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MEDIATING EFFECT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN ADAMAWA NORTHERN SENATORIAL DISTRICT, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the mediating effect of servant leadership on the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in tertiary institutions in the Adamawa Northern Senatorial District. The study was motivated by the need to explain how organisational conditions are translated into employee performance, particularly given the limited empirical evidence on the intervening role of servant leadership in tertiary institutions within Northern Nigeria. A quantitative research approach and cross-sectional survey design were adopted, which enable data to be collected from employees of tertiary institutions in the study area using a structured questionnaire. The descriptive statistics was used to explain the characteristics of the respondents and the regression analysis via the Hayes' process macro 5.0 was used fr mediation analysis. The analysis established that servant leadership partially mediated the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance, indicating that organisational culture influences employee performance both directly and through servant leadership. The study therefore highlights the need for tertiary-institution

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Organisational Culture, Employee Performance, Leadership behaviours, Tertiary Institutions, Adamawa State, Nigeria

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management to develop organisational cultures and leadership practices that jointly support sustained employee performance. The study concludes that employee performance in tertiary institutions is enhanced where favourable organisational cultural practices are complemented by servant-oriented leadership behaviours characterised by trust, empathy, respect, participation and employee support.

Introduction

Employee performance remains a major determinant of organisational effectiveness, particularly in tertiary educational institutions where institutional success depends on the quality of teaching, research, administration and community engagement. Unlike profit-oriented organisations, the performance of tertiary institutions extends beyond financial outcomes to the effectiveness with which employees fulfil their academic and administrative responsibilities. However, sustaining employee performance remains challenging in African institutions, where inadequate infrastructure, resource constraints and socio-political conditions often undermine institutional effectiveness (Adeyemi, 2010; Tunde, 2014). Beyond resource availability, the organisational environment within which employees operate also influences their commitment and work outcomes. Organisational culture is particularly relevant because shared institutional values and practices influence how employees understand their responsibilities and respond to organisational expectations (Aliyu, 2011). A supportive culture can encourage employee commitment and job satisfaction, thereby creating favourable conditions for improved performance (Okoli & Ogbu, 2017; Ogunyemi & Adebayo, 2018). Nevertheless, the hierarchical relationships and collectivist orientations found in some African educational institutions also influence workplace behaviour and employees' perceptions of authority (Ogunyemi, 2015; Zikmund et al., 2013). Although organisational culture establishes the values guiding institutional activities, its influence on employee performance may depend on how effectively leaders translate those values into everyday managerial practices as it raises the relevance of servant leadership as a possible mechanism connecting organisational culture with employee performance.

Servant leadership is particularly relevant to tertiary institutions because academic and administrative responsibilities require employees to exercise professional judgement and maintain commitment to institutional objectives. Introduced by Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership emphasises serving followers, prioritising their development and promoting their well-being. Rather than depending primarily on positional authority, servant leaders encourage participation and establish supportive relationships that can improve employees' workplace experiences. Leadership also plays a central role in communicating institutional values and shaping organisational culture (Akinboye & Longe, 2012). Asogwa (2015) associates servant leadership with trust and employee development, while Ogunyemi and Adebayo (2018) highlight its potential to create supportive working environments that enhance employee performance. In resource-constrained institutional environments, these leadership attributes may be particularly valuable because employees require managerial support to sustain their contributions (Umeh & Akpan, 2017; Bashir et al., 2020). Examining servant leadership is therefore relevant not only to

understanding leadership effectiveness but also to explaining how institutional culture can be translated into improved employee performance.

Organisational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms and practices that influence behaviour and establish expectations within an institution (Aliyu, 2011). Servant leadership describes a leadership philosophy in which leaders prioritise the needs, development and well-being of their followers while promoting collective organisational interests (Greenleaf, 1977). Employee performance refers to the effectiveness with which academic and non-academic employees discharge their responsibilities and contribute to institutional objectives. In tertiary institutions, it encompasses research productivity, administrative effectiveness, student-related outcomes and service delivery, alongside teamwork, innovation and institutional commitment (Akinyele, 2010; Adegboye & Olorunsola, 2015). These constructs are interconnected because organisational culture establishes the institutional environment, servant leadership influences how employees experience that environment, and employee performance reflects their contributions to institutional goals.

Existing literature provides considerable support for the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance. Denison (1990) and Hofstede et al. (2010) provide important foundations for understanding how organisational values and cultural orientations influence employee behaviour and organisational outcomes. Research within African institutions similarly highlights the influence of cultural dynamics on workplace relationships and performance (Ogunyemi, 2015; Zikmund et al., 2013). Regarding servant leadership, Ojo and Alabi (2020) associate this leadership approach with employee motivation, job satisfaction and organisational commitment, while Ogundele (2014) highlights the relevance of cultural values such as respect, community and care in African leadership relationships. Okpara (2018) also identifies the contribution of supportive leadership relationships to employees' professional and emotional engagement. Despite these contributions, empirical research has concentrated considerably on conventional leadership approaches, particularly democratic and transformational leadership (Adewale, 2020; Athumani, 2018; Girei et al., 2024). Consequently, the distinctive contribution of servant leadership, especially its potential mediating function, remains comparatively underexplored. This limitation is significant because servant leadership places particular emphasis on employee welfare, empowerment and development (Fudamu et al., 2019).

The need to address this limitation becomes more pronounced in tertiary institutions in Adamawa Northern Senatorial District, Nigeria. Despite developments in the educational sector, differences in institutional effectiveness and employee performance persist, with some institutions experiencing inadequate resources, low employee morale and ineffective leadership practices (Bello & Dada, 2016). Although organisational culture may establish favourable conditions for employee performance, its influence could be constrained where leadership fails to translate institutional values into supportive workplace experiences. More importantly, the mediating role of servant leadership in this relationship remains insufficiently established within the study area (Nkwagu & Igboji, 2024). The existing literature therefore presents a conceptual gap concerning how leadership translates organisational culture into employee outcomes, an empirical gap arising from limited investigation of servant leadership as a mediator, and a contextual gap relating to the scarcity of evidence from tertiary institutions in Northern Nigeria. Furthermore, the application of

predominantly Western-based leadership perspectives without sufficient consideration of local socio-cultural realities raises questions about their contextual relevance (Nkwagu & Igboji, 2024). Failure to address these limitations may perpetuate leadership practices that are poorly aligned with institutional culture and employee expectations, with adverse implications for productivity and educational quality (Girei et al., 2024; Nkwagu & Igboji, 2024). Accordingly, examining servant leadership as a mediating mechanism offers an opportunity to explain how organisational culture influences employee performance within the institutional realities of the study area.

The study is anchored on Denison's (1990) organisational culture perspective and Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership philosophy. Denison's perspective provides a foundation for explaining how shared institutional values and practices influence employee behaviour and organisational outcomes, while Greenleaf's philosophy explains how leaders influence followers' workplace experiences through service, empowerment and commitment to their development. Integrating these perspectives provides a theoretical basis for examining servant leadership as an intervening mechanism through which organisational culture may influence employee performance. Specifically, organisational culture establishes conditions that encourage servant leadership practices, which, in turn, may strengthen employees' commitment and contributions to institutional objectives.

Against this background, this study examines the mediating effect of servant leadership on the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in tertiary institutions in Adamawa Northern Senatorial District, Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to establish the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance, examine the influence of organisational culture on servant leadership, determine the effect of servant leadership on employee performance, and assess the mediating effect of servant leadership in the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture represents the shared system of values, beliefs, norms and assumptions that distinguishes one organisation from another and influences how employees interpret their roles, interact with colleagues and respond to workplace challenges (Athumani, 2018). It develops through accumulated organisational experiences and established practices, while remaining influenced by internal structures and wider societal values (Adeyele, 2022). Beyond its formal expressions, culture operates through shared expectations, symbolic meanings and unwritten rules that influence appropriate conduct, collaboration and organisational relationships, particularly within African bureaucracies where traditional values and social practices often intersect with institutional arrangements (Chikwanha, 2016; Badu, 2001). These influences also extend to decision-making and leadership, as informal assumptions may influence behaviour alongside officially prescribed procedures (Opara, 2023). For this study, organisational culture is defined as the shared values, beliefs, norms and practices within a tertiary institution that influence employees' behaviour, interactions and decision-making, reflecting both formal organisational structures and the institution's informal socio-cultural context.

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Servant leadership

Servant leadership is a philosophy that places service to others above the pursuit of personal authority, with leaders taking responsibility for the well-being and development of their followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Rather than relying on hierarchical control, this approach emphasises humility, empathy, ethical conduct and stewardship, enabling leaders to build trusting relationships and create an environment in which employees feel supported and empowered to develop their potential (Laub, 1999; Spears, 1995; Sendjaya, 2005; Keith, 2008). Its relational emphasis also encourages inclusiveness, mutual respect and shared accountability, while shifting leadership towards facilitating collective progress rather than individual achievement (Stone et al., 2004; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Northouse, 2018; Van Dierendonck, 2011). In Nigerian organisations, particularly the public sector, servant leadership has been associated with employee motivation, commitment and organisational effectiveness through stronger workplace relationships and a shared sense of purpose (Durojaiye, 2019; Adewale, 2020; Akinyemi & Olanrewaju, 2021; Oluwatayo, 2022). Accordingly, this study defines servant leadership as an approach in which leaders of tertiary institutions in Adamawa prioritise staff and students' development and well-being through ethical conduct, empathy and collaborative relationships that support individual and institutional achievement.

Employee Performance

Employee performance reflects the extent to which employees fulfil their assigned responsibilities and contribute to organisational objectives, making it a significant determinant of organisational effectiveness (June & Mahmood, 2019; Akinyele, 2010; Iwu, 2017). Beyond the volume of work completed, it encompasses the quality of output, efficient use of resources and achievement of agreed targets within established standards (Ambrose et al., 2020; Abiodun & Olanrewaju, 2018; Kroll, 2018; Robbins & Coulter, 2020). Its assessment therefore requires attention to both behavioural contributions, including attendance, dependability and job knowledge, and measurable outcomes such as goal attainment and supervisory evaluations (Moore, 2019; Phua, 2018; Richard, 2019; Kostiuk, 2019). Although productivity and performance are related, they are not interchangeable, as performance also captures effectiveness and employee conduct (Ramlall, 2021; Ogunyemi, 2015; Gibson, 2018; Salanova & Kirmanen, 2021; Nmadu, 2020; Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2017; Business Dictionary, 2020). Accordingly, this study conceptualises employee performance in tertiary institutions within Adamawa Northern Senatorial District in terms of the efficiency, effectiveness and quality of academic and non-academic staff contributions, including timely task completion, service delivery and achievement of institutional objectives.

Relationship between Organisational Culture and Employee Performance

Organisational culture influences employee performance in tertiary institutions through shared values, beliefs and norms that influence workplace relationships and institutional practices, often reflecting leadership and wider socio-political conditions (Ogunyemi, 2012). In African universities, cultures that encourage academic freedom, inclusiveness and collective decision-making tend to strengthen staff motivation, collaboration and productivity (Olagunju & Ojo, 2014; Nwosu &

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Onuoha, 2015; Okemakinde, 2014). Leadership is equally influential, as transformational approaches, transparency and open communication foster trust and engagement, whereas authoritarian practices may suppress creativity and morale (Akinyemi, 2017; Bello & Abiola, 2016). Moreover, institutional commitment to professional development, shared strategic goals and employee well-being can reinforce job satisfaction and sustained performance (Ogbonna, 2018; Osisioma, 2019). However, cultural misalignment, rigid practices and inadequate attention to work-life balance may undermine these benefits (Akinyemi, 2017; Ogunyemi, 2012). Thus, organisational culture requires continuous assessment to sustain employee effectiveness.

Relationship between Organisational Culture and Servant Leadership

Organisational culture and servant leadership are closely connected in shaping the effectiveness of Nigerian tertiary institutions, as institutional values and established practices can either support or constrain leadership behaviour (Ogunyemi, 2019). Although hierarchical structures and formal authority relations may limit participatory leadership, servant leadership offers an alternative by prioritising the needs of others, ethical conduct and collective institutional development (Greenleaf, 1977; Ijaiya, 2020). This relationship becomes particularly relevant amid socio-political pressures and resource constraints, where transparency, mentorship and shared responsibility can strengthen institutional trust and staff commitment (Adebayo, 2021; Oduyoye, 2020). Moreover, leaders who encourage continuous learning, open communication and student-centred practices create opportunities for professional growth and improved academic experiences (Adejoh, 2021; Oyeniran, 2020). However, embedding this approach requires more than senior management commitment; middle managers and faculty must also demonstrate its principles through everyday interactions (Ogunyemi, 2019). Such institutional alignment can strengthen ethical accountability and create a more supportive environment for collective achievement.

Relationship between Servant Leadership and Employee Performance

Servant leadership, rooted in Greenleaf's (1977) conception of leadership as service to others, emphasises employees' well-being, empowerment and professional development as foundations for organisational effectiveness. In Nigerian organisations, particularly tertiary institutions, this approach challenges traditionally hierarchical management structures by promoting trust, participation and shared responsibility (Mukhtar, 2019; Adeniyi, 2020). Through empathy, active listening, mentorship and ethical stewardship, servant leaders create supportive environments that strengthen employee engagement, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Akinbode & Taiwo, 2020; Adetunji, 2018). These practices also help reduce workplace stress and burnout, particularly in institutions characterised by demanding workloads and resource constraints (Owolabi & Ilesanmi, 2020; Olutayo & Mohammed, 2019). Furthermore, empowerment strengthens employees' self-efficacy and sense of responsibility, while ethical leadership and transparency reinforce trust and accountability (Okoye & Chidiebere, 2020; Mukhtar, 2019). Such relationships improve communication, collaboration and willingness to exceed prescribed responsibilities (Mohammed, 2021). By fostering belonging, mentorship and professional growth, servant leadership strengthens employee satisfaction and performance (Okoye & Chidiebere, 2020; Adetunji, 2018). In Nigerian tertiary institutions, these effects extend to organisational

culture, where service-oriented leadership can promote institutional loyalty, collective responsibility and improved academic outcomes. Ultimately, embedding servant leadership across institutional management offers a sustainable approach to strengthening employee performance and institutional effectiveness despite prevailing socio-political and resource challenges.

Mediating Effect of Servant Leadership on the relationship between Organisational Culture and Employee Performance

Organisational culture, reflected in shared values and beliefs, influences employees' behaviour and performance by influencing their identification with organisational goals (Ahmad, 2019; Stephen, 2017). However, the extent to which these cultural values translate into improved performance depends partly on how leaders reinforce them. Servant leadership, grounded in Greenleaf's (1977) philosophy of service and employees' development, offers a mediating mechanism through which organisational culture influences employee performance (Mujahid, 2020). In Nigerian organisations, where communal values and hierarchical traditions remain influential, servant leaders challenge authoritarian practices by fostering trust, empowerment and mutual respect (Ajala, 2018). Through genuine concern for employees' welfare, ethical conduct and professional growth, they strengthen motivation and job satisfaction, thereby encouraging greater commitment and performance (Ahmad, 2019; Mujahid, 2020). More fundamentally, servant leadership reinforces positive cultural values by improving communication and creating an inclusive working environment. Thus, it provides a pathway through which organisational culture translates into improved employee performance and organisational effectiveness (Okoye & Chidiebere, 2020; Mohammed, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework integrates Servant Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Locke's Range of Affect Theory to explain the relationship between leadership behaviour, employee motivation and job satisfaction within tertiary institutions. Although Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises inspiring employees to pursue collective organisational goals through shared vision and personal development (Bass, 1990), Servant Leadership Theory, advanced by Greenleaf (1977), offers a more follower-centred perspective by prioritising employees' welfare, empowerment and professional growth. This distinction makes servant leadership particularly relevant to academic institutions, where mentorship and human development are central to institutional effectiveness. Complementarily, Maslow (1943) explains how the fulfilment of employees' basic needs creates opportunities for higher motivation and self-actualisation, while Locke (1976) argues that job satisfaction depends on the extent to which actual workplace experiences meet individual expectations. Collectively, these perspectives explain how service-oriented leadership can nurture a supportive organisational culture, strengthen employee satisfaction and ultimately improve performance.

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Conceptual Framework

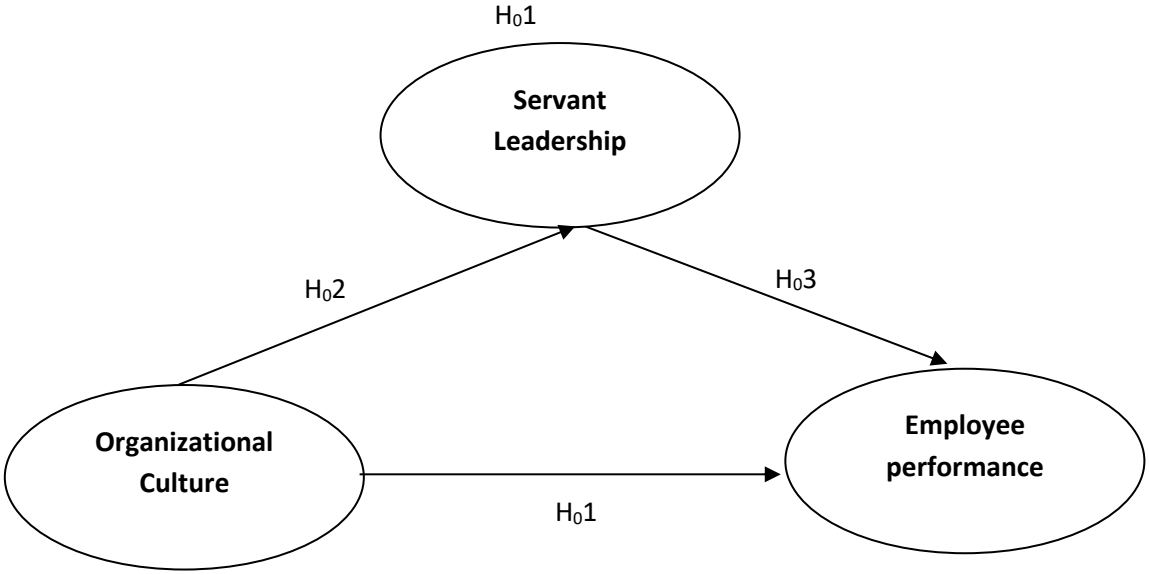

Fig. 1: Conceptual Model **Source: Researcher's Design, 2026**

Organisational culture influences employee performance through shared values and workplace practices that encourage cooperation and commitment; however, these values require effective leadership to translate them into consistent behaviour (Schein, 2010; Ahmad, 2019). Servant leadership provides this mechanism by translating cultural expectations into everyday experiences through service, ethical conduct and concern for employee development (Greenleaf, 1977). By embodying organisational values, servant leaders strengthen employees' engagement and loyalty (Liden et al., 2014), while fostering psychological empowerment and discretionary effort that improve performance (Eva et al., 2019; Pawar, 2020). Through coaching, mentoring and role modelling, they also make organisational expectations more tangible, helping employees align their conduct with institutional standards (Northouse, 2021). Thus, servant leadership mediates the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance.

In this study, servant leadership is conceptualised as the intervening leadership process through which organisational culture translates into employee performance. Specifically, a supportive organisational culture, characterised by shared values of trust, mutual respect and employee welfare, provides an enabling environment for servant leadership to emerge and become embedded in managerial practices (Ahmad, 2019; Stephen, 2017). Within such an environment, leaders are more likely to demonstrate service-oriented behaviours by prioritising employees' development, encouraging participation and responding to their work-related needs (Greenleaf, 1977; Mujahid, 2020). These behaviours subsequently influence employee performance by strengthening employees' motivation, job satisfaction and commitment. More specifically, servant leaders translate organisational values into everyday working experiences through empowerment, supportive communication and ethical role modelling, thereby encouraging employees to demonstrate greater responsibility and effort towards organisational objectives (Ajala, 2018; Okoye & Chidiebere, 2020; Mohammed, 2021). Thus, servant leadership explains the process

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through which organisational culture influences employee performance, rather than merely representing another leadership characteristic associated with performance.

Methods

The study adopted a quantitative survey design to examine relationships among the study variables and assess the proposed mediating effect using standardised employee responses. The study was conducted in the Northern Senatorial District of Adamawa State, North-Eastern Nigeria. Specifically, it covered three tertiary institutions within the district: Adamawa State University, Mubi; Federal Polytechnic, Mubi; and the College of Health Technology, Michika. The district was selected as the geographical setting because it provided the institutional context for examining the relationships among the study variables. Data were collected from employees of the three institutions in 2026 covering a population of 3,507 employees. Yamane's (1964) formula, applied at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, yielded an initial sample of 360 respondents. An additional 72 participants were included to accommodate possible non-response, producing a target sample of 431, in line with Israel's (2013) recommendation. Convenience sampling was used to reach accessible and willing employees, although its non-probability nature limits the generalisability of the findings. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire whose clarity, relevance and coverage were assessed through face and content validity procedures. Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70 across all study variables, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Finally, Hayes' PROCESS macro, version 5.0, was employed to estimate the mediation model and assess the indirect relationship among the variables.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

In this section, the following demographic characteristics (gender, age, educational qualification, cadre of the respondents and marital status) are discussed and the frequency distribution and percentages are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondent

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	293	71.8
Female	115	28.2
Total	**408**	**100.0**
Age Distribution		
19-25 Years	19	4.7
26-45 Years	171	41.9
46 Years and above	218	53.4
Total	**408**	**100.0**
Educational Qualification		
SSCE/GCE	7	1.7
OND/NCE	101	24.8
BSc/MSc	274	67.2

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Characteristics	Frequency	Percent (%)
PhD and above	26	6.4
Total	**408**	**100.0**
Marital Status		
Single	81	19.9
Married	314	77.0
Divorced	13	3.2
Total	**408**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, (2026).

Table 1 summarises the demographic profile of the 408 respondents by gender, age, educational qualification and marital status. Males constituted 71.8% (293), compared with females at 28.2% (115), indicating a gender imbalance that may mean the findings reflect male employees' experiences more strongly, although female perspectives remain represented. Regarding age, 53.4% (218) were aged 46 years and above, 41.9% (171) were between 26 and 45, while only 4.7% (19) were aged 19–25. Thus, the responses largely reflect established employees rather than those at early career stages. Educationally, 67.2% (274) held BSc/MSc qualifications, 24.8% (101) had OND/NCE, 6.4% (26) possessed PhDs or higher, and 1.7% (7) held SSCE/GCE, suggesting a generally well-educated sample. Finally, married respondents accounted for 77.0% (314), singles 19.9% (81), and divorced respondents 3.2% (13), highlighting the relevance of family circumstances to employees' work experiences.

Mediation of Servant leadership

HO_1: Servant leadership does not have a mediating effect on the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in tertiary institutions in the Adamawa Northern Senatorial District.

The last hypothesis was tested using the Hayes, (2013) process macro and the coefficients obtained are presented in figure 2.

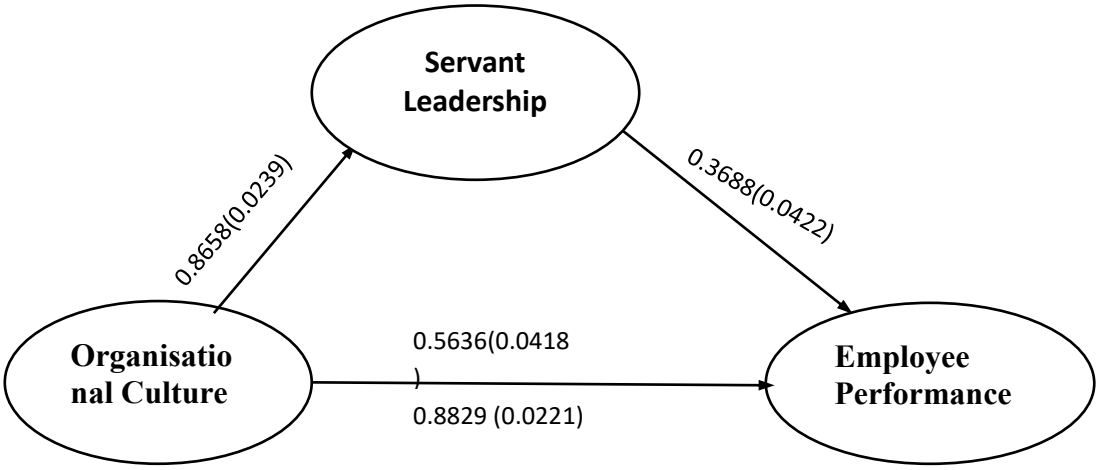

Figure 2: Haye's Process Macro Extracted Coefficients of Mediation

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The study indicates a statistically significant indirect effect of organisational culture on employee performance through servant leadership (β = 0.3193, t = 4.9351). The direct effect of organisational culture on employee performance remained positive and statistically significant after servant leadership (β = 0.5636, t = 13.481, p = 0.000) and the total effect showed that the model is statistically significant (β = 0.883, t = 39.909, p = 0.000). The mediation analysis summary in Table 2 shows that servant leadership significantly and partially and complimentarily mediates the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in tertiary institutions in the Adamawa Northern Senatorial District supporting the alternative hypothesis.

Table 2: Summary of Mediation analysis Results

Relationship	TE	DE	IE	CI		t-statistics	Remark
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
OGC→SLD→EMP	0.8829 (0.0000)	0.5636 (0.0418)	0.3193	0.1860	0.4494	4.9351	*Complimentary Mediation*

TE = Total Effect, DE = Direct Effect, IE = Indirect Effect and CI = Confidence Interval
Source: Computed using SPSS 31 from Field Survey data, (2026).

Discussion of Findings

The mediation analysis demonstrates that servant leadership significantly and partially mediates the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in tertiary institutions in the Adamawa Northern Senatorial District, indicating complementary mediation and supporting the alternative hypothesis. This finding suggests that organisational culture influences employee performance through two related pathways: its direct influence on employees' work behaviour and its indirect influence through the leadership practices that emerge within the institutional environment. In this respect, organisational culture provides the underlying values and expectations that influence institutional conduct, while servant leadership offers a behavioural mechanism through which these values are translated into employees' everyday work experiences. Cultures that encourage participation, fairness, mutual respect and professional development are more likely to provide conditions in which leaders demonstrate servant-oriented behaviours, particularly through listening, empowerment, mentoring and concern for employees' growth. These practices can strengthen employees' commitment and willingness to contribute beyond their prescribed responsibilities. However, where institutional culture is characterised by excessive hierarchy or limited employee involvement, the expression of servant leadership may be constrained, irrespective of individual leaders' intentions. The finding is therefore consistent with Servant Leadership Theory, which emphasises that effective leadership involves serving followers, facilitating their development and creating conditions that enable them to perform effectively (Greenleaf, 1977). It also extends the theory by positioning servant leadership not merely as an independent leadership orientation but as an intervening mechanism through which organisational culture influences employee outcomes. This interpretation is supported by Lee et

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al.'s (2020) meta-analysis of 130 independent studies, which established that servant leadership contributes to employee and team outcomes beyond the explanatory contributions of transformational, authentic and ethical leadership, partly through trust in leaders, procedural justice and leader–member exchange. Similarly, Peng and Chen (2021) found that concern climate and work engagement mediated the relationship between servant leadership and service performance, while Sudarmo et al. (2022) identified innovation self-efficacy as an important mechanism connecting servant leadership with employee productivity. In the higher education context, Jie et al. (2021) reported positive relationships between communication and empowerment, as dimensions of servant leadership, and employee performance among support staff in a Malaysian private university. However, Mpuangnan (2026) found that servant leadership did not directly influence work engagement in teacher education institutions in Ghana, although it contributed to organisational commitment through employees' perceptions of empathy and support. This divergence suggests that the consequences of servant leadership depend partly on institutional conditions and the particular employee outcomes being examined. The present finding advances these studies by demonstrating that servant leadership can explain how organisational culture is translated into employee performance, rather than examining leadership only as an antecedent of employee outcomes. This interpretation also offers an interesting connection with Transformational Leadership Theory. Although both perspectives emphasise employee development and organisational commitment, transformational leadership places greater emphasis on inspiring collective change and communicating institutional aspirations, whereas servant leadership gives priority to serving and empowering followers. Nguyen et al. (2023) established that transformational leadership influences organisational culture and organisational performance, although these relationships vary across organisational contexts. The present study complements this evidence by showing that employee performance may also depend on leaders' willingness to translate institutional values into practical support for employees' professional growth. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs provides an additional motivational explanation. Employees who experience respectful relationships, psychological security, recognition and opportunities for professional development are more likely to perceive their institutions as supportive environments in which their contributions are valued. Servant leadership can facilitate these experiences by addressing employees' interpersonal and developmental needs, thereby strengthening their willingness to invest effort in institutional responsibilities. This interpretation is consistent with Zhang et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis of 139 studies, which established the positive relevance of servant leadership to employee attitudes and performance while demonstrating that cultural values influence its effectiveness. Nevertheless, the application of Maslow's framework requires consideration of the administrative and resource conditions within tertiary institutions in Adamawa State, since institutional policies may express support for employee development without providing the practical opportunities required to fulfil those expectations. Locke's (1976) Range-of-Affect Theory offers a related explanation by suggesting that job satisfaction depends partly on the extent to which employees' valued work expectations correspond with their actual employment experiences. Although job satisfaction was not examined as a mediator in the present study, the theory helps explain how servant leadership may improve employees' work experiences through recognition, supportive supervision and

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professional development, potentially strengthening their contribution to institutional objectives (Locke, 1970, 1973). More broadly, the complementary nature of the mediation indicates that servant leadership accounts for only part of the culture–performance relationship, leaving room for other explanatory mechanisms, including organisational commitment, employee engagement, psychological safety and job satisfaction. This interpretation is reinforced by Ferine et al. (2021), who established positive relationships among organisational culture, leadership and employee performance in an Indonesian education authority, and Egeland et al. (2026), whose findings demonstrate that the consequences of servant leadership depend partly on the motivational climate within organisations. Further support comes from Alipio et al. (2023), who found that organisational culture partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and organisational performance, and Hafid et al. (2024), who reported an intervening relationship involving servant leadership, organisational culture and employee performance. Although their specification of the relationships differs from the present study, the findings collectively reinforce the interconnectedness of leadership, culture and employee outcomes. Indeed, the difference in causal ordering is theoretically interesting: organisational culture may influence the leadership behaviours considered acceptable within an institution, while leaders simultaneously reinforce or reinfluence that culture through their everyday conduct. The present finding therefore supports a complementary rather than exclusively one-directional interpretation of their relationship. It also resonates with Social Exchange Theory, which explains that employees tend to reciprocate favourable organisational treatment through positive attitudes and work behaviours (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). A supportive culture communicates that employees are valued, while servant-oriented leaders reinforce this perception through trust, empowerment and concern for their welfare. Employees may reciprocate through greater commitment and effort, ultimately improving performance. This explanation is consistent with Abdullahi's (2026) evidence that employee commitment mediates the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in public tertiary institutions in Adamawa State, as well as Lu and Cheah's (2024) systematic review highlighting the importance of intervening mechanisms in explaining servant leadership outcomes. Nevertheless, the present findings should be interpreted with methodological caution because the cross-sectional, self-reported design establishes statistical relationships within the proposed model but cannot conclusively demonstrate temporal or causal processes; common-method variance and alternative explanations also remain possible (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Hayes, 2018). From a practical standpoint, improving employee performance requires more than promoting favourable cultural values or introducing leadership development programmes independently. Institutional management should ensure that organisational values are reflected in everyday managerial practices, particularly through employee participation, fair treatment, mentoring and meaningful opportunities for professional development. Servant leadership must also be balanced with clear performance expectations and accountability rather than reduced to personal kindness or excessive accommodation. Overall, the study advances understanding of the culture–performance relationship by establishing servant leadership as a complementary explanatory mechanism within tertiary institutions in North-East Nigeria. Future research employing longitudinal and multisource designs could clarify how these

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relationships develop over time and establish whether other employee-related mechanisms further explain the influence of organisational culture on performance.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study examined the mediating effect of servant leadership on the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance in tertiary institutions in Adamawa Northern Senatorial District, Nigeria. Specifically, it sought to establish whether servant leadership provides an explanatory mechanism through which organisational culture influences employee performance. The study was motivated by the recognition that although organisational culture provides the values and behavioural expectations that influence institutional activities, its influence on employee performance may also depend on how these values are translated into everyday leadership practices. The findings established that servant leadership significantly and partially mediates the relationship between organisational culture and employee performance, thereby supporting the alternative hypothesis. The mediation result indicates complementary partial mediation, suggesting that organisational culture influences employee performance both directly and indirectly through servant leadership. Thus, servant leadership strengthens the influence of organisational culture without eliminating its independent contribution to employee performance.

The finding provides an important understanding into the relationship between organisational culture, leadership and employee performance in tertiary institutions. It demonstrates that the influence of organisational culture extends beyond the establishment of shared institutional values, formal expectations and administrative procedures. Its practical significance also depends on the leadership behaviours through which employees experience these values in their daily responsibilities. Where institutional culture encourages fairness, participation, mutual respect and professional development, servant-oriented leadership can reinforce these values by promoting employee empowerment, providing developmental support and demonstrating concern for employees' welfare. Such practices create a more supportive working environment in which employees are encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities and contribute to institutional objectives. The partial nature of the mediation, however, indicates that servant leadership is not the only mechanism connecting organisational culture with employee performance because there are other organisational and psychological factors may also explain the remaining direct relationship.

The study contributes to leadership and organisational behaviour literature by extending the application of Servant Leadership Theory beyond its conventional treatment as an independent predictor of employee and organisational outcomes. By establishing servant leadership as a mediator, the study demonstrates how leadership behaviours can translate organisational values into employee performance outcomes. This offers a more integrated explanation of the culture–performance relationship, particularly within the context of tertiary institutions in a developing economy. The findings also provide complementary understandings for Transformational Leadership Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Locke's Range-of-Affect Theory. While transformational leadership explains how leaders inspire employees towards institutional objectives, servant leadership emphasises the importance of serving and developing followers. Maslow's framework provides a motivational explanation for the relevance of employees'

interpersonal and developmental needs, while Locke's theory offers understanding into how supportive leadership may help employees experience greater fulfilment of their work-related expectations. Nevertheless, Servant Leadership Theory provides the most direct explanation of the observed mediating relationship. These theoretical perspectives suggest that employee performance is better understood when institutional conditions are considered alongside the leadership practices through which employees experience them.

The findings suggest that management of tertiary institutions should give greater attention to the alignment between organisational culture and leadership practices. Institutional policies promoting employee development, participation and accountability are more likely to influence performance when leaders consistently demonstrate these values in their interactions with employees. Consequently, leadership development initiatives should incorporate servant-oriented behaviours, particularly employee empowerment, active listening, mentoring and concern for professional growth. Institutional managers should also ensure that performance appraisal, promotion and staff development arrangements reflect the cultural values the institutions seek to promote. However, servant leadership should operate alongside clearly defined responsibilities and performance expectations. Supporting employees should not be interpreted as weakening managerial authority or institutional accountability; rather, it should strengthen employees' capacity and willingness to contribute to institutional effectiveness.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The geographical concentration on tertiary institutions in Adamawa Northern Senatorial District limits the extent to which the results can be generalised to other institutions and regions in Nigeria. Future research could extend the investigation to other senatorial districts and geopolitical zones, incorporating comparisons between public and private tertiary institutions to establish whether institutional ownership and administrative arrangements influence the mediating role of servant leadership. The cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish the temporal sequence through which organisational culture influences servant leadership and subsequently affects employee performance. Longitudinal studies would provide stronger evidence concerning how these relationships develop over time. The reliance on self-reported data in this study may introduce common-method bias and social desirability concerns, and future studies could address this limitation through multiple data sources, incorporating employee assessments, supervisors' performance evaluations and relevant institutional performance records. Subsequent investigations should examine other potential mediators, such as employee engagement, organisational commitment and psychological safety, alongside moderators such as organisational support and institutional resource availability because such extensions would help establish the conditions under which servant leadership becomes more or less effective in translating organisational culture into improved employee performance.

This study increases understanding of employee performance in tertiary institutions by demonstrating that organisational culture exerts its influence through both direct and leadership-mediated pathways. Its central contribution lies in establishing servant leadership as a significant complementary mechanism rather than an exclusive explanation of the culture–performance relationship. The findings therefore provide a foundation for further investigation into how institutional values and leadership behaviours interact to influence employee outcomes. A more

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comprehensive understanding of this relationship, particularly through longitudinal and comparative research that would clarify the circumstances under which servant leadership strengthens the influence of organisational culture and contributes to improved employee performance in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and similar institutional settings.

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