

Understanding career-meaningfulness and work centrality to serve customers: servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the conservation of resources theory, this research examines the relationship between managers' servant leadership and frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors by considering career meaningfulness as an underlying mechanism. Furthermore, this study investigates a moderated mediation model by proposing work centrality as a boundary condition in the relationship between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

Design/methodology/approach – Two-source (manager-frontline employee dyad) data were collected through a survey questionnaire from hospitality organizations at three different points in time. Hayes' PROCESS macro was used to analyze the data.

Findings – Findings show that managers' servant leadership fosters frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors directly and through career meaningfulness. Frontline employees' work centrality moderates the relationship between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (second stage) and the indirect effect of servant leadership (through career meaningfulness) on customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (moderated mediation).

Practical implications – The findings imply that managers should exhibit servant leadership behaviors to enhance frontline employees' sense of career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Additionally, hospitality organizations and managers are encouraged to prioritize work centrality when hiring frontline employees and implement training programs to cultivate work centrality.

Statements and declarations: The authors declare that we do not have any competing interests. The authors declare that we do not have a conflict of interest. The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data were collected through self-administered questionnaire, and informed consent from the participants were taken before the data collection. Therefore, clearance from the ethics review board was not required.



Originality/value – This study’s originality lies in exploring career meaningfulness as the underlying mechanism linking servant leadership to customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors while also examining work centrality as a second-stage moderator in this relationship.

Keywords Servant leadership, Career meaningfulness, Work centrality,
Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the face of globalization, technological shifts, and evolving customer preferences, organizations, in general, and those in the hospitality industry particularly, are increasingly recognizing the importance of customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (Wang *et al.*, 2024; Zhang and Li, 2023). The frontline employees’ customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors include (1) internal influence, i.e. the initiative taken by frontline employees in communicating with the organization and co-workers to improve service delivery; (2) service delivery, i.e. providing information and assistance to customers; resolving their complaints, and anticipating their needs; and (3) external representation, i.e. representing their organization externally, being vocal advocates of the image, goods, and services of the organization to outsiders (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Bettencourt *et al.*, 2005). Investigating customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors in frontline employees is crucial as it directly influences customer satisfaction (Jung *et al.*, 2017), service provider performance, and organizational success (Wang *et al.*, 2024).

A recent stream of research has started to investigate how these behaviors can be promoted in frontline employees, considering relational, psychological, and motivational mechanisms (e.g. Olorunsola *et al.*, 2022). Among them, the relational ones, such as spiritual well-being (Bayighomog and Arasli, 2019), dominate. Wang *et al.* (2024) underlie the psychological mechanism, i.e. felt obligation, in the connection between inclusive leadership and frontline employees’ customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Past research ignored the perspective of career development while establishing the link between managers’ leadership behavior and frontline employees’ customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Integrating this perspective is imperative for multiple reasons. First, it shifts the focus from task-based outcomes to long-term career development and progression. Second, a career perspective is essential to understanding how leadership influences employees’ sense of purpose and career satisfaction, which drives sustained engagement in customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Third, there is a lack of scholarly evidence on the role of career meaningfulness in explaining the relationship between leadership behaviors and employees’ broader professional growth and enduring commitment, which are essential for fostering proactive behaviors like customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (see Jung *et al.*, 2017). Finally, frontline employees working under a leader exhibiting a positive leadership style can exhibit more customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors as their leaders’ behavior can inculcate a sense of career meaningfulness. Moreover, by considering frontline employees’ work centrality as a boundary condition, the research can enhance the comprehension of contextual factors shaping the influence of career meaningfulness on their customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. When work is central and pivotal in the frontline employees’ lives, their career meaningfulness, caused by positive leadership, can foster their customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. From this perspective, understanding the dispositional and contextual factors that promote customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors is imperative. Among the former, leadership styles, especially servant leadership, which emphasizes empathy, compassion, and a desire to serve others, can enhance customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors by creating a culture of service excellence (Qiu *et al.*, 2022). Yet, the relationships between servant leadership, career meaningfulness, work centrality, and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors need exploration. This portrays untapped opportunities for organizations, especially in the hospitality industry, due to its focus on frontline employees in

service delivery. To address these gaps, using the conservation of resources theory, this study proposes an integrated framework that analyzes the influence of managers' servant leadership on frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, considering frontline employees' career meaningfulness as a mediating mechanism as well as work centrality as a vital moderator on the link between career meaningfulness and their customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

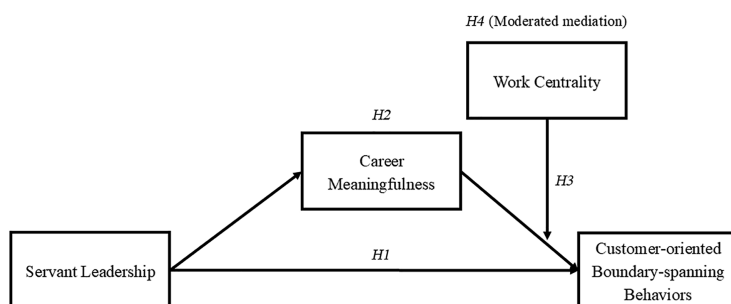
This study contributes to leadership, career development, and service marketing literature. Firstly, it adds to the literature on leadership and service marketing by proposing a fundamental mechanism of career meaningfulness between servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. In so doing, it explicates how servant leadership fosters customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Secondly, identifying work centrality as a boundary condition between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors adds to the literature on career development and service marketing. Lastly, it informs the literature that the interaction of career meaningfulness and work centrality can spur desirable customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Moreover, it offers valuable insights into hospitality organizations. By understanding the relationships between servant leadership, career meaningfulness, work centrality, and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, organizations can develop effective leadership practices that promote employee career-related well-being, positive work ethic beliefs, and customer satisfaction. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study.

Hypotheses development

Servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors

Bettencourt *et al.* (2005) define customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors as the primary functions of frontline employees: (1) representing the organization to customers for developing and enhancing its image, products, and services, (2) influencing the service organization and co-workers by communicating how to improve service delivery, and (3) delivering services to customers in a dedicated, open-to-suggestion, adaptable, and respectful way. It motivates employees to seek novel ways, engage in innovative behaviors, and represent the organization and its services to customers (Olorunsola *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, frontline employees favor leadership styles that prioritize employee needs and foster a positive work environment. Such leadership empowers them to meet customer expectations and embody their organization's values, represent its services, and initiate improvements in service delivery at both individual and organizational levels (Rabiul *et al.*, 2022).

By fostering a supportive work environment and addressing employees' needs, managers instill a sense of superior service delivery and thus represent their organization to customers. Managers' trust in employees' competence, spirit, and skills is crucial for frontline employees'



Source(s): Created by the authors

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (Ye *et al.*, 2019). Some studies also indicate that managers' servant leadership gives employees the autonomy to customize their attitudes and behaviors in various ways (Tuan, 2022). Thus, this study infers that frontline employees working under the guidance of managers who fulfill their needs and provide a supportive work environment may help them adapt their conduct to surpass customers' expectations. Drawing on the resource caravans passageways principle of conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), i.e. the resources in different realms are closely related, this study argues that resources in the situational sphere (e.g. servant leadership) enhance frontline employees' resources in their personal realm. The theory suggests that employees strategically invest their resources in endeavors anticipated to yield prospective resource increases.

Drawing on these arguments, servant leadership can augment frontline employees' personal resources, such as competence, spirit, and motivation. While customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors can enrich frontline employees' resources in the form of in-role performance and creativity, this study argues that employees can invest their personal resources, such as competence and spirit, to engage with customers proactively, sense their expectations, adapt themselves to serve them, represent the organization, and identify ways to improve themselves to better meet customer expectations. Consequently, this proactive approach is expected to enhance their returns (e.g. creativity and performance). Therefore:

- H1. Servant leadership is positively associated with frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

Career meaningfulness as a mediator

Work meaningfulness refers to the degree to which individuals experience their work as important and recognize an alignment between the work and a broader purpose (Michaelson *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, we define career meaningfulness as the degree to which individuals consider their careers significant and maintain an alignment between career, broader purpose, and well-being. A career situation that hinders or restricts employees from achieving their goals can lead to a perceived depletion of their resources, resulting in a diminished sense of meaningfulness in their careers. On the contrary, a career situation that is socially vibrant and promotes support and dialogue provokes employees' perceptions of meaning (Dik *et al.*, 2015). Servant leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering a supportive work environment. This enables frontline employees to comprehend their multifaceted role beyond serving customers. They become ambassadors for the organization and its services, take proactive steps towards self-improvement, enhance its offerings, and foster a positive work culture (Quratulain *et al.*, 2021). Conservation of resources theory suggests that situational resources, such as leadership and a conducive work environment, positively influence individuals' psychological resources. Servant leadership offers frontline employees pertinent situational resources vital to meaningfulness, e.g. a conducive work context (Khan *et al.*, 2022). Past research has also implied that focusing on others' needs and a conducive work environment (the significant components of servant leadership) develop employees' meaningfulness (Jang *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, frontline employees' perceptions of managers' support are among the primary determinants of increased job and career meaningfulness (Lopez and Ramos, 2017). Therefore, building on the conservation of resources theory, this study posits that servant leadership, as a situational resource, increases frontline employees' career meaningfulness (a significant psychological resource) to represent their organization to customers, improve service delivery, and positively influence and motivate coworkers for better service delivery. Thus, this study proposes a positive relationship between servant leadership and the career meaningfulness of frontline employees.

Career meaningfulness provides frontline employees with numerous resources, such as self-efficacy, spirit, a perception of mastery, and a feeling of proficiency (Quigley and Tymon Jr, 2006). Consistent with the conservation of resources theory, people utilize their resources in pursuits that enhance their resource reservoirs. In line with this very argument of conservation of resources theory, we submit that frontline employees who consider that their job is

meaningful for their career promptly capitalize their resources (e.g. self-efficacy, motivation, spirit, and perception of mastery) in customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors to enhance their resources (creative service performance, efficacy, and personal initiative) further. As a result, it is derived that frontline employees' career meaningfulness increases their involvement in customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. This postulation aligns with prior studies (e.g. [Mauno et al., 2022](#)). As such, when frontline employees perceive their work as meaningful and beneficial to their career progression, they will go the extra mile in customer service. Thus:

H2. Frontline employees' career meaningfulness mediates the relationship between servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

Work centrality as a moderator

Conservation of resources theory submits that the effect of situational resources on employees' psychological resources is not alike; instead, individuals with a better pool of psychological resources demonstrate better competence in taking advantage of situational resources. Therefore, this study contends that frontline employees' psychological resources (e.g. work centrality) can influence the effects of servant leadership. Work centrality is crucial for positive outcomes, such as intrapreneurial behaviors, innovative performance, and knowledge sharing ([Usman et al., 2021](#)). Besides, it is negatively related to adverse attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, e.g. knowledge hiding and deviance ([Paesen et al., 2019](#)). Individuals high on work centrality display a convincing connection with their job and consider it vital for them ([Hirschfeld et al., 2000](#)). Therefore, people with high work centrality put in further effort ([Sharabi and Harpaz, 2007](#)) and work extra to succeed in their careers ([Tu et al., 2006](#)).

Moreover, individuals with a higher work centrality expect to achieve more in their job roles. Consequently, they exhibit heightened focus, firm determination, pervasive positivity, persistent hope, a sense of empowerment, and firm confidence ([Diefendorff et al., 2002](#)). Work centrality allows people to get central roles at their jobs, thus increasing their approach to valuable resources ([Paullay et al., 1994](#)). Therefore, work-centric individuals gain more advantages from situational resources, like facilitation in terms of direction and feedback from managers, as well as other imperative financial and informational resources ([Hirschfeld et al., 2000](#)). This gain could increase their sense of meaningfulness in their jobs and careers. Briefly, frontline employees with high work centrality will gain more advantages from situational resources. Therefore, they gain a deeper level of meaning in the jobs and activities they perform for their career. In essence, work centrality supports the effect of servant leadership on career meaningfulness.

To elucidate, the argument that work centrality improves the effect of servant leadership on career meaningfulness conforms to the conservation of resources theory. Furthermore, it suggests that resource enhancement is not uniform for all, and individuals with more resources are more apt to acquire advantages from situational resources. Consequently, they enhance their existing resource reserves. Accordingly, this study argues that frontline employees who are high on work centrality (a personal resource) can acquire more from servant leadership (a situational resource) and exhibit an enhanced aptitude to increase their sense of meaningfulness in the jobs and tasks they perform (a valuable personal resource). Hence:

H3. Frontline employees' work centrality moderates the positive association between servant leadership and frontline employees' career meaningfulness such that the association is strong (weak) when work centrality is high (low).

Moderated mediation

As proposed earlier in [H2](#), servant leadership positively influences frontline employees' career meaningfulness, which, as a result, plays a role as a stimulating element for them to demonstrate customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. To clarify, the influence of

servant leadership transmits to frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors through their career meaningfulness. Additionally, the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) proposes that people with psychological resources benefit more from situational resources. As a result, the study proposes H3 above. Employees high on work centrality attempt to work more effectively in their jobs, and consequently, they become more committed, positive, and hopeful (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2002). Likewise, frontline employees who are high on work centrality are more competent in utilizing servant leadership that could develop their career meaningfulness, which, thus, facilitates them to serve customers while representing their organizations to deal with the customers effectively (Jung and Yoon, 2016). Consequently, it is argued that the indirect positive relationship between servant leadership and frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors through career meaningfulness is strong (weak) for frontline employees who are high (low) on work centrality. Specifically, frontline employees' high (low) work centrality may strengthen (weaken) servant leadership's indirect (via career meaningfulness) relationship with their customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. From a statistical perspective, this denotes a moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015), in which work centrality moderates the indirect effect of managers' servant leadership behavior on frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors through their career meaningfulness. Therefore:

- H4. Frontline employees' work centrality moderates the indirect association between servant leadership and frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (through career meaningfulness) such that the association is strong (weak) when work centrality is high (low).

Methods

Sample and procedure

The data were gathered at three points in time from two sources (manager-frontline employees dyads) using a survey questionnaire in three-to-five-star hotels in Pakistan. The hospitality industry is vital in performing activities requiring interaction, collaboration, and customer communication. Investigating frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors in the hospitality industry in Pakistan is specifically pertinent due to its cultural diversity and richness. As representatives of this industry, frontline employees witness rapid growth, making it an opportune time to study frontline employees' behaviors as they serve customers, represent their organizations, and try to improve themselves to deal with the evolving expectations of the customers of this industry. Similarly, studying the supervisors' servant leadership and frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors in the hospitality industry in Pakistan may add insights into how managers can facilitate frontline employees in establishing a service climate where they not only focus on service delivery but also represent the organization to the customers. Consequently, it is incumbent upon frontline employees to heighten their awareness and enhance their adaptability to serve customers and represent their organization (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Bettencourt *et al.*, 2005) more effectively. Frontline employee's customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors can facilitate organizations' competitiveness because these behaviors support frontline employees in not only sensing and serving customers but also representing their organization effectively and contributing to improving service delivery (Prior, 2016). Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors help frontline employees accomplish customer satisfaction and the organization's branding (Schepers and Nijssen, 2018). Because the authors believe the hospitality industry in Pakistan is an appropriate context for investigating customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

To gather data, first, a master list of 740 managers working in three-to-five-star hotels was developed. Upon the initial contact, 376 managers agreed to participate in the survey

and gave us details of frontline employees working with them. Then, we emailed them cover letters that briefly described the study's purpose and the confidentiality guarantee. We randomly selected one frontline employee from each of the lists given to us. In the first round (time 1), we got 307 responses from frontline employees regarding their demographics, work centrality, and their managers' servant leadership. After eight weeks 1, at the second round (time 2), we got 274 frontline employees' replies about their career meaningfulness. Finally, after eight weeks, at the third round (time 3), we contacted the managers of 374 frontline employees who had responded to the survey at time 1 and time 2. We got 257 managers' responses about their frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. After aligning the data through distinctive codes and thorough assessment, only 245 responses were kept and used for further analysis.

To deal with the problem of common method bias (CMB), data were collected from two distinctive sources. Moreover, the time-lagged design also prevents CMB. The sample of frontline employees included 51.8% males and 48.2% females. Furthermore, 29.4% of frontline employees had completed 12 years of education (intermediate/higher secondary), whereas 34.4 and 36.2% had finished undergraduate (16 years) and graduate (18 years) education, respectively. Their mean age was 30.2 years, and the average duration of their job tenure was 4.5 years.

Measures

All the scales were measured through a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Servant leadership was measured at time 1 through the seven-item scale adapted from [Liden et al. \(2015\)](#). A sample item was "My leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own." Work centrality was also assessed at time 1 by adapting a three-item scale ([Bal and Kooij, 2011](#)). A sample item was "The major satisfaction in my life comes from my job." Career meaningfulness was measured by adapting a three-item scale ([Tymon, 1988](#)). These are: (1) My career is very important to me. (2) My career-related activities are personally fulfilling. (3) My career provides me with a sense of purpose. The items were adapted from a work-specific focus to a broader career context to capture career significance, which aligns with the study's purpose of assessing career meaningfulness. This shift from work to a career-focused context ensures that the emphasis on the importance and meaning of a career is maintained. Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors were evaluated using a thirteen-item scale developed by [Bettencourt et al. \(2005\)](#). A sample item was "This employee follows customer service guidelines with extreme care."

Control variables

To ensure the validity and robustness of the findings, we included several control variables to account for potential confounding effects that might influence the relationships under study. Specifically, frontline employees' gender, age, education, and tenure were controlled, as these demographic factors can shape employees' perceptions of leadership, career meaningfulness, and customer-oriented behaviors. Gender was coded as a binary variable (0 = female, 1 = male), age and tenure were measured in years based on self-reports, and education was coded as an ordinal variable based on the highest level of education achieved (e.g. 1 = 12 years of education (intermediate/higher secondary), 2 = undergraduate (16 years) education, and 3 = graduate (18 years) education). These controls were incorporated into the correlation.

Analytical strategy

We performed confirmatory factor analysis to assess validity and reliability of the constructs. We assessed the reliability of the constructs by calculating Cronbach's alpha. This study examined average variance extracted (AVE) for convergent validity, and the square root of AVE for discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was further confirmed by comparing AVE values

with maximum shared variance (MSV) and average shared variance (ASV). All validity and reliability scores met established thresholds. We conducted descriptive statistics and examined correlations among all constructs to identify basic relationships and ensure data suitability for further analysis. The control variables (gender, age, education, and tenure) showed insignificant correlations with the primary constructs and were excluded from subsequent analyses. We employed Hayes' PROCESS macro to test the hypotheses, specifically utilizing Model 14 for the analysis. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 24.

Analysis and results

Table 1 presents the results of validity and reliability. These results indicate that the constructs meet the established standards for validity and reliability. AVE values greater than 0.50 demonstrate that the majority of variance in each construct's indicators is explained by the construct itself, confirming adequate convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the square root of AVE exceeding inter-construct correlations ensures discriminant validity, affirming that the constructs are conceptually distinct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70 indicate strong internal consistency reliability, as Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) recommended, suggesting that the scales reliably measure their intended constructs.

Table 2 depicts descriptive statistics and the correlations among the constructs. We found insignificant correlations between the control variables and the other constructs (see Table 2), therefore, we did not consider them while performing regression analyses. The significant relationships among the different constructs allow us to conduct further analysis to test the hypotheses.

Table 1. Convergent and discriminant validity

Construct	1	2	3	4	α	AVE	MSV	ASV
1. Servant leadership	<i>0.81</i>				0.93	0.66	0.19	0.12
2. Career meaningfulness	0.44	<i>0.82</i>			0.86	0.67	0.20	0.13
3. Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors	0.37	0.45	<i>0.74</i>		0.94	0.55	0.20	0.11
4. Work centrality	0.14	0.07	0.01	<i>0.75</i>	0.78	0.56	0.02	0.01

Note(s): $N=245$. AVE = Average variance extracted. MSV = Maximum shared variance. ASV = Average shared variance. Italicized values on the diagonals of columns 2–5 are the square root values of AVE

Source(s): Created by the authors based on the results

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Servant leadership	3.41	1.01							
2. Career meaningfulness	2.96	1.12	0.40**						
3. Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors	3.51	1.02	0.35**	0.40**					
4. Work centrality	3.76	0.61	0.10	0.04	0.00				
5. Age	30.18	4.81	−0.03	−0.04	0.02	0.02			
6. Gender	–	–	−0.08	−0.03	0.03	−0.04	0.10		
7. Education	–	–	−0.02	−0.04	0.07	−0.09	−0.07	0.00	
8. Tenure	3.23	1.55	−0.07	0.01	−0.07	0.07	0.09	−0.01	−0.13*

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. Sample size (N) = 245

Source(s): Created by the authors based on the results

The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3. Servant leadership is positively associated with customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.01$), supporting H1. Furthermore, servant leadership demonstrates a positive association with frontline employees' career meaningfulness ($\beta = 0.44, p < 0.001$). Frontline employees' career meaningfulness exhibited a positive association with customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$). Career meaningfulness mediates the link between servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors ($\beta = 0.12, CI = [0.06, 0.19]$), supporting H2.

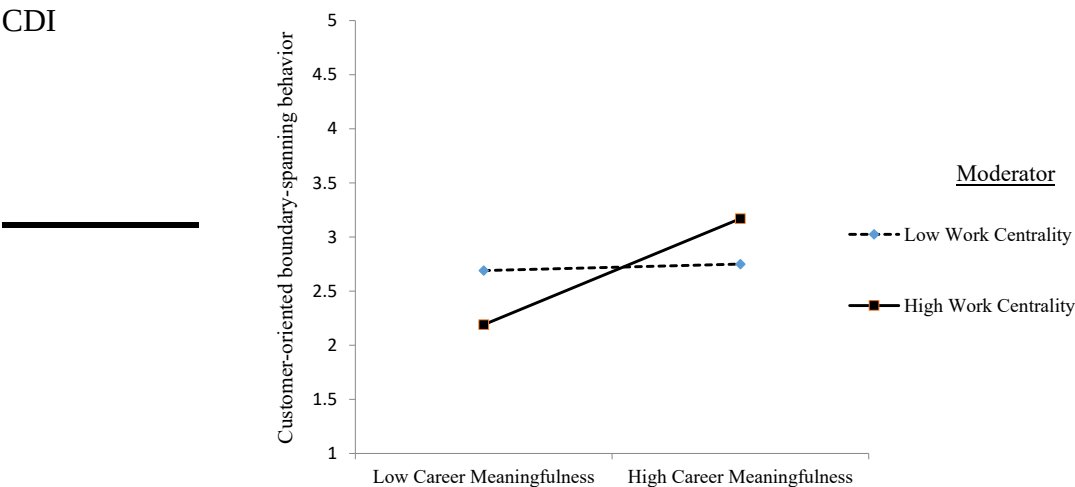
The moderation effects of work centrality on the hypothesized relationships (H3 and H4) were tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 14). PROCESS macro was instructed to create interaction terms by mean-centering career meaningfulness and work centrality to reduce multicollinearity. The regression models included these interaction terms to test whether work centrality moderated the effects as hypothesized.

For H3, a simple slope analysis was conducted to examine the interaction further (Aiken *et al.*, 1991). The results indicated that the positive association between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors was stronger at high levels of work centrality ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$) and insignificant at low levels of work centrality ($\beta = 0.12, p = 0.18$). These findings, visualized in Figure 2, illustrate that high work centrality amplifies the positive impact of career meaningfulness on customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, thus partially supporting H3.

Table 3. Hypotheses results

Total effect	B	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
Servant leadership → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors	0.36***	0.06	0.24	0.48
<i>Direct paths</i>				
Servant leadership → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors	0.24***	0.06	0.11	0.36
Servant leadership → frontline employees' career meaningfulness	0.44***	0.07	0.31	0.57
Frontline employees' career meaningfulness → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors	0.26***	0.06	0.15	0.38
<i>Indirect paths</i>				
Servant leadership → frontline employees' career meaningfulness → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors	0.12	0.03	0.06	0.19
<i>Moderated paths</i>				
Frontline employees' career meaningfulness*frontline employees work centrality → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (Mean)	0.26***	0.06	0.15	0.38
Frontline employees' career meaningfulness*frontline employees work centrality → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (High)	0.41***	0.08	0.26	0.56
Frontline employees' career meaningfulness*frontline employees work centrality → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (Low)	0.12	0.09	−0.05	0.30
<i>Conditional indirect effects</i>				
Index of moderated moderation	0.10	0.04	0.02	0.18
Servant leadership → frontline employees' career meaningfulness → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (on high work centrality)	0.18	0.04	0.10	0.26
Servant leadership → frontline employees' career meaningfulness → customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (on low work centrality)	0.05	0.04	−0.03	0.14

Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$. Sample size (N) = 245 (bootstrapping by specifying a sample of size 5,000)
Source(s): Created by the authors based on the results



Source(s): Created by the authors based on the results

Figure 2. Work centrality moderates the relationship between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors

For H4, the moderated mediation effects were tested by examining conditional indirect effects at different levels of work centrality using the PROCESS macro. Results showed that the indirect effect of servant leadership on customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors via career meaningfulness was significant when work centrality was high ($\beta = 0.18$, $CI = [0.10, 0.26]$), but not significant when work centrality was low ($\beta = 0.05$, $CI = [-0.03, 0.14]$). These results partially support H4, indicating that high work centrality strengthens the indirect relationship between servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors through career meaningfulness.

Discussion

This study examined how and under what conditions servant leadership positively influences frontline employees’ customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Utilizing conservation of resources theory, this research proposed that servant leadership relates to customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Furthermore, the research also investigates how career meaningfulness mediates the link between servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. This study also analyzed the role of work centrality as a moderator in the relationship between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Finally, work centrality moderates the indirect effect of servant leadership (via career meaningfulness) on customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

The findings are in line with the previous studies. For example, Wang et al. (2024) found that inclusive leadership fosters service employees’ customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, wherein they considered the latter as prosocial behaviors. Similarly, Bayighomog and Arasli (2019) found a positive relationship between spiritual leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. These results are consistent with these studies in that servant leadership determines customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. This study is unique in investigating the mediating role of career meaningfulness in the relationship between servant leadership and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors while also considering the moderating effect of work centrality. Its findings highlight the importance of

servant leadership as a key lever to foster career meaningfulness and promote employees' positive customer-oriented behaviors. This knowledge provides valuable insights for hospitality leaders and organizations who seek to cultivate a supportive work environment that fosters employee well-being and customer-oriented behaviors.

The findings highlight the critical role of work centrality in shaping how career meaningfulness influences customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Employees with high work centrality view work as a core part of their self-concept, which amplifies the motivational impact of career meaningfulness on their behaviors. In contrast, when work centrality is low, the motivational power of career meaningfulness weakens to the level of being immaterial. This is reflected in the results, which show that the relationship between career meaningfulness and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors becomes statistically insignificant at low levels of work centrality. From a conservation of resources perspective, employees with low work centrality may perceive career meaningfulness as less valuable, reducing their willingness to invest discretionary effort into customer-oriented behaviors. Similarly, the indirect effect of servant leadership on customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors through career meaningfulness is not significant when work centrality is low.

Theoretical implications

This research has multiple theoretical implications. Firstly, this study contributes new insights to the literature on leadership, career development, and customer-centered behaviors. Past studies have produced valuable insights by examining multiple factors' influence on employees' customer-oriented behaviors, such as organizational factors like organizational support (De Regge *et al.*, 2020), leadership (Wang *et al.*, 2024), and individual antecedents such as proactive personality (Chien *et al.*, 2021) and customer incivility (Hur *et al.*, 2015). However, how managers' servant leadership can enhance frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors is less known. Indeed, there are increasing calls for determining several leadership and individual behaviors that can encourage frontline employees to engage in customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. This study responds to these calls by asserting that frontline employees' supervisors (as servant leaders) and the consequent frontline employees' career meaningfulness can significantly improve their customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

Secondly, the innate features of customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, like empathy, customer focus, adaptability, product knowledge, and interpersonal skills, can create a climate where customers positively interact with the frontline employees. However, the challenging reality customer-oriented employees face is the potential for incivility and abuse from clients. This paper adds to the career development literature by highlighting the imperative role frontline employees and their managers can play in mitigating the impact of such adverse interactions. By examining the frontline employees' orientation toward customers, this research uncovers the role of managers as servant leaders that empower employees to cultivate customer-centric behaviors – necessary for frontline employees' careers. Understanding the dynamics between innate customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors attributes and frontline employees' career orientation holds important implications for organizational practices, informing targeted strategies to encourage a positive customer-oriented climate while ensuring frontline employees' career meaningfulness.

Thirdly, this study adds to the research regarding servant leadership. Previous research demonstrates that servant leadership deters negative attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Mahon, 2021) and leads to positive ones (e.g. Karatepe *et al.*, 2019). The results imply that the frontline employees' supervisors, as servant leaders, emphasize serving the customers. This study contributes to the outcomes of servant leadership by demonstrating that servant leadership expects career meaningfulness and promotes customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Fourth, our results show that supervisors as servant leaders exhibit a service

spirit in the workplace and foster empathy, developing a customer-centered climate. To achieve this, frontline employees' supervisors foster career meaningfulness, which leads to customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Despite past studies emphasizing developing career meaningfulness (Lee *et al.*, 2021), there is limited research on frontline employees' career meaningfulness to show specific behaviors at work for customers. Similarly, the extant insights into its factors are limited. This article adds to the literature on career meaningfulness by stressing career development and providing empirical support for its factors and consequences. Notably, this research focuses on its role as an underlying mechanism illustrating why supervisors' servant leadership positively influences frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

Finally, this study considers a significant factor – frontline employees' work centrality – in the nexus between supervisors' servant leadership and frontline employees' career meaningfulness. Past studies suggest that frontline employees' work centrality provides them with a sense of purpose and personal satisfaction, activating resources in their favor (Mannheim, 1993). Past research also recommends that work centrality is central to achieving enhanced organizational performance (Volery and Tarabashkina, 2021). The current study contributes to theoretical understanding by demonstrating that work centrality shapes how servant leadership fosters career meaningfulness and drives customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. By showing that work centrality strengthens the relationship between career meaningfulness and boundary-spanning behaviors, this study highlights its critical role as an individual value that influences the effectiveness of leadership behaviors in achieving employee and customer outcomes. This study advances the literature by highlighting a significant yet largely overlooked role of work centrality as a boundary condition in the connection between servant leadership, career meaningfulness, and customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors.

Practical implications

This study also provides practical implications. Firstly, by demonstrating that supervisors' servant leadership determines customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, we recommend that supervisors should exhibit a serving concern for employees and customers through their attitudes and behaviors. They can cultivate a serving climate by demonstrating servant leadership behaviors, including customer focus and overall customer-oriented behaviors. By doing so, they can enhance positive outcomes for customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, like customer satisfaction and loyalty. Secondly, our findings indicate that supervisors' servant leadership enhances frontline employees' customer-oriented behaviors by helping employees find purpose and meaning in their careers. This sense of meaningfulness acts as a bridge, connecting effective leadership to positive customer-oriented behaviors. Specifically, they should emphasize frontline employees' capacity development and offer equitable opportunities for career growth. Similarly, supervisors should ensure equal opportunities for promotion and prevent discrimination in the reward system and promotions. Additionally, they should encourage frontline employees in their career aspirations and provide them with career plans to increase their sense of meaningfulness about their careers.

Thirdly, they can further leverage work centrality as a key factor to amplify these outcomes by tailoring interventions that align employees' intrinsic values with organizational goals, particularly for those in customer-facing roles. Our results recommend that frontline employees' work centrality plays a critical role in increasing the effectiveness of their supervisors' servant leadership in developing their career meaningfulness and enhancing their customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors. Hence, this study implies that top management should emphasize improving frontline employees' work centrality. Work centrality helps frontline employees improve their understanding that the ultimate objective of their job is to serve customers and establish good relationships with them. Thus, organizations should also integrate work centrality assessments into employee engagement programs and

foster a culture that reinforces the importance of work to personal growth, as this can enhance leadership effectiveness and improve customer-oriented outcomes.

Finally, organizations can address work centrality by incorporating it into the hiring process to recruit frontline employees who view work as central to their identity. Assessing work centrality through psychometric tests or targeted interview questions can help identify candidates who are more likely to find fulfillment in their roles and demonstrate greater motivation and engagement in customer-oriented behaviors. Additionally, understanding employees' levels of work centrality can inform the design of tailored coaching and training programs. For those with high work centrality, development efforts can focus on enhancing customer-focused skills and leveraging their intrinsic motivation. For employees with lower work centrality, training can emphasize building stronger connections to their roles by highlighting the broader impact of their work, creating meaningful tasks, and offering clear career development pathways. By aligning recruitment and development efforts with work centrality, organizations can cultivate a more motivated and effective frontline workforce.

Limitations and future directions

This research also has limitations. First, regarding servant leadership, this study focused on the immediate supervisors of frontline employees. We recommend that future research emphasize hotel managers' servant leadership behaviors and examine their trickle-down effect on frontline employees' customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors via their supervisors through a multilevel analysis. Second, this study only considered positive leadership behavior (i.e. servant leadership); we further suggest studying a comparison of different leadership styles, such as servant vs empowering leadership (Alvi *et al.*, 2024), as this could provide valuable insights into the relationship between leadership styles and frontline employees behaviors as well as the quality exchange relationship between supervisors and subordinates (Jawahar *et al.*, 2018). Finally, this study gathered two-source data through a time-lagged design to reduce CMB and establish causality. However, we encourage scholars to employ experimental or longitudinal designs to draw strong causal inferences.

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