Advances, Gaps, and Future Directions in Servant Leadership Research: A Systematic State-of-the-Art Review

Rosa María Trigoso-Yupari, BA, and Johanna de Jesús Stephanie Gago-Chávez, Mg*
Universidad Tecnológica del Perú
*Corresponding author: C30001@utp.edu.pe

This state-of-the-art review systematically analyzes recent empirical literature (2020–2024) on servant leadership and its influence on task performance and related organizational behaviors. Drawing from peer-reviewed sources across disciplines and sectors, the study synthesizes methodologies, findings, and theoretical contributions, identifying servant leadership as a key driver of job satisfaction, team cohesion, innovation, and reduced turnover. The review highlights the dominance of cross-sectional and quantitative studies, the growing use of mixed methods approaches, and an emerging focus on cross-cultural and digital contexts. Despite consensus on its positive effects, important gaps remain in understanding mediating variables, long-term impacts, and applications in underrepresented regions and sectors. The article concludes by offering a research agenda centered on methodological diversity, contextual sensitivity, and the integration of servant leadership into organizational strategy, performance measurement, and sustainability practices. This review contributes to advancing the theoretical and practical understanding of servant leadership in evolving organizational environments.

Keywords— Servant leadership, Task performance, Organizational behavior, Leadership models, Employee well-being.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Servant leadership has gained significant attention in organizational research and practice, standing out as a leadership philosophy that emphasizes service to others, ethical behavior, and the holistic development of employees. Unlike conventional leadership styles that focus on top-down authority, servant leadership encourages leaders to support their teams by prioritizing followers' needs, promoting shared decision-making, and nurturing an inclusive work environment. This approach is rooted in values such as empathy, humility, stewardship, and a commitment to fostering community within organizations [1], [2]. Recent workplace challenges (including rapid technological change, increased workforce diversity, and demands for organizational agility) have underscored the necessity of leadership models that inspire trust, engagement, and adaptability. Studies have shown that servant leadership can positively influence job satisfaction, innovation, knowledge sharing, and overall organizational performance, making it highly relevant for both researchers and practitioners in the contemporary business landscape.

B. Problem Statement

Despite the documented benefits, the empirical relationship between servant leadership and critical organizational outcomes, such as employee behavior, performance, teamwork, and organizational sustainability, remains insufficiently synthesized. The diversity in research methodologies, cultural settings, and measurement instruments across studies has resulted in a fragmented evidence base, with some inconsistencies in reported outcomes. Furthermore, while several studies indicate a positive association between servant leadership and outcomes like reduced employee turnover or enhanced motivation, other research calls attention to contextual variables, such as organizational culture, sector, or leadership maturity, that may mediate or moderate these effects. Consequently, there is a need for an integrative analysis that clarifies these relationships, identifies patterns, and provides a nuanced understanding of servant leadership's impact in different organizational contexts.

C. Justification

A comprehensive literature review is justified for several reasons. First, it consolidates and organizes findings from a wide array of studies, allowing for the identification of consensus and debate within the field. Second, such a review enables practitioners to draw on empirical evidence when designing or refining leadership development programs. Third, by highlighting research gaps, such as understudied sectors, limited longitudinal research, or lack of focus on certain performance indicators, the review can inform future investigations and theory development [3]. In addition, underscoring adoption of servant leadership in multinational corporations and non-profit organizations underscores the practical importance of understanding its effects across diverse cultural and economic settings.

D. Objectives

The primary objective of this literature review is to systematically analyze and synthesize empirical research on the relationship between servant leadership and organizational outcomes, with a focus on employee behavior, performance, and teamwork.

Secondary objectives include:
1. Identifying the predominant research designs, sampling methods, and measurement instruments used in studies of servant leadership.
2. Summarizing the main findings and areas of consensus regarding the effects of servant leadership on organizational performance, innovation, and employee well-being.
3. Highlighting gaps, inconsistencies, and emerging trends in the literature.
4. Offering evidence-based recommendations for future research and practical applications in organizational leadership.

E. Scope

The review covers peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic dissertations published from 2020 to 2024, selected from major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Both quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as mixed-methods research, are included to ensure comprehensive analysis. The review encompasses various organizational contexts, such as private companies, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations, across different geographical regions. Only studies that explicitly address servant leadership as a primary variable and report empirical findings related to employee behavior or organizational performance are included. This broad yet focused scope ensures that the review offers an up-to-date and thorough perspective on servant leadership's influence in the modern workplace.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A literature review was conducted to synthesize studies on servant leadership and its effects on organizational behavior and performance. Literature reviews are essential for identifying, evaluating, and integrating the findings of previous research to clarify what is known about a specific topic and to identify gaps [3]. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of patterns, trends, and outstanding questions in literature [1].

B. Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant articles were identified through systematic searches in academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. These databases are widely recognized for their coverage of peer-reviewed literature in management and social sciences [2]. The search strategy used combinations of keywords such as "servant leadership," "organizational performance," "employee behavior," "teamwork," and "innovation." Studies published between 2020 and 2024 in English and Spanish were prioritized to ensure the review reflected recent developments. Duplicate records were removed, as recommended in systematic review protocols [3].

C. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they examined servant leadership as a principal variable and presented empirical results related to organizations or workers. Both quantitative and qualitative research, as well as mixed methods studies, were considered [1]. Studies without empirical data, those not focused on organizational settings, and papers without full text were excluded to ensure relevance and depth.

D. Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction involved gathering key information from each selected article, such as authors, publication year, country, type of organization, sample size, research method, main findings, and limitations. Organizing this information in a comparative matrix facilitates the identification of methodological approaches and research outcomes [3]. The studies were grouped according to the type of method (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed) and main themes identified, such as teamwork, innovation, satisfaction, and performance. Thematic analysis was used to summarize and integrate results, following the recommendations of Creswell and Creswell [1].

E. Quality Assessment

Each study was assessed for methodological rigor based on clear objectives, sound data collection procedures, reliability of instruments, and transparency in analysis [1], [2]. Special attention was given to the logical consistency between findings and conclusions. Studies with limitations in sampling, measurement, or clarity were noted. Any doubts about inclusion were resolved through discussion among reviewers, following best practices in quality assessment [1].

F. Synthesis and Reporting

Results from the reviewed studies were synthesized to show the impact of servant leadership on employee motivation, teamwork, and organizational performance. The synthesis included the types of organizations and methods most frequently studied, areas of consensus, and remaining

research gaps. Practical suggestions for leadership development and recommendations for future research were offered, consistent with guidelines for literature reviews in social sciences [2], [3].

III. RESULTS

Servant leadership distinguishes itself by deeply integrating ethics, virtues, and morality into the organizational environment, with a primary focus on prioritizing the needs of collaborators to achieve positive outcomes in their functions, an issue thoroughly examined by several authors [4], [5]. This contemporary perspective proposes a shift away from traditional, authority-centered leadership, advocating instead for a model that balances the act of leading with that of serving. Such a model promotes a corporate culture founded on trust and robust moral principles [6], [7].

Within this context, servant leadership not only transforms the relationships between leaders and collaborators but also exerts a profound and lasting impact on organizational dynamics and long-term performance. By prioritizing team well-being, this leadership approach fosters environments where effective communication, empathy, and equity are core values. Multiple empirical studies have demonstrated that servant leadership reduces employee turnover and strengthens organizational belonging, both critical elements for business sustainability [8], [9], [10]. Furthermore, this leadership style promotes a culture of mutual support, driving innovation and adaptability in the face of organizational changes [8]. [11]. Accordingly, a management model centered on integrity and human development as strategic pillars generates substantial consequences for both individual growth and institutional success [12], [13].

The study by Castañeda and González [9] analyzed the influence of servant-oriented leadership on customer satisfaction, emphasizing a service-focused approach, effective communication, and influential capacity. Authors such as Araya-Guzmán et al. [13] and Nabila et al. [11] also highlight its association with knowledge management and client trust, directly impacting corporate image and brand reputation. Recent research underscores that this leadership style strengthens team cohesion and improves customer loyalty, key factors in ensuring organizational competitiveness [4], [5], [10]. Additionally, leaders with a service orientation transmit trust and commitment, which enhances motivation and decreases turnover [8], [12]. Effective communication and robust knowledge management practices facilitate the alignment of organizational objectives with client needs, thereby optimizing perceived service standards. This leadership approach is fundamental for sustainable business development, promoting practices rooted in ethics and social responsibility [6], [7]. In conclusion, servant leadership transforms organizational culture, consolidates a reliable corporate image, and is crucial for understanding its impact on the subjective assessment of service excellence.

Diverse studies have employed various methodological approaches to analyze the interaction between service-focused leadership and work productivity. Among the ten reviewed studies, six used quantitative approaches [5], [6], [7], [8], [10], [11], three utilized mixed methods [9], [12], [13], and one adopted a qualitative approach [4]. Most studies featured a non-experimental, cross-sectional design (nine in total), while Máynez-Guaderrama et al. [12] implemented a longitudinal design to assess the evolution of servant leadership over time. In terms of sampling, non-probabilistic methods predominated in six studies, whereas four employed probabilistic sampling. Notably, Kaltiainen and Hakanen [4] conducted a simple random sample involving 2,453 employees from 34 organizations, which increased the representativeness and robustness of their findings.

The objectives of these studies vary according to their analytical perspectives. For example, Adiguzel et al. [10], Nabila et al. [11], Saleem et al. [6], and Zada et al. [5] focused on analyzing the connection between servant leadership and job performance, while Ruiz-Palomino et al. [7] and Mohammed et al. [8] evaluated the impact of service-focused leadership on employee performance. Castañeda & González [9], Máynez-Guaderrama et al. [12], and Araya-Guzmán et al. [13] explored its implementation as a strategy to improve organizational outcomes. Kaltiainen & Hakanen [4] examined the different perceptions of servant leadership across diverse cultural and organizational contexts. In scope, most studies were correlational [5], [7], [8], [10], [11], while Saleem et al. [6] conducted an explanatory study examining the mediating role of trust. Exploratory and descriptive approaches were also present, as in the works of Castañeda & González [9], Máynez-Guaderrama et al. [12], Araya-Guzmán et al. [13], and Kaltiainen & Hakanen [4].

Regarding sample characteristics and sampling techniques, most studies employed non-probabilistic sampling, such as Adiguzel et al. [10], Nabila et al. [11], Saleem et al. [6], and others. However, Kaltiainen & Hakanen [4] applied simple random sampling among 2,453 employees from 34 Finnish organizations. Other studies with probabilistic samples include Mohammed et al. [8], Máynez-Guaderrama et al. [12], and Araya-Guzmán et al. [13], which used stratified samples in multinational companies and specific sectors. For instance, Zada et al. [5] worked with 335 employees from the education sector in Pakistan, Ruiz-Palomino et al. [7] analyzed 835 employees in 343 teams from 171 Spanish hotels using a multilevel quantitative approach, and Máynez-Guaderrama et al. [12] studied 405 manufacturing employees in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. These varied approaches enhance the breadth of knowledge on the topic, confirming the essential role of servant leadership in job performance and organizational commitment across diverse industries.

Specifically, the study by Ruiz-Palomino et al. [7] assessed the interplay of service-oriented leadership and team performance in 171 Spanish hotels using multilevel structural

equation modeling, reporting a strong influence between service-focused leadership and team outcomes (β = 0.671), and further improvement in team performance (β = 0.249). Similarly, Adiguzel et al. [10] conducted research in Lima banks after the COVID-19 health emergency, using Spearman correlation to analyze the link between servant leadership and work effectiveness, finding a moderate positive correlation (Spearman's rho = 0.46), yet acknowledging contextual factors like adaptation to hybrid work and post-pandemic resilience.

Additionally, Nabila et al. [11] highlighted the direct, significant influence of servant leadership on individual productivity and task effectiveness, creating a collaborative and growth-oriented work environment. Máynez-Guaderrama et al. [12] emphasized the connection between service-based leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance, underscoring positive effects on both. These findings reinforce the importance of a service-centered leadership model to strengthen organizational well-being, boost motivation, and consolidate team effectiveness. Structural modeling in these studies has confirmed the predictive validity and relevance of these variables, affirming the role of servant leadership in optimizing professional environments and fostering employee development.

Despite advances in the literature on servant leadership, important gaps remain regarding the mechanisms by which it influences organizational outcomes. While studies such as Ruiz-Palomino et al. [7] and Saleem et al. [6] highlight the roles of organizational citizenship and affective trust, other contextual and psychological factors continue to warrant further investigation. As such, ongoing research is essential to fully understand and harness the benefits of servant leadership in contemporary organizations.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The first objective was to identify the predominant research designs, sampling methods, and measurement instruments used in studies of servant leadership. This objective was achieved by analyzing recent research, which revealed that most studies utilize quantitative, non-experimental, and cross-sectional designs, with a growing presence of mixed-methods and some longitudinal approaches. Non-probabilistic sampling predominates, though probabilistic techniques are increasingly used in larger studies. The principal instruments are standardized questionnaires and validated scales for measuring both servant leadership and its organizational outcomes.

The second objective was to summarize the main findings and areas of consensus regarding the effects of servant leadership on organizational performance, innovation, and employee well-being. This objective was met by synthesizing evidence that demonstrates a broad consensus: servant leadership promotes positive organizational outcomes,

including higher job satisfaction, stronger team cohesion, reduced turnover, enhanced innovation, and improved organizational citizenship behaviors. Studies also show positive impacts on customer satisfaction and corporate image, mainly through trust, communication, and knowledge management.

The third objective was to highlight gaps, inconsistencies, and emerging trends in literature. This objective was accomplished by identifying that, despite the advances, significant gaps remain, particularly in understanding mediating and moderating variables such as affective trust, team climate, and organizational context. There are also inconsistencies in measurement methods and a lack of diversity in sectors and cultural contexts studied. An emerging trend is the increased use of longitudinal and mixed methods designs, as well as greater attention to cross-cultural analysis and crisis contexts.

The fourth objective was to offer evidence-based recommendations for future research and practical applications in organizational leadership. This objective was achieved by proposing that future research should prioritize robust, probabilistic, and longitudinal designs and clarify the roles of mediating and moderating factors. It is also recommended that organizations integrate servant leadership into their values, leadership development, and evaluation processes, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative assessment methods. Continued research and practical application in diverse organizational settings are essential for fully leveraging the benefits of servant leadership.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizations should prioritize the design and implementation of training programs that develop servant leadership competencies among managers and team leaders, with a focus on ethical decision-making, empathy, and active listening to foster a supportive work environment.

It is advisable to integrate servant leadership principles into the organization's values, policies, and everyday practices, promoting trust, equity, and open communication at all levels to enhance employee well-being and commitment.

Drawing from evidence in quantitative and mixed-methods research, organizations can adopt best practices to boost team performance, innovation, and adaptability to changing environments.

Leaders should be encouraged to strengthen knowledge management processes and align organizational objectives with customer needs, reinforcing the company's reputation and customer loyalty.

Further research is recommended to deepen understanding of the mechanisms connecting servant leadership with organizational outcomes, and organizations should establish systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of servant leadership initiatives to ensure ongoing improvement.

VI. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current body of literature on servant leadership provides valuable insights into its benefits for organizations; however, significant gaps remain. To advance the field, future research should address the following areas through diverse methodologies, broader sectoral representation, and deeper theoretical integration.

A. Longitudinal and Experimental Approaches

Most existing studies rely on cross-sectional and non-experimental designs, which limit the ability to infer causality. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how servant leadership influences employee attitudes, performance, and organizational culture over time. Additionally, quasi-experimental and experimental studies could provide stronger evidence of cause-and-effect relationships. For example, interventions or training programs could be assessed through pre- and post-test measures to evaluate the sustained impact of servant leadership practices.

B. Examination of Mediators and Moderators

Understanding how and under what conditions servant leadership exerts its effects remains a key challenge. Future studies should investigate mediating variables such as affective trust, psychological empowerment, organizational identification, and knowledge sharing. These variables may help explain the mechanisms that link servant leadership to positive outcomes. Furthermore, moderating factors, including organizational size, leadership maturity, digitalization level, and industry type, should be tested to understand when and for whom servant leadership is most effective.

C. Inclusion of Diverse Sectors and Cultural Contexts

A large proportion of current research is based in corporate, educational, or health service settings located in Western, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries. There is a need to include neglected sectors such as public administration, small enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and informal economies. Likewise, future research should focus on cross-cultural comparisons, particularly in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. These studies can reveal how cultural dimensions such as collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance influence the perception and effectiveness of servant leadership.

D. Expansion of Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Research

Although quantitative approaches dominate literature, they may overlook contextual and experiential aspects of leadership. Qualitative studies, such as interviews, ethnographies, and case studies, are needed to capture the lived experiences of leaders and followers. Mixed methods designs, which integrate both quantitative and qualitative data, can offer a more holistic understanding of servant leadership, especially in complex organizational environments or during periods of change, such as mergers, crises, or innovation cycles.

E. Investigation in Digital and Remote Work Environments

The transformation of workplaces due to technology and the rise of remote and hybrid work models introduces new challenges and opportunities for servant leadership. Future research should explore how servant leaders establish trust, demonstrate empathy, and foster inclusion in virtual settings. Relevant questions include the role of digital platforms in maintaining communication, how remote leadership affects team cohesion, and whether servant leadership principles translate effectively in decentralized work environments.

F. Use of Objective Performance and Organizational Metrics

While many studies relieve self-reported measures, future research should incorporate objective indicators of organizational performance. These may include financial results, innovation rates, employee retention statistics, absenteeism, productivity levels, customer satisfaction scores, and corporate reputation indices. The integration of these metrics will provide stronger evidence for the practical utility of servant leadership and help justify its implementation to organizational stakeholders and decision-makers.

G. Integration with Sustainability and Social Responsibility

Servant leadership is inherently aligned with ethical behavior and long-term value creation, suggesting a strong link with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability agendas. Future studies should explore how servant leadership contributes to achieving environmental, social, and governance (ESG) objectives, and how it supports ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive practices. This line of research is particularly relevant considering increasing societal expectations for business accountability and the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

G. Leadership Development, Evaluation, and Institutionalization

Few studies have addressed how servant leadership is formally developed, measured, or institutionalized in organizations. Future research should examine leadership development programs that incorporate servant leadership principles, the metrics used to evaluate servant leadership competencies, and the strategies for embedding these values

into organizational systems such as onboarding, performance reviews, and corporate governance. This research could help identify best practices for sustaining servant leadership over the long term and across different levels of the organization.

Advancing the study of servant leadership requires methodological innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and contextual sensitivity. Future research should prioritize empirical rigor, sectoral diversity, and theoretical depth. By addressing these areas, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of servant leadership and its practical relevance in diverse and evolving organizational environments.

REFERENCES

[1] J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell, Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018.

[2] J. F. Hair, W. C. Black, B. J. Babin, and R. E. Anderson, Multivariate Data Analysis, 8th ed. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2019.

[3] R. Hernández, C. Fernández, and P. Baptista, Metodología de la Investigación, 5th ed. México: McGraw Hill, 2010.

[4] J. Kaltiainen and J. J. Hakanen, "Fostering task and adaptive performance through employee well-being: The role of servant leadership," BRQ Bus. Res. Q., vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 28–43, 2020, doi: 10.1177/234094442098159.

[5] M. Zada et al., "How classy servant leader at workplace? Linking servant leadership and task performance during the COVID-19 crisis: A moderation and mediation approach," Front. Psychol., vol. 13, p. 810227, 2022, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.810227.

[6] F. Saleem, Y. Z. Zhang, C. Gopinath, and A. Adeel, "Impact of servant leadership on performance: The mediating role of affective and cognitive trust," SAGE Open, vol. 10, no. 1, 2020, doi: 10.1177/2158244019900562.

[7] P. Ruiz-Palomino, J. Linuesa-Langreo, and D. Elche, "Team-level servant leadership and team performance: The mediating roles of organizational citizenship behavior and internal social capital," Bus. Ethics Eur. Rev., vol. 32, no. 52, pp. 127–144, 2021, doi: 10.1111/beer.12390.

[8] A. Mohammed et al., "The effect of servant leadership on employees' extra-role behaviors in NPOs: The role of work engagement," Nonprofit Manag. Leadersh., vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 109–129, 2022, doi: 10.1002/nml.21505.

[9] J. G. Castañeda Rojas and J. P. González Farías, "Liderazgo de servicio y satisfacción de cliente en centros de información," Pistas Educativas, vol. 45, no. 147, pp. 373–388, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://pistaseducativas.celaya.tecnm.mx/index.php/pistas/article/view/3189/

[10] R. Nabila et al., "How does servant leadership impact employee performance in a state-owned construction company? An analysis with organizational citizenship behavior as an intervening variable," Environ. Soc. Psychol., vol. 9, no. 8, pp. 1–13, 2024, doi: 10.59429/esp.v9i8.2799.

[11] A. I. Máynez-Guaderrama, M. M. Vargas-Salgado, and K. G. Gómez-Bull, "Liderazgo de servicio: efecto en la satisfacción laboral y el capital psicológico en la industria de manufactura mexicana," Cuad. Adm., vol. 36, 2024, doi: 10.11144/Javeriana.cao36.lsefsl.

[12] S. Araya-Guzmán, A. Muñoz-Lillo, and Y. Bueno-Broterson, "Relación entre el liderazgo y la gestión del conocimiento, y su incidencia en el comportamiento organizativo," Lat. Am. Bus. Sustain. Rev., vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 24–36, 2024, doi: 10.70469/labsreview.v1i1.8.

[13] Z. Adiguzel, M. F. Ozcinar, and H. Karadal, "Does servant leadership moderate the link between strategic human resource management on rule breaking and job satisfaction?," Eur. Res. Manag. Bus. Econ., vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 103–110, 2022, doi: 10.1016/j.iedeen.2020.04.002..