DOES SERVANT LEADERSHIP AFFECT PUBLIC EMPLOYEES’ INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Objective: In the context of China’s deepening reform era, innovation is the first driving force leading development. Involving a sample of 576 public employees from government agencies in Yunnan, China, the present study investigates the impact of servant leadership on public employees’ innovative behavior, as well as the underlying mechanisms of this relationship.

Theoretical Framework: According to social identity theory, organizational identity signifies the extent to which individuals acknowledge and identify with their organization. Previous research has shown that leadership styles indirectly affect employee behaviors (e.g., innovative behaviors) through employees’ cognition and emotion [16-18], therefore, organizational identity may be a potential mediating variable in the correlation between servant leadership and the innovative behavior exhibited by employees.

Method: Data was collected between September 2023 and January 2024 among public sector employees in Kunming, located in the Yunnan province. The data was collected in two phases at different time points. First, we distributed questionnaires among part-time MPA students in a university in Yunnan province in the first stage. Then, we continued to distribute questionnaires among full-time public employees at various public sectors in Kunming city.

Results and Discussion: The results revealed a positive impact of servant leadership on the innovative behavior of Chinese public employees. Additionally, organizational identity partially mediated the association between servant leadership and the innovative behavior of Chinese public employees. These findings may provide some suggestions for the public organizations in China.

Research Implications: The present study also has several practical implications for policy-makers within the public sector. First, public organizations ought to attach importance to the servant leadership because it can effectively promote employees’ innovative behavior. Specifically, public organizations can regard the traits of servant leadership as a criterion for selecting leaders within the public sector. By doing so, public organizations can encourage servant leadership style by selecting and promoting those employees with awareness and traits of serving others.

Originality/Value: After deleting invalid questionnaires, 576 completed questionnaires were obtained finally. Of all the participants, 24% (n = 138) was male and 76% (n = 438) was female. 77.6% of the participants were under the age of 26 years (n = 447). 61.8% (n = 356) have worked less five years in the public sector.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Innovative Behavior, Organizational Identity, Public Employee.

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Does Servant Leadership Affect Public Employees’ Innovative Behavior? The Mediating Role of Organizational Identity

A LIDERANÇA DE FUNCIONÁRIOS AFETA O COMPORTAMENTO INOVADOR DOS FUNCIONÁRIOS PÚBLICOS? O PAPEL MEDIADOR DA IDENTIDADE ORGANIZACIONAL

RESUMO

Objetivo: No contexto da era de reforma em curso na China, a inovação é a primeira força motriz do desenvolvimento. Envolvendo uma amostra de 576 funcionários públicos de agências governamentais em Yunnan, na China, o presente estudo investiga o impacto da liderança dos servidores no comportamento inovador dos funcionários públicos, bem como os mecanismos subjacentes a essa relação.

Estrutura Teórica: De acordo com a teoria da identidade social, identidade organizacional significa a extensão em que os indivíduos reconhecem e se identificam com sua organização. Estudos anteriores demonstraram que os estilos de liderança afetam indiretamente os comportamentos dos trabalhadores (por exemplo, comportamentos inovadores) através da cognição e emoção dos trabalhadores [16-18], pelo que a identidade organizacional pode ser uma variável mediadora potencial na correlação entre a liderança dos trabalhadores e o comportamento inovador exibido pelos trabalhadores.

Método: Os dados foram coletados entre setembro de 2023 e janeiro de 2024 entre os funcionários do setor público em Kunming, localizado na província de Yunnan. Os dados foram coletados em duas fases em diferentes momentos. Primeiro, distribuímos questionários entre estudantes de MPA em meio período de uma universidade na província de Yunnan na primeira etapa. Em seguida, continuamos a distribuir questionários entre funcionários públicos em tempo integral de vários setores públicos da cidade de Kunming.

Resultados e Discussão: Os resultados revelaram um impacto positivo da liderança dos servidores no comportamento inovador dos funcionários públicos chineses. Além disso, a identidade organizacional mediou parcialmente a associação entre a liderança dos servidores e o comportamento inovador dos funcionários públicos chineses. Esses resultados podem fornecer algumas sugestões para organizações públicas na China.

Implicações da pesquisa: O presente estudo também tem várias implicações práticas para os formuladores de políticas no setor público. Em primeiro lugar, as organizações públicas devem atribuir importância à liderança dos trabalhadores, porque pode promover eficazmente o comportamento inovador dos trabalhadores. Especificamente, as organizações públicas podem considerar as características da liderança dos servidores como um critério para a seleção de líderes dentro do setor público. Ao fazer isso, as organizações públicas podem incentivar o estilo de liderança dos servidores, selecionando e promovendo os funcionários com consciência e características de servir os outros.

Originalidade/Valor: Após a exclusão de questionários inválidos, 576 questionários preenchidos foram obtidos finalmente. De todos os participantes, 24% (n = 138) eram do sexo masculino e 76% (n = 438) do sexo feminino. 77.6% dos participantes tinham menos de 26 anos (n = 447). 61.8% (n = 356) trabalharam menos cinco anos no setor público.

Palavras-chave: Liderança Servidora, Comportamento Inovador, Identidade Organizacional, Funcionário Público.

¿AFECTA EL LIDERAZGO DE LOS EMPLEADOS PÚBLICOS AL COMPORTAMIENTO INNOVADOR? EL PAPEL MEDIADOR DE LA IDENTIDAD ORGANIZACIONAL

RESUMEN

Objetivo: En el contexto de la profundización de la era de las reformas en China, la innovación es la primera fuerza impulsora del desarrollo. En el presente estudio, que involucra a una muestra de 576 empleados públicos de agencias gubernamentales en Yunnan, China, se investiga el impacto del liderazgo de los servidores en el comportamiento innovador de los empleados públicos, así como los mecanismos subyacentes de esta relación.

Marco teórico: De acuerdo con la teoría de la identidad social, la identidad organizacional significa el grado en que los individuos reconocen e identifican con su organización. Investigaciones anteriores han demostrado que los estilos de liderazgo afectan indirectamente los comportamientos de los empleados (por ejemplo, comportamientos innovadores) a través de la cognición y la emoción de los empleados [16-18], por lo tanto, la identidad
organizacional puede ser una variable mediadora potencial en la correlación entre el liderazgo del sirviente y el comportamiento innovador exhibido por los empleados.

Método: Se recogieron datos entre septiembre de 2023 y enero de 2024 entre los empleados del sector público de Kunming, en la provincia de Yunnan. Los datos se recopilaron en dos fases en diferentes momentos. En primer lugar, distribuimos cuestionarios entre los estudiantes de tiempo parcial de MPA en una universidad en la provincia de Yunnan en la primera etapa. Luego, seguimos distribuyendo cuestionarios entre los empleados públicos a tiempo completo en varios sectores públicos de la ciudad de Kunming.

Resultados y discusión: Los resultados revelaron un impacto positivo del liderazgo de los servidores en el comportamiento innovador de los empleados públicos chinos. Además, la identidad organizacional medió parcialmente la asociación entre el liderazgo de los servidores y el comportamiento innovador de los empleados públicos chinos. Estos hallazgos pueden proporcionar algunas sugerencias para las organizaciones públicas en China.

Implicaciones de la investigación: El presente estudio también tiene varias implicaciones prácticas para los responsables de la formulación de políticas en el sector público. En primer lugar, las organizaciones públicas deberían otorgar importancia al liderazgo de los funcionarios porque puede promover efectivamente el comportamiento innovador de los empleados. Específicamente, las organizaciones públicas pueden considerar los rasgos del liderazgo servil como un criterio para seleccionar líderes dentro del sector público. Al hacerlo, las organizaciones públicas pueden alentar el estilo de liderazgo de los servidores seleccionando y promoviendo a aquellos empleados con conciencia y rasgos de servir a los demás.

Originalidad/Valor: Después de eliminar los cuestionarios no válidos, finalmente se obtuvieron 576 cuestionarios completados. De todos los participantes, el 24% (n = 138) eran hombres y el 76% (n = 438) mujeres. El 77,6% de los participantes eran menores de 26 años (n = 447). El 61,8% (n = 356) han trabajado menos de cinco años en el sector público.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo del Servidor, Comportamiento Innovador, Identidad Organizacional, Empleado Público.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Chinese government first proposed the idea of “innovation, coordination, green development, opening up and sharing”, and put innovation in the top position. It can be seen that innovation has become one of the important work goals of the Chinese government. Innovation is not only a significant catalyst for the advancement of businesses, but also a key way for government organizations to improve their public service capabilities and improve their service efficiency. In this context, how to improve the service performance in the public sector has gradually received more attention because public employees’ innovative behavior is one of the important ways to provide excellent service performance. Many studies have explored the factors that contribute to improving service performance, including employees themselves, leaders, and organizational management system [1]. Compared with standardized services, in the
context of China’s “innovation-driven development” era, innovation in the public sector has become more and more urgent, directly affecting people’s basic needs and satisfaction.

Many scholars have paid attention to the employees’ innovative behavior in recent years. Many research has shown that employees’ innovative behavior are predicted by various factors, including individual traits, leadership style, organizational culture, and organizational atmosphere [2-5]. Among the above factors, leadership style is a key indicator of public employees’ propensity for innovation. Compared with other leadership styles, the effect of servant leadership on fostering employees’ innovation has been paid more and more attention by scholars. Greenleaf first put forward the definition of servant leadership that emphasizes the priority of subordinates rather than leaders [6]. Servant leadership is considered to be able to effectively promote employees’ innovative behavior because it cares about employees’ interests and career development, and can bring sustainable performance to the organization [7,8]. However, previous studies mainly focused on the impact of servant leadership on encouraging employees’ innovation in the business settings, with few studies on the association between servant leadership and public sector innovation. Some scholars indicated that “in an organizational context, innovation is often associated with private organizations, which are more flexible and adaptable than government and nonprofit organizations. However, it's undeniable that public and non-profit organizations also require innovation, despite potential skepticism from scholars. To enhance organizational performance and fulfill social objectives, these entities must actively seek novel approaches to innovation” [9]

According to the theories of social identity, social exchange, and social information processing, some empirical studies have suggested that leadership identity [10], satisfaction with the psychological contract [11], and psychological safety [12,13] serve as intermediary factors linking servant leadership to the innovative behavior among employees. Although previous studies have confirmed the significant impact of organizational identity on employees’ innovative behaviors [14,15], limited scholarly attention has been given to exploring the mediating role of organizational identity in the linkage between leadership style and employees’ innovative behavior. According to social identity theory, organizational identity signifies the extent to which individuals acknowledge and identify with their organization. Previous research has shown that leadership styles indirectly affect employee behaviors (e.g., innovative behaviors) through employees’ cognition and emotion [16-18], therefore, organizational identity may be a potential mediating variable in the correlation between servant leadership and the innovative behavior exhibited by employees.
Based on the above literature review, servant leadership can effectively stimulate employees’ identification with organizational values and missions, which can further stimulate employees’ identification and work engagement by integrating employees’ work-related behaviors with their organization’s goals. Furthermore, previous research has also confirmed that servant leadership is also conducive to boosting employees’ enthusiasm for work and catalyzing their propensity for innovation. Therefore, based on self-determination theory and social identity theory, we explored whether servant leadership is shown to foster innovative behavior among public employees, with a focus on exploring the mediating role of organizational identity in these dynamics (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Hypothesized research model*

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR

Servant leadership was first proposed by [6], who held that leaders should take the initiative to serve others, meet the needs of followers, and gain the trust of followers, thus forming leadership. As a leadership approach that goes beyond personal agendas, servant leaders should communicate with subordinates about their work in a timely manner, attach importance to subordinates’ career development, help subordinates solve work problems, adhere to principles, give reasonable authorization, and put employees’ interests above personal interests [7]. Servant leaders gives employees the right to make independent decisions and is tolerant of employees’ mistakes [19], which provides an innovative working environment and
psychological safety for employees. Servant leadership prioritizes employee development, nurturing their professional skills, offering ample resources and support, and consistently fostering the enhancement of their capabilities and resources [7]. In other words, the primary goal of servant leadership is to promote employee development through service. This leadership style governs its own behavior to meet the “employees’ needs” by realizing the intrinsic value of each employee [6].

Deci and Ryan (2000) [20] first proposed self-determination theory (SDT). According to this theory, situations that satisfy the three basic needs of autonomy, competence and relationship can enhance the internal motivation of individuals, and encourage individuals to maintain a positive state, thus generating positive behaviors, such as innovative behavior. Much empirical research has confirmed the positive effect of servant leadership on employees’ innovative behavior [21]. Neubert et al. (2008) [22] explored for the first time how servant leadership promote the cultivation of innovative behavior among employees. Servant leaders take it as their responsibility to develop the potential of their subordinates to the greatest extent, and achieve the goal of developing employees’ ability by caring, empowering and serving employees. Servant leaders will take the initiative to provide subordinates with necessary guidance and training, pay attention to the promotion and development of subordinates’ potential related to work innovation, and thus promote higher job performance and more innovative behaviors among employees [21]. More recently, a large number of empirical studies offer additional confirmation of the beneficial influence of servant leadership on fostering innovative behavior among employees [4,5,8,23,24]. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Servant leadership is positively associated with public employees’ innovative behavior.

2.2 THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

According to social identity theory, organizational identity means that employees maintain and innovate their own cultural attributes in their work, thus fostering a sense of belonging and intrinsic commitment to the organization [25]. Later, Miller et al. (2000) [26] regarded organizational identity as a result and process of self-definition by organization members, which not only reflects employees’ feelings of attachment and loyalty to the
organization but also indicates the extent to which they resonate with the organization’s mission, vision, values, and objectives.

Individuals who strongly identify with the organization will internalize the organization’s mission into their own career development and are willing to put the organization’s interests above their own interests \(^\text{27}\), which will strengthen the individuals’ work motivation and make them act in favor of the organization. According to the social recognition theory, the higher the employees’ belonging to the team, the more innovative behaviors they will make to achieve the team’s goals \(^\text{28}\). In other words, when employees have higher level of organizational identification, their affinity towards the organization will be heightened, which then will make them exhibit more innovative behaviors. Numerous prior research has demonstrated the profound influence of organizational identity on employees’ propensity for innovation. \(^\text{14,15}\). Organizational identity fosters a sense of belonging among employees, motivating them to actively enhance their work performance and contribute innovative ideas and suggestions \(^\text{29,30}\). More importantly, organizational identity is a process of organizational socialization, which will strengthen employees’ intrinsic work motivation and sense of mission, stimulate employees’ positive work behaviors and attitudes for organizational development, and thus form the motivational basis for innovative behaviors \(^\text{31}\). It can be seen that organizational identity is the key emotional bond between employees and the organization, and then can make employees improve their work performance, puts forward novel ideas, and generates innovative behaviors. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Organizational identity is positively related to public employees’ innovative behavior.

According to social identity theory, individuals form their self-concept and self-definition by inferring how others in an organization treat them \(^\text{32}\). The generation and change of organizational identity are affected by multiple factors, among which leadership style is the key element. Prior research has confirmed that leadership style has a significant effect on organizational identification \(^\text{33,34}\). To a large extent, leaders generally represent the values and norms of the organization, therefore, the way leaders treat employees will directly shape the self-concept of employees in the organization \(^\text{35}\), which in turn affects employees’ organizational identity.

Servant leaders empower subordinates, focus on meeting their needs, provide them with opportunities for personal career development, and recognize their contributions \(^\text{8,19}\). For example, servant leaders will give their subordinates a voice in decision making, which makes
employees feel more respected and recognized. In accordance with the principles of social exchange theory, servant leadership is conducive to the formation of high-quality social exchange relations between leaders and employees, and then promote the emergence of innovative behaviors among employees. Such behaviors of servant leaders may convince employees that they are valuable members of the organization, which in turn may enhance their emotional self-worth and thus increase organizational identification. In addition, servant leadership can create a safe work environment for employees, which may make an organization a more attractive place to work. In other words, servant leadership may enhance the perceived attractiveness of an organization, thereby improving employees’ organizational identity [33,34,36,37].

Based on the above discussions, servant leadership can promote employees’ organizational identity by meeting employees’ spiritual needs and career development. According to hypothesis 1, we also expect that servant leadership will play a key role in encouraging and promoting the innovative behavior among employees. On the other hand, numerous prior studies have established the favorable impact of organizational identity on fostering employees’ innovative behavior. As a result, we expect that organizational identity may be a potential mediator in linking servant leadership with the innovative behavior of public employees. Therefore, we put forward the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3:** Servant leadership is positively related to public employees’ organizational identity.

**Hypothesis 4:** Organizational identity mediates the positive association between servant leadership and public employees’ innovative behavior.

## 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 SAMPLES AND PROCEDURE

Data was collected between September 2023 and January 2024 among public sector employees in Kunming, located in the Yunnan province. The data was collected in two phases at different time points. First, we distributed questionnaires among part-time MPA students in a university in Yunnan province in the first stage. Then, we continued to distribute questionnaires among full-time public employees at various public sectors in Kunming city. After deleting invalid questionnaires, 576 completed questionnaires were obtained finally. Of
all the participants, 24% (n = 138) was male and 76% (n = 438) was female. 77.6% of the participants were under the age of 26 years (n = 447). 61.8% (n = 356) have worked less five years in the public sector.

3.2 MEASURES

All measures in the present study were translated into Chinese from classic English scales. All items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We assessed servant leadership using a 7-item scale developed by Liden et al. (2014) [21]. Sample item included “I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem.” Cronbach’s alpha coefficient in the present study was 0.836. We assessed organizational identity using a 5-item scale developed by Smidts et al. (2001) [38]. Sample item was “I am sufficiently acknowledged in my unit.” Cronbach’s alpha coefficient in the present study was 0.877. We measured innovative behavior using a 6-item scale developed by Scott et al. (1994) [39]. Sample item was “Develops adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas.” Cronbach’s alpha coefficient in the present study was 0.841.

3.3 ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27, AMOS version 24, and the PROCESS macro version 3.0. First, the Cronbach’s alpha and the correlation coefficients of all variables in the present study were calculated. Then, we utilized confirmatory factor analysis to assess the goodness of fit for the proposed four-factor model. Finally, according to the suggestion of Hayes (2014) [40], we employed the PROCESS macro to examine the mediating role of organizational identity in the relationship between servant leadership and the innovative behavior of public sector employees.

4 RESULTS

4.1 CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

To test the goodness fit of our hypothesized model, the model fit was examined with AMOS 24. Table 1 results indicated that the proposed three-factor model demonstrated a more
satisfactory fit ($\chi^2 (125) = 383.747$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.955, TLI = 0.945, and RMSEA = 0.060) with the data than other alternative models. For example, the single-factor model yielded less satisfactory fit indices ($\chi^2 (135) = 654.678$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.909, TLI = 0.897, and RMSEA = 0.082).

Table 1

Comparison of measurement models for variables studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>$\Delta\chi^2$ ($\Delta df$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized three-factor model:</td>
<td>383.747</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>0.955</td>
<td>0.945</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-factor model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combining SL with IB</td>
<td>640.233</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>0.899</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>256.486(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combining SL with OI</td>
<td>630.170</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0.913</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>246.423(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combining OI with IB</td>
<td>615.530</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0.916</td>
<td>0.904</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>231.783(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-factor model (combining all constructs)</td>
<td>654.678</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>0.909</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>270.931(10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 576. TLI=Tucker-Lewis index; CFI=comparative fit index; RMSEA=root mean square error of approximation. Note: SL = servant leadership, OI = organizational identity, IB = innovative behavior.

4.2 DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS AND CORRELATIONS

As shown in Table 2, servant leadership exhibited a positive association with both organizational identity ($r = 0.781$, $p < 0.01$) and innovative behavior ($r = 0.782$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, organizational identity demonstrated a significant correlation with innovative behavior ($r = 0.827$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, all Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the study scales exceeded 0.8, indicating high reliability in the current investigation.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>0.129**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tenure</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.291**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Servant leadership</td>
<td>0.123**</td>
<td>0.443**</td>
<td>0.441**</td>
<td>0.836</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Organizational identity</td>
<td>0.105*</td>
<td>0.457**</td>
<td>0.421**</td>
<td>0.781**</td>
<td>0.877</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Innovative behavior</td>
<td>0.130**</td>
<td>0.453**</td>
<td>0.493**</td>
<td>0.782**</td>
<td>0.827**</td>
<td>0.841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1.811</td>
<td>1.4559</td>
<td>1.5564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.427</td>
<td>0.702</td>
<td>0.674</td>
<td>0.64474</td>
<td>0.65536</td>
<td>0.62326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 576. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. SD = standard deviation. Figures in the bracket represent Cronbach's Alpha Values.
4.3 HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Table 3 indicates a significant and positive relationship between servant leadership and innovative behavior among public employees (B = 0.634, p < 0.001), which supported Hypothesis 1. Servant leadership had a significant and positive impact on public employees’ organizational identity (B = 0.701, p < 0.001), supporting Hypothesis 2. Moreover, organizational identity significantly and positively affected public employees’ innovative behaviors (B = 0.490, p < 0.001). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Moreover, upon including organizational identity in the model, the effect of servant leadership on public employees' innovative behavior decreased, yet remained statistically significant (B = 0.291, p < 0.001). Thus, organizational identity was found to mediate the relationship between servant leadership and public employees' innovative behavior.

Additionally, we utilized bootstrapping to examine the indirect effects. As shown in Table 3, servant leadership exhibited a significant indirect effect on public employees' innovative behavior through organizational identity (indirect effect = 0.343, CI = 0.271, 0.419). Therefore, organizational identity was found to serve as a partial mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and public employees’ innovative behavior, which further supported Hypothesis 3.

Table 3
Results of mediating hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Organizational identity B (SE)</th>
<th>Innovative behavior B (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.0806 (0.082)</td>
<td>-0.012 (0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.003 (0.039)</td>
<td>0.035 (0.037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.120 (0.027) ***</td>
<td>0.097 (0.025) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work tenure</td>
<td>0.077 (0.028) **</td>
<td>0.158 (0.026) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant leadership</td>
<td>0.701 (0.031) ***</td>
<td>0.634 (0.029) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.490 (0.033) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect [95% CI]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.634 [0.577, 0.690]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect [95% CI]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.291 [0.224, 0.357]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect [95% CI]</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.343 [0.271, 0.419]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>△R²</td>
<td>0.631***</td>
<td>0.649***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 576. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001
5 DISCUSSION

Based on self-determination theory and social identity, this study investigated how servant leadership influences the innovative behavior of Chinese public employees, while also exploring the mediating role of organizational identity in this relationship. First, our findings indicated a significant and positive relationship between servant leadership and the innovative behaviors of public employees, aligning with prior research [4,5,8,24]. In other words, when leaders in the public sector have the desire to provide more service for their subordinates, employees will show more innovative behaviors. The findings in our study enriched the literature on public employees’ innovative behavior. Previous research has mostly focused on the employees’ innovative behavior in the business settings, but only few studies has explored the innovation in the public sector. Furthermore, scholars have paid relatively little attention to the relationship between servant leadership and the innovative behavior of public employees because how to motivate the innovation in public organization is still a disputed question [40]. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by exploring the connection between servant leadership and the innovative behavior of public employees within the context of Chinese culture, which may provide a better insight into the understandings of the innovation in the public sector.

Second, our findings revealed that organizational identity partially mediated the relationship between servant leadership and the innovative behaviors of public employees. In line with previous studies [34,36], organizational identity is an important mediating variable in the association between servant leadership and employees’ work-related behaviors (e.g., innovative behavior). More specifically, servant leader in the public sector can promote their subordinates’ organizational identity because they provide more care and support for their subordinates in terms of shared decision-making, job autonomy, and job empowerment. These support from leaders will further stimulate public employees’ innovative behavior. Prior research has validated organizational identity's role as a mediator in the relationship between leadership styles and employees' innovative behavior, [18], thus, our finding further enriched the literature on the mediating mechanisms in the above relationship in the public sector.
5.1 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study also has several practical implications for policy-makers within the public sector. First, public organizations ought to attach importance to the servant leadership because it can effectively promote employees’ innovative behavior. Specifically, public organizations can regard the traits of servant leadership as a criterion for selecting leaders within the public sector. By doing so, public organizations can encourage servant leadership style by selecting and promoting those employees with awareness and traits of serving others. On the other hand, public organizations should improve leaders’ serving awareness and service abilities by training, which can promote leaders to pay more attention to their subordinates’ career development, meet their psychological demands, and subsequently improve the organizational belonging.

Second, our study may help policy-makers establish more effective innovation incentive system by improving public employees’ organizational identity. To stimulate public employees’ innovative behaviors, public organizations should integrate public organizations’ values with public employees’ career development by providing more job autonomy and empowerment management. Additionally, leaders within public organizations should demonstrate increased care and support for their employees, which can improve public employees’ belonging to their organizations and then encourage their innovative behaviors.

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Of course, the present study also has some limitations. First, we used the self-reported data from public employees, which cannot avoid the common method bias. Thus, we will further test the casual relationship between servant leadership and the innovative behavior of public employees by making use of multisource data in the future research. For example, public employees’ innovative behavior should be assessed by their leaders in charge. Second, the data for this study was collected from participants located in Yunnan province, which may limit the generalizations of our findings in other regions in China. As a result, future research should pay more attention to the casual relationships among the variables in the regions by collecting data from more regions. Finally, the present study only examined the intermediary function of organizational identity in linking servant leadership to the innovative behavior of public employees. However, public employees’ innovative behaviors may be affected by many other
variables in Chinese cultural context, including power distance, collectivisms, and Confucian values. Therefore, future research should further explore the potential intermediate variables in the relationship linking servant leadership with the innovative behavior of public employees from Chinese cultural perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, and writing—original draft preparation QW; writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, and Project administration, MSK. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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