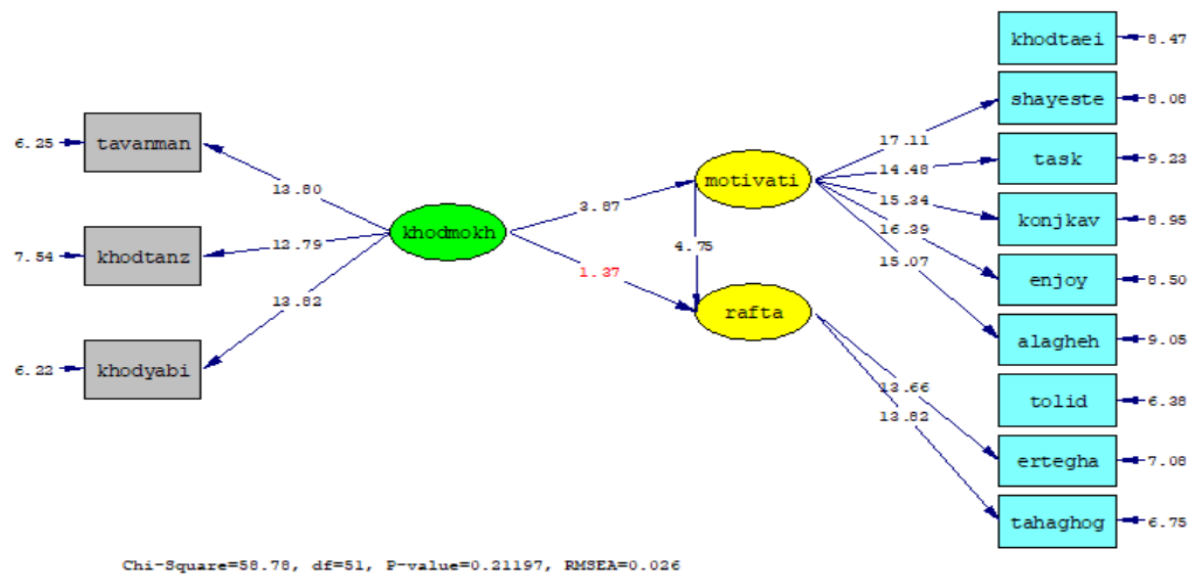


Figure 3. Structural Equation Model in Significance Numbers State

The fit of the proposed model with the data based on goodness-of-fit indices is shown in Table 2.

Table 4: Model Fit Indices

Model Fit Index	Obtained Value	Appropriate Value	Status
Chi-square	51	— +	Appropriate
Chi-square significance level	0.21	<0.05	Inappropriate
Chi-square/df	1.15	<3	Appropriate
GFI	0.96	>0.9	Appropriate
AGFI	0.93	>0.9	Appropriate
CFI	0.99	>0.9	Appropriate
NFI	0.98	>0.9	Appropriate
IFI	0.99	>0.9	Appropriate
RMSEA	0.026	<0.1	Appropriate

As Table 4 shows, the final model has relatively good fit and the overall structure of the relationships tested is confirmed through the obtained data. Among the indices, except for the chi-square index which is affected by sample size and is referred to as a poor index, the other indices are appropriate. The findings related to the research hypotheses according to the tested model are summarized in Table 5.

Based on the results presented in Table 4, the final model has acceptable fit and the overall structure of relationships proposed in the theoretical framework is confirmed through the collected data. Among the fit indices examined, only the chi-square index, which is affected by sample size and is referred to as a poor index, while other indices show favorable status. A summary of the results from testing the research hypotheses based on the tested model is reported in Table 5.

Table 5: Research Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypotheses	Standard Coefficient	t-value	Result
Job autonomy has a significant effect on innovative behavior of teachers.	0.11	1.37	Hypothesis rejected
Job autonomy has a significant effect on intrinsic motivation of teachers.	0.29	3.87	Hypothesis confirmed
Intrinsic motivation has a significant effect on innovative behavior of teachers.	0.36	4.75	Hypothesis confirmed
Job autonomy through the mediating role of intrinsic motivation has a significant effect on innovative behavior of teachers.	0.10	3.06	Hypothesis confirmed

The results of Table 5 show that job autonomy does not have a significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior ($\beta=0.11$, T-Value=1.37). Given that the T-Value is less than 1.96 and lacks significance at the 95% confidence level, this hypothesis is rejected.

The path coefficient of job autonomy on teachers' intrinsic motivation is positive and significant ($\beta=0.29$, T-Value=3.87). Given that the T-Value is greater than 2.58 and the significance level is less than 0.01, this hypothesis is confirmed at the 99% confidence level.

Intrinsic motivation has been able to have a positive and significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior at the 99% confidence level ($\beta=0.36$, T-Value=4.75), therefore the third hypothesis is confirmed. Additionally, the analysis results show that intrinsic motivation plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between job autonomy and innovative behavior ($\beta=0.10$, T-Value=3.06). This finding indicates that job autonomy has an indirect effect on innovative behavior through intrinsic motivation, and therefore the fourth research hypothesis is also confirmed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the mediating role of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between job autonomy and innovative behavior of secondary school teachers in District Two of Zahedan City. Considering the increasing importance of innovation in educational systems and the critical role of teachers in this process, this study sought to discover the psychological mechanisms affecting teachers' innovative behavior.

The results of this research showed that job autonomy does not have a direct significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior. This finding is inconsistent with the research of [Venketsamy and Lew \(2024\)](#), [Dara and colleagues \(2022\)](#), and [Ameri and Farhadpour \(2023\)](#). The results of [Venketsamy and Lew's \(2024\)](#) research on knowledge workers in South Africa showed that job autonomy has a positive and significant relationship with innovative behavior. Also, the findings of [Dara et al.'s \(2022\)](#) research on faculty members of Indonesian universities indicated a positive and significant effect of job autonomy on innovative behavior. Job independence leads to increased meaningfulness of work, sense of responsibility in performing duties, as well as employees' self-actualization in their jobs, and enhances innovative behaviors through strengthening motivation and job engagement ([Ameri & Farhadpour, 2023](#)).

The inconsistency of this research's findings with previous studies can be justified from several perspectives. First, cultural and organizational context differences, as Iran's educational environment with its centralized and hierarchical structure has fundamental differences with South African and Indonesian work environments, and structural constraints, bureaucratic processes, and numerous supervisions in Iran's educational system, especially in regions like Zahedan, may limit the effectiveness of job autonomy. Second, the role of mediating factors, as this research's findings show that job autonomy alone is not sufficient and requires the activation of mediating psychological mechanisms, especially intrinsic

motivation, because merely having freedom of action and independence in decision-making, without creating strong intrinsic motivations, cannot lead to innovative behavior, which is consistent with self-determination theory. Third, demographic characteristics of the sample and factors such as education level, work experience, access to educational resources, and organizational support may play a role in this relationship, and fourth, differences in measurement instruments and operational definitions of variables in different studies may have led to this inconsistency.

The analysis results showed that job autonomy has a positive and significant effect on teachers' intrinsic motivation. This finding is consistent with self-determination theory and related studies by [Frate and Bido \(2024\)](#), [Gagné and Deci \(2005\)](#), [Baard et al. \(2004\)](#), and [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#).

[Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#) in their self-determination theory state that autonomy is considered one of the three basic psychological needs of humans, the satisfaction of which directly strengthens intrinsic motivation. In a comprehensive study using various methods including daily studies, they showed that satisfaction of basic psychological needs not only leads to well-being but also this well-being in turn provides the foundation for strengthening intrinsic motivation and better performance. They explained that on days and in situations where individuals experience greater satisfaction of their needs, their level of vitality, positive mood, and intrinsic motivation significantly increases. Also, work environments that support autonomy lead to better performance, job satisfaction, and higher mental health. [Baard et al. \(2004\)](#) in two different work environments showed that satisfaction of the need for autonomy is a direct predictor of better job performance and psychological well-being. [Gagné and Deci \(2005\)](#) also emphasized that employees who have more autonomy show greater creativity, persistence, and commitment in their work. [Frate and Bido \(2024\)](#) in their recent research confirmed that autonomy at work acts as a key factor in strengthening individual capacities and increasing motivation.

Therefore, the finding of the present research indicates that when teachers have more freedom, independence, and decision-making authority in performing their job duties, their intrinsic motivation significantly increases, and this process is realized through satisfaction of psychological needs and creation of job well-being.

The research findings confirmed that intrinsic motivation has a positive and significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior. This result is consistent with studies by [Srirahayu et al. \(2023\)](#), [Susanti \(2021\)](#), [Bin Saeed et al. \(2019\)](#), [Deci and Ryan \(2017\)](#), [Devloo et al. \(2015\)](#), [Jahangiri et al. \(2016\)](#), and [Sohrabi et al. \(2018\)](#).

[Srirahayu et al. \(2023\)](#) in a systematic literature review of innovative behavior in public organizations emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation and job autonomy as key factors. [Susanti \(2021\)](#) stated that intrinsic motivation affects employees' innovative behavior and the higher the work motivation, the more innovative behavior is created. [Bin Saeed et al. \(2019\)](#) showed that intrinsic motivation plays an important mediating role in the relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior. [Deci and Ryan \(2017\)](#) stated that intrinsic motivation refers to humans' natural tendency to seek novelty, accept challenges, and learn without the existence of external rewards. [Devloo et al. \(2015\)](#) stated that intrinsic motivation can act as a mediator between environmental factors and innovative behavior. [Jahangiri et al. \(2016\)](#) confirmed the positive role of intrinsic motivational factors in teachers' innovative behavior. [Sohrabi et al. \(2018\)](#) showed that psychological characteristics of the job, including autonomy, are associated with stress reduction and improvement of constructive behaviors of educational staff.

Overall, the results of this research showed that job autonomy alone does not have a direct significant effect on teachers' innovative behavior, but through the mediating role of intrinsic motivation, it can indirectly enhance innovative behavior. This finding highlights the importance of psychological mechanisms in the educational innovation process and shows that merely providing autonomy and freedom of action for teachers is not sufficient, but conditions must be created to strengthen their intrinsic motivation. Considering the structural and cultural context of Iran's educational system, it is suggested that educational administrators, in addition to increasing job autonomy, pay special attention to strengthening

teachers' intrinsic motivational factors through creating a supportive atmosphere, providing constructive feedback, and providing professional development opportunities. Among the limitations of this research is the limitation of the statistical population to secondary school teachers in District Two of Zahedan City, which limits the generalization of results. It is suggested that future research examine this model in different regions and educational levels and by considering other moderating variables such as organizational support and transformational leadership.

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