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FACILITATING WORK ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PERCEIVED ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN HOTELS

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Abstract: The hotel sector is characterized by an array of issues conducive to employee disengagement. These include problems of low wages, unstable shift working hours, unclear career structures, autocratic leadership style, long working hours, gender discrimination, tribal discrimination, stress, and burnout, among others. In a quest to explore and alleviate the above predicaments, the current study assessed the influence of perceived organisational support on work engagement, mediated by servant leadership. The interrelationships among servant leadership, perceived organisational support, and work engagement remain unexplored especially in Zimbabwe's hospitality sector, limiting the development of contextually grounded models for improving employee performance and retention. Using a quantitative research approach, the study's research objectives were to: (1) assess the effect of perceived organisational support on servant leadership, (2) determine the effect of servant leadership on work engagement, (3) examine the effect of perceived organisational support on work engagement, and (4) establish the mediating role of servant leadership on the relationship between perceived organisational support and work engagement. The study used a closed-ended questionnaire to collect data from 218 participants working in the hotel sector. Clustered sampling technique was applied. Findings revealed that perceived organisational support has a positive influence on work engagement. It was established that perceived organisational support necessitates work engagement. It was also confirmed that servant leadership enhances work engagement. Furthermore, it was attested that servant leadership positively mediates the relationship between perceived organisational support and work engagement. The study recommends that human resources managers implement policies and initiatives that demonstrate care for employee well-being and value their contributions.

Keywords: work engagement, perceived organisational support, servant leadership, hospitality sector

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry, which hotels are a part of, plays a vital role in economic growth, employment creation, and destination competitiveness, particularly in developing regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, where tourism continues to expand as a strategic development pillar (Vakira & Shereni, 2025; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). Hospitality organisations, however, operate in complex environments which are characterised by high emotional labour, irregular working hours, and chronic labour shortages (Vakira et al., 2023). These conditions, however, place substantial psychological and operational strain on employees (Vakira & Shereni, 2025). As guest expectations rise and competition intensifies, the capacity of hospitality organisations to deliver exceptional and memorable experiences (Hurombo et al., 2024) increasingly depends on their ability to cultivate a motivated, engaged, and well-supported workforce (Ozturk & Karatepe, 2019).

Grobelna & Wyszkowska-Wróbel (2023) emphasises that employee engagement is now one of the strongest predictors of service excellence in hotels, while Ozturk & Karatepe (2019) argue that supportive organisational climates are indispensable for sustaining performance under demanding service conditions. Work engagement, defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (Elamin et al., 2024; Mohammed et al., 2025), is a critical component that can augment the organisational outcomes and it is linked with high customer satisfaction (Akhmetshin et al., 2019). Despite the importance of work engagement, organisations, globally, are facing a serious crisis of work disengagement, which negatively impacts service excellence and economies (Mann & Harter, 2016).

These employee disengagement challenges are partly being triggered by precarious working conditions affecting employees in the hotels (Vakira & Shereni, 2025). While global research emphasises that work engagement (WE), perceived organisational support (POS) and servant leadership (SL) are critical predictors of employee well-being, service

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excellence and retention (Pramita & Soetjipto, 2023; Al-Azab & Al-Romeedy, 2024), evidence from the African and Southern African hospitality context remains strikingly limited (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). Recent scholarly reviews consistently observe that African hospitality research lags behind other regions, particularly in the domains of organisational behaviour and human resource management, where only a small fraction of studies have examined employee psychological states or leadership dynamics (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Ramukumba, 2023). Without empirical insight into how employees in this context experience engagement, organisational support, and leadership, hospitality organisations may struggle to address high turnover, declining service quality and poor employee morale. Furthermore, the interrelationship between servant leadership, POS, and work engagement remains unexplored in Zimbabwe's hotel sector, limiting the development of contextually grounded models for improving employee performance and retention. This absence of evidence underscores a significant knowledge gap and restricts the ability of managers, policymakers, and educators to design interventions that strengthen the psychological and organisational foundations of exceptional service delivery. The main purpose of this study is, therefore, to assess the influence of perceived organisational support on work engagement, mediated by servant leadership in the hotel sector in Zimbabwe. The study's specific research objectives are:

1. To determine the influence of perceived organisational support on servant leadership.
2. To examine the influence of servant leadership on work engagement.
3. To establish the influence of perceived organisational support on work engagement.
4. To ascertain the mediating role of servant leadership on the association between perceived organisational support and work engagement. The current study is relevant to the hotel sector because it assists management and human resource practitioners in formulating strategies and policies that can enhance work engagement behaviour and reduce job disengagement and labour turnover. Limited research has also been conducted on the nexus between work engagement, perceived organisational support and the mediatory role of servant leadership in the hotel industry in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored oin the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which was originally proposed by Homans (1959) to assess human behaviour, as cited in (Molm, 2015). Molm (2015) suggests that the social exchange theory exists when individuals expect something from others and believe that what they offer is of value to others. The SET hence emphasises that when one part of the relationship process provides the other with a benefit that is viewed as important, the other part is obliged to reciprocate by proffering something of value (Oparaocha, 2016). Further, when the relationship is stable, it paves the way for trust and continuous mutual understanding between the parties involved (Chinomona & Mofokeng, 2016). A good relationship between the two parties thus generates positive behaviour, which positively impacts productivity. On the other hand, it is argued that the main reason why employees are disengaged is that they do not view their employers as supportive. Rather, they concentrate on making money at the expense of employees. In that regard, the social exchange theory assumes that when there is fair treatment of employees, the employees will reciprocate by showing high levels of engagement towards their work. Therefore, the social exchange theory was employed to underpin work engagement, servant leadership and perceived organisational support, which are key concepts of the current study.

The Hotel Sector

The hotel industry forms a significant segment of the hospitality and tourism sector, primarily tasked with providing accommodation for local and international guests (Damaianti et al., 2024). However, guests often expect more than just facilities; they largely anticipate exceptional service experiences delivered by hotel employees and their managers (Vakira et al., 2026). Hotel employees, particularly those in frontline roles, such as front office, food and beverage, and housekeeping, are expected to consistently deliver high-quality service (Vakira et al., 2026). Thus, as the hotel industry grows, there is increasing recognition of the pivotal role played by employees in addressing the varied needs of guests. Despite this, employee disengagement remains a pressing issue within the sector (Grobelna & Wiśniewska-Walczak, 2023; Tokarz-Kocik, 2025; Abhishek et al., 2025). Sustaining work engagement in the hotel sector remains challenging due to persistent issues, such as staff shortages, work intensification, high turnover rates, fluctuating demand and emotional exhaustion (Karatepe & Tizabi, 2011; Bakker et al., 2023). Consequently, understanding work engagement within the specific operational realities of hotels remains a critical research priority. Continued empirical inquiry is necessary to deepen insight into how engagement is experienced by hotel employees across roles and contexts. The main purpose of this study is, therefore, to assess the interaction among work engagement, perceived organisational support and servant leadership in the hotel sector in Zimbabwe.

Work Engagement

Work engagement is described as a deeply positive and motivational work-related state, distinguished by vigour, dedication and absorption (van Roekel et al., 2024; Reig-Botella et al., 2024; Gwamanda et al., 2024). Employers are acknowledging that engaged employees produce positive organisational results, which comprise job performance, consumer satisfaction, financial returns and positive organisational behaviour that mitigates turnover intention (Elamin et al., 2024; Mohammed et al., 2025). The above constructs are also consistent with the perception by Kim et al. (2013), who highlight that work engagement has been viewed as a fundamental component in transforming employees' change leading them to augmented performance. The aim for opening a business is to maximise profits through employees who know their work and are committed to their duties. Work engagement leads to better individual initiatives like innovative behaviour, personal initiatives, and organisational initiatives, which lead to reduced turnover, improved productivity,

amplified customer satisfaction, customer retention and loyalty (Dhir & Shukla, 2019). The above sentiments were echoed by Ndoro & Martins (2019) who noted that work engagement is increasingly generating enhanced productivity, business growth, innovation, employee retention and commitment, which in turn greatly contributes to the financial outcomes of the organisation. Mann & Harter (2016) highlight that improving work engagement is necessary because engaged employees have 51% lower turnover, 27% less absenteeism, 18% more productivity and 12% higher profitability. Therefore, work engagement curtails high labour turnover and unnecessary absenteeism (Vakira et al., 2023). If employees are engaged, the financial records of the entity improve. Work engagement occurs at three levels: individual, team and organisation (Frazier et al., 2017; Dhir & Shukla, 2019)and engagement at all these levels ensures that employees fulfil the organisational strategy (Ndoro & Martins, 2019).

Perceived Organisational Support

Arasanmi & Krishna (2019) described perceived organisational support (PSO) as the extent to which the organisation values the contribution of employees and cares about their well-being. The above definition shows that perceived organisational support is how employees perceive the support they are given by the organisation in terms of their well-being. This support can be in the form of supervisory support or salaries and benefits. Perceived organisational support is a critical issue that encourages employees to continue working and develop positive behaviour towards the organisation (Yan et al., 2024). Therefore, organisations should treat employees fairly when they are promoting or rewarding them. Accordingly, employees who possess similar experience and qualifications should be fairly remunerated in line with their performance, ensuring a positive perception towards the organisation and minimising complaints about distributive injustice.

If employees rank the support of the organisation highly, positive behaviour manifests and their performance will be at its pinnacle. The employees should view the organisation as caring about their welfare and well-being so that their attachment and commitment to the organisation is enhanced (Aslan, 2019). Thus, when an employee feels that the POS is high, work attitude and energy towards their work and enthusiasm improve (Alleyne et al., 2022), which facilitates enhanced work engagement (Xu et al., 2022). Within the hospitality context, POS has been shown to buffer the negative effects of job stress and emotional labour, thereby enhancing job satisfaction and loyalty (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Kim et al., 2013; Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). However, if employees perceive that their organisation does not recognise their effort, it can lead to a higher rate of absenteeism and increased labour turnover intention, which translates to actual turnover (Battistelli et al., 2016). The above notion means that high perceived organisational support is a robust negative predictor of turnover intention (Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019). The dimensions of perceived organisational support include fair treatment, supervisory support, rewards and job conditions (Hudie et al., 2017).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is described as a philosophy that values service to others over egotism (Sullivan & Self, 2019) and is linked to the growth and well-being of employees in the organisation and the community (Piong, 2016). It is a leadership style that enhances moral culture in the community, prioritises the needs of employees, ensures fair treatment, and demonstrates compassion (Lamprinou et al., 2021). Furthermore, it can be noted that servant leaders prioritise the interests of their followers at the expense of their own needs. Servant leaders thus exhibit humility (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2018), selfless behaviour, altruism, people-centricity (Phan et al., 2018) and they are dedicated, higher performers, involved in their work and satisfied. They facilitate new ideas and challenge employees to be innovative champions. It is also argued that servant leadership is positively associated with organisational commitment as it emphasises paying attention to the needs of employees and promoting growth for subordinates (Irfan & Rjoub, 2021).

The strategy of servant leaders is thus to motivate employees through the fulfilment of their needs first before they consider their own. In today's business, organisations need to maintain their level of competitiveness to enlarge their market share in an environment where change is continuous and rapid. Therefore, organisations need leaders who motivate employees to embrace change and enhance organisational commitment because work disengagement is costly to the organisation, particularly in the hospitality sector (Irfan & Rjoub, 2021). Servant leadership not only promotes employee organisational commitment and performance, but also nurtures employee engagement and trust between members and their leaders, guided by its mantra of "serving people first" (Sims, 2018). This type of leadership style is, therefore, crucial for enhancing organisational performance and competitiveness (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2018). This leadership style is particularly important in the organisation as it facilitates fairness and compassion toward employees while promoting ethical cultures in contemporary workplace settings (Lamprinou et al., 2021). These outcomes promote employees' identification with their leader, which augments their work engagement and triggers positive job attitudes such as job satisfaction (Hoch et al., 2018). Servant leadership encompasses multiple dimensions, which include creating value for the community, fostering emotional healing, putting subordinates first, demonstrating conceptual skills, empowering others, behaving ethically, building relationships and helping subordinates grow and succeed (Liden et al., 2015).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Perceived Organisational Support and Servant Leadership

The literature reveals that there is scant research focusing on the relationship between perceived organisational support (POS) and servant leadership (Wang et al., 2024; Mahmoud, 2023). Related studies include Wang et al. (2024) who examined POS and perceived supervisory support in relation to workplace aggression and turnover in hotels, showing that high POS mitigates negative outcomes of aggression and reduces turnover intentions. Mahmoud (2023) studied Egyptian hotels and showed that POS—especially support for environmental initiatives—enhances employees' green behaviours and

sustainability performance, indicating that hospitality organisations can leverage POS for environmental, as well as HR outcomes. DeConinck & DeConinck (2017), however, noted that servant leadership positively influences POS, suggesting that leaders who prioritise serving others can enhance employees' perceptions of organisational support. The current study argues that the POS-SL relationship may also be reciprocal. When employees perceive a high level of organisational concern for their well-being, leaders may, in turn, feel motivated to reciprocate by adopting servant leadership behaviours, and sacrificing their own interests for the benefit of their subordinates. Nevertheless, due to the limited empirical evidence on this reciprocal dynamic in existing literature, the current study assumes that:

H_1: There is a significant relationship between POS and SL.

SL and WE

The literature revealed that servant leadership, because of its philosophy of needs of employees first, can necessitate improved work engagement. The work of Cai et al. (2024) carried out in China and collected from project-based organisations, established that servant leadership positively influence work engagement in the workplace. Similarly, earlier work by Carter & Baghurst (2014) assessed the influence of servant leadership on employee engagement and it was believed that the relationship between the two variables is positive. In Turkey, it was established that servant leadership has a positive effect on work engagement in the hotel industry (Kaya & Karatepe, 2020). Therefore, it can be presumed that:

H_2: There is a significant relationship between SL and WE.

POS and WE

The literature confirmed that perceived organisational support has a positive effect on work engagement. Bano et al. (2018) perceived that organisational support has a positive effect on work engagement, although the impact was different from one generation to the other Khajuria (2021) explored the relationship between perceived organisational support and work engagement. The results articulated that the independent variable positively predicts work engagement. The study by Nikhil & Arthi (2018) confirmed a positive relationship between perceived organisational support and employee engagement. Therefore, it can be proposed that:

H_3: There is a significant relationship between POS and WE.

Mediating Role of SL on the Relationship between POS and WE

There are limited studies on the mediating role of servant leadership on the association between perceived organisational support and work engagement. It was established that servant leadership can negatively impact psychological distress, which means it can buffer symptoms of stress in employees (Zada et al., 2022). It was confirmed that servant leadership positively moderates the association between work engagement and organisational innovation in times of crises (Dalain, 2023). This suggests that servant leadership is a panacea for employee disengagement. Servant leaders are able to motivate employees to behave positively. Asad et al. (2019) noted that servant leadership positively mediates the relationship between high-performance work systems and organisational performance. Therefore, the current study assumed that:

H_4: SL positively mediates the relationship between POS and WE.

Proposed Conceptual Model

The researchers proposed four research hypotheses, which are illustrated in the conceptual model diagram presented below:

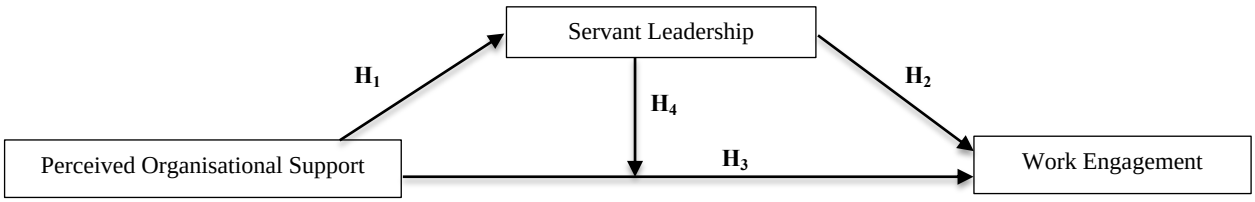


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model (Source: Developed by researchers)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Participants and Research Approach

Saunders et al. (2016) refer to the research approach as the technique the researcher applies in performing research operations. The current study adopted a quantitative approach as the intention was to test the influence of perceived organisational support on work engagement, mediated by servant leadership.

A survey was thus deemed appropriate for the study, and this encompassed the use of standardised closed questions in the collection of participants' views (Burt et al., 2009). The employees in the hotel industry who are based in the Matabeleland South province of Zimbabwe were the targeted population (Table 1). The total number of employees obtained from the Human Resources Department was 650. The researcher used Krejcie & Morgan (1970) to calculate the sample size. Therefore, from the targeted population of 650, the sample size was 242 participants.

Table 1. Distribution of hotels visited per cluster in the Matabeleland South Province

Cluster name	Gwanda	Matobo	Beitbridge	Plumtree
Number of hotels visited: (N= 32)	15	03	10	04

Data Collection and Procedures

Data were collected while upholding values of transparency, confidentiality, data protection and explicit consent of the respondents. Cluster sampling was applied in this study. This is a probability sampling technique in which the entire population is divided into groups called clusters, and a random sample of these clusters is selected for analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Data should be collected from all units within the selected clusters. The cluster sampling technique was used because the population was geographically dispersed. Hotels in the Matabeleland South region are not in the same location, hence clustered sampling was employed (Table 1). The cluster sampling technique is cost-effective and saves time because the population is dispersed. This technique was anchored by a simple random technique (Ormerod, 2006). The survey instrument was pilot tested to confirm the validity and reliability of the research instruments. The questionnaire was pilot tested on 15 potential respondents, from different hotels and one local university and constructive feedback ensured minor adjustments to scales and the reduction in the size of the questionnaires, as respondents felt that the questionnaire was too long. Questionnaires were self-administered face-to-face and online, making use of Google Forms. Some of the employees were on leave during data collection, and some were busy at work; hence, it was imperative to use a Google form to distribute the questionnaire to all participants.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Data from closed-ended questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 30). Correlation analysis was used to analyse all the research objectives. Correlation analysis is used to explain the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. A regression analysis model from SPSS version 30 was used to test all the hypotheses. The Macro Process version 4, which was developed by F. Hayes, was used to measure the mediating effect of servant leadership (Martina & Ahmad, 2010). Data was presented using tables for the entire study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

The research targeted 242 employees contracted in the Hospitality Industry of Zimbabwe's Matabeleland South Province. Out of the distributed questionnaires, 226 were returned. However, 8 were deemed unusable. Consequently, 218 questionnaires were valid for analysis, resulting in a response rate of approximately 90%. Saunders et al. (2007) highlighted that a response rate exceeding 50% is considered adequate to ensure the validity of research findings. Therefore, a response rate of 90% is regarded as sufficiently high to support the credibility and reliability of the study's outcomes. These findings suggest that the sector largely comprises a youthful employee, who may be energetic and well-positioned to propel the organisational performance if appropriately motivated and placed in the right departments.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The analysis of results shown in Table 2; revealed that most respondents were females, accounting for 124 respondents (57%), while males constituted 94 respondents (43%). This indicates a significant gender imbalance within the hotel sector, with a predominance of female employees. The study also established that most employees fall within the 18 to 24-year age group, accounting for 128 respondents (58.7%), followed by those aged 25 to 35, with 61 respondents (28%).

In terms of educational qualifications, most respondents held high school qualifications (N=91 respondents; 42%), followed by those with diploma qualifications (N=79; 36%). This unveils that a significant portion of the employees possess relatively low formal education, which may be reflective of the nature of work in the sector and the predominance of younger employees. The data also revealed that the largest group of employees have between 1 and 5 years of experience (N =79; 36%), followed by those with less than one year (N=70; 32%).

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristic	Frequency N = 218	Percentage (%)	Characteristic	Frequency N = 218	Percentage (%)
Age			**Education**		
18-24 years	128	58.7%	High School	91	41.7%
25-35 years	61	28%	Diploma	79	36.2%
36-40 years	18	8.3%	Degree	41	18.8%
41-45years	8	3.7%	Postgraduate	7	3.2%
46 years and above	3	1.3%	**Work experience**		
Departments			Less than 1 year	70	32.1%
Management	17	7.8%	1-5 years	79	36.2 %
Human resources	17	7.8%	6-10 years	50	22.9 %
Sales & Marketing	16	7.3%	11- 20 years	16	7.3 %
Front Office	50	22.9%	21 years and above	3	1.4 %
Housekeeping	57	26.1%	**Gender**		
Kitchen	28	12.8%	Male	94	43%
Restaurant	33	15.1%	Female	124	57%

This tendency suggests a relatively high rate of employee turnover within the hospitality sector, as a significant proportion of the workforce comprises relatively new employees. Supporting this observation, the data also shows that only three (N=3; 1%) respondents had over 21 years of experience, highlighting the limited number of long-serving employees in the sector. These findings reflect potential challenges related to employee retention and institutional knowledge loss

within the Zimbabwean hotel sector. Finally, in terms of employee deployment, housekeeping had the highest number of respondents with 57 respondents (26%), and front office had 50 respondents (23%). These results indicate that most employees in the hospitality sector are placed in the front office and the housekeeping departments.

Reliability of the Measurement Instrument

The research instrument was measured and determined using Cronbach's coefficient. The results in Table 3 below; include the measurement instruments of the Work Engagement Scale, which demonstrated strong internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of α = .92, Perceived Organisational Support α = .89, and Servant Leadership α = .97. The scale items exceeded the acceptable threshold of α = .70 as recommended by Nunnally (1978). In that respect, these results confirm a high internal consistency on all concepts used by the current study. Therefore, it can be noted that these measurement instruments were reliable. Table 3 below displays the results:

Table 3. Factor Loading and Cronbach's Alpha

Constructs	Items	Loading	Items	Loading	Alpha	Constructs	Items	Loading	Items	Loading	Alpha
Work Engagement	WE1	0.92	WE10	0.92	0.92	Servant Leadership	SL1	0.97	SL11	0.97	0.97
	WE2	0.92	WE11	0.92			SL2	0.97	SL12	0.97	
	WE3	0.92	WE12	0.92			SL3	0.97	SL13	0.97	
	WE4	0.92	WE13	0.92			SL4	0.97	SL14	0.97	
	WE6	0.92	WE14	0.92			SL5	0.97	SL15	0.97	
	WE7	0.92	WE15	0.92			SL6	0.97	SL16	0.97	
	WE8	0.92	WE16	0.92			SL7	0.97	SL17	0.97	
	WE9	0.91	WE17	0.92			SL8	0.97	SL18	0.97	
Perceived Organisational Support	POS1	0.90	POS11	0.88	0.89		SL9	0.97	SL19	0.97	
	POS4	0.90	POS14	0.88			SL10	0.97	SL20	0.97	
	POS7	0.88	POS15	0.88							
	POS8	0.88	POS16	0.89							
	POS10	0.88									

Correlation Analysis between POS and SL

The results indicated a strong positive correlation between perceived organisational support and servant leadership. This relationship was statistically significant, as evidenced by a p-value of 0.000**,** which is below the conventional cut-off threshold of 0.05**.** The Spearman's rho coefficient was 0.61**,** signifying a strong positive association between the two variables. This suggests that as levels of POS increase by 61%, servant leadership increases correspondingly. These findings highlight the importance of perceiving organisational support positively as leaders who recognise such support end up serving the needs of employees first, hence improving employee work engagement in the hospitality sector. The detailed results are presented in Table 4**.**

Table 4. Correlation between POS and SL **(**** - Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

			PerOrSup	ServLead
Spearman's rho	PerOrSup	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.612**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	218	218
	ServLead	Correlation Coefficient	.612**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	218	218

Correlation Analysis between SL and WE

The results indicated a weak to moderate positive correlation between servant leadership and work engagement. This relationship was statistically significant, as evidenced by a p-value of 0.000**,** which is below the conventional cut-off threshold of 0.05**.** The Spearman's rho coefficient was 0.38**,** signifying a weak to moderate positive association between the two variables. This suggests that as levels of SL increase by 38%, work engagement increases correspondingly. These findings highlight the importance of applying servant leadership behaviour or approach which considers the needs of employees first as a strategy which increases the levels of work engagement of employees in the hospitality sector. The detailed results are presented in Table 5**.**

Table 5. Correlation between SL and WE **(**** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

			ServLead	WorkEng
Spearman's rho	ServLead	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.379**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	218	218
	WorkEng	Correlation Coefficient	.379**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	218	218

Correlation Analysis between POS and WE

The results indicated a weak positive correlation between perceived organisational support and work engagement. This relationship was statistically significant, as evidenced by a p-value of 0.000**,** which is below the conventional cut-off

threshold of 0.05**.** The Spearman's rho coefficient was 0.32**,** signifying a weak positive association between the two variables. This suggests that as levels of POS increase by 32%, work engagement increases correspondingly. These findings highlight that when employees perceive the organisation as supportive and concerned about their well-being, their level of work engagement in the workplace improves. The detailed results are presented in Table 6**.**

Table 6. Correlation between POS and WE (**- Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

			PerOrSup	WorkEng
Spearman's rho	PerOrSup	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.317**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	218	218
	WorkEng	Correlation Coefficient	.317**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	218	218

Testing Research Hypotheses Using Macro Process: This section presents the results attained on the relationships among the proposed hypotheses of the study. These hypotheses were measured using the Macro Process that was proposed by (Hayes et al., 2019). Hayes & Rockwood (2019) highlighted that the mediation test should meet three conditions in the regression analyses: For a mediation effect to be confirmed, the predictor X (CQ) must predict M (SL), and M (Mediator/Moderator) must predict the outcome Y (WE). For full mediation to be confirmed, the predictor variable (CQ) must not have a significant predictive effect on the outcome variable (WE) in the presence of the mediator variable (SL). Where the predictor variable is still significant, then partial mediation or moderation is confirmed.

The Relationship between Perceived Organisational Support and Servant Leadership

A path coefficient of $\beta = 1.609$, se = 0.152 was obtained, indicating a significantly strong positive relationship between perceived organisational support and servant leadership. This suggests that as POS increases, SL increases. The associated p-value of 0.000, which is below the threshold of 0.05, confirms the statistical significance of this relationship. These findings suggest a strong positive effect of POS on servant leadership. However, there is scant research in the literature that has measured the relationship between POS and servant leadership. DeConinck & DeConinck (2017) confirmed that servant leadership positively influences POS, suggesting that leaders who prioritise serving others can enhance employees' perceptions of organisational support. Based on these findings, the alternate hypothesis (H_1), which posited a positive relationship between POS and SL was supported, while the null hypothesis was rejected. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Hypothesis of POS and SL (Note: Dependent variable: ServLead (Servant Leadership). Predictor: PerOrSup (Perceived Organisational Support). B = unstandardised coefficient; SE = standard error; LLCI and ULCI = lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval)

Variable / Statistic		**B**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Model summary		$R = 0.5851$; $R^2 = 0.3423$; MSE = 410.3372; $F(1, 216) = 112.4150$; $p < 0.001$					
Regression coefficients	Constant	27.9472	6.1343	4.5559	< 0.001	15.8563	40.0380
	PerOrSup	1.6092	0.1518	10.6026	< 0.001	1.3100	1.9083

The Relationship between SL and WE

A path coefficient of $\beta = .152$, se = 0.026 was obtained, indicating a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and work engagement. This suggests that as levels of SL increase, WE increases. The associated p-value of 0.000, which is below the threshold of 0.05, confirms the statistical significance of this relationship. These findings suggest a moderate positive effect of servant leadership on work engagement. These results are in line with the work of Cai et al. (2024) who established that servant leadership positively influence work engagement in the workplace. Similarly, the work of Carter & Baghurst (2014) assessed the influence of servant leadership on employee engagement and it was found that the relationship between the two variables is positive. Based on these findings, the alternate hypothesis (H_2), which posited a positive relationship between SL and WE was supported, while the null hypothesis was rejected. The results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Hypothesis of SL and WE (Note: Dependent variable: WorkEng (Work Engagement). Predictor: ServLead (Servant Leadership). B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit of the 95% confidence interval)

Variable / Statistic		**B**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Model Summary		$R = 0.3682$; $R^2 = 0.1356$; MSE = 92.4539; $F(1, 216) = 33.8745$; $p < .001$					
Regression Coefficients	Constant	43.2132	2.4795	17.4284	< .001	38.3262	48.1003
	ServLead	0.1524	0.0262	5.8202	< .001	0.1008	0.2041

Table 9. Hypothesis of POS and WE (Note: Dependent variable: WorkEng (Work Engagement). Predictor: ServLead (Servant Leadership). B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit of the 95% confidence interval)

Variable / Statistic		**B**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Model Summary		$R = 0.3682$; $R^2 = 0.1356$; MSE = 92.4539; $F(1, 216) = 33.8745$; $p < .001$					
Regression Coefficients	Constant	43.2132	2.4795	17.4284	< .001	38.3262	48.1003
	ServLead	0.1524	0.0262	5.8202	< .001	0.1008	0.2041

Mediating Role of Servant Leadership on POS and WE

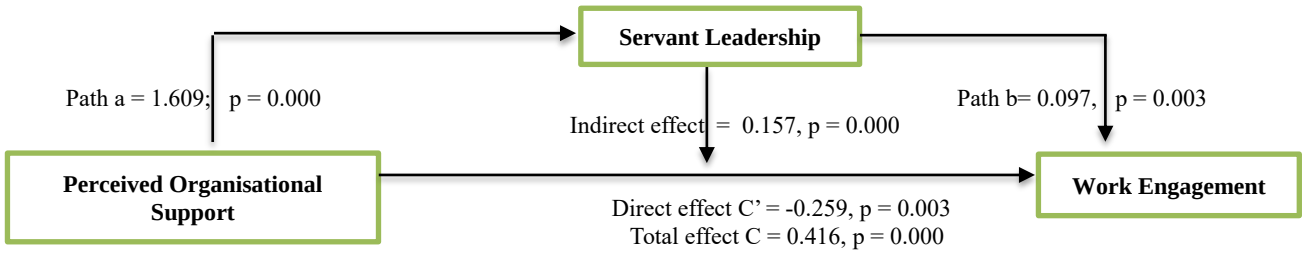
The results established that servant leadership partially mediates the relationship between perceived organisational support and work engagement. The p-value of POS was significant (p = 0.003) in the presence of servant leadership, which explains the partial mediation. These results entail that the direct effect of POS (β = 0.259) is more powerful compared to the indirect effect of servant leadership (β = 0.157) on work engagement. The total effect of both servant leadership and POS was (β = 0.416), which confirms that the presence of servant leadership is significant on the nexus between POS and work engagement. This entails that this model can enhance work engagement in the Hospitality sector. These results resonate with observations by Zada et al. (2022) that servant leadership can negatively impact psychological distress, which means it can buffer symptoms of stress in employees. It was also confirmed that servant leadership positively moderates the association between work engagement and organisational innovation in times of crises (Dalain, 2023). Furthermore, Asad et al. (2019) accepted that servant leadership positively mediates the relationship between high-performance work systems and organisational performance. Based on these findings, it was accepted that servant leadership positively mediates the relationship between perceived organisational support and work engagement in the hospitality sector. Therefore, the alternate hypothesis (H_4) was supported, while the null hypothesis was not accepted. The results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. The Mediating Role of Servant Leadership on POS and WE (Note. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; BootSE = bootstrap standard error; LLCI/ULCI = lower/upper confidence interval limits. The indirect effect uses bootstrap confidence limits; its t and p values were not reported. Confidence level and bootstrap resample count were not provided)

Variable / statistic		B / Effect	SE / BootSE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
MODEL FIT		R = 0.4119; R^2 = 0.1697; MSE = 89.2172; F (2, 215) = 21.9698; p < .001					
REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS	Constant	38.0344	2.9946	12.7008	< .001	32.1318	43.9370
	PerOrSup	0.2594	0.0873	2.9726	.0033	0.0874	0.4314
	ServLead	0.0973	0.0317	3.0658	.0024	0.0347	0.1598
MEDIATION EFFECTS	Total effect (c)	0.4159	0.0721	5.7661	< .001	0.2737	0.5581
	Direct effect (c′)	0.2594	0.0873	2.9726	.0033	0.0874	0.4314
	Indirect effect (ab) via ServLead	0.1565	0.0628	—	—	0.0407	0.2912

Therefore, with the above results, the study developed a tested conceptual model that can be used in the hospitality sector to enhance employee work engagement. Improved work engagement is of paramount important because it can necessitate improved organisational effectiveness. Figure 2 presents the proposed model.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model



CONCLUSIONS

The present study set out to assess the influence of perceived organisational support on work engagement, with servant leadership as a mediating variable, within the hotel sector in Zimbabwe. Anchored in the Social Exchange Theory (Molm, 2015), the study aimed to explore how employees' perceptions of organisational support influence their level of engagement at work, and the extent to which servant leadership helps explain this relationship. The findings revealed a significant and positive relationship between perceived organisational support and work engagement. This suggests that when employees believe that their organisation values their contributions and genuinely cares for their well-being, they are more likely to invest emotionally and cognitively in their work. This is particularly relevant in the hospitality sector, where employees often face high job demands, limited resources, and challenging work conditions.

Furthermore, the study found that servant leadership partially mediates the relationship between POS and work engagement. This implies that perceived organisational support not only directly increases engagement but also encourages leadership behaviours characterised by empathy, humility, and a strong focus on employee development. These servant leadership behaviours, in turn, enhance employees' sense of purpose, belonging, and motivation at work. In conclusion, the study highlights the critical role of both organisational support and leadership style in promoting work engagement in the hospitality industry. It provides empirical support for the application of the Social Exchange Theory in explaining how positive organisational practices and leadership behaviours interact to shape employee outcomes.

Given the labour-intensive nature of hospitality, these constructs have substantial practical implications. Firstly, hotels seeking to reduce turnover and improve service quality should prioritise supportive HR practices, leadership development programmes, employee recognition systems, and mechanisms for enhancing psychological well-being. Thus, HR managers should implement policies and initiatives that demonstrate care for employees' well-being and value their contributions. This could include transparent communication and regular feedback loops. Secondly, HR managers should be offering employee assistance programmes (EAPs), mental health resources, wellness initiatives, recognition and reward systems that

highlight individual and team efforts. This helps build a foundation of perceived organisational support which directly contributes to increased employee engagement. In addition, since servant leadership mediates the relationship between support and engagement, HR managers and the top management should also consider integrating servant leadership principles. Servant leadership training can equip supervisors with relational and developmental competencies, while POS-enhancing initiatives such as fair scheduling, wellness programmes and transparent communication foster employee retention. Ultimately, building a culture that supports engagement, demonstrates organisational care, and develops leaders who serve rather than command, is crucial for sustainable competitiveness in hospitality. Another implication is that hotel human resources departments should select and promote managers who naturally exhibit servant leadership traits. Thus, servant leadership competencies should be included in performance evaluations for managers. By equipping leaders to serve rather than control, employees are more likely to feel supported and engaged. HR can also align organisation values and daily operations with a culture of support and service by creating onboarding programmes that emphasise mutual respect, inclusiveness, and support, encouraging open-door policies and flattening hierarchies to make leaders more accessible.

Lastly, the study also recommends that management for the hotel industry must model servant leadership at all levels, including the executive level. Management should lead by example through humility, empathy, and a commitment to employee development. In addition, they must invest in organisational support systems, and the allocation of resources to initiatives that promote staff well-being, recognition, and career growth. In addition, managers in the hotel sector must embed support and servant leadership approaches into the strategy that aligns corporate goals with employee-first values by making support and leadership behaviours key performance indicators.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study should be treated with caution due to some limitations. The sample size of respondents drawn from the hotel employees in Matabeleland South may not be a true representation of the hotel's population in Zimbabwe. Thus, generalisability may be compromised. The study also used survey instruments, which may be vulnerable to common-method bias and social-desirability effects inherent to self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2024). The study selected hotels and excluded restaurants, which may not be a true representation of the hospitality industry population. The research used a cross-sectional study, which captures data at a single point in time, hence the ability to evaluate long-term effects is limited. However, despite these limitations, the research outcomes proffer valuable perceptions of the hotel community and offer a base for future research. Future researchers should consider assessing how perceived organisational support and servant leadership influence work engagement across different cultural or national contexts, especially within African hospitality markets. It is also important to examine how the association among perceived organisational support, servant leadership, and work engagement evolve longitudinally. Future researchers could study other variables like psychological safety, emotional intelligence or organisational justice that can be employed as mediators or moderators. Furthermore, future researchers should compare the dynamics of these constructs in the hospitality sector versus other service industries like healthcare or retail.

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List of abbreviations: EAPs - Employee Assistance Programmes; HR - Human Resources; POS - Perceived Organisational Support; SL - Servant Leadership; SET - Social Exchange Theory; WE - Work Engagement

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