

## Servant Leadership

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### Abstract:

Servant leadership has solidified its position as a critical and influential leadership paradigm within organizational studies, distinguished by its emphasis on leader behaviors that prioritize the growth, well-being, and empowerment of followers. Its relevance has expanded beyond its ethical and philosophical origins to demonstrate significant impact across key organizational outcomes, including enhanced employee performance (Lee et al., 2020), increased innovative work behavior (Newman et al., 2020), strengthened organizational citizenship behavior (Liden et al., 2022), and improved employee well-being and engagement (Eva et al., 2019). **Objectives:** A core objective of this systematic review was to identify and examine the prevailing thematic areas within Servant Leadership (SL) research in organizational contexts over the past five years. **Methods:** This study employed the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique (SQAT), a robust framework developed by Pickering and Byrne (2014) to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and replicable review process. The SQAT protocol was selected for its ability to systematically identify, screen, and synthesize a body of peer-reviewed literature while minimizing selection bias. Its structured approach emphasizes methodological clarity and is particularly effective at revealing geographic, methodological, and thematic trends and gaps within a defined research field **Results:** This section presents the findings from the systematic review of 58 articles on Servant Leadership (SL) published between 2019 and 2024. The results are organized to address the predefined research questions, detailing the temporal and geographical distribution of the literature, the balance between conceptual and empirical studies, and the dominant methodological approaches. The findings are integrated with a discussion of their significance for the study of Servant Leadership in Organizational Contexts. **Conclusions:** This systematic review set out to analyse the landscape of Servant Leadership (SL) research within organizational contexts over the recent five-year period (2019-2024). Drawing from a final corpus of 58 peer-reviewed articles, the study mapped the temporal and geographical distribution of publications, the balance between conceptual and empirical work, and the dominant methodological approaches, ultimately identifying four primary thematic trajectories: Performance and Organizational Outcomes, Psychological and Mediating Mechanisms, Antecedents and Leader Development, and Cross-Cultural Applications and Public Service.

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership

## 1. Introduction

Servant leadership has solidified its position as a critical and influential leadership paradigm within organizational studies, distinguished by its emphasis on leader behaviors that prioritize the growth, well-being, and empowerment of followers. Its relevance has expanded beyond its ethical and philosophical origins to demonstrate significant impact across key organizational outcomes, including enhanced employee performance (Lee et al., 2020), increased innovative work behavior (Newman et al., 2020), strengthened organizational citizenship behavior (Liden et al., 2022), and improved employee well-being and engagement (Eva et al., 2019).

From Greenleaf's (1970) seminal conceptualization of the leader as a servant first to the contemporary multi-dimensional models developed by researchers like Liden et al. (2008) and van Dierendonck (2011), the construct has evolved into a robust theoretical framework for understanding how altruistic and follower-centric leadership can generate sustainable competitive advantage and foster positive ethical climates. In the aftermath of global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Great Resignation, and heightened demands for corporate social responsibility, there has been a pronounced scholarly and practical turn towards leadership models that cultivate trust, psychological safety, and resilience. Servant leadership, with its core tenets of empathy, stewardship, and community building, has emerged as a pivotal lens for examining how organizations can navigate an increasingly complex and volatile environment.

Over the past five years, research has sought to refine the nomological network of servant leadership, exploring its antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions across diverse cultural and industrial contexts. Concurrently, vigorous debates have continued around its discriminant validity from other leadership styles (e.g., ethical, authentic, and transformational leadership), the potential for conceptual stretching, and the development of more precise and universally applicable measurement scales (Eva et al., 2019). Furthermore, the rapid shift to hybrid and remote work models has introduced new questions about the manifestation and efficacy of servant leadership principles in digital and dispersed environments (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). This evolving landscape of work, characterized by digital transformation and changing employee expectations, necessitates a contemporary reassessment of the theory's applicability and impact.

Despite this burgeoning body of literature, a comprehensive synthesis capturing the thematic evolution, methodological advancements, and contextual nuances of servant leadership research in the post-2019 period is notably absent. The literature remains somewhat fragmented, with studies often isolated within specific disciplinary siloes such as healthcare, education, or corporate management, with limited integration of findings. Moreover, while the theory's application is growing globally, conceptual and empirical contributions from non-Western contexts, though increasing, remain underrepresented in dominant

narratives. This systematic review aims to address these gaps by mapping the trajectory of servant leadership research between 2019 and 2024. Specifically, the study aims to (i) identify the dominant thematic clusters and emergent trends in the literature, (ii) assess geographical and methodological patterns in research production, and (iii) evaluate the evolving theoretical debates and future research directions. Unlike prior reviews that may focus on earlier periods or narrow outcomes, this synthesis offers an up-to-date, holistic perspective that links servant leadership to the most pressing contemporary organizational challenges and highlight its enduring and perhaps escalating significance in nurturing ethical, productive, and humane workplaces. The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows: methodology, data analysis and conclusion.

## 2. Objectives

A core objective of this systematic review was to identify and examine the prevailing thematic areas within Servant Leadership (SL) research in organizational contexts over the past five years.

To tests the applicability and measurement invariance of SL across different national cultures and its unique value in public sector and NGO contexts.

Investigates the intrinsic motivations, values and personality traits that predict SL, alongside models for measuring and developing servant leaders.

Examines the impact of SL on job performance, creativity, organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), turnover intentions, and overall firm performance.

## 3. Methods

This study employed the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique (SQAT), a robust framework developed by Pickering and Byrne (2014) to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and replicable review process. The SQAT protocol was selected for its ability to systematically identify, screen, and synthesize a body of peer-reviewed literature while minimizing selection bias. Its structured approach emphasizes methodological clarity and is particularly effective at revealing geographic, methodological, and thematic trends and gaps within a defined research field. The application of the SQAT steps to this review is detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1: SQAT Methodology for Servant Leadership Review**

| S/N | Step                                | Application in Current Study                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | <b>Define Topic</b>                 | Servant Leadership (SL) articles published between 2019 - 2024                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2   | <b>Formulate Research Questions</b> | Four research questions were defined:<br>1. What is the temporal and geographical distribution of SL articles?<br>2. What is the balance between conceptual and empirical studies?<br>3. What are the primary thematic clusters and key |

|   |                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |                                      | findings?<br>4. What are the dominant methodological approaches (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods)?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 3 | <b>Identify Keywords</b>             | Primary search string: " <b>Servant Leadership</b> "                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 4 | <b>Identify and Search Databases</b> | 1. Five major databases were utilized: Scopus, Web of Science, Elsevier (Science Direct), EBSCO host (Business Source Complete), and Wiley Online Library.<br>2. An " <b>All in Title</b> " search was conducted using the exact phrase " <b>Servant Leadership</b> " to capture articles where it was a central focus.                                                                                                                                         |
| 5 | <b>Read and Assess Publications</b>  | 1. The abstracts of all articles identified in the search were read to ensure they explicitly dealt with servant leadership as a core construct.<br>2. <b>Exclusion Criteria:</b> Book reviews, editorials, book chapters, duplicate publications, and articles where "servant leadership" appeared only in the reference list or passing mention were removed.<br>3. The full text of remaining articles was reviewed for final inclusion and data extraction. |

**Source:** Pickering and Byrne (2014).

The search and screening process which was conducted using Google Scholar, yielded a final corpus of 58 articles for in-depth analysis. Data from each article was extracted and coded into a standardized spreadsheet for analysis. The coded variables included: publication year, author(s), country of corresponding author, country of data collection, research methodology (conceptual/empirical; quantitative/qualitative/mixed), primary industry/sector context, key variables studied (e.g., antecedents, outcomes, mediators, moderators), and main findings.

**Table 2: SL journal publication (2019 - 2024)**

| <b>S/NO</b> | <b>Publisher</b>   | <b>Number of Articles</b> |
|-------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>1.</b>   | Taylor and Francis | 18                        |
| <b>2.</b>   | Wiley              | 17                        |
| <b>3.</b>   | Elsevier           | 8                         |
| <b>4.</b>   | Springer           | 10                        |
| <b>5.</b>   | Sage               | 5                         |
|             | <b>TOTAL</b>       | 58                        |

**Source:** Authors' Review, 2025

## 4. Results

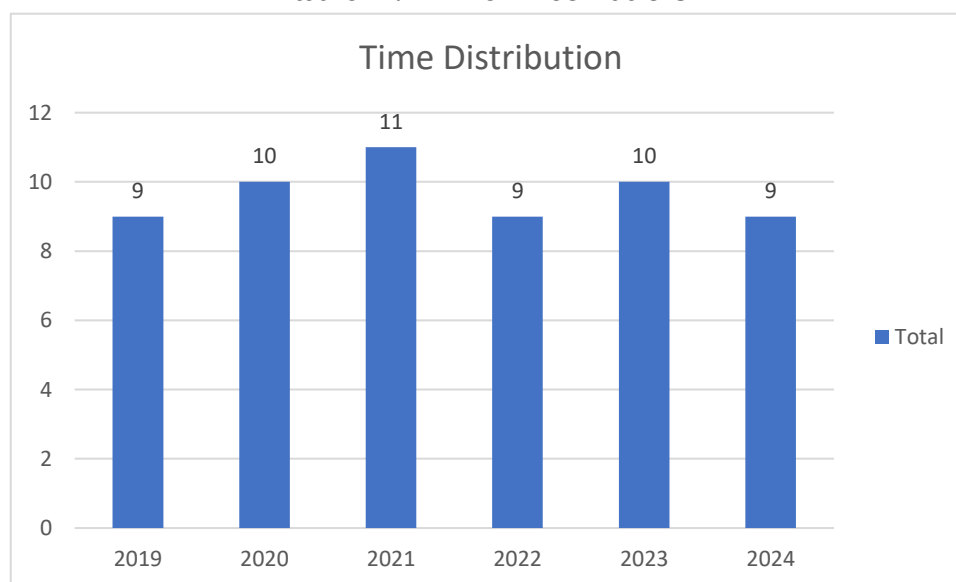
This section presents the findings from the systematic review of 58 articles on Servant Leadership (SL) published between 2019 and 2024. The results are organized to address the predefined research questions, detailing the temporal and geographical distribution of the literature, the balance between conceptual and empirical studies, and the dominant methodological approaches. The findings are integrated with a discussion of their significance for the study of Servant Leadership in Organizational Contexts.

## 5. Discussion

### 3.1 Time Distribution of SC Articles

The annual publication output of SL research from 2019 to 2024 is presented in Figure 1. The data indicates a remarkably consistent and sustained scholarly interest in the topic over the six-year period.

**Table 1: Time Distribution**



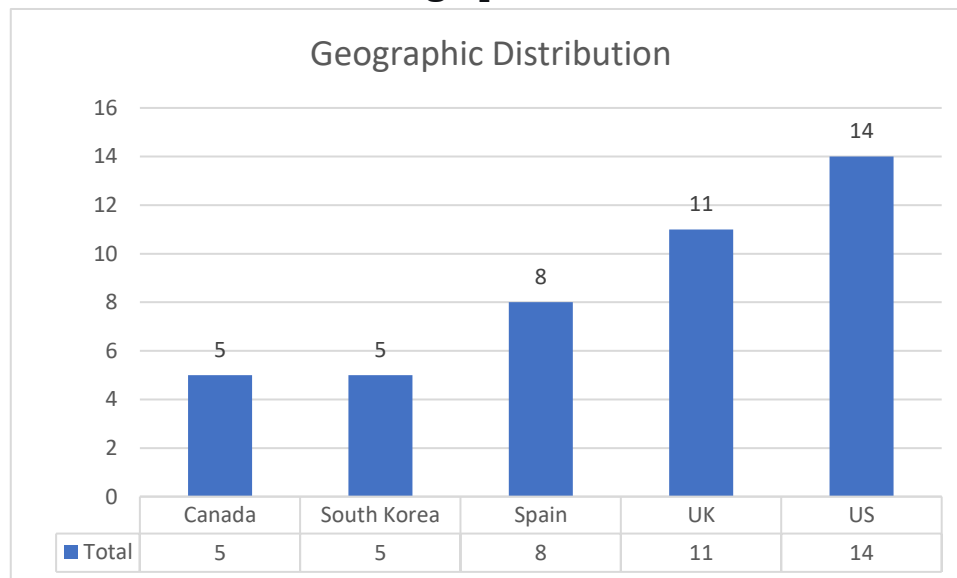
**Source: Author, 2025**

The stability in annual output, averaging approximately 10 articles per year, suggests that research on Servant Leadership has secured a stable position within organizational and leadership studies. This consistency indicates that SL is no longer a novel concept but is recognized as a relevant and persistent area of inquiry for understanding modern organizational dynamics. The slight peak in 2021 is particularly telling; it aligns with the global COVID-19 pandemic, a period that likely intensified the search for leadership models that foster support, empathy, and employee well-being which is a hallmarks of servant leadership, amidst widespread organizational crisis and change. This trend underscores the concept's perceived practical utility in helping organizations navigate complex challenges.

### 3.1.2 Geographic distribution

The geographic distribution of research, determined by the country of the corresponding author, reveals a significant concentration of scholarly activity in a few key nations. For clarity, Figure 2 includes only countries that produced at least five articles during the review period.

**Table 2: Geographic Distribution**



**Source: Author, 2025**

The findings demonstrate a pronounced Western and Anglo-Saxon dominance in organizational SL research, led by the United States (14 articles) and the United Kingdom (11). This is consistent with the geographic origins of the modern SL construct and the concentration of business and management scholarship in these regions.

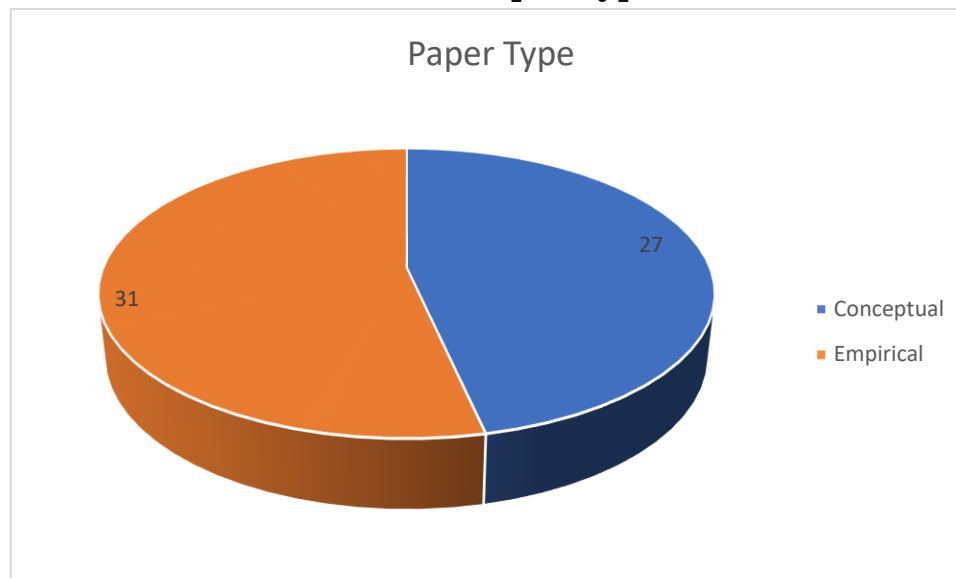
However, the data reveals crucial insights for global organizations. Spain's significant contribution (8 articles) indicates strong engagement within Southern European organizational contexts. Most notably, the presence of South Korea (5 articles) as a top contributor is critical. It provides evidence that the application of servant leadership is being rigorously examined within East Asian organizational cultures, which are often characterized by hierarchical structures. This suggests that the principles of SL can be adapted and are found to be effective even in cultural settings distinct from its Western origins. For multinational organizations, this growing body of work is essential for understanding how to implement leadership development programs across different cultural units.

Nevertheless, the overall lack of research from Africa, South America, and most of Asia represents a significant gap. The current literature offers limited guidance for organizations operating in these regions, potentially overlooking unique cultural nuances that could influence how servant leadership is perceived and enacted locally.

### 3.1.3 Article type

The analysis reveals a near-even split in the types of papers published, with a slight majority being empirical studies. This balance provides a comprehensive view of the field, encompassing both theoretical advancements and practical validations.

**Table 3: Paper Type**



**Source: Author, 2025**

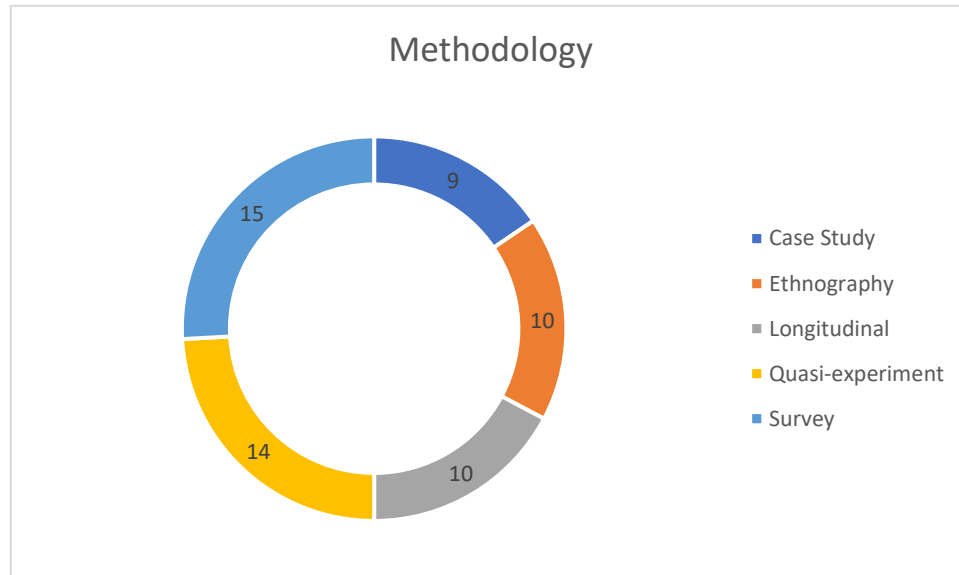
The strong presence of conceptual papers (27 articles, 46.6%) indicates that the field is still actively engaged in theory-building. These papers play a crucial role in refining the definitional boundaries of SL, proposing new conceptual models that link SL to emerging organizational phenomena (e.g., digital transformation, sustainability, well-being), and critiquing existing frameworks. This ongoing theoretical discourse is essential for the maturation of the construct and ensures it remains relevant to evolving organizational realities.

The slight majority of empirical papers (31 articles, 53.4%) demonstrates a commitment to grounding theoretical propositions in evidence. This empirical focus is critical for establishing the legitimacy of SL among practitioners and scholars who prioritize evidence-based management. It provides the necessary data to convince organizational leaders of SL's tangible benefits, moving it from a philosophical ideal to a validated leadership approach with demonstrable outcomes. The balanced ratio suggests a healthy research ecosystem where new theoretical ideas are subsequently tested and validated through empirical inquiry, fostering a robust and evolving understanding of servant leadership in organizations.

### 3.1.4 Methodology

Going further into the data analysis, empirical studies the methodological approaches employed are overwhelmingly quantitative, with qualitative and mixed-methods designs being significantly underrepresented.

**Table 4: Methodology**



**Source: Author, 2025**

The dominance of quantitative methods (87.1% of empirical studies) confirms that the field relies heavily on cross-sectional survey-based methodologies. This approach is highly effective for establishing statistical relationships between SL and key organizational variables (e.g., employee performance, job satisfaction, trust, turnover intentions) across large samples. It allows researchers to generalize findings and build a compelling case for the predictive power of servant leadership on positive organizational outcomes.

However, this methodological imbalance reveals a significant gap. The scarcity of qualitative studies (9.7%) means we lack rich, contextual insights into *how* servant leadership is enacted in the daily life of an organization. Qualitative approaches, such as in-depth case studies, interviews, and ethnographic observation, are needed to uncover the nuanced behaviors of servant leaders, the challenges they face in political organizational environments, and the lived experiences of the followers they serve. Furthermore, the minimal use of mixed-methods (3.2%) represents a missed opportunity to harness the strengths of both approaches. A mixed-methods design could, for example, use a survey to quantify SL's impact on performance and then use follow-up interviews to explain the mechanisms behind that statistical relationship.

### 3.1.5 Research theme

A core objective of this systematic review was to identify and examine the prevailing thematic areas within Servant Leadership (SL) research in

organizational contexts over the past five years. From the analysis of the 58-article corpus, four dominant thematic clusters emerged. To qualify as a distinct theme, a topic had to be the central focus of at least five separate articles which demonstrate consistent analytical relevance across the literature. The identified themes are summarized in Table 3 below and discussed in detail below.

**Table 3: Servant Leadership Research Themes (2019 - 2024)**

| Authors                                                                                              | Theme                                          | Key Theme                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Eva et al. (2019); Liden et al. (2020); Lee et al. (2020); Hoch et al. (2020)                        | Performance and Organizational Outcomes        | Examines the impact of SL on job performance, creativity, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), turnover intentions, and overall firm performance. |
| Mayer et al. (2021); Rivkin et al. (2022); Chiniara & Bentein (2018); Sousa & van Dierendonck (2020) | Psychological and Mediating Mechanisms         | Focuses on the "why" and "how," exploring mediators like trust, psychological safety, psychological capital, and leader-member exchange (LMX).          |
| Sendjaya & Cooper (2021); van Dierendonck & Patterson (2019); Barbuto & Gottfredson (2021)           | Antecedents and Leader Development             | Investigates the intrinsic motivations, values, and personality traits that predict SL, alongside models for measuring and developing servant leaders.  |
| Ozyilmaz & Cicek (2021); Abdelmotaleb & Saha (2020); Schwarz et al. (2022)                           | Cross-Cultural Applications and Public Service | Tests the applicability and measurement invariance of SL across different national cultures and its unique value in public sector and NGO contexts.     |

**Source:** Authors' Compilation, 2025

### 3.5.1 Performance and Organizational Outcomes

This is the most prolific theme, capturing the extensive efforts to link servant leadership to tangible and intangible organizational benefits. Empirical articles within this category consistently demonstrate that SL is a significant predictor of positive outcomes at multiple levels. At the individual level, studies correlate SL with increased employee task performance, enhanced creativity, and stronger organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), where employees go beyond their formal job duties (Eva et al., 2019). At the team level, SL is associated with higher team potency and effectiveness (Liden et al., 2020). Crucially, SL is also strongly linked to reducing negative outcomes, most notably lower turnover intentions and actual turnover (Lee et al., 2020). The strength of this theme lies in its direct translational value for organizations; it provides compelling evidence that

investing in servant leadership practices can yield significant returns in productivity, innovation, and talent retention.

### **3.5.2 Psychological and Mediating Mechanisms**

Moving beyond establishing *that* SL works, this theme delves into *how* and *why* it influences outcomes. Research here focuses on unlocking the "black box" between leader behavior and follower performance. A consensus has emerged that SL does not directly cause outcomes but operates through key psychological mediators. Primarily, SL builds trust in the leader and fosters a climate of psychological safety, enabling employees to take risks and voice ideas without fear (Mayer et al., 2021). It is also shown to enhance followers' psychological capital (PsyCap)—their hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism—which in turn boosts performance (Rivkin et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies explore the role of leader-member exchange (LMX) as a mediating mechanism, finding that SL fosters high-quality, trust-based relationships between leaders and each of their followers (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2020). This theme is critical for developing more precise theoretical models and effective interventions.

### **3.5.3 Antecedents and Leader Development**

This theme shifts the focus from the outcomes of SL to its origins, seeking to answer: what makes a servant leader? Research here explores the individual antecedents that predispose leaders to adopt this style, including personality traits such as agreeableness and emotional intelligence, as well as deeply held values and moral identity (Sendjaya & Cooper, 2021). Concurrently, a significant sub-focus is on measurement and development. Scholars continue to refine and validate scales for measuring SL to improve empirical rigor (Barbuto & Gottfredson, 2021). Furthermore, conceptual papers within this theme propose frameworks for how organizations can select, train, and develop leaders who embody servant principles, moving the concept from an innate trait to a developable competency (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2019).

### **3.5.4 Cross-Cultural Applications and Public Service**

This emerging theme examines the boundary conditions and unique applications of SL. A growing body of research investigates whether the principles of SL are universally applicable or are perceived differently across cultural contexts. Studies compare the effectiveness of SL in Eastern vs. Western cultures, often testing the measurement invariance of scales to ensure constructs are equivalent (Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2021). Findings suggest that while the core elements are valued globally, their manifestation and impact can be nuanced by cultural values like power distance and collectivism. Secondly, SL is frequently studied within public service and non-profit organizations (Abdelmotaleb & Saha, 2020; Schwarz et al., 2022). The ethos of service in SL aligns naturally with the mission-driven goals of these sectors, and research confirms its potent

effectiveness in enhancing motivation, commitment, and public service motivation (PSM) among employees in these fields. This theme expands the relevance of SL beyond traditional business settings.

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