

Employee Motivation Mediating Servant Leadership and Work Outcomes in China's Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interrelationships among leadership styles, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment across twelve private higher education institutions located in Guangxi Province, China. The research aims to identify how leadership directly affects these indicators and influences them through the mediation of employee motivation. Incorporating Confucian values, this investigation contextualizes leadership dynamics in China's private university sector. This study used quantitative methods and collected data from academic and administrative personnel at twelve private higher education institutions through online surveys. The survey tool includes a tested scale to measure leadership ability, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, which is based on Likert 7-point scale. To analyse data and evaluate direct and mediating effects, it is recommended to use structural equation modelling (SEM). This research advances theoretical comprehension of leadership dynamics by examining the interplay among leadership practices, employee motivation, and work outcomes, while elucidating their cultural significance within higher education settings. Practical experience and lessons learned may help develop leadership plans that focus on employee growth and well-being. This study also aims to provide ideas for future work on leadership in specific cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Servant Leadership, Employee Motivation, Organizational Commitment, Higher Education and Leadership Styles*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the dynamically transforming higher education sector, leadership approaches constitute a critical determinant of organizational efficacy and workforce performance outcomes. Among these, servant leadership — characterized by humility, empathy, empowerment, and a commitment to serve others — has garnered increasing scholarly interest for its potential to foster meaningful work relationships and enhance organizational outcomes. Within China's higher education sector—currently experiencing profound structural reforms and pursuing international competitiveness—elucidating the dynamics between leadership approaches and workforce outcomes emerges as critically imperative.

Work outcomes—including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, enhanced performance, and employee retention—constitute fundamental determinants for academic institutions pursuing sustained excellence. However, the pathways through which leadership influences these outcomes remain complex and multifaceted. One promising explanatory mechanism is employee motivation, which refers to the intrinsic and extrinsic drivers that prompt individuals to exert effort toward organizational goals. Motivation is not merely a byproduct of leadership behavior but a critical psychological process that can mediate how leadership translates into tangible performance outcomes.

Although extensive international scholarship has investigated the impact of servant leadership on work outcomes, the mediating mechanism of employee motivation remains underexplored empirically—particularly within China's academic milieu, wherein cultural dimensions including collectivism, power distance, and Confucian principles potentially shape leadership perceptions and efficacy. Furthermore, universities in China are facing increasing pressure to internationalize, innovate, and improve quality — all of which require motivated academic and administrative staff.

This research addresses the identified gap by examining the mediating mechanisms through which employee motivation links servant leadership to work outcomes within China's distinctive higher education environment. Theoretically grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory, this investigation empirically assesses whether servant leaders cultivate motivational climates that foster workforce engagement, consequently generating enhanced performance, elevated satisfaction, and increased retention. By doing so, it offers both theoretical contributions and practical insights for leadership development and policy formulation in Chinese universities.

1.2 Background

Leadership represents a pivotal determinant of organizational effectiveness and performance outcomes, fundamentally shaping institutional achievement. In different leadership styles, traditional leadership is receiving increasing attention by emphasizing serving others and prioritizing employee needs (Samsir & Muis, 2023). This approach is based on the belief that leaders must motivate employees to achieve personal and professional development, ultimately improving organizational efficiency. Good leadership encourages trust, collaboration, and positivity, creating a supportive environment that positively impacts employee motivation and performance (Forson et al., 2021).

Employee motivation represents a fundamental driver of performance outcomes. A motivated workforce characteristically demonstrates elevated job satisfaction and organizational commitment—critical precursors enhancing both individual productivity and institutional efficiency (Khuzwayo et al., 2022). However, the specific mechanisms by which leadership influences these outcomes, particularly through motivating employees, have not been fully studied. Understanding these connections can provide valuable information on how organizations can utilize leadership practices to increase employee engagement and overall success (Zayed et al., 2022).

Work outcomes—particularly job satisfaction and organizational commitment—constitute fundamental indicators of organizational health (Akoto et al., 2022). Elevated job satisfaction demonstrably enhances workforce productivity and reduces turnover rates, whereas organizational commitment fortifies employee loyalty and sustains long-term engagement (Sonnenschein et al., 2022). Given the importance of these results, it is necessary to study how leadership affects them, particularly by motivating employees.

1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

Higher education institutions face various challenges related to improving employee productivity and job satisfaction, such as low employee motivation, high employee turnover rates, and increased training costs. Research has shown that appropriate leadership styles, especially true leadership styles, can effectively improve employee motivation and performance (Aboramadan et al., 2020). However, existing research mainly focuses on the impact at the organizational level, without sufficient attention to individual experiences. Furthermore, the mediating pathways through which employee motivation connects leadership approaches to performance outcomes remain insufficiently examined within China's higher education context. This empirical investigation specifically addresses this gap by analyzing how servant leadership influences critical work outcomes—including job satisfaction and organizational commitment—through its motivational mechanisms. This study provides theoretical insights and practical recommendations for optimizing the management practices of higher education institutions (Ahmed et al., 2022).

This research seeks to analyse the relationship between servant leadership approaches and multidimensional work outcomes, with primary emphasis on delineating employee motivation as the mediating mechanism within Chinese higher education institutions. This study will be conducted among staff at twelve private higher education institutions in Guangxi Province, China. The twelve participating institutions are Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning University, Xiangsihu College of Guangxi Minzu University, Shiyuan College of Nanning Normal University, Nanning College of Technology, Faculty of Chinese Medicine Science at Guangxi University of Chinese Medicine, Beihai University of Art and Design, Beihai College of Beihang University, Guilin University, Guilin Institute of Information Technology, Liuzhou Institute of Technology, and Guangxi City Vocational University. This investigation establishes two primary objectives: first, to empirically examine the direct effects of servant leadership on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment; second, to assess the indirect effects of leadership on these work outcomes via motivational mechanisms (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023). The specific research objectives (RO) are as follows:

- i. RO1: To determine the influence of servant leadership on employee motivation among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- ii. RO2: To determine the influence of servant leadership on job satisfaction among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- iii. RO3: To determine the influence of servant leadership on employee organizational commitment among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- iv. RO4: To determine the influence of employee motivation on job satisfaction among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- v. RO5: To determine the influence of employee motivation on employee organizational commitment among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- vi. RO6: To determine the indirect influence of servant leadership on job satisfaction under the mediation of employee motivation among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- vii. RO7: To determine the indirect influence of servant leadership on employee organizational commitment under the mediation of employee motivation among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

Aligned with these objectives, the study also poses a set of research questions (RQ) to guide the inquiry:

- i. RQ1: What influence does servant leadership have on employee motivation of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- ii. RQ2: What influence does servant leadership have on job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- iii. RQ3: What influence does servant leadership have on employee organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- iv. RQ4: What influence does employee motivation have on job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- v. RQ5: What influence does employee motivation have on employee organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- vi. RQ6: What indirect influence does servant leadership have on job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China under the mediation of employee motivation?

- vii. RQ7: What indirect influence does servant leadership have on employee organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China under the mediation of employee motivation?

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 synthesizes foundational and contemporary scholarship on servant leadership, employee motivation, and work outcomes, delineates the theoretical framework (Self-Determination and Social Exchange Theories), and identifies critical research gaps within Chinese higher education institutions. Section 3 delineates the research methodology, encompassing the conceptual model, formal hypotheses, and survey instrumentation design. Section 4 articulates the anticipated theoretical advancements and practical implications. Section 5 consolidates key empirical findings and proposes future research trajectories.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Servant Leadership

Rooted in Greenleaf's (1977) seminal conceptualization, servant leadership prioritizes follower welfare over leader self-interest. Core behavioural manifestations include empathetic engagement, demonstrated humility, and active stewardship of follower development. Empirical evidence confirms that such leaders cultivate psychologically supportive climates that enhance workforce satisfaction and institutional efficacy (Liden et al., 2008). The leadership principle is closely related to the values of Confucian philosophy, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of benevolence(仁), humility(谦), and the responsibility of leaders to serve and educate followers. These values are consistent with the key characteristics of leadership, making them particularly important in the Chinese context. In this cultural paradigm, leadership is not only about power, but also about creating harmony and ensuring the collective success of the team. This connection suggests that leadership may be particularly effective in Chinese organizations such as higher education institutions (Zhang, Everett, & Elkin, 2012). This study was conducted among employees of 12 higher education institutions in China. University is a unique environment where collaboration, trust, and employee development are key to achieving academic and organizational goals (Ahmed et al., 2022). In this sense, the focus of research is on leadership, which is particularly relevant for understanding how leadership practices affect employee performance in such environments.

2.2 Employee Motivation: Theories and Role

Motivation constitutes the psychological catalyst that influences behavioural patterns and performance consequences. Contemporary frameworks classify it dichotomously: intrinsic motivation arising from inherent task satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation propelled by instrumental rewards. Within organizational contexts, empirically documented evidence indicates motivated workforces demonstrate significantly enhanced productivity, elevated satisfaction, and strengthened organizational commitment (Forson et al., 2021). Scholarly investigations have rigorously established linkages between leadership paradigms and motivational processes. Specifically, servant leaders cultivate intrinsic motivation through purpose-driven meaning-making and psychological belongingness. This research centers on employee motivation as the mediating mechanism that transmits leadership influence to performance outcomes, thereby addressing the leader-outcome discontinuity identified in extant literature (Su et al., 2020).

2.3 Work Outcomes: Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Job satisfaction constitutes an affective-cognitive evaluation of role fulfillment derived from work experiences. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that leadership approaches significantly predict satisfaction levels, with servant leaders' altruistic service orientation fostering enhanced work engagement through psychological empowerment mechanisms (Song et al., 2021). Community leaders promote open communication, support, and care, which has a positive impact on the work attitude of staff. Organizational commitment represents a psychological bond characterized by affective attachment and normative loyalty toward the institution. Elevated commitment demonstrably correlates with reduced turnover rates and enhanced organizational citizenship behaviors (Miao et al.,

2014). Empirical research substantiates that servant leadership cultivates relational trust and fiduciary loyalty through its capacity to strengthen affective commitment dimensions. In the context of higher education institutions, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are particularly important as these factors promote the overall efficiency of academic and administrative staff. By studying these findings in Chinese universities, this study aims to provide insiders with information on how leadership practices affect employee well-being and organizational success (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023).

2.4 Research Gaps

While extant scholarship acknowledges the positive association between leadership competencies and work outcomes, the underlying mediating pathways—particularly the psychological and behavioral mechanisms translating servant leadership into performance gains—remain critically underexplored. Especially, few studies have considered the mediating role of employee motivation in linking leadership with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Understanding this intermediary mechanism is crucial for the development and practical application of leadership theory (Song et al., 2021). Furthermore, a conspicuous scarcity persists in empirical investigations examining culturally embedded manifestations of servant leadership within Chinese higher education institutions, particularly regarding how Confucian values and institutional structures moderate leadership efficacy. The behaviour of leaders is often shaped by cultural values, combining Confucian principles such as benevolence and harmonious relationships with leadership theory, providing a culturally relevant approach to studying the effectiveness of leadership (Pang & Wang, 2017). This research addresses these critical gaps by empirically investigating how servant leadership—culturally resonant with Confucian principles of moral stewardship and hierarchical harmony—cultivates intrinsic motivation and enhances work outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance, and retention) within China’s distinctive higher education institutional context.

Scholarly consensus now acknowledges servant leadership as a distinct transformative paradigm centering fundamentally on follower development, holistic well-being, and dignity elevation. By systematically addressing both intrinsic psychological needs and extrinsic workplace requirements, such leadership catalyses motivational pathways that generate positive organizational consequences—notably enhanced job satisfaction and strengthened organizational commitment. This research is theoretically anchored in the complementary frameworks of Social Exchange Theory (reciprocity norms) and Self-Determination Theory (psychological needs satisfaction), which collectively elucidate the servant leadership-motivation-outcomes nexus (Aryee et al., 2023).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that organizational relationships function through reciprocal transactions. When leaders demonstrate supportive behaviours and prioritize staff welfare, they establish environments characterized by mutual trust and fidelity (Sheynis, 2023). This relational dynamic consequently motivates employees to engage in organizationally constructive behaviours, thereby enhancing job satisfaction and strengthening organizational commitment (Aryee et al., 2023).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that intrinsic motivation serves as a fundamental driver of optimal employee functioning. Effective leadership fulfils three core psychological needs: autonomy (self-direction), competence (mastery), and relatedness (meaningful connections) (Ryan et al., 2022). By meeting these needs, leaders not only enhance internal motivation, but also increase employees’ sense of purpose and belonging, thereby improving job performance (Hudecek et al., 2024).

This study integrates leadership theory with Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to establish a robust theoretical framework that elucidates the sequential mechanisms through which leadership behaviours influence employee motivation, subsequently shaping job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This model considers employee motivation as a mediator, providing a foundation for the hypotheses and directions of research methods (Kumar et al., 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Framework and Hypotheses

This study investigated the relationship between servant leadership, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among employees at twelve private higher education institutions in Guangxi Province, China. This conceptual model includes both direct and mediating effects to analyse these connections. Assuming the following:

3.2 Hypotheses for Direct Effect Model

H1: Servant leadership has a strong and positive impact on the employee motivation of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H2: Servant leadership has a strong and positive impact on the job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H3: Servant leadership has a strong and positive impact on the organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H4: Employee motivation has a strong and positive impact on the job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H5: Employee motivation has a strong and positive impact on the organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

3.3 Hypotheses for Mediating Effect Model

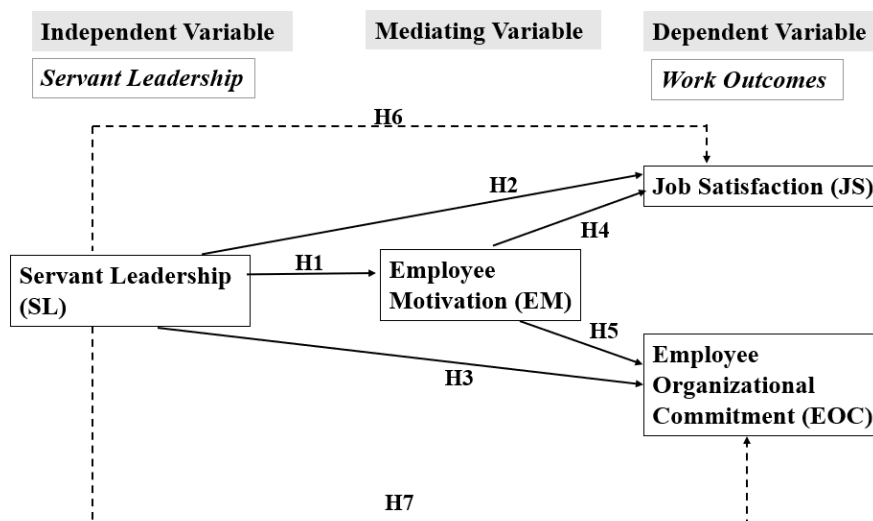
H6: Employee motivation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H7: Employee motivation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

Figure 1 is a graphical illustration that depicts concisely the relationships between the dependent variable, mediating variable, independent variable, and study hypotheses.

Figure 1

Illustrates the interactions of the independent variable, the mediating variable, the dependent variable, and the research hypotheses.



3.4 Research Design

This study used quantitative methods of online surveys to collect data from employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. The emphasis on higher education organizations provides valuable insights into leadership practices in academic contexts.

Population and Sample

The target audience is academic and administrative personnel at selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. We will use stratified random sampling to ensure the representativeness of different departments and positions. Researchers use the Raosoft calculator (available at <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>) to determine the appropriate sample size. According to the modelling requirements of Total Population and Structural Equation (SEM) (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019), the expected sample size is 303 respondents.

3.5 Instrumentation

The survey instrument consists of four sections, measuring the key variables of the study using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree." The details are as follows:

1. Section 1: Servant Leadership (Independent Variable)
Measured using the Servant Leadership Scale (SLS) by Fields and Winston (2010) and Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011).
2. Section 2: Employee Motivation (Mediator)
Measured using the scale developed by Wardiansyah et al. (2024).
3. Section 3: Job Satisfaction (Dependent Variable)
Measured using the Job Satisfaction scale adapted from Spector (1994).
4. Section 4: Organizational Commitment (Dependent Variable)
Measured using the Organizational Commitment scale developed by Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979).

3.6 Data Collection

The data will only be collected through online surveys distributed to employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. The survey will be developed using online platforms to ensure availability and convenience. Before its full release, the tool will undergo pilot testing among a small group of respondents to ensure its clarity and reliability. Participation in the survey is voluntary, and responses will be anonymous to promote integrity and privacy protection (Ishtiaq, 2019).

3.7 Data Analysis

The collected data will be analysed using IBM SPSS V.29 package and Smart-PLS V. 4.1.0.9 analytical software. The analysis will include the following steps: Descriptive Statistics: Summarize the demographic characteristics and general data trends of respondents. Reliability and Validity Testing: Ensure consistency and accuracy of measurement scales. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM): Evaluate the relationship between leadership, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, and validate the mediating role of employee motivation (Hiebl, 2021).

4. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances theoretical and empirical understanding by systematically examining motivation as the critical mediating mechanism linking servant leadership to core work outcomes—specifically job satisfaction and organizational commitment—within China’s higher education context. Although previous studies have considered the direct impact of leadership, this study extends the theoretical framework by integrating employee motivation as a key intermediate variable (Su et al., 2020). In addition, by placing this study in the context of higher education in China, it emphasizes how leadership aligns with Confucian cultural values, thereby enriching the cultural applicability of leadership theory (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023). In addition, it is expected that the research findings will help fill existing literature gaps and provide empirical data on the impact of leadership abilities in academic institutions, which are a relatively unknown organizational background. Furthermore, this research elucidates the cultural contingency of leadership efficacy by demonstrating how servant leadership practices are contextualized within China’s unique higher education ecosystem (Forson et al., 2021).

4.2 Practical Contributions

This study provides practical recommendations for managers and administrators of higher education institutions, especially in China. By demonstrating how leadership promotes employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, this study provides a roadmap for cultivating supportive and effective leadership practices (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Higher education institutions can use research findings to develop leadership courses that emphasize leadership principles, including ethical behaviour, emotional support, and employee empowerment. These practices can boost employee morale, reduce turnover rates, and create a more loyal and proactive workforce (Aboramadan et al., 2020). In addition, the research findings may assist academic institutions in formulating policies that encourage managers to introduce leadership styles that align with organizational goals and cultural values. Such policies foster organizational climates characterized by interpersonal harmony and operational efficiency, thereby enhancing institutional effectiveness in both academic and administrative domains (Hudecek et al., 2024).

4.3 Contextual Contributions

This study focuses on the unique environment of universities in Guangxi Province China and explores the background factors that affect the effectiveness of leadership in higher education in China. It provides localized insights into how leadership interacts with cultural elements, such as Confucian principles of benevolence and harmonious relationships, to influence employee outcomes (Zhang, Everett, & Elkin, 2012). In addition, the results of this study can serve as a reference for other institutions with similar cultural or organizational backgrounds, providing recommendations for implementing appropriate leadership to achieve expected outcomes (Samsir & Muis, 2023).

5. CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

This study investigated the relationship between leadership, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. By analysing the direct and indirect impacts, this study attempts to determine the mechanism by which leadership affects performance by treating employee motivation as a key intermediate variable (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023). The conceptual model of the study combines theoretical perspectives on leadership and motivation in literature, placing the research within the cultural and organizational context of higher education in China. This approach advances scholarly comprehension of leadership efficacy in academic settings while addressing critical literature gaps through culturally contextualized insights (Forson et al., 2021).

Limitations of the Study

Although this study is expected to make significant contributions, there are still some limitations that need to be acknowledged: Sample Size and Scope: This study only focuses on employees in twelve private higher education

institutions in Guangxi Province, China, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other backgrounds or industries.

Cross-sectional Design: Data will be collected at a single point in time, which may not reflect the dynamic nature of the relationships between variables. Self-reported Data: Relying on self-report surveys may lead to bias due to participants' subjective perceptions or desires to comply with social norms (Hudecek et al., 2024).

Future Research Directions

To eliminate these limitations, future research can consider the following methods: Expand the sample to include other universities or organizations from different cultural or industrial backgrounds to improve comparability of results. Application of longitudinal research design: Conducting temporal studies to better understand causal relationships and temporal dynamics between variables. Integrating multiple sources of data collection methods: utilizing evaluations from colleagues or managers to reduce self-report bias and improve the reliability of results (Su et al., 2020).

Closing Remarks

This study generates actionable insights regarding performance optimization in higher education institutions by elucidating motivation's mediating role between leadership and outcomes. The findings underscore the dual imperative of fulfilling employees' psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and cultivating empowering work environments. These evidence-based conclusions offer meaningful contributions to both leadership theory refinement and practical organizational interventions, creating mutual value for institutions and their workforce (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023).

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