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The mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment in a selected non-profit organisation

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Orientation: Leadership is essential for the effective performance of organisations. Therefore, understanding the appropriate leadership styles for non-profit organisations (NPOs) helps develop employee attitudes that can improve service delivery.

Research purpose: This study examined the mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment.

Motivation for the study: One of the critical challenges confronting NPOs in South Africa is the inability to influence employee attitudes. Accordingly, servant leadership has been identified as a significant predictor of employee attitudes, such as organisational commitment.

Research design, approach and method: This study adhered to a positivist paradigm and the quantitative approach. Data were collected from a sample of 208 employees working in a selected NPO in the North West province of South Africa. SMART PLS4 was used to analyse data using structural equation modelling.

Main findings: The results revealed that servant leadership had a significant impact on self-esteem and organisational commitment. Furthermore, the results showed that while self-esteem significantly predicted organisational commitment, it partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment.

Practical/managerial implications: In line with the research results, this investigation suggests that NPOs cultivate a culture that fosters a servant leadership style.

Contribution/value-add: This study focused on the non-profit sector, which has primarily been underexplored in leadership studies.

Keywords: servant leadership; self-esteem; organisational commitment; turnover intentions; mediation.

Introduction

A management style that prioritises employee care has piqued the interest of academics and practitioners alike (Eva et al. 2019). There has been a heightened need for more people-oriented management and a concern that all relevant stakeholders should share in the success (Feng & Liu 2018). According to Arain, Hameed and Crawshaw (2019), successful leadership entails prioritising followers' interests over leaders' interests. However, current leadership theories primarily take a leader-first approach (Kahya & Şahin 2018). According to these theories, the organisation's principal player is the leader, and the followers must follow their leader. However, a lot has changed in today's business environment, and leaders need to serve their followers to facilitate professional development and turn followers into significant players who serve their organisation (Riquelme, Rios & Gadallah 2019). This has brought to the fore the importance of servant leadership in the contemporary business environment. This leadership style enables organisations to achieve higher accomplishments than a single leader (the key player) could achieve alone (Sorour & Elkholy 2021).

The challenges facing the workplace today include, but are not limited to, technological advancements, a growing competitive market and the need to enhance leadership skills. Some of the critical challenges, particularly within non-profit organisations (NPOs) in South Africa, include the inability to influence employee attitudes, such as organisational commitment (Zulu, Chetty & Karodia 2017). Benecke and Holtzhausen (2018) indicated that NPOs are struggling to retain skilled employees, who are moving to for-profit organisations to better their careers. The solution to this may lie in

applying different leadership styles, such as servant leadership, in NPOs. Servant leadership has been studied extensively and proven to have a significant impact on employee attitudes (Jang & Kandampully 2018). However, there is limited research exploring how individual employee characteristics, such as self-esteem, could mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee attitudes in NPOs in South Africa. This study sought to bridge this lacuna.

Firstly, this study is significant in that it integrates social exchange theory (SET) and social identity theory (SIT), offering a multi-theoretical explanation of organisational commitment. Most studies rely on a single lens; this study shows how exchange-based (reciprocity) and identity-based (belonging) processes operate together, providing a more holistic account. Secondly, positioning self-esteem as a mediator is a key theoretical contribution. While prior studies often focus on constructs like trust or engagement, this study highlights self-esteem as a psychological mechanism that translates servant leadership into commitment – bridging external leader behaviours and internal employee self-concept. Thirdly, the focus on a NPO adds contextual novelty. Leadership research is heavily skewed towards corporate settings; this investigation extends theory into the NPO context, where values such as service, altruism and mission alignment may amplify the effects of servant leadership. This article is organised as follows: (1) a literature review and hypothesis development, followed by (2) a discussion of the results.

Problem statement

An estimated 60 000 employees in the NPO sector in South Africa are social workers (Skhosana 2020). However, because of job uncertainties owing to poor funding (Setati 2023). This sector is plagued by organisational commitment issues (Mujajati, Ferreira & Du Plessis 2024). Non-profit organisations that seek exceptional performance and the retention of human resources need a workforce that is committed to both the organisation and their job (Özdemir 2017). Servant leadership is one of the primary strategies NPOs can adopt to get employees committed to the organisation. However, the servant leadership construct has been widely researched (McQuade, Harrison & Tarbert 2021), and its impact on attitudes such as organisational commitment is limited, especially in the context of NPOs (Ngah, Taiwo & Ismail 2023). In this regard, this study examined the impact of servant leadership on organisational commitment in a selected NPO in South Africa. Given the limited research on the mechanisms underlying servant leadership's effects on individual attitudes and behaviours, this study explored the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

This study is based on SET and SIT. The SET is one of the most recognised concepts for clarifying exchanges between individuals (Ng 2023) and it is crucial in explaining the development of commitment among employees. Social exchange theory posits that parties can be involved in reciprocal relationships that benefit each other. In essence, employees attribute human-like characteristics to their employers, reflecting how much they care for the workers' well-being (Jelil Ladebo, Jacob Olaoye & Oyekale Adamu 2008). The employer–employee relationship is determined by employers' perceptions of their benevolence, as reflected in the provision of favourable job conditions such as promotion, equitable policies and emotional support. Hence, an employee reciprocates positively when such favourable conditions exist. In the context of this research, servant leadership attributes such as sharing power, teamworking and an emphasis on employee well-being can elicit high levels of organisational commitment. In essence, employees' commitment to the organisation represents a form of reciprocity. Hence, SET is a suitable theoretical underpinning for this study. On the other hand, the SIT proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) helps explain the development of self-esteem among employees. Social identity theory posits that people derive part of their identity – their social identity – from the groups to which they belong (Scheepers & Ellemers 2019).

Social Exchange Theory and SIT complement each other by explaining both relational and identity-based mechanisms linking servant leadership to organisational commitment via self-esteem. Social Exchange Theory suggests that when servant leaders provide support and care, employees feel valued, which enhances self-esteem and prompts reciprocity, leading to stronger commitment. In contrast, SIT explains how servant leadership fosters a sense of belonging and organisational identification, thereby strengthening self-esteem. Together, these theories show that self-esteem reflects both exchanged support and internalised organisational identity, thereby reinforcing commitment.

Servant leadership

Greenleaf (1977) established the concept of servant leadership. It posits that leadership is exercised by first fulfilling employees' highest priority demands. The servant-first character of servant leadership distinguishes this notion from other leadership theories, as the above anecdote illustrates (Lee et al. 2020). It prioritises meeting its followers' highest needs, setting aside personal needs and wishes (Eva et al. 2019). Previous servant leadership research has primarily related leadership to employee attitudes and behaviours in the workplace (Dinc 2018), including the psychological atmosphere of the workplace (Jena, Pradhan & Panigrahy 2018). However, servant leadership research in for-profit organisations focuses on unit, group and team-level characteristics to examine its direct impact on employee attitudes and actions, as well as the mediating effects of organisational culture and climate (Qing et al. 2020). It is well recognised that servant leadership prioritises satisfying the needs of individual followers, and that, usually, a servant leader's interaction with their followers is on an individual

basis (Wu et al. 2021). However, the effects of individual-level servant leadership on employee attitudes and personal resources, such as self-esteem, have not been explored particularly in a non-profit organisational context.

Organisational commitment

Meyer and Allen (1991) defined organisational commitment as a firm belief in, and support of, an organisation's goals, determination to apply hard work on behalf of the organisation, and a genuine desire to remain with the organisation. It has been linked to several positive individual and organisational outcomes (Mitonga-Monga, Flotman & Cilliers 2018). Organisational commitment is a three-dimensional construct which includes: (1) affective commitment (AC), (2) continuance commitment (CC), and (3) normative commitment (NC). Affective commitment, which entails exploring how employees identify with the organisation, their involvement, and how they are emotionally attached to their job (Gao–Urhahn, Biemann & Jaros 2016). It has been noted that employees with high CC continue to work in their jobs because they want to. Continuance commitment *(CC)* is a method of evaluating an employee's commitment based on their capacity to assess the cost of leaving their job as well as the cost of changing employers (De Clercq et al. 2021). Several studies (De Clercq et al. 2021) have also reported that employees with a strong continuance commitment to their jobs tend to stay because they believe they would lose a significant amount if they left. Normative commitment *(*NC) is defined as a commitment founded on an individual's obligation to their work and is unrelated to the employee's emotional connection to their company (McCormick & Donohue 2019). In this study, organisational commitment will be reported as an outcome of the relationship between servant leadership and self-esteem, serving as a mediating variable.

Self-esteem

In today's world, the concept of self-esteem is ubiquitous. People often assume that high self-esteem is necessary for success in various settings, including classes, workplaces, sporting activities and music concerts (Vaughan-Johnston et al. 2020). Indeed, promoting and preventing low self-esteem is commonly regarded as a critical societal goal that requires extensive intervention to improve the population's self-esteem levels. According to Peixoto and Almeida (2010), self-esteem refers to a person's subjective assessment of their worth as an individual. Self-esteem has been linked to positive outcomes such as increased initiative, satisfaction and happiness. It has become increasingly evident that self-esteem is not only a significant psychological need but also an economic need and an employee's cognitive and decision-making capacity. Individuals with high self-esteem have been reported to handle conflict situations, execute tasks independently and establish relationships with others (Harris & Orth 2020). An individual's self-evaluation is mainly based on their interactions with others (Tan, Krishnan & Lee 2017). As a result, interactions with superiors or managers are likely to affect an individual's self-esteem.

To concur with this notion, Shamir House and Arthur (2018) reported that servant leadership draws some of its efficacy from its effects on follower self-esteem. However, there is a paucity of studies in the literature, particularly in the South African context, that examine the effects of follower self-esteem on leaders. Following this point, the study uses self-esteem to reflect followers' attitudes towards their leaders and followers' attitudes towards themselves, respectively, and hypothesises it as a mediator between servant leadership and employee attitudes such as turnover intentions and organisational commitment.

Hypotheses development

Servant leadership and organisational commitment

Servant leadership fosters organisational commitment by prioritising employees' growth, well-being and empowerment, thereby strengthening the relational and psychological bonds between employees and the organisation. Servant leaders demonstrate humility, ethical behaviour and a genuine concern for followers' needs, which cultivates trust and perceived organisational support. Through behaviours such as active listening, stewardship and the development of employees' capabilities, leaders create a supportive work environment that satisfies employees' socio-emotional needs. This, in turn, enhances AC, as employees feel valued and emotionally attached to the organisation. From the lens of SET, employees reciprocate the care and support received from servant leaders with positive attitudes and loyalty, thereby increasing their willingness to remain with and contribute to the organisation.

Authors such as Li, Xie and Li (2022) support the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment by stating that servant leadership emphasises serving others, sharing power, fostering teamwork and building a sense of community within and beyond the organisation. This triggers a sense of belonging among followers, leading to organisational commitment. Organisational commitment is also enhanced because servant leadership entails the motivation to serve others and a long-term interest in employee well-being (Dahleez, Aboramadan & Bansal 2021). In support of this, Bantha and Sahni (2021) stated that servant leaders display ethical conduct and support followers' development, thereby reducing employees' stress levels. All this inspires followers to develop positive attitudes, such as organisational commitment. Authors such as Drury (2004) and Awee et al. (2014) also reported a significant positive association between servant leadership and organisational commitment. Hence, it can be hypothesised (H) that:

> **H1:** Servant leadership positively influences organisational commitment.

Servant leadership and self-esteem

Servant leaders receive respect in organisations because they can motivate their followers. Accordingly, motivated employees can achieve organisational objectives timeously, thus enhancing their self-esteem (Bantha & Sahni 2021). In support of this, Clarence et al. (2021) stated that servant leaders influence, motivate and enable those being led to

perform better and develop their human and social capital. The development of human and social capital enhances the follower's confidence and abilities, leading to increased self-esteem. Furthermore, authors such as Li, Xie and Li (2022) have noted that servant leadership is associated with favourable treatment from leaders; thus, employees who perceive a high level of servant leadership are more likely to exhibit high self-esteem. Hence, it can, therefore, be hypothesised that:

H2: Servant leadership positively influences self-esteem.

The mediating role of self-esteem

Self-esteem is considered a predictor of behaviour (Azila-Gbettor et al. 2020). Hence, scholars have posited that self-esteem is central to explaining employee attitudes. According to Pierce and Gardner (2004), individual self-esteem is vital in determining employee motivation, work-related attitudes and behaviours. Different studies conclude that there is a relationship between organisation-based self-esteem and job satisfaction (Kuster, Orth & Meier 2013), motivation (Benavides 2020), citizenship behaviour (Azila-Gbettor et al. 2020), job performance (Moon & Pan 2022), as well as other important organisation-related attitudes and behaviours such as organisational commitment (Jackson & Jackson 2019).

On the other hand, prior research has confirmed the mediation role of self-esteem in individual behaviour studies (see Shabeer, Nasir & Rehman 2023). In the context of this study, servant leaders inculcate a culture of trust and competence among followers (Bantha & Sahni 2021), and this fosters high self-esteem among followers. High self-esteem individuals feel good about themselves (Azila-Gbettor et al. 2020) and are likely to be emotionally attached to the organisation. It can therefore be argued that self-esteem is a critical ingredient in the servant leadership–organisational commitment link. The following hypotheses can therefore be made:

H3: Self-esteem positively influences organisational commitment.

H4: Self-esteem positively mediates the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment.

Considering the discussion above, a conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

Research methods and design

Research paradigm

A positivist approach was used in this study. This is essentially the belief that only 'truthful' data, generated through observation and scientific measurements, is trustworthy (Marsonet 2019). When using this approach, the investigator's role is limited to data collection and interpretation, and an objective methodology is employed. In this type of study, the results are observable and quantifiable.

Research approach and design

This study followed a quantitative descriptive method. This quantitative study involves the use of questionnaires to gather data for statistical analysis and reach a conclusion for the stated hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell 2017). Quantitative research is cost-effective and time-efficient This study utilised a cross-sectional survey because it enabled the simultaneous assessment of the research outcome (organisational commitment), exposures (servant leadership) and the mediating factors (self-esteem) to answer the research questions.

Population

A population is referred to as all the elements that meet a set of specific criteria for inclusion in a study (Salkind & Frey 2014). The population for this study consisted of 420 non-managerial employees working at a selected NPO in the North West province of South Africa.

Sampling technique and sample size

A simple random sampling method was used to select participants. A complete list of 420 individuals was created, with each person given a unique number from 1 to 420. Random numbers were generated in Microsoft Excel, and the list was sorted by them. The first 260 individuals from this randomised list were chosen as the sample. Sampling was carried out without replacement to ensure that each participant had an equal and independent chance of being selected for the study. According to Israel (1992) and Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample size of at least 201 employees is considered sufficient for the targeted population. However, 208 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 80%. The inclusion criteria required participants to be non-managerial employees with at least 1 year of experience in a selected NPO in the North West province of South Africa, and both male and female employees were eligible to participate.

According to Table 1, a total of 208 respondents took part in the study, and the majority (n = 124) of them were female. Most (n = 90) respondents were between the ages of 30 years and 39 years and were most likely to have a bachelor's degree. Seventy-eight employees had served the organisation for 16 years – 20 years.

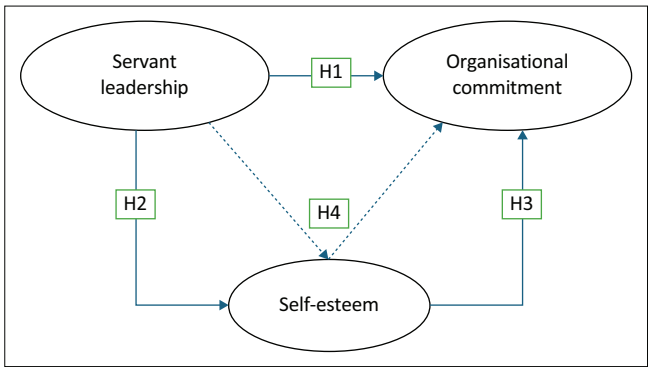
Instrumentations

Section A: Demographic factors

This section comprises four questions, including age, gender, educational level and tenure.

Section B: Servant leadership

This section measured servant leadership using six items from the Liden et al. (2008) scale. The scale was also validated by Mahembe and Engelbrecht (2013) in South Africa. This scale was considered appropriate for measuring servant leadership in NPOs because it has been widely used and validated across organisational contexts. Respondents were required to rate the servant leadership of their head of departments, managers and supervisors using a five-point



H, hypothesis.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework.

Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. An example of a measurement item is: Our leader prioritises employee development.

Section C: Self-esteem scale

A 6-item self-esteem scale by Heatherton and Wyland (2003) was used in this study to assess participants' self-esteem. The scale was also validated by Westaway, Jordaan and Tsai (2015) in South Africa. Respondents were required to rate their responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. An example of a measurement item is 'I feel confident about my abilities'.

Section D: Organisational commitment

This section measured employees' commitment to their organisation using a six-item AC questionnaire adopted from Allen and Meyer (1990). Authors such as Manetje and Martins (2009) have used a similar scale in South Africa. Respondents were required to indicate their level of commitment using a five-point Likert scale ranging from '(1) strongly disagree, (5) strongly agree'. An example of a measurement item is 'I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond what is usually expected to help this organisation to be successful'.

Reliability and validity of the instruments

Indicator reliability

If a reflective indicator loading is higher than 0.5, the item is a good measurement of a latent construct (Hulland 1999). Accordingly, all the indicator loadings exceeded 0.5 (see Table 1).

Internal consistency reliability

This study used Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency reliability. Gefen, Straub and Boudreau (2000) state that a CR value of at least 0.7 indicates adequate internal consistency reliability. Hair et al. (2017) suggested that Cronbach's alpha (α) values greater than 0.60 are widely considered desirable in research to indicate internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alpha and CR threshold values were satisfied.

TABLE 1: Sample characteristics.

Demographics	Sub-groups	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	84	40.4
	Female	124	59.6
Age (years)	20–29	26	12.5
	30–39	112	53.8
	40–49	56	26.9
	50+	14	6.7
Level of education	No formal schooling	2	1.0
	Matric	66	31.7
	Bachelor's degree	114	54.8
	Master's degree	23	11.1
	PhD	3	1.4
Tenure	3 years or less	23	11.1
	4 years but less than 10 years	22	10.6
	11–15 years	26	12.5
	16–20 years	78	37.5
	21 years and above	59	28.4

PhD, Doctor of Philosophy.

Convergent reliability

Convergent reliability is the extent to which a measure correlates positively with alternative measures of the same construct (Hair et al. 2012). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is used to assess convergent reliability and should be greater than 0.5. Table 2 confirms that AVE values are acceptable.

Table 2 confirms the instrument's reliability. The Cronbach alpha, AVE and CR were within acceptable limits.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity reflects the extent to which a construct does not correlate with measures of theoretically different or unrelated constructs. According to Hair et al. (2012), discriminant validity can be assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. This technique compares the square roots of the AVE values with the correlations of the latent variable with other constructs. To satisfy discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE of each construct should be higher than the correlation with any other construct (Hair et al. 2012).

Table 3 confirms that the measuring instrument meets the discriminant validity threshold, as each construct's discriminant validity values exceed its correlations with other constructs.

Ethical considerations

This study sought and obtained ethical approval from the North-West University Faculty of Economics and Management's Research Ethics Committee (FEMS REC). The ethical approval number is NWU-00940-20-A4. Respondents were not coerced into taking part in this research, as informed consent was sought before data collection. The collected data was stored in a password-encrypted database. All collected data will be disposed of within 5 years in line with the *POPI Act*, and NWU has established guidelines and procedures.

TABLE 2: Factor scores, mean, standard deviation, average variance extracted and composite reliability.

Code	Variable	Factor score	Alpha	AVE	CR
	Servant leadership	-	0.732	0.512	0.734
SL1	We seek help from our leader if we have a problem.	0.621	-	-	-
SL2	Our leader emphasises the importance of giving back to the community	0.713	-	-	-
SL3	Our leader prioritises employee career development	0.655	-	-	-
SL4	Our leader cares about other people's successes	0.636	-	-	-
SL5	Our leader cares about employees' well-being	0.648	-	-	-
SL6	Our leader gives others the responsibility to make important decisions about their jobs	0.637	-	-	-
	Self-esteem	-	0.774	0.534	0.782
SE1	I feel confident about my abilities	0.680	-	-	-
SE2	I feel confident that I understand things	0.734	-	-	-
SE3	I feel as smart as others	0.794	-	-	-
SE4	I take a positive attitude towards myself	0.691	-	-	-
SE5	I feel that I am a person of worth, at least in an equal plane with others	0.521	-	-	-
SE6	I feel good about myself	0.670	-	-	-
	Organisational commitment	-	0.863	0.600	0.877
OC1	I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond what is normally expected to help this organisation to be successful	0.834	-	-	-
OC2	I talk up this organisation to my friends as a great place to work for	0.781	-	-	-
OC3	I would accept almost any job tasks to keep working for this organisation	0.583	-	-	-
OC4	I find that my values and the organisation's values are very similar	0.689	-	-	-
OC5	I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organisation	0.879	-	-	-
OC6	I care about the fate of this organisation	0.842	-	-	-

SL, servant leadership; SE, self-esteem; OC, organisational commitment; AVE, average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability.

TABLE 3: Discriminant validity.

Construct	Organisational commitment	Self-esteem	Servant leadership
Organisational commitment	0.775*	-	-
Self-esteem	0.743	0.687*	-
Servant leadership	0.617	0.612	0.652*

*, discriminant validity values.

TABLE 4: Coefficient of determination (R^2).

Exogenous variable	Endogenous variable	R^2
Servant leadership + Self-esteem	Organisational commitment	0.566
Servant leadership	Self-esteem	0.515

TABLE 5: Effect size (F^2).

Exogenous variable	Endogenous variable	F^2
Servant leadership	Organisational commitment	0.172
Servant leadership	Self-esteem	0.294
Self-esteem	Organisational commitment	0.220

Results

Common method bias

This study employed Harman's one-factor test (Harman 1976) to assess common method bias (CMB). According to this test, no single factor should account for more than 50% of the variance among variables. The findings confirmed this criterion, as the strongest single factor explained only 29% of the total variance.

Evaluation of the structural model

This study evaluated the predictive capabilities of the structural model through Q^2 values and its explanatory strength using R^2 and F^2 Effect Size measures (Rubel, Kee & Rimi 2020).

In SMART PLS, Q^2 is calculated using the blindfolding technique. As suggested by Chin (1988), Q^2 should be greater than zero (0). The Q^2 values were 0.15 and 0.13 for self-esteem and organisational commitment, respectively. This indicates that the model's predictive accuracy was strong.

The R^2 was used to evaluate the model's explanatory power. As shown in Table 4, servant leadership and self-esteem explained 56.6% of the variance in organisational commitment. However, self-esteem accounted for a greater explanatory contribution (0.619), whereas servant leadership accounted for 0.172 of the variance. On the other hand, servant leadership explained 51.5% of the variance in self-esteem. These results indicate a strong explanatory model.

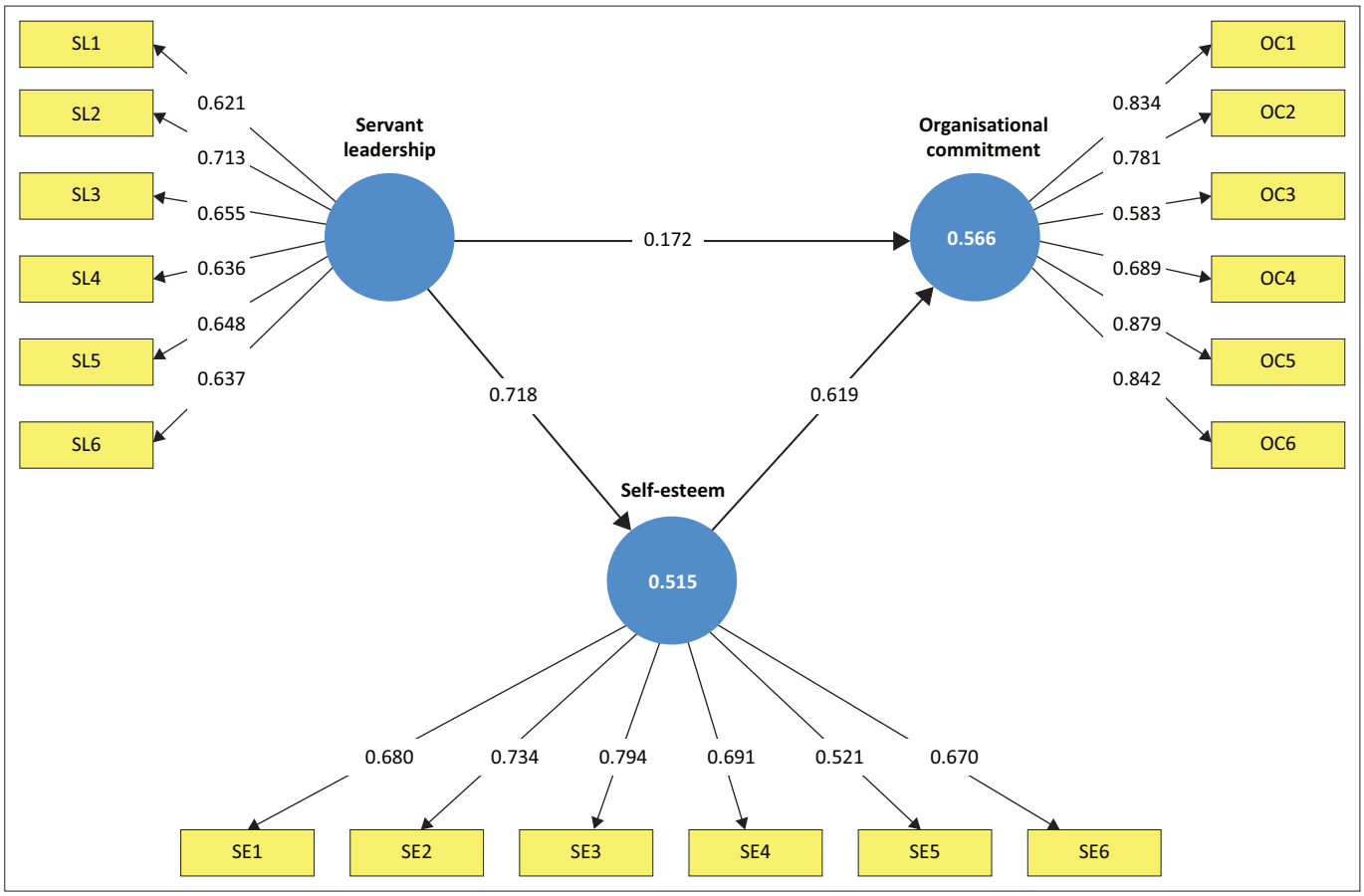
According to Cohen (1988), f^2 values are interpreted as follows: values close to 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium and 0.35 = large. Accordingly, servant leadership had the greatest effect size on self-esteem (0.294) and a medium effect on organisational commitment (0.172). Self-esteem had a fairly large effect on organisational commitment (0.220) (see Table 5). These results imply that exogenous variables had a significant explanatory power on the endogenous variables.

Results presentation

Structural equation modelling was used to test the hypotheses above, and the results are shown in Figure 2 and Table 6.

Direct effects

Table 6 shows that servant leadership significantly affected self-esteem and organisational commitment (β = 0.172, $p < 0.00$; $\beta = 0.718$, $p < 0.00$). Hence, H1 and H2 were accepted. These results imply that a one-unit increase in servant



SL, servant leadership; SE, self-esteem; OC, organisational commitment.

FIGURE 2: Structural Equation Modelling output.

TABLE 6: Path coefficients and probability values.

Hypotheses	Path	Path coefficient	*p*-value	Decision
H1	Servant leadership → Organisation commitment	0.172	0.000	Accepted
H2	Servant leadership → Self-esteem	0.718	0.000	Accepted
H3	Self-esteem → Organisational commitment	0.619	0.000	Accepted
H4	Servant leadership → Self-esteem → Organisational commitment	0.444	0.000	Accepted

leadership will result in a 17.2% rise in organisational commitment and a 71.8% increase in self-esteem. The impact of servant leadership is more substantial on self-esteem than on organisational commitment. Furthermore, self-esteem significantly affected organisational commitment ($\beta = 0.619$, $p < 0.00$). Hence, H3 was accepted. As stated earlier, a one-unit increase in self-esteem results in a 61.9% increase in organisational commitment.

Mediation effects of self-esteem

The results also showed that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment ($\beta = 0.444$; $p < 0.00$); hence, H4 was accepted.

Discussion

This study investigated the mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment in a selected NPO. As discussed below, all the study hypotheses were confirmed.

Firstly, as hypothesised, servant leadership significantly impacted organisational commitment. The direct effect size appears weak because there is no underlying mechanism to support it. However, the finding corroborates the work of Clarence et al. (2021), Dahleez et al. (2021), and Jackson et al. (2022). Key servant leadership attributes critical to creating a conducive work environment include the ability to listen, empathy towards workers, a sense of healing and awareness of the environment. (Bantha & Sahni 2021). All these attributes foster a sense of belonging among followers, thereby improving organisational commitment levels. The ability of servant leaders to overcome their self-interest and work tirelessly towards the interests of followers ignites emotional attachment to the organisation and its objectives, resulting in a strong employer–employee bond. This strengthens organisational commitment.

Secondly, in line with the findings of Li et al. (2022), servant leadership was found to be a strong predictor of self-esteem. Servant leaders are supportive, follower-oriented (Li et al. 2022) and motivational (Bantha & Sahni 2021). All this enables

followers to achieve their set goals, thereby increasing self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals feel good, secure, capable and worthy (Jelil Ladebo et al. 2008), thus increasing the organisation's ability to achieve its objectives.

Thirdly, self-esteem had a significant impact on organisational commitment. This finding supports the work of Azila-Gbettor et al. (2020), who opined that self-esteem can be considered a behaviour predictor. Because self-esteem is one's dispositional attitude towards one's own self-worth (Li et al. 2022), it follows that, generally, people exhibiting high self-esteem perform well in a wide variety of situations. The motivation associated with high self-esteem (Bantha & Sahni 2021) can likely spur emotional attachment to the organisation.

Lastly, the mediation effect of self-esteem was confirmed in this research. The mediation effect is stronger than the direct effect because self-esteem instils confidence and self-belief in an individual, thereby improving organisational commitment. This finding agrees with previous studies (see Jackson & Jackson 2019; Yang et al. 2018). High levels of self-esteem are likely to buffer the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment. Followers with high self-esteem view themselves favourably and do not suffer from self-doubt. They are eager to achieve organisational targets and, as a result, can develop an attachment to the organisation as they work towards accomplishing their objectives.

Recommendations

The job performance model of motivation emphasises the significance of job context (leadership styles) and individual factors, including ability, job knowledge, dispositions and traits, as well as beliefs, in determining individual performance and positive employee attitudes. We were interested in self-esteem as an important individual trait for organisational commitment. In line with the job performance model (Mitchell 1997), this contribution argues that contextual or situational variables (e.g. servant leadership) affect individual variables (e.g. self-esteem), which, in turn, influence employee outcomes (e.g. organisational commitment). This means that when evaluating employee performance, one must consider both situational and contextual factors.

This study concluded that servant leadership has a profound impact on organisational commitment and self-esteem. The study therefore recommends that NPOs inculcate a culture of servant leadership through leadership development programmes. Leadership development programmes build a knowledgeable pool of employees who are likely to have improved self-esteem. Furthermore, this study concluded that self-esteem serves as an underlying mechanism of servant leadership, influencing organisational commitment. In line with this, it is recommended that NPOs focus on building self-esteem among their workforces. This can be done through workshops or coaching sessions that focus on building confidence and self-worth. Furthermore, to improve self-esteem, NPOs must prioritise a culture of recognition and feedback, and provide opportunities for growth to promote self-esteem and hence commitment.

Theoretical implications

The theoretical significance of this study is manifold. Firstly, this study validates the SET. The significant positive relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment implies a reciprocal relationship between employer and employee. This finding implies that employees in the NPO perceive their leaders' benevolent actions positively, which, in turn, leads to their commitment to the organisation. Secondly, South African studies on servant leadership primarily focus on large corporations; therefore, this study extends the body of evidence on servant leadership to the NPO industry. Thirdly, although servant leadership research is well established, there remains a need for research exploring the mechanisms by which servant leadership and individual attitudes influence behaviours (Dahleez et al. 2021). This study, therefore, introduced self-esteem as a mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and organisational commitment.

The findings of this study have practical significance for NPOs. The findings suggest that managers who exhibit servant leadership behaviours can significantly enhance employees' self-esteem, which, in turn, leads to higher organisational commitment. This indicates that adopting a servant leadership approach can be a strategic way to improve overall employee attitudes within the NPO. Non-profit organisations in South Africa face high turnover rates, which are attributed to poor leadership styles among other factors (Aboramadan & Dahleez 2020). Given the significant relationship between servant leadership, organisational commitment and self-esteem, organisations should evaluate leadership styles when hiring for managerial positions. Organisations should instead focus on hiring people for management positions who are empowering, encouraging, honest and servant-like. In addition, Greenleaf (1977) suggests that a servant leader has a natural desire to serve others. Servant leadership is an inherent quality within an individual, and individuals can therefore be trained to demonstrate this behaviour according to the behaviourist approach to leadership (Northouse 2016). Non-profit organisations must assess the extent to which current leadership cadres demonstrate servant leadership behaviour and develop training and development interventions to enhance their desire to serve. Organisations are more likely to experience favourable employee attitudes if these types of people are selected to fill management positions.

The study also confirms that a person's self-appraisal of their worth also impacts organisational commitment. Self-awareness is also a key ingredient in leadership development programmes. Self-awareness contributes to both organisational commitment and employee performance. To support this, company leaders should implement self-awareness training that enables employees to better understand their feelings,

thoughts and values. Investing in employee development programmes can enhance self-esteem and commitment, ultimately helping counteract high turnover in the NPO sector. Training initiatives that focus on emotional intelligence, self-awareness and skill development not only improve job performance but also strengthen employees' confidence in their abilities, leading to greater organisational commitment.

Conclusion

The research study was conducted on a sample from a single NPO, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other South African organisations. The survey questionnaire was administered only in English, and not all respondents used English as their first language. This could have resulted in a risk of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The study is also dependent on the truthfulness of respondents' answers. Furthermore, social desirability bias and limitations in causal inference are other factors. These findings, however, do not affect the validity of the research results. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs with large samples across various for-profit and non-profit organisations to increase generalisability and support causal analysis. In addition, future studies can also test this model across different NPO contexts, examine boundary conditions and moderators, and examine other mediators alongside self-esteem.

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Competing interests

The authors, Mmabatho H. Molebatsi; Leon T.B. Jackson and William Makumbe, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Mmabatho H. Molebatsi: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Leon T.B. Jackson: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. William Makumbe: Data curation, Formal analysis, Software, Validation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, William Makumbe, upon reasonable request.

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