

Linking leadership styles to communication competency and work engagement: evidence from the hotel industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the mediation effects of leaders' communication competency in the link between leadership styles (i.e. servant and transactional leadership) and employees' work engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – Cross-sectional survey data from 392 employees in 33 hotels in Bangladesh were collected. To analyze the data, structural equation modeling was adopted, and partial least squares (PLS) analysis was used.

Findings – Results of PLS analysis revealed that servant leaders and leaders' communication competency positively influence employees' work engagement. In boosting employees' work engagement, communication competency is an important tool for servant leadership but not for transactional leadership.

Practical implications – Hoteliers and managers may want to adopt a servant leadership style and develop effective leadership communication skills to increase employees' engagement at work.

Originality/value – This study introduces communication competency as a mediating mechanism between leadership styles and work engagement in the hospitality industry.

Keywords Bangladesh, Communication competency, Hospitality industry, Servant leadership, Transactional leadership, Work engagement

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Highly engaged employees show a high level of mental spirit, enthusiasm, inspiration, investment and effort, persistence, and concentration and immersion at work (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). Organizations need dedicated, enthusiastic, vigorous and fully absorbed employees for competitive advantage, greater customer service, financial success and better employee outcomes (Albrecht *et al.*, 2018; Milliman *et al.*, 2018; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020; Xanthopoulos *et al.*, 2009). In the hospitality industry, highly engaged employees reduce turnover intention, increase job satisfaction, provide effective customer service and produce better employee outcomes (Gemedda and Lee, 2020; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020; Milliman *et al.*, 2018; Zheng *et al.*, 2019). Despite the importance of work engagement, a recent report by the Gallup organization shows that worldwide engagement remains at 15% in different industries, including the hotel industry (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020), suggesting the need to examine the low level of employees' engagement at work.



To examine work engagement, studies identified that, over the last decade, leadership style was the constant top driver of engagement along with other factors, such as leaders' communication style, career opportunities and employee well-being (Aon Hewitt, 2018; Harter and Rubenstein, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009). Various leadership theories (such as authentic, paradoxical and transformational) have also been developed to identify the most effective leadership style that helps achieve organizational goals (Breevaart *et al.*, 2013, Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020). Earlier studies have compared different leadership styles to better understand their effectiveness (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Hoch *et al.*, 2018; Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019). For example, servant leadership has been compared with other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014), authentic leadership (Kaya and Karatepe, 2020), and empowering and paradoxical leadership styles (Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019) in relation to work engagement.

Servant leadership produces greater behavioral and attitudinal outcomes than other leadership styles, such as authentic, ethical, transformational and empowering (Hoch *et al.*, 2018; Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020). In the hospitality industry, servant leadership has received much scholarly attention and is considered to be the most appropriate style (Bavik, 2020; Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020) because it involves a human-services focus (Greenleaf, 1977; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017). This leadership style achieves a shared vision, where the needs of immediate followers and their personal growth and advancement are prioritized over both self and organizational interests (Rabiul *et al.*, 2021a; Stone *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, servant leadership yields consistent positive employee outcomes worldwide in developing and developed nations (Bavik, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2021). This format of leadership might be effective in the Bangladeshi hotel industry, which has been growing simultaneously with its economic growth over the years (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020).

Similar to the servant leadership style, transactional leadership style focuses on work through an exchange process that prioritizes organizational objectives (Bass *et al.*, 2003; Jensen *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2018). This leadership style motivates employees to complete their work with regard to contingent rewards or punishment (Gemedá and Lee, 2020; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2001; Tims *et al.*, 2011). Service-oriented industries, such as hotel establishments, require employees to deliver quality service on time and to the customers' satisfaction and expectations, which suggests that transactional leadership could also be effective as it tends to be task-focused (Bass *et al.*, 2003; Li *et al.*, 2018; Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013).

Furthermore, Bangladesh is a typical collectivist country, with a hierarchical culture in which corporate objectives are highly valued and workers are more likely to be instructed to achieve them (Bass, 1997; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Jensen and Bro, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, employees' motivations and the effectiveness of leadership styles vary from culture to culture, work environment and structure, and individual traits (Hater and Bass, 1988). Transactional leadership is found to be inconsistent with positive and negative results (Bass *et al.*, 2003; Gemedá and Lee, 2020; Jensen *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2018; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2001; Young *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, very few studies look at the comparative effects of the servant and transactional leadership styles in the hospitality industry (Chiang and Wang, 2012; Dai *et al.*, 2013; Kool and Van Dierendonck, 2012; Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013). Hence, it emphasizes the importance of studying the transactional leadership style and its effect on employees' work engagement. Thus, we propose the **first research question**:

RQ1. Do servant leadership and transactional leadership affect employees' work engagement in the Bangladesh hotel industry?

Furthermore, previous studies have revealed that both servant and transactional leadership styles boost employees' work engagement through various mediating processes, such as

autonomy, psychological capital, social support and psychological empowerment (Breevaart *et al.*, 2013; De Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019; Joo *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2018). Despite its significance, previous studies have yet to explore the underlying mechanism of leaders' communication competency between these two leadership styles and employees' work engagement.

Both servant and transactional leaders communicate their work expectations to their subordinates (Breevaart *et al.*, 2013; De Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2018; Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013; Zhu *et al.*, 2012). Servant leaders influence followers by appealing to their inner values through persuasive communication (Avolio *et al.*, 2009; Farling *et al.*, 1999), while transactional leaders attach their relationship to the followers with an economic value (Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013; Zhu *et al.*, 2012). Although their processes are different, it is speculated that both types of leaders are likely to affect work engagement, because they communicate their expectations to accomplish work-related outcomes and organizational goals (Jiang and Luo, 2018; Karanges *et al.*, 2015; Kang and Sung, 2017).

According to the competency theory (Mulder, 2017), leaders' communication competency leads to followers' positive employee behaviors (e.g. work engagement). The need for studying leaders' communication competency is crucial, because earlier studies have identified several critical issues that contribute toward employee disengagement, including inappropriate leadership styles and ineffective communication (Li *et al.*, 2021; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Weaver and Mitchell, 2012). Consequently, organizations count an average loss of \$62.4 million per year, due to the lack of adequate communication (SHRM, 2017). Moreover, the significant role of leader communication in employees' positive behaviors (Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Jiang and Luo, 2018; Karanges *et al.*, 2015; Kang and Sung, 2017; Weaver and Mitchell, 2012), like leaders' communication competency as a potential underlying mechanism, seems to have been neglected. Hence, this leads to the **second research question**:

RQ2. Could a leader's communication competency explain the differing effects of servant leadership and transactional leadership on employees' work engagement?

This study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, examining leaders' communication competency as a linking mechanism or mediator in the relationship enhances our theoretical understanding of why different leadership styles affect work engagement differently. Our study differs from previous research focused on examining the impact of leadership and leaders' communication skills on work engagement separately (e.g. Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Jiang and Luo, 2018; Weaver and Mitchell, 2012). Second, by studying the two leadership styles together, the findings contribute to the leadership literature, where leaders' communication competency may differ across leadership styles to motivate the positive employee outcomes (i.e. engagement). Moreover, the present study has practical value, in that it offers insight into the developmental needs of leaders in hospitality organizations.

2. Review of the literature and hypothesis development

2.1 Leadership styles (servant and transactional) and work engagement

Work engagement refers to "a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006, p. 702). Vigor refers to high energy levels and mental resilience toward work; dedication refers to an emotional involvement with the work, with a sense of inspiration, pride and challenge; and absorption refers to a deep concentration toward work (Tims *et al.*, 2011; Wang and Chen, 2020; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009).

According to Greenleaf (1977), “the servant-leader is servant first [. . .] it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (p. 6). Servant leader prioritizes the needs of immediate followers over organizations and him/herself (Farling *et al.*, 1999; Liden *et al.*, 2015). Once the needs of the followers are met, servant leaders focus on the organizational outcomes (Greenleaf, 1977; Stone *et al.*, 2004). We focused on Greenleaf (1977) core concept by following the concise definition by several researches (e.g. Bavik, 2020; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017; Farling *et al.*, 1999; Liden *et al.*, 2015; Stone *et al.*, 2004).

As an employee-oriented manager, a servant leader shares power with employees and focuses on their growth, development and well-being to help them accomplish the organizational goals (De Clercq *et al.*, 2014; Karatepe *et al.*, 2018). When employees receive help and guidance from their leader, they are likely to feel empowered and believe that their job is meaningful, thus making them more engaged at work (Bao *et al.*, 2018; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017). In this regard, the leader is likely to be perceived as a crucial job resource (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), which employees can leverage to be engaged at work and accomplish their work roles. Moreover, leaders’ service-oriented behavior increases employee commitment by ensuring personal growth and development, which leads to employees’ positive work behavior, attitudes or states (Chen and Peng, 2019; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021a; Yang *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, servant leaders’ encouraging, positive and helpful, behaviors are reflected in employees’ positive behaviors, attitudes or states (Jang and Kandampully, 2017; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2018). For instance, in the Taiwanese hospitality industry, servant leaders increase psychological capital through serving behavior, which leads to greater work engagement (Chen and Peng, 2019; Peng and Chen, 2020).

Furthermore, Uehara (1995) stated that reciprocity is a pattern of exchange by “which mutual dependence of people is realized” (p. 484). Consistent with the social exchange theory (SET) employees demonstrate work engagement to reciprocate the support and guidance of the servant leader (Bavik, 2020; Uehara, 1995). In their recent study, Bao *et al.* (2018) found support for the SET in the positive influence of servant leadership on subordinates’ work engagement. This is in line with other studies, which also demonstrated the positive influence of servant leadership on work engagement in the services and hospitality industry (e.g. Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020). In their meta-analytic study, Bavik (2020) and Li *et al.* (2021) showed a similar effect of servant leadership in the hospitality industry. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1. Servant leadership style is positively associated with work engagement.

Transactional leaders focus on the organizational goal first in the exchange process (Gemedá and Lee, 2020; Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013; Zhu *et al.*, 2012). Transactional leaders motivate employees by negotiating an agreement with rewards, praise or punishment for good and poor performance and satisfying the employees’ lower-order and psychological needs (Afshari and Gibson, 2016; Clarke, 2013). In this exchange process, employees are encouraged to work with full enthusiasm and energy for the financial rewards, recognition and possibly avoid disciplinary action (Bass *et al.*, 2003; Young *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Since transactional leaders are goal-oriented, they clarify the work roles and responsibilities, focus on clear expectations of employees in completing work by providing the necessary resources (Bass *et al.*, 2003; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2001) and recognize employees’ achievement of work outcomes (Gemedá and Lee, 2020).

Metanalysis by Young *et al.* (2020) showed that transactional leaders generate positive task and contextual performance by empowering subordinates. Psychologically empowered employees are more likely engaged at work (Joo *et al.*, 2019). These leaders generate satisfaction to employee and extra efforts in hospitality service (Quintana *et al.*, 2015). Psychologically empowered, satisfied and spiritual employees are more likely engaged at work (De Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Joo *et al.*, 2019; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020; Zheng *et al.*, 2019).

It is expected that under this leadership style, employees who receive the necessary support and empowerment are likely to exert higher levels of work engagement (Harter *et al.*, 2016; Joo *et al.*, 2019). A study by Li *et al.* (2018) in a Chinese context confirms that transactional leaders enhance work engagement directly and indirectly through increasing subordinates' psychological capital. Consistent with SET (Uehara, 1995), the behaviors of the transactional leadership styles will encourage employees to work with complete concentration, vigor and dedication. Based on the evidence and arguments above, we propose the following:

H2. Transactional leadership style is positively associated with work engagement.

2.2 Leadership styles and communication competency

A leader's communication competency could be defined in various ways, but most researchers agree that it comprises two components: communication effectiveness and communication appropriateness (Flauto, 1999; McCroskey, 1982; Monge *et al.*, 1981; Rubin, 1985; Wiemann and Backlund, 1980). Communication effectiveness refers to achieving shared objectives through consistency without violating norms (Canary and Spitzberg, 1989; Monge *et al.*, 1981). Communication effectiveness is task- or achievement-oriented, which requires performance (Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Wiemann, 1977). In contrast, communication appropriateness is relationship-oriented and can avoid situational or relational inappropriate sanctions concerning communicative context (Canary and Spitzberg, 1989; Monge *et al.*, 1981). It requires more than verbal, nonverbal and intellectual skills while sending and receiving messages to subordinates (Macik-Frey *et al.*, 2005). The appropriateness of communication depends on verbal sensitivity and relational and environmental contexts (Canary and Spitzberg, 1987). In essence, communication competency is communication skills where leaders effectively and appropriately achieve their valued aims consistently without violating norms while avoiding any situational or relational inappropriate sanctions concerning the communicative context (Canary and Spitzberg, 1989; Macik-Frey *et al.*, 2005).

Limited studies have empirically examined the association between leadership and communication competency (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2015). However, several scholars have proposed that servant leaders are effective communicators while they serve their followers for their well-being (Avolio *et al.*, 2009; Farling *et al.*, 1999). The relatively more human approach of servant leadership works with ethics and justice (Greenleaf, 1977; Stone *et al.*, 2004). Hence, an employee may perceive servant leaders' communication as appropriate because of their more human leadership approach. Thus, servant leaders are expected to achieve their goals and keep relationships with subordinates appropriately and effectively by using competent communication. A study by Park *et al.* (2015) on hospital nurses demonstrated a positive relationship between servant leaders and communication competency.

Similarly, according to Hackman and Johnson (2013) and Zeffass and Huck (2007), communication is essential for transactional leaders in the process of a transaction. For instance, this leadership style clearly communicates requirements, rewards for the successful task completion, explains necessary rules and procedures for the tasks and establishes standard compliance (Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013; Zhu *et al.*, 2012). Several studies have demonstrated that communication competency and leadership behaviors are positively correlated, and leadership is enacted through communication (Barge and Hirokawa, 1989; de Vries *et al.*, 2010; Flauto, 1999; Penley *et al.*, 1991). An empirical study demonstrated that task-oriented transactional leadership is positively related to competent communication (appropriateness and effectiveness) (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2015). Thus, we present the following hypotheses:

H3. Servant leadership is positively correlated with communication competency.

H4. Transactional leadership is positively correlated with communication competency.

2.3 *Communication competency and work engagement*

Communication plays a fundamental role in engaging employees at work (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009). Effective communication (such as participative and relational communication) positively influences employees to engage themselves with their work (Ruck *et al.*, 2017; Vercic and Vokic, 2017; Walden *et al.*, 2017). Clear, honest and consistent communication engages employees by keeping them energized, focused and productive, which ultimately contributes to long-term organizational success and employee morale (Aon Hewitt, 2018; Harter and Rubenstein, 2020). On the contrary, leaders who demonstrate poor communication quality with subordinates are likely to make them feel disengaged at work (Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Marone, 2020). A lack of communication may increase conflict and ambiguity, which leads to disengagement through burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

Contrarily, competency theory suggest that individuals competent in communication can consistently manage conversational activities, express themselves using various linguistic nonverbal codes during the interaction and present their concerns with feelings, emotion, attentiveness and interest (Barge and Hirokawa, 1989; Mulder, 2017). Thus, employees are expected to become engaged at work when leaders use communication competency skills by maintaining communication appropriateness (relationship-oriented) and effectiveness (task or achievement-oriented). For instance, communication effectiveness (task-oriented) clarifies ambiguity and uncertainty, which increases the employees' level of work engagement, while communication appropriateness enhances the employee-leader relationship. Previous studies indicated that a better relationship between managers and employees leads to employees' greater work engagement (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021b; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Weaver and Mitchell, 2012). It also increases employee job engagement, as it clarifies job rules and reduces uncertainty through effective communications (Kang *et al.*, 2020; Kunie *et al.*, 2017; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021b). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. Leaders' communication competency is positively correlated with work engagement.

2.4 *Communication competency mediates the relationship between leadership styles and work engagement*

Several scholars note that leadership and communication are correlated and cannot be separated (Baker and Ganster, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Hackman and Johnson, 2013). According to Barge and Hirokawa (1989), "leadership occurs through the process of interaction and communication" (p. 171). During the interaction, leaders exchange messages to clarify the goals and objectives that followers can use to achieve the target. That is, "the exercise of leadership is dependent upon the possession of specific communication competencies or skills" (Barge and Hirokawa, 1989, p. 173). Conclusively, leaders must communicate with their followers, but their success depends on communication competency.

Through communication competency, leaders may achieve their tasks and maintain appropriate and effective relationships with subordinates. For instance, according to the competency theory, competency is a set of abilities that includes personal traits, capabilities, knowledge and skills (Mulder, 2017). Communication is one of the competencies a leader must possess to influence subordinates to behave appropriately for employee outcomes (Chomsky, 1968; Mulder, 2017). Through a communication process, effective leaders must competently articulate a vision. Leaders competent in communication can develop and maintain interpersonal relationships with their employees, making them more engaged at work (Barge and Hirokawa, 1989). Leaders not only achieve goals through effective communication skills and fulfill communication functions, but also maintain conversational and interpersonal norms appropriately without violations (Flauto, 1999; Madlock, 2008).

Precisely, transactional leaders communicate with subordinates about the contingent reward in an organized, well-structured and well-articulated way (Crews *et al.*, 2019; de Vries *et al.*, 2010; Pacleb and Bocarnea, 2016; Pacleb and Cabanda, 2014). Likewise, servant leaders use spoken language effectively when communicating with subordinates (Avolio *et al.*, 2009; Farling *et al.*, 1999; Park *et al.*, 2015). Thus, both leadership styles could influence the subordinates' positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes (i.e. engagement) through well-structured, well-articulated and persuasive communication (Avolio *et al.*, 2009; Crews *et al.*, 2019; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009).

Additionally, Pennington *et al.* (1999) stated that some of the exchanges have relations with emotions (e.g. communication), which are more important than economic exchanges. In this regard, leaders' competency in communication could be considered an important mediating mechanism to stimulate the positive behavior of employees. Homans (1958) explained that oral communication or verbal behavior is one of the most functional mechanisms in a social exchange relationship. Specifically, the competency theory proposes that leaders' communication competency will result in followers' positive employee outcomes (e.g. work engagement) (Mulder, 2017). Precisely, leaders' competency in communication increases employee safety, boosts employee morale, clarifies work roles, builds a better relationship with employees, increases employee participation in decision-making and energized at work, which then boosts a higher work engagement (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020; Kang *et al.*, 2020; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021b; Ruck *et al.*, 2017; Vercic and Vokic, 2017; Walden *et al.*, 2017). Thus, leaders' communication competency will have a meaningful role in influencing subordinates' positive behavior at work. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H6. Communication competency plays a mediating role in the association between servant leadership and employees' work engagement.
- H7. Communication competency plays a mediating role in the association between transactional leadership and employees' work engagement.

Figure 1 shows the study's proposed model.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sample size and data collection procedure

Lower and mid-level hotel employees provided opinions regarding their immediate supervisor/managers' leadership styles and communication competency. They also provided self-reported data on their level of work engagement. The employees recruited for this study were food and beverage assistants, room attendants, supervisors and assistant managers. Only 44 star-rated hotels are available across eight divisions in Bangladesh (BIHA, 2020).

In this study, we followed the earlier studies (e.g. Rabiul and Yean, 2021; Vallen and Vallen, 2014) and the total population of 6,695 was identified by a staff and room ratio of 1:1 (one room: one employee). To define the required sample size, Krejcie and Morgan's (1970)

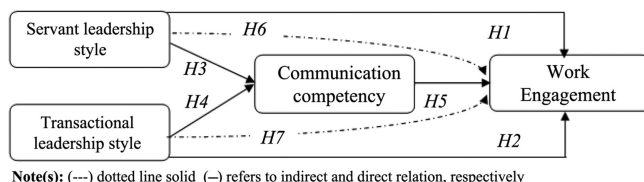


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

recommendation was applied. After contacting 44 hotels, only 33 agreed to take part in the survey. Among 33 hotels, 27 were privately-owned local hotels, and 6 belonged to international hotel chains. Questionnaires were distributed and collected during the last four months of the year 2019.

The researchers distributed 735 questionnaires with the assistance of hotel representatives, such as marketing and human resources managers, to expect that more than 50% of responses would be obtained to meet the required sample size of 357. To collect data, a simple random sampling technique was applied with the following steps. Although the hotels did not provide a list of the employees' full names, their IDs were obtained separately on paper with the cooperation of hotel managers. For instance, in a hotel with 100 employees (as estimated with a ratio of 1:1), 100 employee IDs were obtained. Further, the number of questionnaires distributed at each hotel was also determined by the size of its staff. For example, hotels with 300 employees were given 38 questionnaires, and those with 100 employees were given 13 questionnaires.

Each n th sample in the population was determined to randomly select 38 and 13 samples from the specified hotel. To avoid potential bias, the researchers' representatives distributed the questionnaires in a sealed envelope to the participants directly, with the permission of the HR managers. Five representatives helped the researchers in collecting responses. Each representative had a master's degree in business administration (MBA) and an experience of over four years in the hotel industry. The representatives were educated about the variables to facilitate the participants. In addition, to ensure no common method bias and avoid other related biases, bilingual and short versions of the questionnaires were used, and participants' anonymity was ensured (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). The participants were also informed that the data will be used in aggregate form so that their identity could be concealed. The questionnaires were written in both Bengali and English as these languages are commonly understood and spoken. A valid sample size of 392 was received after treating missing data and outliers.

Of 392 responses, 54.14% were from employees at five-star hotels, 13.28% from four-star hotels and 32.58% from three-star hotels. Most participants were men (84%), and 63% were not married. Around 46% of the participants had a bachelor's (pass course and honors certificate) or an equivalent degree, followed by 28% with a diploma and 13% with a master's degree. Approximately one-third of the participants worked at the front office, while others belonged to the food and beverage, housekeeping, human resources, sales and marketing, and accounting and finance departments. As for age, the participants were relatively young; approximately 40% were aged between 22 and 25 years; only 13% were over the age of 30.

3.2 Measures

Established measures from Liden *et al.* (2015) and MacKenzie *et al.* (2001) were used for servant (seven-items) and transactional leadership (seven-items), respectively. These instruments have shown high reliability and validity in different contexts in earlier studies (e.g. Chiang and Wang, 2012; Karatepe *et al.*, 2018; Kaya and Karatepe, 2020; Liden *et al.*, 2015; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2001; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021a; Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013). By aligning with these earlier studies, we concentrate on complete leadership style rather than leaders' individual behaviors.

Moreover, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for transactional leadership revealed a single factor (e.g. Floyd and Widaman, 1995; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021b) which is similar to other studies (e.g. Chiang and Wang, 2012; Rothfelder *et al.*, 2013). Thus, a unidimensional measurement was suitable for both leadership styles. The sample items for servant and transactional leadership styles include: "my immediate supervisor puts my best interests ahead of his/her own" and "my immediate supervisor acknowledges my good performance," respectively.

A 12-item communication competency scale was adapted from [Monge et al. \(1981\)](#). Sample items include such statements as: “my immediate supervisor has a good command of the language”. Considering the two dimensions of communication competency, we employed a CFA, which revealed a single factor. Additionally, we followed prior studies (e.g. [Madlock, 2008](#); [Steele and Plenty, 2014](#)) and thus, considered the factor as unidimensional.

A nine-item instrument, widely used in hospitality, of work engagement was taken from [Schaufeli et al. \(2006\)](#). Previous studies have suggested this scale to be unidimensional ([Rabiul and Yean, 2021](#); [Vallieres et al., 2017](#)). Our factor analysis revealed a high correlation with three dimensions, with nine items loaded together in a single factor. Thus, following factor analysis ([Floyd and Widaman, 1995](#); [Rabiul et al., 2021b](#)) and other earlier empirical studies ([Breevaart et al., 2013](#); [Lee et al., 2019](#); [Zheng et al., 2019](#)), we considered work engagement to be unidimensional. A sample item includes “I am immersed in my work.”

All questionnaire items were in English and Bengali language and included a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) to ensure that participants could understand the statements and respond accurately.

3.3 Face validity, the translation of questionnaire, pre-test and pilot test

Even though all measurements were well established and conducted in different cultures earlier, a senior lecturer and an associate professor in management from Universiti Utara Malaysia in Malaysia and Jagannath University in Bangladesh, respectively, were requested to validate the true representation of the constructs. These academicians also contributed to translating the questionnaire from English to Bengali. Following the suggestion by [Brislin \(1970\)](#), the “committee approach” was employed. The items were translated by three management academics who were fluent in both Bengali and English. Two managers working in the hotel industry then checked the translated version to ensure that any sensitive issues for hoteliers were avoided.

Besides, since the measurements were used in a different context, face validity and pre-testing were performed. A pre-test is crucial to develop and increase the effectiveness of the questionnaire in a new context. The final version (English and Bengali) was given to a group of 10 employees working in the hotel for their opinions if they have any difficulty to understand the questions. The recommendations were taken from them and modified. Additionally, a pilot test was performed using 67 samples, suggesting that all variables have internal consistency, with Cronbach’s Alpha above 0.807.

3.4 Data analysis and bias treatment

Smart-PLS (partial least squares) was used to analyze the data, while the SPSS version 25.0 was employed for data entry and demographic analysis. The PLS is effective for predictive and explanatory research ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). Potential outliers were deleted, following [Lynch’s \(2013\)](#) Chi-square table and Mahalanobis distance at a significance level of more than 0.001. Moreover, nonresponse bias was checked through Levene’s test by dividing data into two groups of early responses (223 cases) and late responses (168 cases). Levene’s test showed no significant difference between the two groups.

As data were single-sourced, statistical remedies, such as the Harman single-factor analysis, were performed ([MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012](#)). The analysis indicated a total of four factors that explained 59.195 and a single factor that explained only 31.84%, which was less than 50% ([MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012](#)), suggesting that no common method bias was a threat.

To check for multicollinearity and correlations among the variables, variance inflation factors (VIF) with tolerance was performed (see [Tables 1 and 2](#)). Since the VIF was lesser than 5.0, tolerance was greater than 0.2, and no relationship with more than 0.70 was found among the variables, multicollinearity was not an issue in the present study ([Hair et al., 2019](#); [Rabiul and Yean, 2021](#)).

3.5 Control variables

Past studies (e.g. [Kaya and Karatepe, 2020](#); [Tsauro et al., 2019](#); [Schaufeli et al., 2006](#)) indicated that background variables had a significant influence on subordinates' work engagement. Therefore, this study controlled for the participants' education, age, gender and work experience to avoid any further probable influence.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model

To test the measurement model, composite reliability, loading for individual items and AVE (average variance extracted), heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) were used (see [Figure 2](#), [Tables 3 and 4](#)). Several items (TSL2, CC5 and WE4) were removed due to unsatisfactory communalities below 0.50 and poor loading less than 0.50. [Table 3](#) shows composite reliability and AVE above 0.890 and 0.503, respectively. Thus, all variables met the necessary

Table 1. Standard deviation (SD), zero-order correlation and Means of the latent variables

Constructs	Means	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Servant leadership	5.097	0.957	1			
2. Transactional leadership	5.297	0.913	0.363**	1		
3. Communication competency	5.003	0.912	0.347**	0.262**	1	
4. Work engagement	5.091	0.952	0.602**	0.333**	0.355**	1

Note(s): **two-tailed significant correlation at 0.01 level

Table 2. Collinearity diagnosis

Variables ^a	Tolerance	VIF
Transactional leadership style	0.800	1.150
Communication competency	0.847	1.181
Servant leadership style	0.858	1.165

Note(s): ^adependent variable: Work engagement

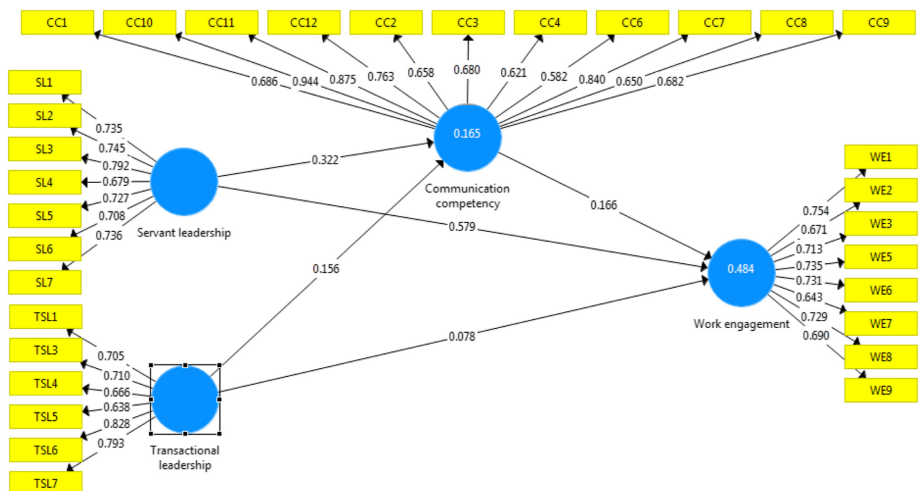


Figure 2. Measurement model

Variables	Items	CC	SL	TSL	WE	CR	AVE	
Communication competency (CC)	CC1	<i>0.685</i>				0.926	0.538	
	CC10	<i>0.944</i>	0.336*	0.286*	0.405*			
	CC11	<i>0.875</i>						
	CC12	<i>0.763</i>						
	CC2	<i>0.658</i>						
	CC3	<i>0.680</i>						
	CC4	<i>0.621</i>						
	CC6	<i>0.582</i>						
	CC7	<i>0.840</i>						
Servant leadership style (SL)	SL1		<i>0.735</i>			0.890	0.537	
	SL2		<i>0.745</i>		0.513*			
	SL3		<i>0.792</i>	0.360*				
	SL4		<i>0.678</i>					
	SL5		<i>0.727</i>					
	SL6		<i>0.707</i>					
	SL7	0.347*	<i>0.739</i>					
	Transactional leadership style (TSL)	TSL1			<i>0.705</i>		0.869	0.528
		TSL3			<i>0.710</i>			
TSL4				<i>0.666</i>				
TSL5				<i>0.638</i>				
TSL6		0.247*	0.343*	<i>0.828</i>				
TSL7				<i>0.793</i>	0.301*			
Work engagement (WE)		WE1	0.340*			<i>0.754</i>	0.890	0.503
	WE2			0.297*	<i>0.671</i>			
	WE3				<i>0.713</i>			
	WE5				<i>0.735</i>			
	WE6				<i>0.731</i>			
	WE7				<i>0.643</i>			
	WE8		0.515*		<i>0.729</i>			
	WE9				<i>0.690</i>			

Linking leadership styles

Table 3. Construct validity, loading and cross-loading

Note(s): *the highest cross loading; *italics* = indicator loading

Constructs	1	2	3	4
1. Communication competency				
2. Servant leadership style	0.382			
3. Transactional leadership style	0.280	0.406		
4. Work engagement	0.404	0.674	0.361	

Table 4. Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio

conditions of convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, all the constructs satisfied the condition of discriminant validity (see Table 4), such as relationships between latent variables being less than 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). Loadings and cross-loadings demonstrated that all items within the variable were highly loaded compared to other items in other constructs (see Table 3).

4.2 Quality of the model

In Smart-PLS, to understand model quality, standardized root mean residual (SRMR), coefficient of determination (R^2), cross-validated redundancy and (Q^2) are normally evaluated.

SMMR lower than 0.08 and Q^2 more than zero are considered a good model fit and have predictive accuracy (Hair *et al.*, 2019). More precisely, Q^2 of 0.02, 0.015 and 0.35 represent small, medium and substantial predictive power respectively. R^2 of 0.10 indicates satisfactory while values of 0.19, 0.33 and 0.67 indicate weak, moderate and strong effects, respectively (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The exogenous variables (leadership styles and communication competency) explained 48% of the variance (R^2) on the endogenous variable (work engagement), suggesting that the model had a moderate effect. The SRMR values of 0.051 showed a good model fit, while Q^2 of 0.075 on communication competency and 0.208 on work engagement indicated weak and small predictive relevance.

4.3 Structural model

To test the hypotheses, bootstrapping was performed on 5,000 samples against a sample size of 392. Age, gender and job experience were controlled because of their association with employees' behaviors (e.g. Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). Controlled variables were excluded from measuring the effects and association between the variables due to marginal changes in R^2 . Table 5 displays that only two hypotheses (H2 and H7) were not supported. To understand the mediation, we followed Nitzl *et al.* (2016). For example, full mediation occurs when the direct effect is not significant, but indirect effects are significant (Nitzl *et al.*, 2016). When both indirect and direct effects are significant, partial mediation, such as complementary or competitive, exists (Nitzl *et al.*, 2016).

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Conclusion

The mediating role of communication competency in Bangladesh's hotel industry between leadership styles (servant and transactional) shows that servant leaders boost work engagement both directly and indirectly through communication competency. Even though transactional leaders exhibit communication competency, the insignificant relationship with work engagement raises an important question of why transactional leaders fail to engage employees. Therefore, more research on transactional leadership and employee's work engagement is needed.

No	Hypothesized paths	(β)	t -values	Results/supported	Bias corrected confidence interval 95%	
					LL	UL
H1	SL → work engagement	0.579	9.246*	Yes	0.453	0.698
H2	TSL → work engagement	0.079	1.201	No	-0.049	0.212
H3	SL → COM	0.323	4.747*	Yes	0.182	0.450
H4	TSL → COM	0.156	2.263***	Yes	0.014	0.284
H5	COM → work engagement	0.166	2.926**	Yes	0.046	0.269
<i>Mediated hypotheses</i>						
H6	SL → COM → work engagement	0.054	2.561***	Mediate	0.017	0.099
H7	TSL → COM → work engagement	0.026	1.640	No mediation	0.003	0.064

Table 5. Direct and indirect hypotheses

Note(s): β = path coefficient. COM = communication competency, * $p \leq 0.001$ or $t \geq 3.29$; SL = servant leadership, LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit, ** $p \leq 0.01$ or $t \geq 2.58$; TSL = transactional leadership, *** $p \leq 0.05$ or $t \geq 1.96$, $n = 391$

5.2 Discussion

Servant leaders are expected to have a positive influence on work engagement in the workplace (H1). This finding is in line with prior studies (e.g. [Eva et al., 2019](#)). This is because such leadership ensures that employees enjoy a work-life balance, have a psychologically safe environment and establish a relationship with their superiors. Servant leaders use the human-oriented leadership style and manage employees with empathy and justice by giving priority to their needs, which consequently leads to their demonstration of positive behaviors ([Greenleaf, 1977](#)). In addition to that employees' positive behaviors, attitudes, or states are reflected by their leaders' encouraging, positive and helpful behaviors ([Bavik, 2020](#)).

Conversely, transactional leaders do not have a positive effect on work engagement (H2), which contradicts the findings of previous studies ([Bakker et al., 2011](#); [Zhang et al., 2014](#)), because of the purported lack of motivational power of these leaders. Using positional authority and maintaining organizational policy through constructive and corrective transactions of reward and punishment may not increase employees' engagement at work ([Popli and Rizvi, 2015](#)). This could be because such a leader does not invoke commitment, trust and motivation toward the work ([Chiang and Wang, 2012](#); [Dai et al., 2013](#); [Zhang et al., 2014](#)). Besides, transactional leaders only concentrate on extrinsic motivation rather than the higher-order needs of employees ([Li et al., 2018](#)).

However, this leadership style, also known as the "double-edged sword," can produce positive and negative employee outcomes, that is, work engagement ([Gemedda and Lee, 2020](#); [Li et al., 2018](#); [Young et al., 2020](#)). A study on diverse private organizations in Malaysia confirms that transactional leaders do not have a significant positive relationship with work engagement ([Lee et al., 2019](#)). They further found this leadership style does not influence positive work engagement due to a lack of supervisory coaching and performance feedback. Nevertheless, once servant leadership is controlled, the transactional leadership style has a positive and significant effect on work engagement, both directly and indirectly, via communication competency. People in Bangladesh are emotional, while transactional leaders may not be emotional ([Rowold and Rohmann, 2009](#)).

Both leadership styles are expected to positively correlate with communication competency (H3 and H4) and subsequently enhance work engagement (H5). Unlike transactional leaders (H7), servant leaders (H6) use communication competency to boost employees' work engagement in the workplace. The result of the study implies that leadership and communication are inseparable, and communication is the main component of leadership ([Baker and Ganster, 1985](#); [Barge and Hirokawa, 1989](#); [Hackman and Johnson, 2013](#)). This finding is consistent with that of [Madlock \(2008\)](#), who demonstrated that communication competency has a positive and significant influence on subordinates' work engagement. According to [Greenleaf \(1977\)](#), servant leaders always listen and communicate from the heart with fairness. They prioritize employees' needs through effective communication by developing a genuine communication environment ([Avolio et al., 2009](#); [Farling et al., 1999](#); [Jensen et al., 2018](#)).

Conversely, task-oriented transactional leaders may not focus on relational competencies but on other aspects such as rules, regulations, goal setting and planning with personal goals and agendas ([Barge and Hirokawa, 1989](#); [de Vries et al., 2010](#); [Flauto, 1999](#)). Specifically, this leadership style focuses on organizational goals, planning and rules directed by the management through an exchange process ([Popli and Rizvi, 2015](#)).

Besides, [Crews et al. \(2019\)](#) found that the contingent reward behavior of transactional leaders is negatively related to the emotional, verbally aggressive and manipulative communication style. This indicates that a transactional leader is not verbally aggressive, emotive or manipulative toward subordinates but controls emotion while communicating verbally. Transactional leaders also rely on a precise communication style (structured and articulated) ([Crews et al., 2019](#)). Since transactional leaders' communication styles do not

involve motivational factors, employees may not be encouraged to engage with their work for greater success. Employees experiencing less emotion in the use of oral language will detach themselves from their work role because people in Bangladesh are culturally emotional (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). It is hard to predict the transactional and communication competency relationship without considering a variety of antecedents such as organizational settings, individual ability and organizational situations.

5.3 Theoretical implications

First, this study contributes to SET and leadership development using the hotel industry sample, by elucidating how the social exchange process, the joint activity of two or more actors, benefits everyone by exchanging behaviors or goods (Lawler, 2001). For example, once employees receive any socioemotional (leader's positive behaviors) resource from the organization, they feel obliged to repay in kind (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017).

Our study demonstrates that servant leaders have a more significant effect on employees' work outcomes when compared to transactional leaders. Contrary to servant leadership, transactional leaders are ineffective at influencing subordinates' positive behavior. Results suggest that the transactional leadership style is not applicable in the context of a developing country compared to servant leadership. This shows that transactional leadership is culturally unified and less likely to change across cultures (Bass, 1997; Li *et al.*, 2021), while servant leadership is consistent across different settings, including a robust hierarchical culture (Bavik, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2021). Hence, our study differentiates between servant and transactional leadership styles, contributes to leadership development and extends SET by investigating hotel employees in Bangladesh.

Second, it extends competency theory and SET by investigating the mediating role of competency between leadership styles and subordinates' work engagement. The results suggest that both types of leaders exercise significant communication competency while motivating employees. However, only servant leaders tend to be effective and appropriate in using their communication skills to influence employees' positive behavior at work (H3: $t = 4.74$) compared to transactional leaders (H4: $t = 2.26$). Findings reconfirm that both servant and transactional leaders demonstrate good communication skills (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2015; Park *et al.*, 2015), which are yet to be explored. Results indicate leaders' communication competency matters while motivating employees for positive outcomes. Thus, it extends competency theory and contributes to leadership development using hotel industry samples from developing context.

Third, Duck (1994) indicated that communication is central to all exchange relationships. Limited studies (i.e. Park *et al.*, 2015) tested communication competency as mediator in different context, while few studies (i.e. Rabiul and Yean, 2021; Rabiul *et al.*, 2021a) examined other types of communication (two-way communication, use of spoken language) with different leadership styles. However, previous studies are yet to identify the leaders' communication competency as a mechanism tool between these two leadership styles to foster work engagement. Findings of the hotel sample in this study reveals that servant leaders use communication competency (H6: $t = 2.561$) as the influential explanatory instrument in boosting employees (Farling *et al.*, 1999), while transactional leaders do not (H7: $t = 1.64$) (Foster, 2019). The mediating role of communication competency contributes not only to SET but also to competency theory (Duck, 1994; Donohue *et al.*, 1988; Mulder, 2017) and extends leadership theories.

Fourth, this study contributes to work engagement literature in an Asian context by investigating hotel employees in Bangladesh. Limited studies have conducted research on leadership, communication competency and work engagement in the hotel industry in developing context. Overall, our findings contribute to SET, leadership development and

communication competency theory by demonstrating how servant leaders differ from transactional leaders, particularly in their communication competency and achieve positive employee behaviors, psychological state, or attitude in the Bangladesh hotel industry.

5.4 *Practical implications*

The present study has several managerial implications: managers in the hotel industry must practice service-oriented leadership instead of task-oriented transactional leadership as servant leaders generate greater work engagement than transactional leaders. Besides, the task-oriented transactional leadership style does not influence employees' positive work behaviors directly or indirectly through communication competency. Servant leadership is consistent across cultures and positively related to engagement (Bavik, 2020; Huertas-Valdivia *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2021).

Indeed, servant leaders explicitly demonstrate human-oriented leadership that uses their communication skills to gain positive employee outcomes (Farling *et al.*, 1999). Hoteliers may benefit from providing training leadership programs to promote servant leaders' behaviors in both managers and employees because the latter may become managers in the future and will need to be equipped with the necessary competencies and skills. However, transactional leaders seem to produce positive work engagement directly and indirectly via communication competency. It is biased to recommend based on the data from a single study that hoteliers should not aim for better employee outcomes.

Indeed leaders' competency in communication is warranted when interacting with their employees for positive workplace outcomes (Aon Hewitt, 2018; Harter and Rubenstein, 2020; Madlock, 2008; Marone, 2020; Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009; Ruck *et al.*, 2017; Vercic and Vokic, 2017; Walden *et al.*, 2017). One of the most important functional competencies hotel manager should have is communication competency (Bharwani and Talib, 2017). Hence, organizations should provide communication training programs for senior management level and all levels of employees (Popli and Rizvi, 2015). Promoting communication competency skills in leaders/managers may lead to unexpected employee disengagement and indirect financial loss (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020; SHRM, 2017). Hoteliers should recruit both managers and employees by assessing communication competency skills and leadership practices for better organizational outcomes.

It should be noted that highly social, motivated, conscientious and trained people are required in promoting a pragmatic servant leadership culture in the workplace (Eva *et al.*, 2019). The prioritization of employees' needs is, in many ways, contradictory to human survival's impulses motivated by self-interest. In addition to many advantages of servant leadership, both leaders and employees must be willing to immensely commit to building a servant leadership community, starting with themselves as role models (Greenleaf, 1977; Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2017).

5.5 *Limitations and future research suggestions*

The findings of this study have the following limitations. First, although servant leaders are more likely effective in the hotel industry (Eva *et al.*, 2019), transactional leadership may be effective in the public service sector, where controlling and monitoring behaviors are preferred. Since leadership styles vary according to the context (e.g. economic situation, culture of organizations, work environment), the rising economic development of Bangladesh (from lower-level income to mid-level income country) demands the managers' leadership styles be sophisticated. Therefore, future research should investigate how transactional and servant leaders act in other sectors.

Single-source and cross-sectional data may not provide a cause-and-effect relationship in the long run. Cross-sectional data could generate endogeneity bias. Therefore, multi-source

data could provide greater insight and mitigate common method biases, although such bias was not an issue in this study. Therefore, future research can include time lag research and multi-source design to mitigate this bias. For instance, work engagement and communication competency can be collected at time 1 and leadership styles at time 2.

Communication competency consists of task-oriented and relational-oriented dimensions. However, we could not observe whether different leadership styles exhibit different communication dimensions, due to one-factor loading. Since different leaders have different foci in motivating their employees, we speculate that their communication foci could also be different. Hence, future research may want to explore this issue further.

Leadership effectiveness depends on individual traits, organizational resources and organizational culture (Hater and Bass, 1988). Future research can explore the boundary conditions, such as job demands, job resources and personality factors, to examine the differences in leadership styles. Economic factors (e.g. job availability and job security), individual factors (e.g. employees' knowledge and ability) and organizational factors (e.g. human resources practices) could be influential in reversing or elucidating their relationships. Moreover, different types of communication, such as transparent communication, two-way communication and upward communication, could be important functional mechanisms to differentiate between leadership styles. Future research may aggregate two or more leadership styles to obtain a better understanding of how leadership influences positive outcomes.

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