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Servant leadership and healthy work relationships in university context: a moderated mediation analysis of psychological safety and socially responsible leadership

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ABSTRACT

Organizations face challenges in fostering healthy work relationships among staff, which are crucial for organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Despite the recognized importance of servant leadership and psychological safety in promoting healthy work environments, there is limited understanding of how these factors interact with socially responsible leadership to influence work relationships within the setting of Ugandan public universities. Therefore, our study investigates the relationship between servant leadership, healthy work relationships, psychological safety, and socially responsible leadership within public universities in Uganda. Drawing on a sample of 241 staff, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted to find out the indirect effect of servant leadership on healthy work relationships through psychological safety, moderated by socially responsible leadership. The results indicate a significant positive association between servant leadership and healthy work relationships. Furthermore, psychological safety was found to mediate this relationship, suggesting workers who believe there is more servant leadership experience greater psychological safety, leading to healthier work relationships. Additionally, socially responsible leadership was found to moderate the way servant leadership indirectly affects healthy work relationships via psychological safety. These findings underscore the prominence of fostering servant leadership qualities and promoting a supportive organizational climate characterized by psychological safety and ethical leadership practices.

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Introduction

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of work relationships and fostering a healthy work environment. Within the realm of academia, particularly in public universities, effective leadership practices are essential for nurturing an atmosphere conducive to collaboration, innovation, and employee well-being (Kyambade et al., 2024b). One leadership approach that has garnered increasing attention for its potential to cultivate positive work relationships and organizational outcomes is servant leadership. Based on the idea of serving others and putting followers' needs first, servant leadership has emerged as a compelling model for guiding leadership behavior in diverse settings (Greenleaf, 1970). This leadership approach emphasizes empathy, empowerment, and ethical decision-making, aiming to enhance employee satisfaction, performance, and engagement (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Within the context of public universities, where the pursuit of academic excellence and the advancement of knowledge are paramount, servant leadership may offer a promising framework for promoting healthy work relationships among faculty, staff, and administrators. Healthy work relationships, characterized by trust,

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mutual respect, and effective communication, are essential for fostering a supportive work environment and promoting organizational success (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Research suggests that positive work relationships are associated with higher levels of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and employee well-being (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Moreover, healthy work relationships facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation, contributing to the attainment of organizational goals (Dyne, 2008).

In the context of public universities, where diverse stakeholders collaborate to fulfill the organization's mission of teaching, and research, the quality of work relationships among faculty staff and administrators is critical for achieving academic excellence and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which servant leadership impacts healthy work relationships in public universities is of paramount importance for educational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to promote the effectiveness of the organizational and the well-being of employees (Kyambade et al., 2024b). The association of servant leadership and healthy work relationships may be contingent upon contextual factors and leadership practices that influence the work environment. One such factor that has received extensive attention in organizational research is psychological safety. Psychological safety denotes the perception that one can freely express ideas, voice concerns, and take risks without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Research has shown that psychological safety fosters open communication, constructive feedback, and innovation, thereby improving organizational performance and quality of work relationships (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009; Edmondson, 1999; Kyambade et al., 2024c). Furthermore, the success of servant leadership in stimulating healthy work relationships may be influenced by the degree to which leaders demonstrate socially responsible leadership behaviors. Socially responsible leadership entails a commitment to ethical decision-making, social justice, and community engagement, aligning with servant leadership values (Mayer et al., 2009). Leaders who prioritize the welfare of followers and the community are likely to foster an organizational culture characterized by trust, fairness, and compassion, thereby enhancing work relationships and well-being of employees (Liden et al., 2008; Mayer et al., 2009).

While earlier studies have examined the individual associations among these constructs, there is a lack of comprehensive research that investigates how they collectively influence work dynamics in higher education settings. Specifically, existing literature tends to focus on isolated relationships, such as the direct effects of servant leadership on employee performance or the mediation role of psychological safety in leadership effectiveness (Kyambade et al., 2024f). However, there's a paucity of studies that examine the combined effect of servant leadership, psychological safety, and socially responsible leadership on the development of healthy work relationships in public universities. Additionally, most existing research on servant leadership and healthy work relationships has been conducted in corporate or non-profit settings, with limited attention given to the unique organizational dynamics and challenges faced by public universities. Our study addresses this gap by investigating the role of socially responsible leadership as a moderator, which enhances the positive effects of servant leadership on healthy work relationships. Additionally, we explore how psychological safety serves as a mediator that explains the mechanism through which servant leadership fosters these relationships. Together, socially responsible leadership strengthens the environment of trust and ethical conduct, while psychological safety facilitates open communication and interpersonal risk-taking, contributing to the development of healthy work relationships in public universities. This integrative approach provides valuable insights that can inform leadership strategies aimed at improving employee well-being and fostering positive organizational cultures in higher education institutions. Therefore, there is a need for studies that specifically examine these relationships within the context of higher education institutions, taking into account the diverse stakeholders, institutional missions, and cultural factors inherent in academic settings. By addressing these research gaps, our study provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which servant leadership, psychological safety and socially responsible leadership contribute to the development of healthy work relationships in public universities. This knowledge can inform leadership development programs, organizational policies, and strategic initiatives aimed at fostering a healthy work environment and enhancing the well-being of employees in higher education settings.

Our study makes both theoretical and practical contributions, particularly to Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges between parties that foster trust,

commitment, and mutual benefit. By examining the interplay of servant leadership, psychological safety, and socially responsible leadership, this research extends SET by highlighting how these leadership practices cultivate healthy work relationships through the creation of a trust-based, supportive environment. Servant leadership, with its focus on empathy and empowerment, reinforces positive exchanges between leaders and employees, promoting open communication and psychological safety, which in turn enhances healthy work relationships (Edmondson, 1999; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Furthermore, the study introduces socially responsible leadership as a contextual factor that strengthens this exchange process, aligning leadership actions with ethical standards and organizational values (Mayer et al., 2009). This theoretical integration deepens our understanding of the role of leadership in fostering reciprocal, trust-driven relationships in academic settings. Practically, this research addresses the gap in the existing literature by exploring these dynamics specifically in public universities, an area that has been underexplored in favor of corporate and non-profit settings. The findings will offer actionable insights for university leaders, policymakers, and administrators on how to implement leadership strategies that promote employee well-being, collaboration, and organizational effectiveness (Kyambade et al., 2024b). By examining the combined roles of psychological safety and socially responsible leadership in moderating the impact of servant leadership on healthy work relationships, this study fills a critical gap and provides a more comprehensive framework for fostering a supportive and collaborative work environment in higher education (Kyambade et al., 2024c).

Given the complexity of leadership dynamics in public universities and the multifaceted nature of healthy work relationships, there's a need for further research to explore the mechanisms underlying the relationship of servant leadership and healthy work relationships, particularly in the context of socially responsible leadership and psychological safety. Therefore, our study aims to investigate the moderated mediation effect of psychological safety and socially responsible leadership on the association of servant leadership and healthy work relationships in public universities. By elucidating the underlying processes through which servant leadership influences healthy work relationships, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for educational leaders and policy makers seeking to promote organizational effectiveness and employee well-being in higher education settings.

Literature review

Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) postulates that individuals engage in social interactions based on the principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit (Cook et al., 2013). According to this theory, employees develop relationships with their leaders and colleagues based on the perceived balance between costs and rewards in the exchange process. In the context of leadership, employees are likely to engage in positive work relationships and exhibit organizational citizenship behaviors when they perceive that their leaders provide valuable resources, support, and opportunities for growth in return for their contributions. In the context of healthy work relationships, SET suggests that individuals are motivated to invest time and effort in building positive relationships with their colleagues and supervisors when they perceive that their contributions are valued and reciprocated (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Employees who receive respect, support, and acknowledgment from their leaders and peers are likely to feel a sense of belonging and satisfaction at work, leading to increased healthy work relationships (Lam & Lau, 2012). When applied to the association between leadership, psychological safety, and healthy work relationships, SET suggests that leaders who create a work environment that is psychologically safe, where employees voice concerns, feel free to express ideas, and take interpersonal risks with no fear of negative consequences, are more likely to foster respect, trust, and cooperation among team members. Consequently, it leads to the improvement of healthy work relationships characterized by open communication, collaboration, and mutual support. Furthermore, leaders who demonstrate supportive behaviors, such as empathy, transparency, and active listening, are perceived as more trustworthy and reliable partners in the social exchange process. Employees are more willing to invest their effort and time into building positive relationships with leaders who prioritize their well-being and create a conducive work environment. Moreover, SET acknowledges the role of organizational norms and values in shaping social

exchange processes. Organizations that promote a culture of fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness create an environment conducive to building and maintaining healthy work relationships among employees.

In the context of the current study, SET serves as a useful framework for understanding the relationships between servant leadership, psychological safety, socially responsible leadership, and healthy work relationships within public universities. Servant leadership is rooted in the leader's desire to serve the needs of followers first, prioritizing their well-being, growth, and empowerment (Greenleaf, 1970). From the perspective of SET, this leadership style fosters reciprocal trust and loyalty because leaders demonstrate genuine concern for employees. When leaders focus on meeting the needs of their followers, employees perceive these actions as investments in their personal and professional development. This promotes a sense of obligation to reciprocate by engaging positively in their work and building healthy work relationships, characterized by trust, respect, and open communication (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Psychological safety, defined as the shared belief that individuals can express their ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999), plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between servant leadership and healthy work relationships. When leaders create an environment where employees feel safe to voice their opinions and take risks, employees are more likely to engage in constructive exchanges and collaborate effectively with their peers. In this context, SET applies as psychological safety facilitates the reciprocal exchange of trust, where leaders provide emotional and professional support, and employees reciprocate by actively contributing to the organization's goals and fostering positive work relationships (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009). Socially responsible leadership, characterized by ethical decision-making, fairness, and a commitment to societal and community welfare (Mayer et al., 2009), moderates the relationship between servant leadership and healthy work relationships. SET suggests that when leaders act ethically and align their leadership behaviors with social responsibility, they further reinforce the norms of reciprocity. Employees are likely to perceive these actions as part of the leader's moral obligation to promote fairness and justice. In turn, employees are more inclined to respond positively by strengthening their relationships with colleagues and contributing to a collaborative, respectful work environment (Liden et al., 2008). Socially responsible leadership, therefore, strengthens the social exchange process, as it encourages a culture of fairness and ethical reciprocity that enhances psychological safety and work relationships. Healthy work relationships, defined by trust, mutual respect, and effective communication, are a natural outcome of positive reciprocal exchanges between leaders and employees, as outlined in SET. Servant leadership promotes these exchanges by focusing on follower needs, psychological safety ensures that these exchanges occur in a supportive environment, and socially responsible leadership reinforces the ethical foundation of these relationships. The result is a positive organizational climate where employees are motivated to build and maintain healthy relationships that support the organization's success (Edmondson, 1999; Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

In this study, servant leadership acts as the initiator of the social exchange process, fostering positive exchanges between leaders and employees. Psychological safety mediates this relationship by ensuring that these exchanges occur in a safe, trust-based environment, while socially responsible leadership moderates the relationship by reinforcing the ethical and moral foundations of these exchanges. Together, these factors enhance healthy work relationships, fulfilling the principles of SET, where reciprocal trust, commitment, and collaboration lead to positive organizational outcomes.

Servant leadership and healthy work Relationships

The idea of 'serving others' is the foundation of servant leadership. According to Canavesi and Minelli (2022), servant leadership is a type of moral leadership in which leaders put followers' needs over their own as well as those of their customers, employees, and other stakeholders ahead of their own. A servant leader prioritizes the needs and goals of his subordinates and is concerned with taking care of everyone, including society at large. The degree to which a servant leader intentionally prioritizes the interests and well-being of others, the maintenance of positive working relationships with coworkers, organizational care, and the greater good for the community is reflected in this description (Brohi et al., 2021). In servant leadership, the primary goal is to serve others. As a result, followers receive guidance for their personal development and growth, which positively affects their conduct, morals, and output.

Previous studies on servant leadership style and healthy work relationships have found inconsistent results for example, Kauppila et al. in their study of serving to help and helping to serve: found that, Understanding how individuals in work support roles like human resources, finance, accounting, marketing, research and development, or communications can positively impact others outside of their supervisory relationships is one area in which servant leadership is especially helpful. According to their study, servant leadership has a positive impact on work attitudes and individual and organizational outcomes like job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which in turn leads to a variety of positive work outcomes. A strong positive correlation has been found between organizational citizenship behaviors, servant leadership; trust in the leader, and quality relationships with the leader, according to Seto and Sarros' (2016) study on the influence of servant leadership on trust and quality relationships in organizational settings. Additionally, Jit et al. found that the servant leadership style fosters a sense of cohesion, collaboration, and long-lasting relationships among followers in addition to creating a mentally and emotionally sound workforce through its special qualities of empathy, compassion, and altruistic calling and healing. Accordingly, Maula-Bakhsh and Raziq conducted a research on the relationship between servant leadership and subjective well-being from the perspective of manufacturing and services-based small and medium enterprises in Pakistan, their findings indicate a positive significant relationship among characteristics of servant leadership (emotional healing, empowerment and conceptualization) and the affective dimension of subjective wellbeing. Ahmad et al. documented that the servant leadership style supports eliminating workplace bullying, both indirectly and directly, in the presence of employee resilience which helps in the reduction of employee turnover and results in a healthy work relationship among the different employees. A study by Ghayas et al. revealed that the relationship between the aspects of servant leadership and organizational commitment is significantly impacted indirectly by a leader's level of trust.

H₁: Servant Leadership style has a positive association with Healthy Work Relationships

Servant leadership and psychological safety

Research shows that there is a scarcity of studies associating servant leadership and psychological safety, available studies like Kyambade et al. (2023b) attempted already to demonstrate the association of each of these variables with socially responsible leadership. The results in the findings indicated that psychological safety and servant leadership have an effect on socially responsible leadership. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2021) used regression to assess the direct effects on 252 full-time employees in the United Kingdom and confirmatory factor analyses to test the validity of the measurement model in their investigation of the relationship between servant leadership, psychological safety, and employee well-being and creativity under the theory of conservation of resources. The results of the study showed a strong correlation between psychological safety and servant leadership. When leaders in the workplace demonstrate empathy, support, and growth for their staff members, they give them resources and help to create a psychologically safe environment for them (Iqbal et al., 2020). These beneficial outcomes are attained by servant leaders through confidence-building and nurturing, which encourages creativity, helpful behaviors, and followers' wellbeing (Lemoine et al., 2019). All things considered, these results lend credence to the theory that servant leadership fosters positive organizational behaviors, which in turn raises followers' well-being and reduces their desire to quit the company (Shah et al., 2020). Therefore, the emphasis placed by servant leadership on encouraging healthy behaviors in followers has a favorable effect on the followers' results (Arain, 2017). Based on this idea, it is suggested that elements of servant leadership (such as psychological resources) enhance employees' positive organizational behaviors. According to Brohi et al. (2021), there is a statistically significant positive correlation between psychological safety and servant leadership among nurses employed at the Divisional Headquarters in the Pakistani Province of Sindh. Similarly, Lv et al. (2022) bootstrap results from 323 Chinese hotel employees demonstrated that servant leadership directly fosters psychological safety and supervisor-subordinate guanxi. China makes extensive use of ganxi, which fosters the growth of relationships between leaders and followers and helps with employee retention (Miao et al., 2020). In their research, Khan et al. (2023) looked at the direct effects of servant leadership as well as the mediating role of psychological

safety in pro-social rule-breaking. They provide evidence that pro-social rule-breaking and psychological safety are positively impacted by servant leadership, and that pro-social rule-breaking is influenced by psychological safety. Additionally, a strong positive correlation between psychological safety and servant leadership is revealed by Marinan and Brown (2019). According to Sanchez (2019), servant leadership has an impact on workers' psychological safety and well-being. On the other hand, Ma et al. (2021) discovered an inverse relationship between psychological safety and servant leadership and burnout among Pakistani nurses. According to this study, nurse burnout is thus considerably decreased by servant leadership. Employees are therefore given the freedom to take chances and make mistakes as well as the tools to feel this freedom when their needs are met and their self-development is encouraged. In fact, studies by Schaubroeck et al. (2011), Erkutlu and Chafra (2019), and Chughtai (2016) have shown that servant leadership and psychological safety are positively correlated.

H₂: Servant leadership is positively associated with psychological safety.

Psychological safety and healthy work relationships

Despite the growing attention in the study of psychological safety and healthy work relationships, researchers point out that not only are empirical studies in this field scarce, but that the number of studies in this particular area is particularly low. The existing have not fully explored this relationship. For example, Appelbaum et al. (2018); Zuber and Moody (2018); Schwappach and Richard, (2018); Kyambade et al. (2024a, 2024g), stated psychological safety in terms of trust, while others have defined it as a climate that encourages speaking up, a component of the justice culture, or a sense of security surrounding innovation. Most studies have also involved a single variable, thus creating an empirical gap that this study intends to address. In their 2009 study, Carmeli and Gittel show a significant relationship between psychological safety and high-quality relationships, as well as the importance of learning from mistakes in work environments. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2020) found that in airline companies, psychological safety is positively influenced by high-quality interpersonal relationships, which also positively influences learning from mistakes and creative self-efficacy. According to Dramanu (2020), senior high school teachers' work engagement is positively correlated with their psychological flexibility and sense of psychological safety, both of which are indicators of a positive working relationship. Five characteristics are essential to a healthy work relationship, according to Ito et al. (2022) who analyzed 88 articles on psychological safety in the healthcare industry. These characteristics include strong interpersonal relationships, group-level phenomena, safe work environments for taking interpersonal risks, and a non-punitive culture. According to Ge (2020), workers who feel safe in their psychological environment are more likely to speak up at work and engage others in their work. These results add to earlier studies and clarify the relationship between an employee's psychological safety and work engagement. Thus, autonomy increases psychological safety in software teams, and psychological safety again has a favorable impact on team reflexivity and a direct impact on team performance, which supports a positive working environment in Norwegian development teams (Buvik & Tkalic, 2021). According to Durrah (2022), there is a positive correlation between the prevalence of friendships and psychological safety in the workplace. This refers to having a workplace that is psychologically safe for employees, encouraging positive relationships with coworkers, fostering friendships, treating each other with respect and care, acting with sincerity, and being able to focus more on work. Conversely, Cole et al. (2022) found that although psychological safety was inversely correlated with the quantity of ideas a team produced, it was positively correlated with the caliber (quality) of those ideas. These findings suggested that psychological safety may affect a team's ability to generate strong candidate ideas that can advance in the design process, even though it may not boost team productivity in terms of the quantity of ideas generated. The conditions for psychological safety and its effect on high-quality relationships between coaches and athletes were studied by Jowett et al., 2023. Regardless of the athletes' gender, psychological safety was found to account for the relationship between athletes' communication (i.e., their ability to be open, honest, and transparent as well as effectively manage interpersonal conflict) and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. The results showed that it is possible for athletes to feel psychologically safe and, as a result, be able to engage in risky interpersonal interactions (e.g. raise

concerns, admit mistakes) within their group context without fear of intimidation and humiliation if they are able to have open discussions and effectively navigate conflict with their coaches.

H₃: Psychological Safety positively associates with Healthy Work Relationships

Socially responsible leadership and healthy work relationship

According to research by Batool et al. (2024), responsible leadership only has a positive relationship with organizational identification and creative idea sharing when the organization has a highly supportive culture; in all other cases, the relationship is negative. According to a study by Kyambade et al. (2024a), psychological safety and work passion are positively correlated with socially responsible leadership. The results of this study highlight the importance of socially conscious leadership in fostering positive working relationships within an organization by demonstrating how employees feel psychologically safe, which increases their enthusiasm for their jobs. Furthermore, Pimenta et al. (2024) discovered that ethical HRM promotes employee engagement at work. However, organizational support and affective commitment which promote positive working relationships in an organization are the sequential mediators of this effect. According to Sahar et al. (2023), environmental corporate social responsibility serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between environmental corporate social responsibility and responsible leadership. Responsible leadership has a positive impact on environmental organizational citizenship behavior. According to Seray Özkan et al. (2023), there is a discernible correlation between customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior and responsible leadership at higher levels of relational identification. Wang et al. (2024) and Kyambade et al. (2024d) research unequivocally demonstrated that the responsible leadership of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) contributes significantly to improving an organization's performance and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) by fostering a positive organizational climate. Additionally, Luu (2021) found a link between employees' sense of purpose in their work and socially conscious HR practices. According to research by Tian and Suo (2021), ethical leadership has a positive impact on workers' environmental-friendly actions.

H₄: Socially Responsible Leadership is positively associated with Healthy Work Relationships

Servant leadership style and socially responsible leadership

According to Kyambade et al. (2024b), socially responsible leadership and servant leadership are positively and significantly correlated. According to their research, servant leadership is exhibited in an academic environment such as a workplace by encouraging a collaborative work culture, group listening, and management's dedication to advancing employees' careers to higher positions without letting anyone fall behind. Demeke et al. (2024) additional research demonstrated the beneficial correlation between servant leadership and several important individual and organizational outcomes. Relatedly, socially responsible leaders who utilize the servant leadership style are committed, empathetic, and they offer service to others by prioritizing the needs of their followers and fostering their development on both a personal and professional level. These leaders achieve this by putting their team members' well-being first, which results in a climate of trust, cooperation, and high levels of ownership (Kyambade et al., 2023a). Socially conscious leadership and a servant leadership style are similar in that these leaders work to better the community, suppliers, and customers by sharing power, growing their followers, and developing them (Afshari et al., 2024). Additionally, such leaders set examples, instill a culture of work engagement with followers, and promote interpersonal relations and community support in order to create 'servant -minded followers' (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). According to MacFarlane (2023), servant leadership and socially responsible leadership foster the idea that success comes from looking out for stakeholders, including the environment, community, and employees. According to a study by Kyambade et al. (2023b), there is a strong positive correlation between socially responsible leadership and servant leadership in Ugandan public universities. The study also examined the effects of psychological safety and servant leadership on socially responsible leadership. According to Lapointe and Vandenberghe (2018) empirical research, there is a positive correlation between servant leadership and socially responsible leadership, particularly at the CEO level. This is based on the idea that servant

leadership shapes commitment and individual sacrifice in an organization. According to Canavesi and Minelli (2022) and Kyambade et al. (2024e), servant leaders and socially responsible leaders are passionate about serving their subordinates and serve as models of how to steward authority by investing more time and energy in their work.

H₅: Servant Leadership is associated with Socially Responsible Leadership

Psychological safety's mediation role on servant leadership and healthy work relationships

The idea of servant leadership was first presented by Greenleaf in 1970, with an emphasis on the leader's duty to serve others. Servant leaders put their followers' needs first, encourage teamwork, and give their staff members the freedom to realize their full potential. Research conducted by Liden et al. (2008) and Van Dierendonck (2011) has demonstrated that servant leadership is positively correlated with several markers of positive working relationships, such as trust, communication, and job satisfaction. Workplace Psychological Safety: Organizational research has focused more on psychological safety because of its significance in fostering learning, creativity, and open communication. A common conviction among team members that they can speak up, ask questions, and voice concerns without fear of embarrassment or retaliation is how Edmondson (1999) conceptualized psychological safety. Studies conducted by Carmeli et al. (2010) and Kahn (1990) have demonstrated the beneficial effects of psychological safety on worker well-being, creativity, and team performance. The role of psychological safety as a mediator in the relationship between organizational outcomes and leadership behaviors has been examined in a number of studies. The relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement was found to be mediated by psychological safety, according to research by Carmeli and Gittell (2009) and Kyambade et al. (2024c). In a similar vein, Schaubroeck et al. (2011) discovered that psychological safety acted as a mediating factor in the connection between team performance and authentic leadership. Nonetheless, there has been little research that particularly looks at psychological safety's mediating function in the context of servant leadership and positive working relationships.

H₆: Psychological safety mediates Servant leadership and healthy work relationships

Mediation role of socially responsible leadership on servant leadership and healthy work relationships

The beneficial effects of socially responsible leadership and servant leadership on organizational outcomes have been empirically supported by research. For example, a study conducted in 2008 by Liden et al. discovered a positive correlation between servant leadership and follower commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and job satisfaction. Similar findings were made by Waldman et al. (2006) and Aguinis and Glavas (2012), who showed how socially conscious leadership improves stakeholder satisfaction, organizational performance, and employee engagement. These findings underscore the significance of both servant leadership and socially responsible leadership in promoting positive work relationships and organizational success. Socially responsible leadership involves leading with social justice, commitment to ethical values, and environmental sustainability. Leaders who practice socially responsible leadership consider the impact of their decisions and actions on stakeholders, communities, and the environment. Maignan et al. (1999) conceptualized socially responsible leadership as a multifaceted construct that encompasses ethical leadership, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability practices. While servant leadership focuses on serving others and empowering employees, socially responsible leadership extends this focus to broader societal concerns. Research by Waldman et al. (2006) and Aguinis and Glavas (2012) have suggested that socially responsible leadership behaviors may enhance organizational outcomes by promoting trust, fairness, and accountability. However, limited research has specifically examined the mediation role of socially responsible leadership in the association between servant leadership and healthy work relationships. While empirical research directly examining the mediation role of socially responsible leadership on the association between servant leadership and healthy work relationships is limited, theoretical arguments suggest plausible mechanisms. Socially responsible leadership practices, such as promoting ethical conduct, engaging in CSR initiatives, and

fostering stakeholder relationships, may enhance the positive effects of servant leadership on healthy work relationships. By demonstrating social justice, commitment to ethical values, and sustainability, socially responsible leaders build a supportive organizational culture that encourages trust, collaboration, and well-being of employees.

H₇: Socially responsible leadership mediates servant leadership and healthy work relationships

Moderation role of socially responsible leadership on servant leadership and psychological safety

Research has provided empirical support for the positive association between servant leadership and psychological safety. For example, studies by Nielsen et al. (2016) and Walumbwa et al. (2010) found that servant leadership behaviors such as listening, empathy, and supportiveness were positively associated with employees' insights into psychological safety. These findings suggest that servant leaders create an environment where employees feel relaxed speaking up, taking risks, and expressing their opinions with no fear of negative consequences. Servant leadership emphasizes empathy, humility, and empowerment, creating a supportive environment where employees feel heard and valued. Studies by Liden et al. (2008) and Van Dierendonck (2011) have found positive associations between psychological safety and servant leadership, indicating that servant leaders foster an atmosphere of trust, openness, and psychological comfort among followers. While servant leadership promotes psychological safety by prioritizing the needs of employees and creating a supportive culture, socially responsible leadership may moderate this relationship by further enhancing organizational climate and values alignment (Kyambade et al., 2024b, 2024f). By engaging in CSR initiatives, promoting ethical conduct, and fostering stakeholder relationships, socially responsible leaders reinforce the importance of psychological safety and ethical behavior within the organization. Socially responsible leaders prioritize ethical decision-making, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and stakeholder engagement, which reinforce the significance of psychological safety and ethical behavior within an organization. Through aligning organizational practices with ethical values and social responsibility, socially responsible leaders enhance the effectiveness of servant leadership in promoting psychological safety and employee well-being.

H₈: Socially responsible leadership moderates the indirect and positive relation between servant leadership and healthy work relationships through Psychological safety.

We offer a theoretical framework that explains how servant leadership promotes healthy working relationships by integrating all of the earlier proposed hypotheses. In the model, psychological safety acts as the mediator while socially responsible leadership is the moderator and mediator as well, thereby connecting servant leadership and healthy work relationships. A proposed model is shown in Figure 1.

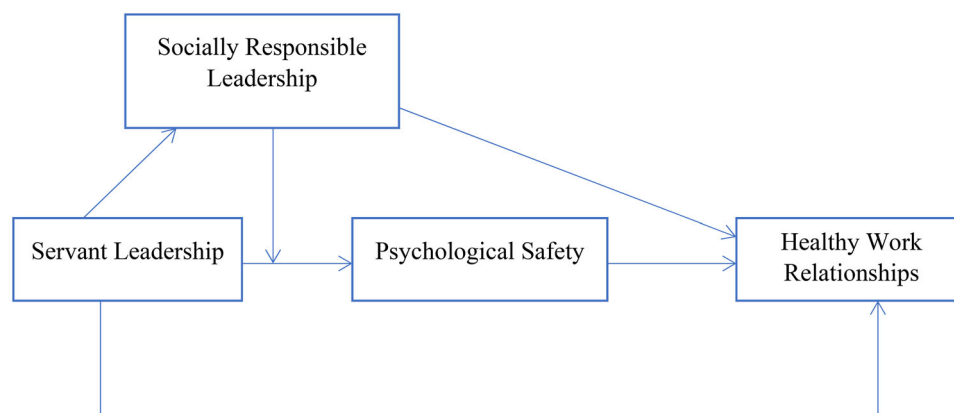


Figure 1. Model.

Methodology

Research design

To address all research objectives and investigate the connection between servant leadership and healthy work relationships, a moderated mediation of psychological safety and socially responsible leadership in public universities in Uganda, the study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design. The study was conducted in Uganda's public universities mostly those in the central region of Uganda. This is due to the fact that these universities are located in the most populous areas where leadership is applicable.

Sample

Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample of 214 employees from Uganda's public universities was chosen from 6119 staff. This sample size was considered sufficient to provide reliable and valid results, ensuring that the findings could be generalized to the broader population of public university employees. The sample size meets the standards for statistical analysis in a cross-sectional, quantitative study, where a larger sample is necessary to capture variability and ensure the robustness of findings. 250 questionnaires were distributed to the research universities. Only 214 valid forms, or responses, were gathered, resulting in an 85.6% response rate. The high response rate strengthens the reliability of the results, as it reduces the risk of non-response bias, and the collected data can be seen as representative of the study population. The sampling method, although convenient, was applied carefully to ensure that the respondents had relevant insights into the leadership dynamics within their universities, making the sample both sufficient and appropriate for addressing the research objectives.

Data collection

The following self-administered questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was used to gather data from the respondents: First, there is Strong Disagree (SD), followed by Disagree (D), Not Sure (NS), Agree (A), and Strong Agree (SA). Convenience sampling, which is widely used when randomization is impractical, was chosen for this study due to the size of the researchers' limited resources and the population. Convenience sampling is a non-probability technique where participants are selected based on availability and willingness to participate. While this method may introduce some bias, it was considered appropriate given the constraints of the study, allowing the researchers to access a sufficient number of participants within the available time frame.

Ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of the subjects' information was the primary ethical consideration for this study. In order to protect their privacy, the researcher did not coerce the respondent, and the study was handled in confidence with academic purposes only. The subject was also told up front that their names are not needed and that they had the right to decline questions for which they could not provide the necessary information.

Measurement of variables

The variables were measured in the following ways: servant leadership was measured using promoting sense of community and holistic approach to work using a modified version from earlier scholar Greenleaf (1970). The modification involved tailoring Greenleaf's general servant leadership framework to fit the specific context of public universities in Uganda. This included simplifying and operationalizing key constructs to ensure they were relevant and understandable in an academic setting. We emphasized two key aspects:

1. fostering a collaborative work environment ('sense of community') and,
2. addressing employee well-being and personal development ('holistic approach to work').

The modifications were based on prior studies and pilot testing with university staff to ensure the instrument's relevance and applicability. The instrument, as modified, is multidimensional, in line with broader servant leadership research. While Greenleaf's original work is often viewed as a conceptual framework, subsequent studies have developed various dimensions to capture the full scope of servant leadership.

Other variables were measured as follows: healthy work relationships were measured using trust and open communication modified version of earlier scholars Mastroianni and Storberg-Walker (2014), socially responsible leadership was measured by a version of a tool used by previous researchers to measure social responsibility and morality (Kyambade et al., 2024b), and psychological safety was measured by a modified version of a tool based on previous researchers such as Edmondson & Lei, measuring job engagement and learning from failure.

Test for common method bias

Subsequently all the variables' data came from a single source, we used a single factor by Harman with confirmatory factor analysis in which all indicators are intentionally loaded onto a single factor to determine whether common method variance had any impact on the dataset. According to the results, a single factor only interpreted 34.530% of the variance, which is less than the necessary value of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As a result, neither the biasness nor the responses' substantial biases present a serious issue. As a result, the suitability of data ensuing statistical analysis is verified.

Demographic characteristics

The findings of the study showed that 44.9% of participants were female and 55.1% of participants were male. This indicates that there are more men than women enrolled in Uganda's public universities. This could mean that women may have a harder time finding work than men do. The social roles that women play in their homes may help to explain this, but more investigation is necessary to determine the root cause and, ideally, boost female enrollment in Uganda's public universities. The findings show that the largest proportion of respondents 2.8% were over 56–65 years old, whereas 54.7% of respondents are aged of 31 to 45. The majority of employees in public universities in Uganda are composed of people with bachelor's degrees (43.9%), with 1% of respondents having doctorates, according to the highest education measure.

Results

Validity and reliability

Before the hypotheses are tested, a number of analyses were done to validate the measures. Initially, the measures' discriminant validity was investigated. Due to high number of measurement items and the relatively small sample size, we created parcels in accordance with Little et al. (2002) and Bandalos (2002)'s recommended procedures in order to achieve item to construct balance for every measure. To be more precise, In each measure, we started by combining the items with the highest and lowest loading, then the items with the second-highest and second-lowest loading, and so on. Ultimately, six constructs for healthy work relationships (HWR), five constructs for psychological safety (PS), five constructs for socially responsible leadership (SRL), and five constructs for servant leadership (SL) were created. Table 1 supports the hypothesized four factor model, with the predicted model achieving a satisfactory

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	χ^2	Df	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Four Factor Model	245.774	118		0.089	0.856	0.850	0.051
Three Factor Model: PS and HWR	453.345	121	206.460*** (3)	0.143	0.777	0.760	0.097
Two Factor Model: SL, PS and HWR	1236.368	123	1080.483*** (5)	0.212	0.750	0.524	0.205
One Factor Model: SL, SRL, PS and HWR	2004.680	124	1747.705*** (6)	0.167	0.391	0.513	0.238

N = 241, all models (1, 2 and 3) compared with four-factor model. ***p < 0.001.

Table 2. Results for measurement model.

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE	VIF
Servant Leadership	SL1	0.811	0.967	0.730	1.201
	SL2	0.762			
	SL3	0.793			
	SL4	0.710			
	SL5	0.900			
Socially Responsible Leadership	SRL1	0.766	0.925	0.683	1.098
	SRL2	0.717			
	SRL3	0.755			
	SRL4	0.762			
	SRL5	0.888			
Psychological Safety	PS1	0.798	0.912	0.598	1.378
	PS2	0.962			
	PS3	0.782			
	PS4	0.770			
	PS5	0.890			
Healthy Work Relationships	HWR1	0.731	0.901	0.621	1.307
	HWR2	0.751			
	HWR3	0.783			
	HWR4	0.850			
	HWR5	0.912			
	HWR6	0.831			

Table 3. Discriminant validity, pearson correlation and AVE.

	SL	SRL	PS	HWR
Servant Leadership (SL)	0.640			
Socially responsible leadership (SRL)	0.213	0.562		
Psychological safety (PS)	0.359	0.099	0.505	
Healthy work relationships (HWR)	0.455	0.237	0.429	0.697

Note: slanting numbers are AVE values.

fit ($\chi^2 = 245.774$, $df = 118$; RMSEA = 0.089, CFI = 0.856, TLI = 0.850, SRMR = 0.051) compared to all models. This is in accordance with Hu and Bentler (1999) recommendations.

Next, in accordance with Podsakoff et al. (2012), we employed self-reported surveys that are appropriate for gathering people's impressions, convictions, conclusions, and emotions. We attempted to mitigate the possible influence of common method bias both procedurally and statistically. We collected data twice, procedurally (Podsakoff et al., 2003). All values were below a cutoff of two when we statistically assessed covariance using the technique of variance inflation factor (VIF) (see Table 2). A single factor could only account for 34.530%, or less than 40%, of the common variance, according to the results test of Harman's single-factor (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). These findings collectively imply that common method variance was not an issue in our study. Additionally, factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess the convergent validity. Table 2 displays all factor loading results that have reached the minimum value of 0.5. A high degree of convergent validity was indicated by values of AVE being greater than 0.5 and the values of CR value being 0.7 and greater.

In addition, we employed the method proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to demonstrate the constructs' discriminant validity. Table 3 illustrates that the value of AVE square root for Servant Leadership is 0.640, greater than the maximum value of absolute correlation coefficient between factors (0.359). The inter-factor correlation coefficient's maximum absolute value (0.237) is less than the value of AVE square root of 0.562 for socially responsible leadership. The inter-factor correlation coefficient's maximum absolute value (0.429) is less than the AVE square root value of 0.505 for psychological safety. The maximum value of absolute correlation coefficient between factors (0.429) is less than the AVE square root value for healthy work relationships, which is 0.697. The variables have strong discriminative validity, according to all of these findings.

Descriptive statistics

Table 4 reports bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for the variables under investigation. Healthy work relationships were linked to psychological safety, socially responsible leadership, servant

Table 4. Means, standard deviation and correlation.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
University	0.371	0.489							
Gender	0.442	0.475	0.216**						
Age	1.700	0.650	0.098	0.032					
Education	2.121	0.507	0.152	−0.089	0.185**				
Servant Leadership	5.102	1.172	0.347***	0.019	0.146	0.300**			
Socially Responsible Leadership	4.560	1.156	0.274*	0.221	0.079	0.049	0.108		
Psychological Safety	4.745	0.784	0.255***	0.020	−0.142	−0.060	0.268***	0.088	
Healthy Work Relationships	5.442	1.001	0.301**	−0.076	−0.030	−0.015	0.244***	0.181*	0.415***

Note: N = 241, ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Table 5. Mediation analysis.

SL-PS-HWR	Estimate	Boot SE	95% Bootstrapped CI (LL-UL)	Results
Total-effects	0.253	0.056	[0.152, 0.365]	Supported
Direct-effects	0.223	0.054	[0.027, 0.232]	Supported
Indirect-effects	0.141	0.041	[0.061, 0.220]	Supported

N = 241, Bootstrap = 6000. SL = servant leadership, PS = psychological safety, HWR = healthy work relationships.

Table 6. Mediation analysis.

SL-PS-HWR	Estimate	Boot SE	95% Bootstrapped CI (LL-UL)	Results
Total-effects	0.253	0.056	[0.147, 0.289]	Supported
Direct-effects	0.223	0.054	[0.019, 0.187]	Supported
Indirect-effects	0.141	0.041	[0.069, 0.301]	Supported

N = 241, Bootstrap = 6000. SL = servant leadership, PS = psychological safety, HWR = healthy work relationships.

leadership, and public university dummy, as the table illustrates. There was a correlation between servant leadership and the public university dummy and psychological safety. There was a correlation between a public university dummy and socially responsible leadership. Education and the public university dummy were related to servant leadership. Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 received some preliminary support from the strong positive correlations between psychological safety, servant leadership, and healthy work relationships.

Mediation analysis

We used Hayes (2013) suggested Process Macro 3.2 in SPSS to perform a mediation test, which is aligned with the product indicator approach in order to evaluate Hypothesis 6. The overall influence of servant leadership on healthy working relationships was significant, as demonstrated in Table 5 (95% CI: (0.152, 0.365)). The direct impact of servant leadership on healthy work relationships was significant [95% CI: (0.027, 0.232)] after psychological safety was added as a mediator. The indirect effect of servant leadership on healthy work relationships via psychological safety was also significant [95% CI: (0.061, 0.220)]. This demonstrates complementary mediation. Complementary mediation occurs when both direct and indirect effects are present, and the mediator contributes to explaining the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables without fully substituting the direct effect. These findings suggested that psychological safety acted as a partial mediating factor in the association of servant leadership and healthy working relationships. As a result, Hypothesis 6 gained support. In addition, we used the transmittal approach for mediation test approach. This method involves examining the pathways through which the independent variable (servant leadership) influences the dependent variable (healthy work relationships) through the mediators (i.e. psychological safety and socially responsible leadership). By testing the significance of the indirect effect while accounting for the direct effect, we identified the partial mediation effects, aligning with our findings of significant indirect effects and retained direct effects.

The SPSS process macro 3.2, as suggested by Hayes (2013), was still employed to test hypothesis 7. Table 6 demonstrates that servant leadership had a significant overall influence on healthy working relationships (95% CI: 0.147, 0.289)). Following the inclusion of socially responsible leadership as a mediator,

Table 7. Hierarchical regression results of servant leadership on psychological safety moderated by socially responsible leadership.

	Psychological Safety			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Step 1: control variables				
Public University	0.387***	0.273*	0.231*	0.315*
Age	−0.153	−0.199	−0.203	−0.199
Gender	−0.102	−0.058	−0.063	−0.107
Education	−0.107	−0.171	−0.171	−0.184
Step 2: Main-effects				
Servant leadership (SL)		0.250***	0.248***	0.208***
Step 3: Main-effects				
Socially responsible leadership (SRL)			0.019	0.053
Step 4: Moderating-effects				
SL X SRL				−0.104**
R ² change ^a		241	0.240	0.148
R ²	0.080	0.208	0.420	0.238
Adj R ²	0.060	0.178	0.173	0.210
Overall F	4.440**	8.620***	7.095***	7.201***

Note: servant leadership and socially responsible leadership were mean centered for all the analysis. ^a R² change values for model 2, 3 and 4 are from comparisons with model 1. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Table 8. Moderated mediation indices.

	Index	Boot SE	95% Confidential Level	
			Lower level	Upper level
Servant Leadership – Psychological Safety – Healthy Work Relationships	−0.058	0.021	−0.099	−0.017

Note: N = 241, Bootstrap = 5000.

there was a significant direct effect of servant leadership on healthy work relationships [95% CI: (0.019, 0.187)], as well as an indirect effect via socially responsible leadership on healthy work relationships [95% CI: (0.069, 0.301)]. These findings suggested that a partial mediating factor in the association between servant leadership and positive working relationships is socially responsible leadership. As a result, Hypothesis 7 gained support.

Moderation analysis

For the moderation analysis, we employed the orthogonalizing approach, where mean-centering was applied to the moderator and predictor variables before entering them into the regression model. This approach helps to reduce multicollinearity and facilitates the interpretation of interaction effects. To examine how socially responsible leadership influences outcomes, we employed hierarchical regression analysis. The moderating and independent variables for the moderated regression analysis were first mean centered. Then, in separate steps, we added two independent variables that's servant leadership and socially responsible leadership, four control variables including public university, age, gender, and education as well as an interaction between the two into the model. Table 7 shows that the interaction term between servant leadership and socially responsible leadership was significant and negative in predicting psychological safety, even after controlling for main effects and demographic variables ($b = 0.106$, $p < 0.01$). As expected, the slope of the association between psychological safety and servant leadership was non-significant for workers with high psychological safety ($\beta = 0.085$, $p > 0.1$) but positive and significant for workers with low psychological safety ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.001$). As a result, Hypothesis 8 gained support.

Moderated mediation analysis

Using SPSS and Hayes' Process Macro 3.2, we looked at the moderated mediation effect (2013). The conditional indirect effects of servant leadership on healthy working relationships at different levels of socially responsible leadership were demonstrated in Table 9 and the index of moderated mediation effect was displayed in Table 8. To be more precise, socially responsible leadership significantly

Table 9. conditionally indirect effect of servant leadership on healthy work relationships link at specific levels of socially responsible leadership.

Socially responsible leadership	Boot Indirect Effect	Boot SE	95% Confidential Level	
			Lower level	Upper level
-SD	0.165	0.034	0.083	0.282
Mean	0.108	0.022	0.038	0.168
+SD	0.031	0.025	-0.029	0.107

Note: N = 241, Bootstrap = 6000.

mitigated the conditional indirect effect of servant leadership on healthy work relationships through psychological safety (Table 8: moderated mediation indeces = -0.058, bootstrap 95% CI [0.099, 0.017]).

What's more, for employees who exhibited low levels of socially responsible leadership (Table 9: estimate = 0.165, 95% CI = [0.083, 0.282]), servant leadership had a significant indirect effect on healthy work relationships; however, this effect was not seen for workers who exhibited high levels of socially responsible leadership (Table 9: estimate = 0.031, 95% CI = [-0.029, 0.107]). Hypothesis 8 was further supported because zero was not included in the indirect effects confidence interval.

Eventually, we evaluated path coefficients and t-values in order to validate the Process procedure's reported moderated mediation effect. All of the hypotheses were found to be supported.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a significant positive association of servant leadership style and healthy work relationships within organizational contexts. Research has constantly demonstrated the positive influence of servant leadership on various aspects of organizational effectiveness, including employee engagement, satisfaction, and performance (Liden et al., 2008). Servant leaders create psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, expressing themselves, and collaborating with others with no fear of judgment or reprisal (Walumbwa et al., 2010). This supportive environment encourages open communication, constructive feedback, and the formation of strong interpersonal connections, all of which contribute to the development of healthy work relationships (Liden et al., 2008). Furthermore, servant leaders focus on the development and growth of their followers, fostering a culture of learning, continuous improvement, and personal development (Greenleaf, 1977). By empowering employees, providing mentorship, and facilitating opportunities for skill-building and career advancement, servant leaders nurture a sense of belonging and commitment among staff, which strengthens their interpersonal bonds and fosters positive work relationships (Eva et al., 2019). In addition, servant leadership emphasizes ethical and values-based decision-making, promoting fairness, integrity, and ethical conduct in organizational practices (Spears & Lawrence, 2004). Leaders who demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior inspire confidence and trust among their followers, leading to enhanced collaboration, cooperation, and mutual respect within teams (Neubert et al., 2008).

The results of this study also demonstrate a significant positive association between servant leadership and psychological safety within organizational contexts. Studies have shown that servant leaders demonstrate high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence, enabling them to understand and respond to the concerns and needs of their followers effectively. By demonstrating care, compassion, and genuine concern for their employees' welfare, servant leaders create an environment where individuals feel valued, supported, and psychologically safe to be themselves and contribute authentically to the organization (Liden et al., 2008). Furthermore, servant leaders foster a culture of inclusivity, collaboration, and mutual respect, where diversity of thought and perspective is encouraged and appreciated (Eva et al., 2019). By promoting fairness, transparency, and ethical behavior, servant leaders establish norms of trust and integrity that contribute to psychological safety and enable employees to engage in constructive conflict resolution, innovation, and risk-taking without fear of judgment or reprisal (Spears & Lawrence, 2004). In addition, servant leadership puts emphasis on empowerment and employee development, encouraging individuals to take ownership of their work, make decisions autonomously, and grow professionally (Greenleaf, 1977). Empowered employees are more likely to experience a sense of

psychological safety, as they feel confident in their abilities, supported by their leaders, and free to experiment, learn, and grow without undue constraint or micromanagement (Neubert et al., 2008).

The findings of this study underscore a significant positive relationship between psychological safety and healthy work relationships within organizational contexts. Research has consistently demonstrated that teams and organizations characterized by psychological safety high levels exhibit greater levels of trust, open communication, collaboration, and innovation (Edmondson, 2018). Studies have shown that once employees feel psychologically safe, they are likely to engage in constructive conflict resolution, express dissenting opinions, and seek feedback from colleagues and supervisors (Edmondson, 1999). This open exchange of ideas and perspectives fosters a sense of trust, understanding, and mutual respect among team members, which forms the basis for healthy work relationships (Carmeli et al., 2010). Moreover, psychological safety enables individuals to bring their authentic selves to work, contributing to a culture of authenticity, belonging, and inclusivity (Carmeli et al., 2010). When employees feel accepted and valued for who they are, regardless of their background, beliefs, or identity, they are more likely to form strong interpersonal connections and develop meaningful relationships with their colleagues and supervisors (Edmondson, 2018). Leaders play a vital role in fostering psychological safety within teams and organizations. Leaders who demonstrate humility, vulnerability, and openness create an environment where employees feel safe to share their concerns, speak up, and take risks with no fear of judgment or retribution (Edmondson, 1999). Through providing support, encouragement, and constructive feedback, leaders can cultivate a culture of psychological safety that underpins healthy work relationships and drives organizational performance (Carmeli et al., 2010).

The results of this study reveal a significant positive association between socially responsible leadership and healthy work relationships within organizational contexts. Research has shown that socially responsible leaders foster a culture of trust, transparency, and integrity, which forms the foundation for healthy work relationships (Waldman et al., 2006). By demonstrating fairness, empathy, and concern for the welfare of their employees, socially responsible leaders create an environment where individuals feel respected, valued, and supported, leading to stronger interpersonal connections and positive work relationships (Brammer et al., 2007). Moreover, socially responsible leaders engage in practices that promote well-being of employees, such as providing opportunities for growth and development, supporting work-life balance, and investing in employee health and safety (Waldman et al., 2006). By prioritizing the needs and concerns of their employees, socially responsible leaders create a sense of belonging and commitment among staff, fostering collaboration, cooperation, and mutual support within the organization (Brammer et al., 2007). Furthermore, socially responsible leaders are mindful of the influence of their actions and decisions on the broader community and society, taking into account the social, environmental, and ethical implications of their business practices (Waldman et al., 2006). Through aligning organizational goals with societal values and expectations, socially responsible leaders build trust and credibility with their stakeholders, including customers, employees, and investors, which contributes to positive work relationships and organizational success (Brammer et al., 2007).

The findings of this study reveal an insignificant association between servant leadership style and socially responsible leadership within organizational contexts. Research suggests that while servant leaders may focus on the well-being of their immediate followers, they may not always extend their concern to broader societal issues or stakeholders beyond their immediate circle (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders may focus on developing individual relationships with their followers and promoting their development and growth, but they may not necessarily engage in broader initiatives or practices that promote social responsibility or address societal concerns (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leadership style may be more inward-focused, emphasizing personal relationships and individual development, rather than outward-facing and oriented toward addressing larger social or environmental issues (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders may excel at creating a supportive and empowering environment for their immediate team members but may not prioritize broader social responsibility initiatives or engage with stakeholders outside their immediate sphere of influence (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). The emphasis on humility and service in servant leadership may not always align with the assertiveness and advocacy required of socially responsible leaders to address systemic issues or advocate for change on behalf of broader stakeholder groups (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders may be more inclined to lead by

example and empower others to take action, rather than taking a more proactive stance on social or environmental issues themselves (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015).

The results of this study highlight the mediation role of psychological safety in the association between servant leadership and healthy work relationships within organizational contexts. Research suggests that servant leaders create a psychological safety climate by demonstrating humility, vulnerability, and empathy, and by fostering a culture of respect, trust, and inclusion (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Servant leaders focus on the well-being and development of their followers, providing support, encouragement, and constructive feedback, which contributes to a sense of psychological safety among staff (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Psychological safety, defined as the extent to which individuals feel safe to express themselves, take interpersonal risks, and share ideas with no fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999), plays a vital role in fostering healthy work relationships. When employees feel safe psychologically, they are likely to engage in open communication, collaboration, and constructive conflict resolution, leading to stronger interpersonal connections and positive work relationships (Edmondson, 2018). Servant leaders empower their followers to take risks, express themselves, and contribute their unique perspectives and ideas, creating an environment where individuals feel safe to engage in authentic dialogue and voice their opinions (Liden et al., 2008). By fostering psychological safety, servant leaders lay the groundwork for healthy work relationships characterized by trust, openness, and mutual respect (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

The findings of this study shed light on the mediation role of socially responsible leadership in the association between servant leadership and healthy work relationships within organizational contexts. Research suggests that socially responsible leaders create a culture of transparency, trust, and integrity, which forms the foundation for healthy work relationships (Waldman et al., 2006). By demonstrating ethical behavior and corporate citizenship, socially responsible leaders foster a sense of pride and commitment among employees, leading to stronger interpersonal connections and positive work relationships (Brammer et al., 2007). Socially responsible leadership encompasses a broader commitment to ethical behavior, corporate social responsibility, and stakeholder engagement, with leaders striving to create value for all stakeholders while upholding ethical standards and corporate values (Waldman et al., 2006). Socially responsible leaders focus on the well-being of their employees, customers, suppliers, and society at large, demonstrating fairness, transparency, and concern for the welfare of their stakeholders (Waldman et al., 2006). Socially responsible leaders engage in practices that promote well-being of employees, such as providing opportunities for growth and development, supporting work-life balance, and investing in employee health and safety (Waldman et al., 2006). By focusing on the concerns and needs of their employees and society, socially responsible leaders create a culture of trust and mutual respect, which improves employee engagement, satisfaction, and performance (Brammer et al., 2007).

The results of this study illuminate the moderating role of socially responsible leadership in the indirect and positive association between servant leadership and healthy work relationships via psychological safety. Socially responsible leadership acts as a catalyst that amplifies the positive effects of servant leadership on psychological safety and healthy work relationships (Waldman et al., 2006). Servant leaders, through their focus on serving others and fostering individual growth, lay the groundwork for psychological safety within the organization. Socially responsible leaders then build upon this foundation by reinforcing ethical standards, promoting employee well-being, and aligning organizational goals with societal needs. Socially responsible leaders set the tone for ethical conduct and promote values such as fairness, integrity, and transparency. This ethical foundation establishes trust among employees and fosters a sense of psychological safety wherein individuals feel comfortable sharing ideas, expressing themselves, and taking risks without fear of reprisal. As a result, employees are likely to engage in collaborative efforts, communicate openly, and build strong interpersonal connections, which are foundational to healthy work relationships (Edmondson, 1999). Moreover, socially responsible leaders show genuine concern for the well-being of employees and society. They prioritize initiatives that support employee development, promote work-life balance, and contribute to the broader community. By championing these initiatives, socially responsible leaders create a supportive and inclusive work environment that enhances psychological safety and promotes healthy work relationships.

Managerial implications

Public university administrators in Uganda should prioritize training programs that educate leaders on servant leadership principles. These programs should focus on fostering empathy, humility, and a focus on serving others, as these qualities are foundational to cultivating healthy work relationships. Given the significant role of socially responsible leadership in enhancing healthy work relationships, university leaders should also integrate ethical leadership practices into their organizational policies and procedures. This includes promoting transparency, fairness, and integrity in decision-making processes and stakeholder interactions. Public universities should strive to create a supportive organizational climate that prioritizes employee well-being and fosters psychological safety. This can be achieved through initiatives such as mentorship programs, employee assistance programs, and regular feedback mechanisms that promote open communication and trust among faculty and staff. Leaders should encourage collaboration and teamwork among faculty and staff members to strengthen interpersonal relations and promote a sense of belonging within the organization. By fostering a collaborative work environment, universities can capitalize on the synergistic effects of socially responsible leadership and servant leadership in cultivating healthy work relationships. To further enhance socially responsible leadership and servant leadership competencies among university leaders, institutions should invest in ongoing professional development opportunities. This may include workshops, seminars, and leadership coaching sessions focused on leadership effectiveness, ethical decision-making, and stakeholder engagement. Public universities should implement reward systems that recognize and reinforce ethical behavior and leadership practices. By publicly acknowledging and rewarding instances of servant leadership and socially responsible leadership, institutions can incentivize positive organizational behaviors and reinforce a culture of integrity and accountability. Finally, university administrators should regularly evaluate leadership effectiveness and its impact on healthy work relationships. This may involve conducting employee surveys, focus groups, or performance reviews to assess leadership practices and identify areas for improvement.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the understanding of social exchange theory (SET) and its application in organizational leadership contexts, specifically through the lens of servant leadership, psychological safety, and socially responsible leadership. This study enhances SET by providing insights into how leadership behaviors, particularly servant leadership and socially responsible leadership, cultivate an environment conducive to healthy work relationships through psychological safety. Servant leadership fosters an environment where the leader prioritizes the well-being, development, and growth of employees. This aligns with the core tenets of SET, where employees reciprocate the care and support they receive from servant leaders through increased trust, collaboration, and commitment. The reciprocal nature of servant leadership manifests in employees forming healthy work relationships characterized by mutual respect, open communication, and teamwork (Liden et al., 2008; Walumbwa et al., 2010). Through servant leadership, employees feel valued and respected, prompting them to reciprocate with positive behaviors such as engagement and cooperation, thus supporting the idea of balanced social exchanges in the workplace. In SET terms, the exchange between servant leaders and their followers is not merely transactional but relational, where emotional and psychological safety are pivotal. By fostering psychological safety, servant leaders encourage employees to voice their concerns and ideas without fear, further reinforcing the exchange of trust and cooperation, which in turn strengthens healthy work relationships.

The study confirms that psychological safety mediates the relationship between servant leadership and healthy work relationships, adding a new dimension to SET. Psychological safety allows employees to engage in interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999) without the fear of negative repercussions, which facilitates reciprocal exchanges of trust and collaboration. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to share knowledge, contribute to problem-solving, and invest in their work relationships. In terms of SET, psychological safety functions as the medium through which the benefits of servant leadership are reciprocated. Employees perceive psychological safety as a resource provided

by the leader, and they respond by deepening their commitment to their work and colleagues, thus fostering healthy work relationships. Socially responsible leadership amplifies the effects of servant leadership by incorporating broader ethical and societal considerations into the social exchange. This leadership style enhances the relationship between servant leadership and healthy work relationships through its focus on fairness, transparency, and the well-being of all stakeholders (Waldman et al., 2006). In SET terms, socially responsible leaders extend the scope of the exchange by promoting values such as integrity and community welfare, which increases employees' sense of belonging and commitment to the organization. Employees, in turn, reciprocate these values by developing stronger interpersonal relationships and contributing positively to the work environment. By embedding ethical standards into organizational practices, socially responsible leaders create a foundation for trust and mutual respect, which are essential components of SET. The reciprocal benefits derived from such leadership result in stronger collaboration, higher engagement, and healthier work relationships, as employees are more likely to reciprocate positive organizational practices with loyalty and cooperation (Brammer et al., 2007). The findings also show that socially responsible leadership moderates the relationship between servant leadership and psychological safety, enhancing the positive effects of servant leadership on healthy work relationships. This indicates that socially responsible leadership acts as a catalyst within the social exchange framework, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between leaders and employees by promoting values that align with organizational ethics and societal well-being. In SET, this moderation effect highlights that the quality of the exchange can be elevated when leadership behaviors are aligned with ethical and socially responsible practices. Employees perceive these behaviors as beneficial, prompting them to respond with stronger interpersonal bonds and greater investment in the organization's success, thus fostering healthier work relationships.

This study contributes to SET by integrating the concepts of servant leadership, psychological safety, and socially responsible leadership into the exchange process. It demonstrates that leadership styles that prioritize employee well-being, ethical behavior, and psychological safety create more robust exchanges that foster healthy work relationships. These findings extend SET by showing that leadership behaviors not only influence individual performance but also shape the quality of relationships within organizations through complex mediated and moderated pathways. The study highlights that the reciprocity inherent in social exchanges is enhanced when leaders create psychologically safe and ethically grounded environments, leading to positive organizational outcomes. This research thus advances SET by illustrating how leadership can shape the social exchanges that underpin healthy work relationships, providing both theoretical and practical implications for improving organizational dynamics through effective leadership.

Limitations and future research

The study only focused on Public Universities in Uganda excluding private and foreign aided universities, which is a small sample. The use of specific measurement tools and the sample's focus only on public universities in Uganda may limit the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation of this study was the paucity of literature on public university leadership and socially responsible leadership in Uganda, Africa, and the world at large. The study was primarily concerned with cross-sectional research design, which limited the applicability of the variables as longitudinal studies may yield different results from those obtained because the behavior of the variables over an extended period of time could not be analyzed. In order to investigate the dynamic processes and causal mechanisms underlying the reciprocal relationship between leadership practices and organizational outcomes over time, longitudinal studies are required. A questionnaire that restricted respondents' opinions about variables outside of the closed-ended questions was used in the study. An interview guide as a follow-up would have provided us with information on the rationale behind respondents' particular opinions. Future research could be done with larger sample sizes in different industries or countries. Subsequent investigations could potentially explore duplicating or extending this research in alternative contexts with additional variables. Despite the aforementioned research limitations, we think that the data from Uganda's public universities offers preliminary empirical support for the hypotheses. Future research should also explore comparative studies across different types of universities and cultural contexts that could provide a broader

understanding of the factors influencing organizational dynamics and leadership practices in higher education settings. Furthermore, future research could explore the role of individual differences, such as cultural values and personality traits, in shaping perceptions of servant leadership, psychological safety, and healthy work relationships. By addressing these areas of inquiry, future research endeavors can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in organizational behavior, leadership theory, and management practices within the context of public universities in Uganda and beyond.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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