

Servant leadership's impact on trust, commitment, and performance in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the relationship between servant leadership (SL), organizational trust (OT), organizational commitment (OC), and task performance (TP). It employed a quantitative research design with partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) and bootstrap estimation. Data were collected through a survey of 111 lecturers from 12 universities in Eastern Indonesia. It found that SL does not affect TP and OC. Meanwhile, OT affects OC but not TP. Further, OC does not affect TP. Therefore, OT does not affect TP through OC. Likewise, SL does not affect TP through OC. It practically implies that universities should be concerned the selection and placement of professional leaders. Successful professional leaders support and enhance the OC and TP of lecturers with SL. This study enriches leadership literature empirically examining SL, TP, OT, and OC in religious higher education. Besides, it provides evidence that SL in tertiary institutions does not exhibit a positive impact on lecturer performance. Institutional limitations lead to difficult situations and allow lecturers to accept reality. Furthermore, it uncovers challenges and demands the need for in-depth investigation of SL studies, which are paradoxical and contradictory to the previous SL theories and findings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions face a strong range of challenges over time, such as an aggressive competitive environment [1], globalization, and technological advancement [1]. This phenomenon requires lecturers to show high performance for them to create excellent academic institutions. A low performance will bring about an effect on the institutional existence and future. Scholars have depicted that strong leadership, the capability of building trust and commitment, is a precondition for improving members' performance [2], [3]. The leader serves to encourage and improve the performance of lecturers [4], [5]. Scholars and practitioners have highlighted the potential role of leadership practices. They research leadership styles to understand better the leadership practices prevalent in the higher education sector [6], [7]. Leadership style can potentially influence the organizational trust (OT), organizational commitment (OC), and task performance (TP) of the members. In the contemporary perspective, the evolved leadership style in the last decade is SL [8], [9].

So far, the existing literature has demonstrated its application in businesses, for example, servant leadership (SL) study in hospitality [10], [11], SL in public service [12], [13], SL in an industrial environment [14], SL in tourism [15], and SL in the restaurant [16], [17]. Their study proved positive results that SL exerts a significant effect on the development, growth, and success of employees and organizations or companies. Meanwhile, the study of SL within an organization or academic institution is distinctly limited. A single study by Scardino regarding SL focuses on its relationship featured by university leaders in New Jersey with students' engagement level on campus [18].

The current study aims to enrich or fill in the literature gap by examining, investigating, and empirically validating the relationship between SL, OT, OC, and TP in religious higher education. Therefore, the formulated research question is whether SL, OT, and OC affect TP among lecturers around religious higher education in Eastern Indonesia. This study hypothesized that SL affects the level of lecturers' OT, OC, and TP. This relationship needs investigation for two reasons: leadership affects TP through OT and OC; and research on SL in the context of religious higher education in relation to the lecturers' TP is not well developed and is still severely limited in the literature.

The concept of SL was first introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf [19] with its explicit focus on serving, empowering, developing followers, interpersonal acceptance, and humility [20], [21]. The main purpose of SL is creating a healthy organization, maintaining individual growth, strengthening organizational performance, helping and developing all the potentials that members have [22]–[24] and finally creating positive impact on society [25], [26]. SL is grounded to serve the followers [27], [28]. A study [29] described that SL is about helping others to achieve common goals by empowering, encouraging consistent collective work, and facilitating the followers' personal growth [19], [30].

Meanwhile, trust is a basic need of organizations and solution to advance members' participation as organizational relationships are built on trust [31]. Through mutual trust, members can find the opportunity to realize the goals of the organization better. High OT can build good relationships among organization members [32], [33]. In other words, trust is a fundamental characteristic of any employment relationship within organizations today [34]. OT arises from the employee's assessment of the organization and product of ethical norms that promote reciprocity, moral obligation, duty to society, honesty, reliability, cooperation, and a sense of responsibility to others [35], [36]. This study examines the lecturers' trust in the head of STPK and the organization, referred to as organizational trust [37]. It adapts the definition of OT that trust is rooted in three different types of factors [38], namely: i) trust based on dispositions, trust givers; ii) trust based on cognition, a product of recognition, profound knowledge of the trusted person; iii) trust based on influence.

Commitment is a pillar for the success of an organization [39], [40]. It indicates the desire willingness to serve the best for the success and goodness of the organization and stay in the organization for the organizational goals [41], [42]. Thus, organizational commitment is an important behavioral dimension that can be used to assess the tendency of employees to persist as members of the organization [43]. This study adopts the idea [38] that OC means employees' willingness to remain a member of the organization. Previous research [38] explained three types of OC: i) affective commitment, the willingness to remain a member for emotional attachment and involvement with the organization; ii) continuance commitment, the willingness to remain a member of the organization for being aware of the huge impact they will receive in relation to costs once leaving the organization; iii) normative commitment, the willingness to stay due to feeling of responsibility, such duty-bond or indebted to the leader, colleague, or company. Further, task performance is about doing the right thing at the right time [44]. In common-sense, performance is the ability to work and accomplishment to show. It focuses on activities formally recognized as a part of the individual's work [45], [46]. It is used as one of the important indicators upon achieving organizational goals because it contributes directly to the organizational goals [47]. Good employee performance will provide a good climate also to the sustainability of the organization [46]. This study refers to the idea [38] which divides TP into three categories considering the extent to which the context of the work is routine, changing, or requiring new or unique solutions. Routine TP involves responses to the current demands in a normal, routine, or predictable way. In contrast, adaptive TP is the ability of employees to adapt to changes around the work environment. Creative task performance refers to the degree to which individuals develop ideas and realize individual innovations and creativity.

Literatures exposing OC as an intervening variable are relatively limited. A study that puts OC as an intervening variable is carried out by Kehoe *et al.* [48] which links transformational leadership to OT mediated by OC. Also, according to Rua and Araújo [49], [50], positions OC as moderation variable on the relationship among SL in organizational culture, organizational citizenship behavior, and customer satisfaction. However, there has been a scarcity of empirical studies on the systematic examination on the mediating role of OC, especially in the relationship of SL, OT, and TP on campus. To fill this gap, the current study is essentially novel.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Sample and data collection

The respondents of this study were all lecturers at the Catholic Pastoral High School (STPK) in Eastern Indonesia. There were 12 STPKs in the area, from which 111 respondents participated in the study. 108 of their answers were processed, 3 were not for 1 incomplete answer and 2 inconsistent answers which let the data outlier. Demographic composition of the respondents: 88 of them were men (82%) and 20 were women (12%). The majority of them, 40 (37.0%) were aged approximately 41-50 years, 30 (27.8%) were aged 31-40 years, and a small percentage (7.4 %) were relatively young, less than 30 years old. Level of education: 96 (88.9%) of them held master's degree and 12 (11.1 %) were Ph.D. Meanwhile, in terms of functional position, 54 (50.0%) respondents were lecturers, 53 (49.1%) were expert assistants, and only one respondent was a lecturer head.

2.2. Measures

Four measures (SL, OT, OC, and TP) were on consideration. This study used a questionnaire that was structured based on conceptual and operational definitions arranged in the form of statements [51]. The research instrument employed the Likert scale model with the criteria of strongly agree (SS)=4, agree (S)=3, disagree (TS)=2, and strongly disagree (STS)=1. The validity test of the instrument was performed on STPK lecturers other than Eastern Indonesia. The validity and reliability test worked with SPSS version 26. The variable SL (X1) consisted of 34 item statements, each of whose P-value was <0.05 , which concluded their validity. The reliability value of variable SL was 0.971, which indicated that the instrument was reliable. The variable OT (X2) consisted of 17 statements. The result of the item correlation analysis demonstrated that all items had a P-value of <0.05 , so all were valid. The reliability value of this variable was 0.970, which indicated that the instrument was reliable. The variable OC (X3) consisted of 17 statements. The result of the correlation analysis showed that 12 items had a P-value of <0.05 , thus all were valid. The reliability value of variable OC was 0.906, so the instrument was reliable. Meanwhile, the variable TP (Y) consisted of 18 items. The result of the correlation analysis showed that 15 items had a P-value of <0.05 . Therefore, 15 items were valid and consistently measured the indicators of variable TP. The reliability value was 0.920, so the instrument was reliable.

2.3. Procedure

This research was conducted over one year, starting with a field study in July 2021. The stages of data collection are as follows: first, writing a permission letter to the head of STPK to conduct research around the campus environment. After obtaining permission, the researcher handed over questionnaires to each chairman of STPK. Then, the chairmen distributed the questionnaires to lecturers. The data were collected through questionnaires. Before using the instrument, the validation process was performed in content and empirical validity. For the content validity, it was tested by 3 experts: 1 practitioner and 2 academics. The experts suggested that several items be specifically outlined so that respondents could easily understand. As a result, the number of items, which was originally amounted to 67 items, increased to 86 statements. Meanwhile, the empirical validity test was conducted on 52 STPK lecturers other than Eastern Indonesia.

2.4. Data analysis

To determine the validity of each variable in the instrument, factor analysis was performed. After confirming the model fitness, structural equation modeling was used to estimate the fitness of the proposed model and to test the research hypotheses. Hypothesis testing consisted of two parts: i) hypothesis testing on SEM measurement models, which aimed to study the validity of the items and the reliability of the developed research instruments; ii) hypothesis testing on SEM structural models, by testing the validity of indicators that had been generated from the factor scores or latent variable scores (LVS) and testing the hypotheses, either the direct or indirect effect within the path analysis. The significance test of indirect effect employed T-test statistics. The indirect effect was declared significant if it met the criteria of the statistic value of the $t\text{-test} > 1.96$.

Furthermore, the feasibility evaluation of the estimated loading factor and path coefficient was performed under goodness of fit (GoF). Using 4 to 5 criteria of GoF is adequate to assess the feasibility of a model. These criteria must represent absolute fit indices, incremental fit indices, and parsimony fit indices. The criteria of GoF absolute fit indices cover the recommended suitability values: chi-square (p) > 0.05 , the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.08 , and the goodness of fit index (GFI) > 0.90 . The criteria of GoF incremental fit indices include adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI) > 0.90 , normal fit index (NFI) > 0.95 , comparative fit index (CFI) > 0.90 , incremental fit index (IFI) > 0.90 , relative fit index (RFI) > 0.90 . Meanwhile, the criteria of GoF parsimony fit indices include expected cross-validation index (ECVI)-default $< \text{ECVI saturated}$ and ECVI independence, Akaike's information criterion (AIC) default $< \text{AIC}$

saturated and AIC independence, consistent Akaike's information criterion (CAIC) default < CAIC saturated and CAIC independence, and parsimonious goodness of fit index (PGFI) > 0.60. Direct and indirect effect hypothesis test was exhibited through the path coefficient test. The used criteria were: if i) the model fits with data; ii) the price of loading factor > 0.50 or with t-test statistic price > 1.96; and iii) estimation of construct reliability (CR) coefficient ≥ 0.70 and variance extracted (VE) ≥ 0.50 .

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The results of descriptive analysis for the four variables using percentages are available in Table 1. The average responses of lecturers on variable SL are 94.20% positive. Meanwhile, those on OC, OT, and TP are 90% positive. The path analysis in this study adopts Smart-PLS with precondition analysis, namely the validity and reliability of each item.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents' answers

No	Distribution of respondents' answers	SD	Percentage			Total
			D	A	SA	
1.	SL	0.5	5.3	48.4	45.8	100
2.	OT	0.5	5.7	45.8	48	100
3.	OC	0.8	8.5	48.4	41.2	100
4.	TP	0.7	6.2	55.7	37.4	100

SD: strongly disagree; D: disagree; A: agree; SA: strongly agree

3.2. Validity and reliability test

Evaluation of the measurement model is performed with convergent and discriminant validation tests. In the convergent validity test, the indicator of meeting the good results is that it has a loading factor value of > 0.70. Of the four variables measured, some items are invalid so they are not used for the next analysis process. The analysis from the calculated PLS Algorithm results in several indicators containing outer loading $e > 0.7$, so they meet the valid requirements then they are used to evaluate the model. The discriminant validity test uses cross-loading value. The cross-loading value must meet the discriminatory validity condition, which says the cross-loading value of an indicator on a variable must be greater than that on another variable. The validity of the discriminant must compare the values of the AVE. The condition to meet by AVE value in the variable is that the value should be > 0.5. Table 2 lists the AVE values of the four variables. Table 2 demonstrated that the AVE values of variable SL are 0.576, OT is 0.665, OC is 0.699, and TAPI is 0.668, which suggests that all the variables are reliable > 0.5. Correspondingly, Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability values exceed the minimum requirement, 0.7. Therefore, variables SL, OT, OC, and TP are reliable.

Table 2. The average variance extracted and reliability test

Variable	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Conclusion
SL	0.578	0.967	0.969	Reliable
OT	0.665	0.968	0.971	Reliable
OC	0.699	0.890	0.920	Reliable
TP	0.668	0.937	0.948	Reliable

Source: Smart PLS data processing

Besides, Figure 1 explains that the variables are related to one another. It demonstrates that the servant leadership variable has a positive effect on organizational commitment and a negative effect on task performance. Organizational trust has a positive effect on organizational commitment and task performance. Then the organizational commitment variable has a positive effect on task performance. Therefore, we need to conduct a test to ensure the significance of the relationship among the variables. Significance testing and hypothesis testing can be made through the bootstrapping method, likewise with the hypothesis test on Smart-PLS. The results of hypothesis testing using the t-test can be seen in Table 3. It shows SL does not affect TP, so H1 is rejected. Similarly, OT does not affect TP. Therefore, H2 is rejected. Rejections also happen to H3, H4, and H5 that OC does not affect TP; SL does not affect OC; and OT does not affect OC. Therefore, the remaining two hypotheses, H6 and H7, are also rejected: OT does not affect TAPI through OC, and SL does not affect TP through OC.

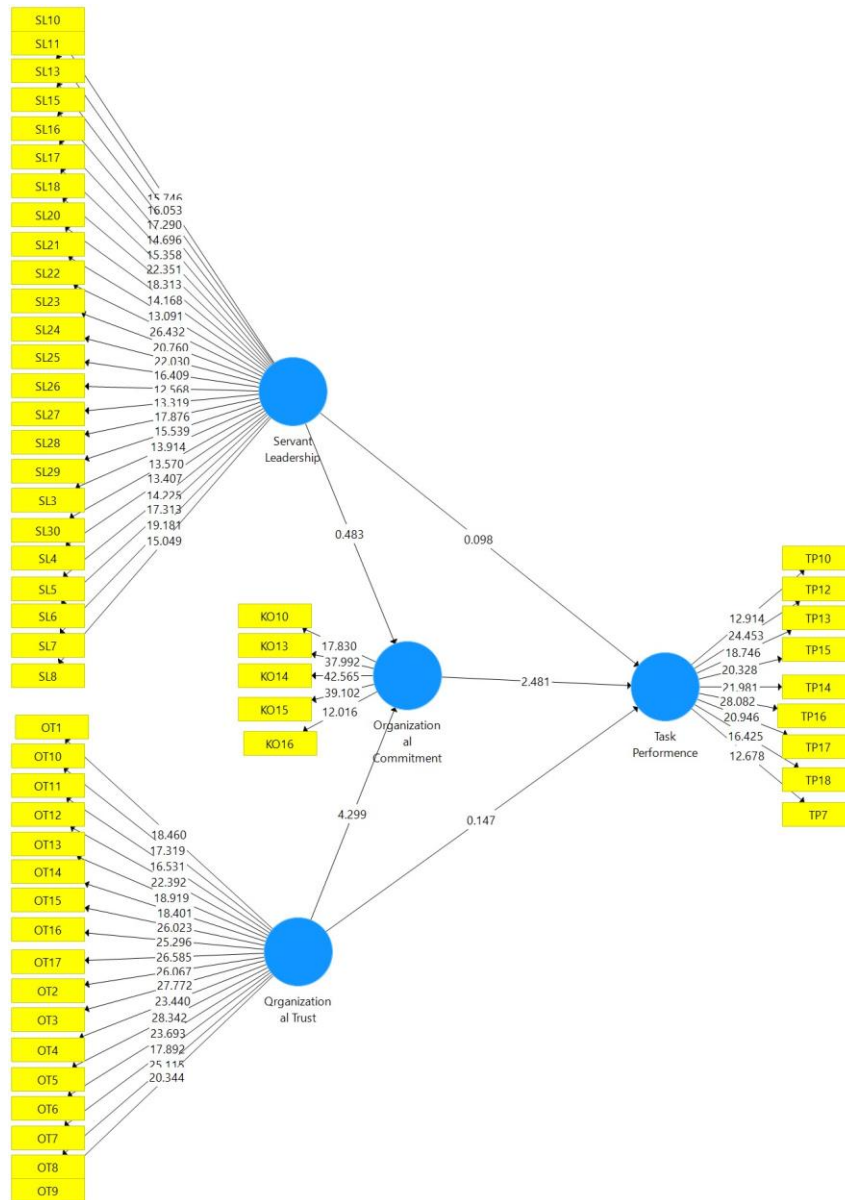


Figure 1. Path diagram results with bootstrapping

Table 3. Hypothesis test results

Hypothesis	Variable relationship	t-statistics	P-value
H1	SL on TP	0.167	0.867
H2	OT on TP	0.260	0.795
H3	OT on TP	2.365	0,018
H4	SL on TP	0.077	0.938
H5	SL on TP	4.270	0.000
H6	OT->OC->TP	1.811	0.071
H7	SL->OC->TP	0.069	0.945

The results suggested that SL (X1) does not affect the TP (Y) of lecturers. It might turn out that the lecturers have not directly experienced and witnessed the positive changes and individual development of lecturers in terms of welfare and careers though they are the results and direct impacts of SL. According to previous study [52], the dimensions of serving and leading are integrated for the organizational prosperity, development of the followers’ potential [53], [54], individual development, and well-being of followers [55]. Also, OT (X2) does not affect the TP (Y) of lecturers for certain conditions in the subjected higher schools. Few students studied at this campus, and most of them come from lower economic families, which results in

a limited financial budget. Educators are aware of the limitations, so they accept the condition. They do not demand a salary increase under the limitation. This finding does not correspond to the finding of the previous research that employees with more confidence in organizational leadership demonstrate good task performance [56], [57].

Variable OC (Z) does not affect TP (Y) among STPK lecturers in Eastern Indonesia. Organizational commitment is vital because it can replace the strict control mechanisms practiced within an institution [58]. However, the study exhibits a distinct result, which pessimistic attitudes among the lecturers might induce as a result of the relatively poor condition of the institution. In other words, the high commitment of the lecturers does not bring about a positive impact on career development and welfare. This finding contradicts the adopted theory. Commitment will let employees serve the best for the success and good of the organization [59]. Commitment demonstrates strong belief and support for the values and goals that the organization seeks to achieve [60]–[62].

SL (X1) does not affect OC (Z) of the lecturers. It might happen due to the unexpected reality of the higher school. Most lecturers are also mostly pastors. They have accepted the conditions of this institution [62]. This finding does not correspond to the concept and theory of SL that SL significantly affects organizational commitment and the performance of the members [63]. OT (X2) has a positive and significant effect on organizational commitment (Z) among the lecturers. This study depicts that the better the trust level of the organization, the better the organizational commitment. If the followers put great trust in the organization, they will work well. They believe that doing a good job will affect the organization's progress. This finding agrees that trust is a fundamental need of an organization and a new solution to increase member participation because organizational relationships are built on trust [64]–[66].

OT (X2) does not affect TP (Y) through OC (X3) as the mediator. It contradicts to the hypothesis because the lecturer works as it is. They realize that how hard they struggle will not change the situation. This higher school is a private foundation with a lot of limitations in the aspect of students' quantity, costs, facilities, infrastructure, and other supporting components. SL (X1) does not affect TP (Y) through OC (X3) as a mediator. It happens to the lecturers in this higher school because the leaders and educators are also religious leaders (pastors). As a religious leader, they must be down to earth, accepting the situation as it is [67]. Although they exhibit a good commitment to the organization and carry out their duties well and seriously, the struggle will not increase their welfare. They realize their function as servants of the people. This reality happens to all these higher schools. This finding refutes the theory that suggests SL exerts a significant effect on the OC and TP of followers [63], [68].

4. CONCLUSION

This study proves that SL, in practice, may also exhibit contradiction to the existing theory. In the context of STPK religious higher school, the direct and positive relationship is only found in the variable OT to OC, not in other variables studied. This study contributes new insight, enriches leadership literature, and provides empirical evidence regarding SL practice, which does not have a positive impact on the performance of members within religious higher school institutions. Apart from the findings, the authors acknowledged some limitations, mainly related to the lecturer's in-depth reasons for providing answers to the questionnaires, thus turning into distinct results from the previous studies. Therefore, it is highly advisable to further study qualitatively to complement the current quantitative research. It is expected that a deeper and more holistic understanding is found regarding the constraints of related institutions to change, improve, and transform along with the development of the 21st century. In turn, leaders can take the right and quick policy.





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