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Servant leadership and innovative work behavior: Does psychological empowerment matter?

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ABSTRACT

Using the social exchange theory and Spritzer's empowerment model, this research explains how servant leadership affects innovative work behavior. There is a lack of empirical evidence on servant leadership's influence on innovative behavior within the African or higher education context, as well as mediating models of psychological empowerment in the relationship between servant and innovative work behavior. The present study particularly hypothesizes that psychological empowerment positively mediates the Servant Leadership-Innovative Work Behavior relationship. To examine the proposed links, using a cross-sectional survey, the study uses a sample of 308 academic staff members employed by Uganda's public universities. The findings derived from the structural equation modeling validate each of the study's hypotheses and suggest new research directions of inquiry for servant leadership and innovative work behavior research. Specifically, servant leadership predicted innovative work behavior, and psychological empowerment significantly mediated the relationship between servant leadership and innovative work behavior. The present study clarifies the hitherto understudied relationship between servant leadership and employees' innovative work behaviors in Uganda's public universities, as well as the crucial role psychological empowerment plays in this relationship. This is an important finding for both theory and practice.

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Introduction

Over recent decades, workplace innovation has become a focal point for organizational scholars, emphasizing its critical role in the success of knowledge-based economies (Barua, Islam, Kibria, & Barua, 2025; Lemmetty & Billet, 2023). Central to this concept is employees' innovative work behavior (IWB), which refers to self-initiated actions aimed at introducing and implementing new ideas for organizational and individual benefit (Sonmez Cakir, Kalaycioglu, & Adiguzel, 2024; Xu & Suntrayuth, 2022). Given the advantages of IWB, such as enhanced competitive advantage, productivity, and adaptability, research is increasingly focused on identifying ways to foster this behavior among employees (Barua et. al, 2024; Lemmetty & Billet, 2023).

Consequently, it is important to understand the antecedents and mechanisms that affect employees' IWB (Cai et al., 2018; Iqbal et al., 2020). Numerous studies (e.g. De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007; Erhan et al., 2022; Iqbal et al., 2020) have recognised the importance of managers' leadership style in developing a culture of innovative and creative work behaviours among employees. Servant leadership (SL) is conceptualized as a people-centric leadership approach that prioritizes the team's performance and employees' well-being ahead of the leader's own interests (Bilal et al., 2021; Liden, et al., 2015). Meeting the needs of others, particularly their team members, and promoting their personal growth are the goals of this leadership ideology (Bilal et al., 2021). Some characteristics that distinguish SL from other leadership philosophies are authenticity, humility, empowerment, trust, and dedication to the growth of others (Bilal et al., 2021). Recent meta-analytic research indicates that SL has better predictive validity for a variety of

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individual outcomes than other leadership philosophies like ethical, transformational, and authentic leadership (Fuller et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020).

Servant Leadership (SL) fosters a people-focused approach that encourages followers to engage in Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) by creating a more ethical and productive work environment (Bilal et al., 2021; Liden et al., 2015; Schowalter & Volmer, 2023). Recent studies (e.g. Cai et al., 2018; Erhan et al., 2022; Iqbal et al., 2020; Xu & Wu, 2025) indicate an increase in interest among scholars and practitioners regarding the impact of SL on IWB. Nevertheless, there are calls for comprehensive investigations into the connection and mechanisms between SL and IWB due to inconsistencies in previous research findings (Eva et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2018). Chongvisal (2020) reported a positive correlation between servant leadership (SL) and innovative work behavior (IWB), while Newman et al. (2018) found contradictory results. This inconsistency suggests the need to explore psychological factors, such as employees' psychological empowerment (PE), to clarify the relationship (Yang et al., 2019).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is utilized to analyze the link between servant leadership (SL) and employee outcomes, particularly IWB, emphasizing the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). SET posits that relationships are formed by weighing the benefits and costs of interactions. Researchers have applied this theory to elucidate mediating factors such as leader–member exchange (Bao et al., 2018) and employee commitment (Jang & Kandampully, 2018). However, drawing on Spreitzer's empowerment model (Spreitzer, 1995), it is proposed that enhancing IWB also requires employees to have psychological resources, notably psychological empowerment, to effectively manage work challenges (Kustanto et al., 2020; Spreitzer, 1995).

Moreover, not much is known about how Servant Leadership (SL) initiates psychological processes, particularly Psychological Empowerment (PE), which are crucial for enhancing behaviors like IWB (Iqbal et al., 2020; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017). PE reflects employees' intrinsic motivation and control over their work and has been linked significantly to IWB (Zhou & Chen, 2021). By proposing a mediator- PE, we contend that SL positively impacts individual work behavior (IWB) by motivating academics to innovate. SL creates an empowering environment that fosters competence, meaning, self-determination, and impact, prompting individuals to take initiative, address challenges, and generate novel ideas, thus enhancing their IWB. This focus on employee development enables individuals to move beyond conventional practices and engage in creative behaviors. Our investigation into PE's mediating role aims to bridge existing gaps and contribute to the IWB literature both theoretically and practically. Finally, previous research has largely overlooked how SL relates to IWB, especially in populations outside developed economies (Ekmekcioglu & Öner, 2024; Xiao et al., 2025). This study investigates data from academic staff at Uganda's public universities, offering insights into SL's impact on IWB within the context of Uganda's collectivistic culture and high power distance, contrasting with the predominantly Western-centric literature (Rarick et al., 2013).

SL is necessary for IWB in the higher educational sector because it fosters a supportive, psychologically safe, and empowering environment that directly motivates academic employees to generate and implement new ideas. This leadership philosophy prioritizes employee growth and well-being, which is crucial for encouraging risk-taking inherent in innovation (Khattak et al., 2023). This makes this study necessary in view of the declining levels of IWB among academic staff in public universities (Namono et al., 2021). The present study examined the intricacies between SL and IWB. Specifically, the study examines the relationship between SL and IWB, and how this relationship is mediated by PE. Understanding how SL, PE, and IWB are interdependent may help create more comprehensive strategies for promoting opportunity exploration, idea generation, idea promotion, idea realization, and idea sustainability in today's dynamic workplace. The next section describes the literature review and the model's hypotheses.

Theory and hypotheses development

The study's theoretical perspective

The study is based on two theories: the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and Spritzer's (1995) empowerment model. The social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) is premised on the assumptions of

reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and thus examines how individuals form and maintain relationships by assessing the costs and benefits of their relations. SET explains the link between SL and IWB through the principle of reciprocity. Servant leaders provide employees with support, care, and opportunities for growth, creating a strong, positive social exchange. In return for the valuable treatment, employees feel motivated to reciprocate with strong innovative behaviors, as they feel a greater sense of obligation, commitment and trust towards the organization (Bao et al., 2018; Jang & Kandampully, 2018). Based on Spritzer's Empowerment model (Spreitzer, 1995), we contend that cultivating an exchange relationship between leaders and followers is not the only way to encourage IWB because employees also need psychological resources like PE to deal with work-related challenges (Kustanto et al., 2020; Spreitzer, 1995). Therefore, SET and Spritzer's Empowerment model combine to explain that SL fosters IWB by building trust and felt obligations, while PE moderates this relationship, amplifying the effect when employees feel a strong sense of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact.

Innovative work behaviour

IWB is defined as the intentional creation, introduction, and application of new ideas within a work role, group, or organization, in order to benefit role performance, the group, or the organization (Janssen, 2000). This definition suggests that IWB encompasses more than just stimulating creativity, although creativity is crucial at the onset for generating valuable ideas. IWB also involves promoting ideas and implementing innovations, which contribute to product and service development, as well as the advancement of production processes and management systems (Sonmez Cakir et al., 2024).

In the innovation literature, IWB is viewed from various perspectives. Dorenbosch et al. (2005) differentiate idea conception and implementation, while Scott and Bruce (1994) propose a triadic model that includes generating novel ideas, seeking sponsorship, and implementing these ideas. Innovation processes involve interrelated activities, where both employees and leaders may participate in different combinations at any time. This summary adopts a unidimensional yet comprehensive perspective on IWB, incorporating Scott and Bruce's three-stage model.

First, employees can generate ideas by identifying opportunities to address performance gaps, resolve workflow challenges, and tackle sources of customer dissatisfaction. This exploratory behavior is influenced by their perceived need, willingness, and ability to innovate, indicating a readiness for change (Tan et al., 2021). In the idea championing phase, employees collaborate with supportive leaders and colleagues to secure resources essential for implementing proposed changes (Tan et al., 2021). A supportive environment that fosters change is crucial for developing innovation champions. The process concludes with the implementation phase, where employees refine, test, and actualize ideas. This highlights that workplace innovation goes beyond mere job requirements, necessitating that organizational leaders understand and promote innovative work behavior (IWB).

Servant leadership

Servant leadership prioritizes the well-being of individuals within an organization by fostering a caring, people-centered environment and promoting follower development (Greenleaf, 1970). Key characteristics include humility, direction provision, empowerment, authenticity, and a focus on followers' needs (Bilal et al., 2021). Distinct from other leadership styles, servant leadership emphasizes support and moral obligation to serve others, highlighting the importance of follower growth. Research indicates that this leadership approach enhances employee health, reduces stress, boosts engagement, and promotes IWB (Khattak et al., 2023).

Psychological empowerment

Empowerment is primarily recognized as a management practice through which superiors delegate authority to subordinates, known as structural empowerment (Lu et al., 2024). Traditional views have largely focused on this delegation, neglecting the psychological aspects experienced by the empowered. Research shows that the actual perception of empowerment by employees is crucial and cannot be replaced by structural empowerment alone (Monje-Amor et al., 2021). This shift has led to the

development of psychological empowerment, reflecting an individual's internalization of structural empowerment and their sense of authority within an organization. While structural empowerment is necessary for psychological empowerment, the latter significantly influences employee work attitudes, performance behaviors, and organizational performance. The term 'psychological empowerment' refers to an individual's intrinsic motivation and control over their work or life, characterized by a sense of competence, autonomy, meaningfulness, and the perceived impact of their actions (Steffen et al., 2024). It emphasizes the internal strength to take charge, make choices, and influence outcomes (Kamil et al., 2025).

Servant leadership and innovative work behavior

Innovative work behavior (IWB) and servant leadership (SL) are crucial for organizational long-term success. Research indicates that SL positively influences employees' IWB (Iqbal et al., 2020). Originating in 1970 from Greenleaf's concept of serving others, SL prioritizes employee needs above self-interest (Khattak et al., 2023). In today's dynamic business environment, emphasis on human capital is increasing, making SL a key predictor of various performance outcomes (Rofcanin et al., 2021; Song et al., 2024; Zafar et al., 2025).

Based on the SET (Blau, 1964), a servant leader's concern for the followers' well-being creates an obligation for them to return the favour. The link between SL and IWB, is explained by SET through the principle of reciprocity. Servant leaders provide care, respect and support, which employees then reciprocate with greater effort, loyalty, and willingness to take risks, such as by generating novel ideas. This relationship moves beyond a simple transaction to create a social exchange where employees feel valued and are more motivated to contribute more meaningfully to the organization. Therefore, by forging strong bonds between leaders and followers and developing an obligation for employees to reciprocate at the workplace, SL has demonstrated a beneficial impact on IWB (Alajhar & Salam, 2022).

The prioritization of employee needs and genuine concern for well-being positions servant leadership (SL) as a credible catalyst for change, enhancing acceptance of initiatives like innovative work behavior (IWB) (Wu et al., 2021). SL employs strategies that foster social and cognitive processes essential for developing IWB, as noted by Khan et al. (2021). Servant leaders demonstrate traits such as active listening and empathy, which create a supportive environment, encouraging employees to propose innovative solutions and engage in continuous learning (Walumbwa et al., 2018).

Despite this, current research reveals a lack of empirical evidence on the impact of Servant Leadership (SL) on Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) (Cai et al., 2018; Iqbal et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2018). Most studies focus on profitable firms, making it difficult to generalize findings to non-profit organizations like public universities. Also, the conflicting outcomes in this area underscore the need for detailed investigation, as some studies show positive links between SL and IWB (Chongvisal, 2020), while others report contrary results (Newman et al., 2018). There is also a gap in understanding the traits academic leaders should have to promote IWB (Khan et al., 2017). Based on these theoretical and empirical arguments, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H_1. SL and IWB are positively associated.

Mediation role of psychological empowerment

The relationship between SL and employees' drive to engage in IWB can be explained by the SET (Blau, 1964), which illustrates how employees exchange leaders' behaviors and resources through the concept of reciprocity. Based on SET, as followers are more inclined to return the favours of servant leaders with more inventive actions, SL is consequently thought to have a beneficial effect on followers' IWB. The SET generally helps us understand the mutually beneficial interactions that exist between the leaders and their employees (Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017). We combine the SET (Blau, 1964) with Spreitzer et al.'s (1995) empowerment model in this study to explain how SL can help followers build their psychological resources, like PE and inspire them to engage in innovative activities. SET and Spreitzer's empowerment model combine to explain that SL fosters a high-quality, trusting relationship (SET) that translates into employees' intrinsic motivation and self-perceptions (Spreitzer et al., 1995), which in turn drives IWB.

Psychological empowerment refers to an individual's intrinsic motivation and sense of control over their work and life (Steffen et al., 2024). It encompasses four key components: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Kamil et al., 2025). Meaning relates to the significance and value of one's work; competence reflects confidence in one's abilities; self-determination involves autonomy in decision-making; and impact assesses the belief in one's ability to affect organizational goals (Spreitzer, 1995; Steffen et al., 2024). Together, these elements contribute to an individual's capacity to take charge of activities and influence outcomes such as IWB (Steffen et al., 2024).

Positive, people-centred leadership significantly contributes to the establishment of psychological conditions such as psychological empowerment (PE) (Kamil et al., 2025). Building on theoretical arguments by Tripathi et al. (2021), it is suggested that servant leadership (SL) enhances employee performance outcomes through empowerment (Schowalter & Volmer, 2023; Xu & Wu, 2025). Servant leaders enrich the work experience by respecting staff, fostering stewardship, and providing professional development opportunities. They also address competency cognition by understanding development needs and offering relevant training (Kamil et al., 2025). By granting autonomy and involving employees in decision-making, servant leaders enhance self-determination and help workers recognize their organizational impact. Therefore, we propose that:

H2. SL and PE are positively linked.

According to a study by Rafique et al. (2023), psychological empowerment (PE) mediates the relationship between contextual predictors and both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Servant leaders who offer growth opportunities, promote power-sharing, and support autonomy enhance employees' empowerment. This support makes employees more competent and inspires them to engage more proactively in their tasks, encouraging innovative work behavior (IWB) (Steffeet al., 2024; Tripathi et al., 2021; Yasmin et al., 2024). The findings suggest a strong association between servant leadership practices, PE and behavioral outcomes such as IWB. In light of these results, we propose that:

H3. Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between SL and IWB.

The study is guided by the following research model (Figure 1)

Materials and methods

Participants and procedure

This study adopted a cross-sectional design and used self-report data because of its efficiency, cost-effectiveness and ability to gather data on subjective experiences (IWB) and prevalence at a single point in time (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024). The study involved 357 academic staff from eleven public

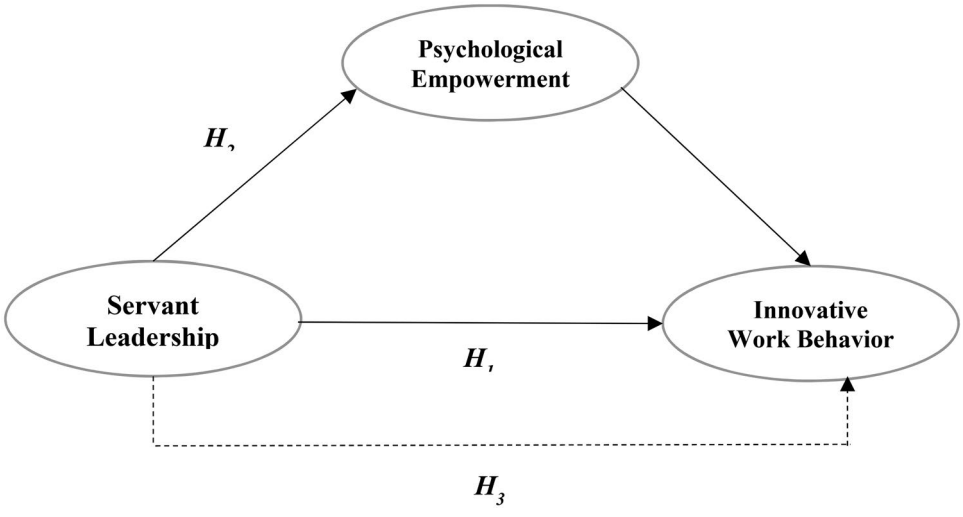

Figure 1. Researchers' model.
Note, the dashed line illustrates the indirect effect of SL on IWB once the mediator (PE) has been integrated into the model.

universities in Uganda, drawn from a total population of 3396 based on HR department personnel lists as of August 30, 2022. Data collection occurred from 3rd January to 24th May, 2024. The focus on academic staff was motivated by a lack of research on influencing factors of IWB in public universities, and their role as key contributors to creativity and effectiveness in higher education (Abdullah et al., 2021; Cheah et al., 2019). Ethical approval was granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of Busitema University (BUFHS-2023-102), and participant consent was obtained, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

The study involved a sample of 357 participants selected using Yamane's 1967 sampling methods, with a questionnaire response rate of 86% (308 returned). Using a stratified sampling approach, the total population of 3396 was divided into distinct subgroups based on the 11 public universities in Uganda, and the sample size for each stratum (public university) was proportionally determined. From each stratum, we randomly selected a sample, and later combined them to form the final representative sample of 357. The study's subjective biases were addressed by this method. To minimize the potential sampling bias in this study, we relied on a stratified sampling approach that ensured every member of the target population had an equal chance of being selected to participate in the study (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024). The survey instruments were distributed by two trained research assistants with the help of staff from the 11 Public Universities' Directorate of HRM, during gazetted working hours, and participation was voluntary. The participants consisted of 58% men, 75% held at least a bachelor's degree, 63% had over five years of service, and the average age was 38. To avoid linguistic issues, the survey was conducted in English. The higher education system in Uganda features a strong institutional focus and qualified faculty, suggesting participants provided accurate responses to the survey's questions.

Measurement of study variables

This study used validated and traditional measures, with items derived from literature anchored on a 5-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, and 5-strongly agree), except for control factors including gender, age, and work experience.

Innovative work behavior

Using items from the literature, IWB was measured as a five-dimensional construct that includes opportunity exploration (OE), idea generation (IG), idea promotion (IP), idea realization (IR), and idea sustainability (IS) (Ayoub et al., 2023; De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010; Janssen, 2000). A sample item included: *'I am able to develop ideas and solutions for creative opportunities in my field'* The internal consistency of the scale - Cronbach's Alpha (α) for this construct was found to be 0.86 in this study, well above the suggested minimum of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978).

Servant leadership

A 28-item measure comprising seven facets of SL: conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers' first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community was used to measure SL (Liden et al., 2008). A sample question included,' *My supervisor is always honest'*. This scale has commonly been used across diverse settings and has posted robust psychometric properties (Liden et al., 2015). Cronbach's Alpha (α) for this construct was found to be 0.865 in this investigation.

Psychological empowerment

Spritzer's (1995) scale, which evaluates four components of PE: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact, was used to measure PE. The fact that it has been extensively used in research to measure PE and has produced reliable findings influenced its selection (Khairani et al., 2021). A sample item included: '*I am confident in my ability to perform my work'.* The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient statistic (α) for this construct was found to be 0.823.

Data screening

The study used SPSS *v.* 27 in the preliminary analysis of data screening. Before the main analyses, data were screened to ensure the assumptions of parametric tests were met, focusing on outliers, normality,

and multicollinearity. Outliers were examined via boxplots, and extreme cases were removed based on theoretical justification. Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, and the p-values were greater than the alpha (p >.05), alluding to normality. We assessed for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF) and the tolerance statistics. All the VIF values were below 5, and all tolerance statistics exceeded 0.2, suggesting that each predictor shared less than 80% of its variance with the other variables, implying tolerable threat of multicollinearity (Hair et al. 2019; Field, 2024; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

Assessment of common method variance

Since the measure of IWB was self-reported, we utilized both statistical and procedural remedies to control and evaluate CMV, as suggested by other studies (Podsakoff et al., 2012). As a procedural remedy, we protected the participants' full privacy and anonymity in order to prevent dishonest answers. Further, we ensured scale item clarity through a systematic and methodical questionnaire development process. The scales developed by previous researchers were initially used to create the questionnaire items, which were then modified based on qualitative information gathered from interviews. We also adopted a psychological separation approach, where constructs were rated differently. This process prohibited participants from inferring a cause-and-effect relationship between the study variables.

Based on statistical techniques, we used two tests to determine whether CMV was present in our data. We started by performing Harman's single-factor test. The test's results showed that the total variance explained by one component was 36%, much less than the 50% threshold, indicating that CMV is not a significant problem in our investigation. Second, we used a full collinearity test to generate variance-inflated factors (VIF), which is in line with (Kock, 2015) recommendations for SEM data analytical technique. According to this test, VIF values more than 5 reveal collinearity issues and, thus, the presence of CMV. Our analysis revealed VIF values between 1.54 and 3.21, further confirming that CMV posed no serious threat to our study.

Statistical analyses and results

We used AMOS (*v*.21) software to analyze the data and test the links of the proposed research model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). This analytical approach is deemed appropriate because of its ability to simultaneously analyze complex, multidimensional constructs with measurement error, and it can represent the relationships between latent variables (unobservable constructs) and observed variables (Hair et al., 2019). Compared to more conventional techniques like multiple regression, SEM provides more nuanced insights and is especially helpful for analyzing causal linkages and testing theoretical models (Hair et al., 2019). For data analysis and reporting of SEM results, we adhered to the most recent recommendations and procedures suggested by Schreiber et al. (2006 together with Hair et al. (2019)

Descriptive and correlation results

The descriptive statistics and correlations for all the study variables are presented in Table 1. Results in Table 1 reveal that innovative work behavior is positive and significantly related to servant leadership ($r = 0.505$, $p < 0.01$) and PE ($r = 0.383$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, servant leadership was found to be positively and significantly correlated to PE ($r = 0.518$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Descriptive and correlations results.

Variable	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3
Servant Leadership (1)	3.6849	1.074	1		
Psychological empowerment (2)	3.6526	1.091	.518**	1	
Innovative Work behavior (3)	3.5674	0.390	.505**	.383**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Measurement model assessment

Assessment of the measurement model is the initial stage in the SEM analysis, which guarantees that only constructs with strong validity and reliability are integrated in the structural path model. To achieve this, through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the first- and second-order constructs' indicator and internal consistency reliability, discriminant validity, and convergent validity were assessed (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results of the measurement model assessment, which comprise the average variance extracted (AVE) (all > 0.50), composite reliability (all > 0.70), outer loadings (all > 0.50), and RMSEA (all models >0.06), are shown in Table 2.

Also, all the models have an NFI > 0.95, which further supports the convergent validity **(**Table 3**).** The χ^2 statistics for the SL, PE, and IWB models, which were 83.775, 24.023, and 105.445, respectively, were not significant at the 0.05 level, suggesting that the models adequately fitted the data. These findings attest to the measurement model's suitability for further structural analysis (Hair et al., 2019). Table 3, and Figures 2–4, show results of the three measurement models: SL, PE and IWB models. The Chi-square for each of the three models was non-significant, and all other fit indices were within an acceptable range: $p > 0.05$, RMSEA< 0.08, GFI > 0.95, CFI > 0.95, NFI> 0.95, SRMR = 0.05.

Structural model assessment

Based on the suggestions of Hair et al. (2017), we initially examined for potential collinearity issues in the structural model that could skew the path coefficients. The VIF values for each predictor construct ranged between 1.54 and 3.21, a value lower than the recommended threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2017). Thus, our structural model does not have potential collinearity threats. The structural model's fitness was then evaluated. Both the control variables and the research variables were entered. The fit statistics for the structural model posited the following results: χ^2 = (0.832), χ^2/df = 2, RMSEA = 0.000, GFI = 0.993, AGFI = 0.999, CFI = 1.000, NFI = 0.996, SRMR =0.04. The model appears to have a good fit of the data because the fit indices are greater than the suggested threshold values. Figure 5 and Table 4 show the path coefficients of the final structural model. The model explained 28% of the total variance in IWB.

Table 4 and Figure 5 display the findings of structural path analysis. H1 predicted that SL is positively associated with employees' IWB ($\beta = 0.414$, $p < 0.01$). The results demonstrate a significant direct and positive relationship between SL and IWB, which implies that SL traits such as empowerment, provision of growth and development opportunities, etc, motivate staff to engage in IWB. Also, the study found that SL elements positively and significantly contribute to PE ($\beta = 0.515$, $p < 0.01$), which provides support for hypothesis 2 (H2). This suggests that SL fosters PE by focusing on the development and well-being of followers, creating a supportive environment where they feel valued, trusted, and capable of making decisions and contributing their best work. In accord with hypothesis 3 (H3), PE revealed a significantly positive relationship with IWB ($\beta = 0.168$, $p < 0.01$). The results emphasized that psychologically empowered employees are motivated to engage in IWB.

Testing for mediation

We further examined the specifics of the suggested mediation model and discovered that when PE was included as a mediator, the strong direct effects of SL on IWB, in particular, were reduced but still remained significant, indicating that PE partially mediates the association between SL and IWB. The results in Table 5 and Figure 5 demonstrate that the standardized total effect of SL on IWB is significant (0.501; $p < 0.001$). On the introduction of PE as the mediator, the path coefficients for the relationship between SL and IWB decreased from (0.501; $p < 0.001$) to (0.414; $p < 0.001$), but the model remained significant, suggesting a partial mediation type. The difference can be explained by the indirect effect **(0.087).** This suggests that PE may have played a role in mediating the SL-IWB link. This result supports H3: Consequently, the fundamental relationship between SL and IWB is mediated by PE.

To further test for the significance of mediation, we used the bootstrapping approach. Specifically, to assess the importance of the indirect effects, 2,000 bootstrap samples were used to construct a 95% bias-corrected CI around the indirect effects. This bootstrapping approach was used due to its accuracy in calculating confidence intervals for mediation effects when the effect is non-zero. If the 95%

Table 2. CFA – factor item loadings, cronbach alpha and AVE.

Variable	Item code	Items	Factor loading (***R2***)	Factor loading (***R2***)	Factor loading (***R2***)	AVE	Cronbach alpha
SL	SLV1	My supervisor emphasizes the importance of giving back to community.	.77**				
	SLV2	My supervisor is always interested in helping people in our community.	.69**				
	SLV5	My supervisor encourages me to volunteer in community service.	.45**				
	SLB1	My supervisor holds high ethical standards	.67**			**.65**	**.81**
	SLB2	My supervisor is always honest	.84**				
	SLB3	My supervisor would not compromise ethical principles to achieve success.	.85**				
	SLB4	Honesty is more important to my supervisor than financial gain.	.88**				
	SLB5	My supervisor upholds the highest moral standards established by this university.	.83**				
	POS16	This university does its best to make my work interesting.	.46**				
	SLH1	If I have a personal problem, I approach the supervisor who provides much needed assistance.	.47**				
	SLH5	My supervisor shows empathy to me	.64**				
	SLH6	My supervisor positively copes with my strong emotions	.68**				
	SLF1	My supervisor cares more about my success than his/her own	.60**				
	SLF2	My supervisor puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.	.52**				
	SLF4	My supervisor does whatever she/he can to make my job easier.	.38**				
	SLE1	My supervisor gives me the responsibility to make important decisions about my job.	.57**				
	SLE2	My supervisor encourages me to handle important work decisions on my own.	.59**				
	SLC1	My manager can tell if something work-related is going wrong.	.75**				
	SLC2	My manager has the capacity to effectively solve complicated issues.	.50**				
	SLC6	I have the ability to evaluate different aspects of university operations.	.48**				
	SLG1	My supervisor prioritizes my professional growth.	.70**				
	SLG2	My supervisor is interested in making sure that I achieve my career goals.	.75**				
	SLG3	My supervisor provides me with work experiences that enable me to develop new skills.	.78**				
PE	PEM4	I am accountable for the outcome of my work.		.67**			
	PEM5	The purpose of my work is related to the university values and standards		.78**			
	PEM6	The purpose of my work is related to the standards set by the university.		.67**			
	PEC2	I am confident in my ability to perform my work		.46**		**.67**	**.83**
	PEC3	My work is well-designed to fit my skill level.		.92**			
	PES3	I have an opportunity to use personal initiative in my work		.60**			
	PES4	I determine the way to improve in my job performance		.77**			
	PES5	I feel independent at my workplace		.56**			
	PEI2	My opinion counts in the university decision-making		.73**			
	PEI3	I have a significant influence on service quality.		.54**			
IWB	IWO1	I am able to develop ideas and solutions for creative opportunities in my field			.63**		
	IWO2	I share ideas with my colleagues or supervisors about opportunities for the dev't of working methods within the university			.73**		
	IWO3	I share ideas with my supervisors about the opportunities to find solutions to the problems we face at work			.51**		
	IWO6	I discuss with my colleagues the possible opportunities to change work patterns to achieve better results			.52		
	IWG1	I propose new ideas for dev't within the university			.52	.61	.86
	IWG5	I suggest improvements to ideas expressed by colleagues or bosses at work			.69		
	IWG6	When putting ideas into practice, I test evolving solutions for work shortcomings.			.93		
	IWG7	In order to make my work easier, I look for unique and innovative tools.			.67		
	IWS4	I discuss with colleagues on how to consolidate newly implemented ideas in the university.			.68		
	IWS5	I am aware of the steps that can be taken to make the implementation of the proposed idea a success			.46		
	IWP1	I am able to convince others of the importance of an improved idea.			.67		
	IWP2	I propose new ideas to key people authorized to allocate resources to this new idea			.76		
	IWP3	I promote supervisors' & colleagues' new ideas			.60		

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Variable	Item code	Items	Factor loading (***R2***)	Factor loading (***R2***)	Factor loading (***R2***)	AVE	Cronbach alpha
	IWP5	I illustrate how the new idea can be applied gradually and practically to others			.75		
	IWR1	I test solutions for unexpected problems that arise when new ideas are put into practice			.45		
	IWR4	I determine the necessary requirements for realizing a new idea.			.86		
	IWR5	I keep colleagues informed about progress in achieving the new idea			.49		

Note. SL: servant leadership; PE: Psychological empowerment; IWB: Innovative work Behavior.

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

Model	*df*	χ^2	p-Value	NFI	TLI	CFI	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA
SL	104	83.755	0.928	0.952	1.000	1.000	0.970	0.955	0.000
PE	29	24.023	0.728	0.957	1.010	1.000	0.957	0.976	0.000
IWB	109	105.445	0.579	0.952	0.992	1.000	0.961	0.946	0.000

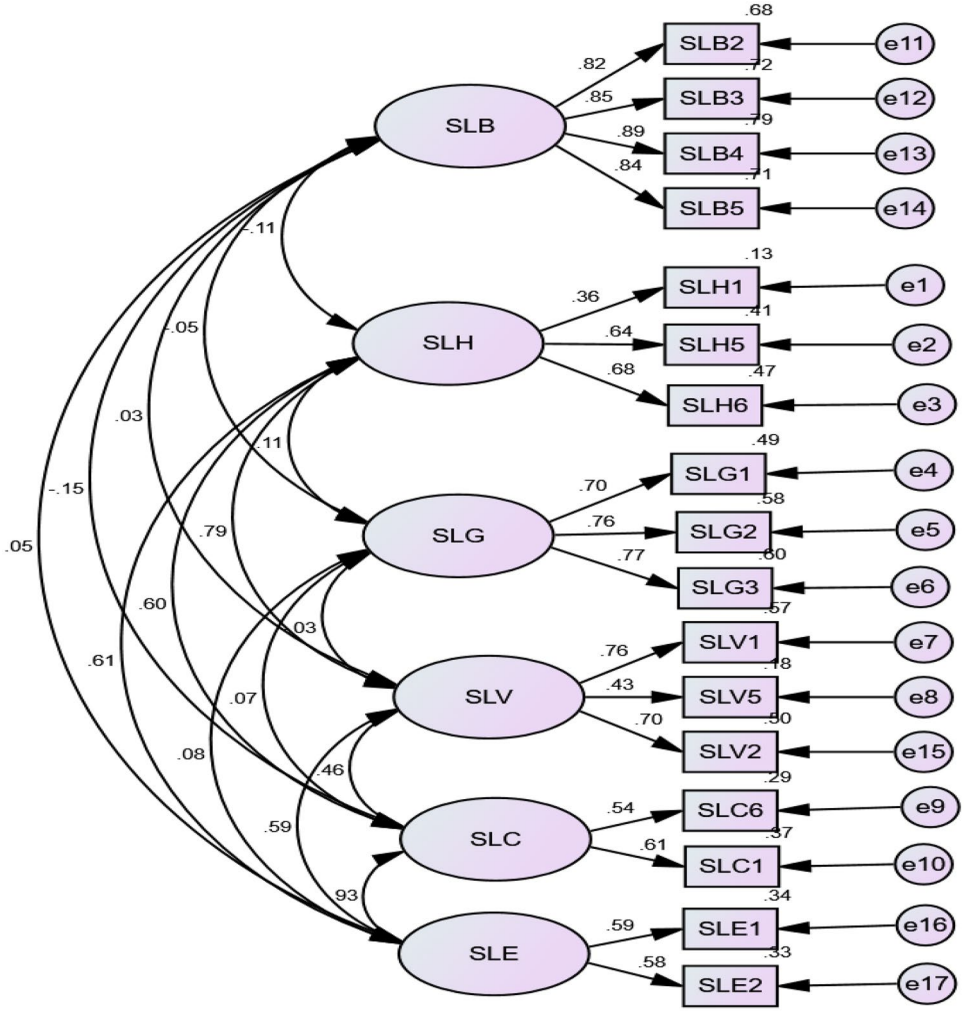

Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis for servant leadership.
Goodness of Fit Indices.
χ^2 = 83.755; *p*-value = 0.928, *d/f* = 104; RMSEA (0.000); TLI (1.000); IFI (0.998); CFI (1.000); NFI (0.952); GFI (0.970) and AGFI (0.955); Key: SL-servant leadership; SLG- subordinates' growth and success; SLC- conceptual skills; SLE-empowering; SLB- ethical behaivor; SLH- emotional healing; SLV- creating value for the community.

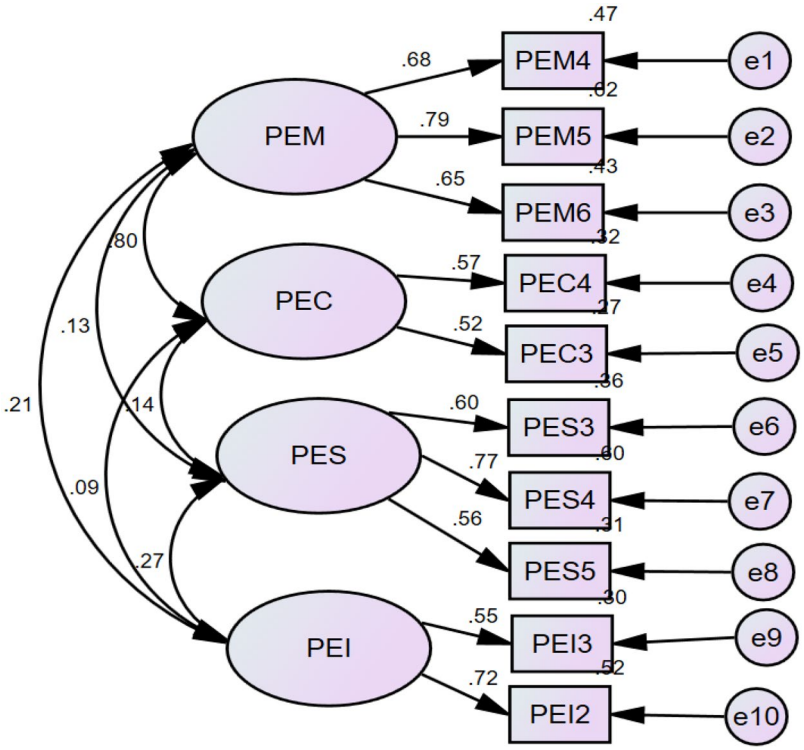

Figure 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis for psychological empowerment.
Goodness of Fit Indices.
χ^2 = 25.940; *p*-value = 0.629, *d/f* = 29; RMSEA (0.000); TLI (1.009); IFI (1.001); CFI (1.000); NFI (0.954); GFI (0.984) and AGFI (0.969) Key: PEM-meaning; PES- self-determination; PEC- competence; PEI-impact.

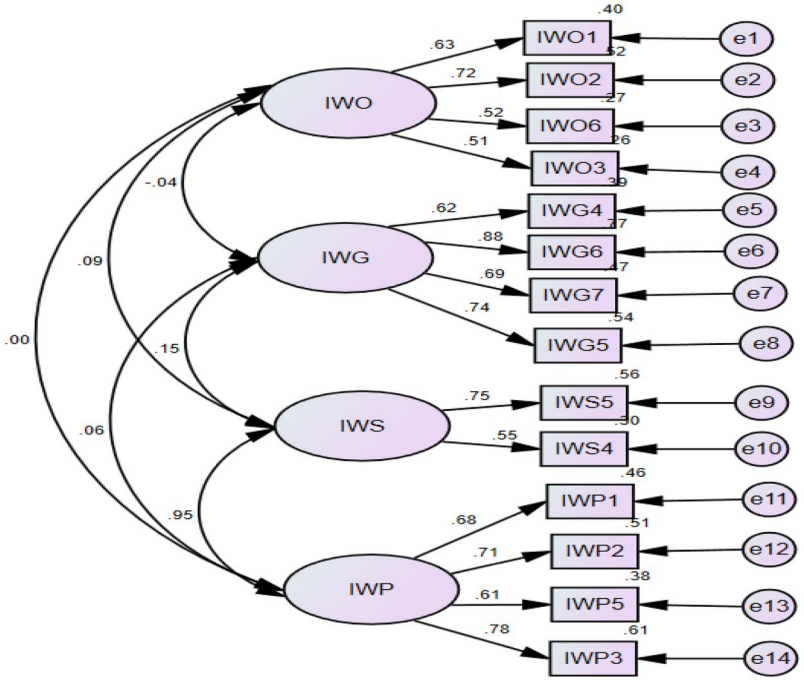

Figure 4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis for innovative work behavior.
Goodness of Fit Indices.
χ^2 = 100.519; *p*-value = 0.437, *d/f* = 71; RMSEA (0.037); TLI (.969); IFI (.976); CFI (1.000); NFI (0.951); GFI (0.976) and AGFI (0.952); Key: IWR-idea realization; IWG- idea generation; IWS- idea sustainability; IWP-idea promotion; IWP-idea promotion.

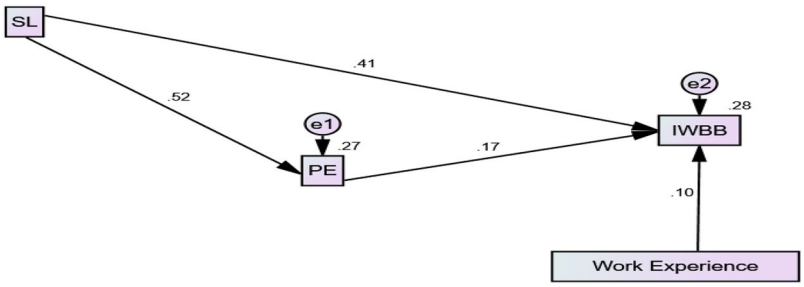

Figure 5. Structural Model for innovative work behavior.
Goodness of Fit Indices.
χ^2 = 0.832; *p*-value = 0.660, *d/f* = 2; RMSEA (0.000); TLI (1.018); IFI (1.006); CFI (1.000); NFI (0.996); GFI (0.999) and AGFI (0.993); Key: SL- servant leadership; PE- psychological empowerment; IWBB- innovative work behavior.

Table 4. Regression weights of the mediated/structural model for hypotheses testing.

Mediated model	Unstandardized coefficient (B)	SE	CR	Standardized coefficient (*β*)	*P*
SL → IWB	0.482	0.020	7.312	0.414	* * *
SL → PE	0.589	0.047	10.617	0.515	* * *
PE → IWB	0.387	0.020	2.974	0.168	0.003
WK Exp → IWB	0.185	0.018	2.153	0.104	0.031

Source. Authors' own work.

Table 5. Total, direct and indirect effects.

Standardized Total Effects.

	EXP	SL	PE
PE	0.000	0.518	0.000
IWB	0.104	0.501	0.168

Standardized Direct Effects.

	EXP	SL	PE
PE	0.000	0.518	0.000
IWB	0.104	0.414	0.168

Standardized Indirect Effects.

	EXP	SL	PE
PE	0.000	0.000	0.000
IWB	0.000	**0.087**	0.000

Bootstrapping Mediation Results of PE.

Parameter	Point estimate	SE	Lower bounds	Upper bounds	*p*-Value	*z*-Value
IWB ← SL	**0.087**	0.019	0.215	0.342	0.001	4.555

bias-corrected CI does not contain a zero, the generated effect is considered significant (Mallinckrodt et al., 2006). H4, which states that PE partially mediates the link between SL and IWB, is supported by the results in Table 5, which shows that the standardized indirect (mediated effect) of SL on IWB is substantially different from zero at the 0.001 level of significance (*p* - 0.002, two-sided). In total, the mediated model accounts for 39% of the unique variance in IWB.

Discussion

Drawing on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and Spritzer's (1995) empowerment model, this research explores the relationship between servant leadership (SL) and employees' innovative work behavior (IWB) by incorporating psychological empowerment (PE) as a mediating factor. Findings show that SL positively influences IWB both directly and indirectly through PE, consistent with previous studies highlighting the role of servant leaders in enhancing employees' strengths and encouraging IWB (Chongvisal, 2020; Iqbal et al., 2020; Schowalter & Volmer, 2023). Van Dierendonck (2011, p. 1228) asserts

that 'leadership inspired by the ideas from SL theory might well be what organizations need now, given the current demand for more ethical and people-centered management style. SET explains the link between SL and IWB through the principle of reciprocity. When servant leaders show care, respect and support, employees feel a social obligation to reciprocate with greater commitment and effort, including developing and implementing new ideas. This creates a high-quality, trust-based relationship that goes beyond a simple economic transaction, fostering an environment where employees feel valued and are motivated to be innovative (Song et al., 2024; Xu & Wu, 2025; Zafar et al.2025).

Moreover, the study posits a testable hypothesis linking SL to PE, revealing a significant positive relationship between the two. Servant leaders enhance PE by prioritizing follower needs, providing support, and cultivating a trusting, developmental environment. This aligns with Kamil et al. (2025) and Vu et al. (2025), who assert that SL creates a supportive atmosphere where employees feel valued and empowered. By offering autonomy, fostering meaningful work, and encouraging involvement in decision-making, servant leaders strengthen employees' competence, self-determination, and influence. Based on Spritzer's (1995) empowerment model, SL promotes PE by implementing specific behaviours that directly foster the four dimensions of Spritzer's (1995) model: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Servant leaders act as catalysts, creating an environment where followers can grow and feel a sense of control and purpose in their work. The subsequent sections discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several implications for theory. First, our study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between servant leadership (SL) and innovative work behavior (IWB) by providing empirical evidence of a positive correlation between the two (Hughes et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2017). This supports the social exchange theory (SET) and suggests that when servant leaders empower followers and prioritize their interests, it fosters IWB, particularly in knowledge-intensive environments (Iqbal et al., 2020; Chongvisal, 2020). This finding suggests that servant leaders promote IWB by fostering psychological safety, empowering employees, and encouraging creativity and continuous improvement. They achieve this by prioritizing employee growth and well-being, actively listening and building trust, collaborative relationships where staff feel secure to take creative risks and are motivated to be proactive, and innovative (Schowalter & Volmer, 2023). This research enhances existing theories by addressing previously contradictory empirical findings and highlights the importance of servant leadership in promoting innovation.

This study broadens the understanding of the relationship between SL and IWB by identifying PE as a key mediating variable. It employs Spreitzer's empowerment model to examine how SL influences IWB, responding to calls for the application of personal resource theories in this context (Eva et al., 2019). Based on Spreitzer's empowerment model, the links between SL, PE, and IWB are explained through a four-stage process: servant leaders foster PE by engaging in behaviours such as empowering employees, participating in decisions, and demonstrating confidence, which in turn cultivates employees' PE. This empowerment then facilitates and encourages IWB by providing employees with a sense of competence, ownership, and autonomy to create and innovate. The findings confirm that empowered employees are more likely to show initiative, adaptability, and engagement in IWB (Garg et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2025; Xiaoli & Xiaopeng, 2022). The research indicates that when servant leaders prioritise followers' needs and focus on their development, it fosters PE, which subsequently promotes a positive work environment and risk-taking behaviours associated with IWB (Spreitzer et al., 1997; Garg et al., 2023). This study, therefore, provides empirical evidence emphasising the importance of PE in understanding how SL impacts IWB.

Thirdly, by exploring the connection between Servant Leadership (SL) and Psychological Empowerment (PE), this study enhances the existing PE literature (Kamil et al., 2025; Newman et al.,2018; Tripathi et al., 2021). It emphasizes SL's vital role in fostering PE within the dynamic context of higher education. By addressing employee needs and equipping them with necessary skills, servant leaders bolster competence, self-determination, and organizational impact. Conducted in Uganda, where organizational traits include significant power distance (Van Dierendonck, 2011), this research challenges the notion that SL

is less effective in such environments, demonstrating its universal benefits across social and cultural divides.

Also, the study on servant leadership enhances the understanding of innovative work behavior (IWB) in organizations. It highlights that adaptive and proactive behaviors, crucial in dynamic settings, emerge from supportive environments fostered by servant leaders. Such leaders improve employees' psychological empowerment, enabling them to go beyond predefined task roles. According to Gürbüz et al. (2024), the success of leaders is linked to their ability to create these supportive conditions.

Finally, examining the SL, PE, and IWB model in Uganda's higher education sector contributes to theory by testing established Western-based theories (SET, and Spreitzer's empowerment model) in a unique developing country context (Uganda), revealing how the model functions in a specific environment with unique challenges such as underfunding, huge workload and hierarchical structures (Lam-Lagoro & Okello, 2023). This research contributes by providing empirical evidence for the relationship between SL and IWB, clarifying the mediating role of PE, and adding to the limited data on this specific model outside Western contexts.

Practical implications

Our research offers significant practical implications. First, this study emphasizes the importance of servant leadership in promoting innovative work behaviors among the academic staff in public universities. To cultivate an innovation-friendly environment, public universities should focus on developing and training servant leaders, characterized by ethical standards and a service-oriented mindset. Recommended strategies include using behavioral interviews for recruitment, implementing targeted training programs, and incorporating metrics like innovation support rates into performance evaluations. Greater autonomy and supervisor support are also highlighted as key factors in enhancing motivation for innovation.

Second, this study highlights the critical role of psychological empowerment in enabling public employees' innovative behaviors through servant leadership. Prior studies corroborate that psychological empowerment is positively correlated to employees' innovative work behaviors (Grošelj et al., 2021; Marampa et al., 2025; Vu et al., 2025). Therefore, servant leaders in public universities should foster psychological empowerment by practising empathy, promoting autonomy, providing growth opportunities, and building a psychologically safe community. This approach helps faculty and staff feel their work is meaningful and that they have a sense of control and impact within the institution. By doing this, public personnel will be persuaded to freely express themselves and share creative ideas, which fosters innovation.

Finally, our findings indicate that psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employees' innovative work behaviors. Public universities should prioritize psychological empowerment and altruistic motivation in their recruitment processes, ensuring employees' personal values align with organizational missions to enhance employees' innovative work behaviors. University managers can prioritize psychological empowerment by focusing on its four key dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Actionable strategies involve providing necessary resources, fostering a supportive and communicative culture, and offering opportunities for professional growth.

Additionally, from a policy perspective, policymakers should enhance psychological empowerment through training programs focused on prosocial motivation and organizational goals, facilitating the integration of innovation into daily activities. Also, the positive impact of servant leadership on innovative work behavior can inform educational policy reforms by providing a framework to cultivate an environment of psychological empowerment, trust and professional growth of academic staff in public universities, which in turn drives creativity and innovation in the lecture rooms and the broader institution.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Our study has a number of limitations that point to potential directions for further investigation, despite its apparent theoretical and practical implications. First, this study utilized self-report measures of IWB, which could lead to CMV and change the pattern or strength of associations between study variables. While we used several statistical and procedural remedies to deal with this possible problem, we can not entirely rule out the problem of CMV. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct additional research to replicate our findings using both supervisor-rated and self-rated measures of IWB. Second, to test the

proposed study model of IWB, we selected a sample of academic workers from Uganda's public universities. Research conducted in a single industry and one nation may raise concerns about the results' generalizability to other industries and nations. A cross-industry and cross-cultural sample may be used in future studies to better understand the suggested linkages, improve the results' application, and have more rigorous consequences. Third, the study's finding of partial mediation of PE raises the possibility that there are other mediation mechanisms that can more effectively carry the impact of SL on IWB. Therefore, to ascertain which of the mechanisms can more effectively explain the relationship between SL and IWB, researchers are encouraged to explore additional mediation mechanisms using competing theoretical lenses such as social cognitive and social learning theories.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence of a strong positive relationship between SL and IWB among public university academic staff in the Ugandan context, highlighting the applicability of SL in a collectivistic culture. The findings confirm that SL, with its focus on empathy, employee empowerment and commitment to the growth of others, is a significant driver of innovation and closely aligns with Uganda's cultural values. The mediating role of PE introduces a distinct perspective, suggesting that while PE influences the SL-IWB relationship, its impact may be complex, with PE potentially enhancing innovation in certain contexts. Despite its limitations, the study establishes a basis for future research on the relationship between servant leadership and innovative work behavior across various cultures and industries. It highlights servant leadership's potential to enhance innovation, providing organizations with a means to succeed in competitive environments.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Mercy Wanyana**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ibrahim Abaasi Musenze**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Kaziba Abdul Mpaata**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

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

Informed consent

All participants provided written informed consent before their inclusion in the study. The study was conducted following the ethical standards of the Research and Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of Busitema University, with full observance of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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Data availability statement

Data for this study will be made available on request.

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