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SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND THRIVING AT WORK AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF OF UNIVERSITIES IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Academic staff in Nigerian universities increasingly face heavy workloads, resource constraints, delayed promotions, and recurrent industrial actions that erode workplace vitality and continuous learning. This study examines whether servant leadership fosters thriving at work among academic staff in Plateau State, Nigeria, directly and indirectly through psychological capital. Anchored on conservation of resources (COR) theory and the socially embedded model of thriving at work, the study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. Data were obtained from 313 academic staff of two public universities in Plateau State, selected through proportionate stratified random sampling, using validated scales for servant leadership, psychological capital, and thriving at work. Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with the SEMinR package in R. The measurement model exhibited satisfactory indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Structural results show that servant leadership had a significant positive effect on thriving at work and on psychological capital, while psychological capital significantly predicted thriving at work. Bootstrapped analysis further showed that psychological capital partially mediated the servant leadership–thriving at work relationship. The model explained 56% of the variance in thriving at work and 30% of the variance in psychological capital, with large predictive relevance. The findings suggest that servant leadership enhances academic staff thriving both by directly shaping a supportive work climate and by building the hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism that staff draw upon to remain energised and continually learning. Universities are encouraged to institutionalise servant leadership development and psychological capital-building interventions as complementary strategies for sustaining academic staff wellbeing, vitality, and long-term institutional performance.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are widely regarded as engines of intellectual, economic and social development, generating the knowledge, skills and innovation that sustain national competitiveness (Valero & Van Reenen, 2019; OECD, 2023). In developing economies, their role is more transformative still, strengthening institutional capacity, improving social mobility and supplying the skilled professionals on whom nation-building depends. Universities

discharge this mandate chiefly through their academic staff, whose teaching, research and community engagement depend heavily on their psychological wellbeing and work experience (Correia & Carvalho, 2026).

In Nigeria, however, academic staff increasingly operate under conditions that undermine rather than support this mandate. Overcrowded classrooms and infrastructural deficits constrain the conditions under which teaching is conducted; irregular and inadequate funding limits research activity; promotion exercises stall for extended periods; and recurrent industrial action interrupts both income and academic continuity (Saint et al., 2003; Aguwa et al., 2024). Empirical evidence from Nigerian universities consistently documents elevated burnout, low job satisfaction and chronic work-related stress among academics (Aguwa et al., 2024), suggesting that many academic staff are surviving rather than thriving in their roles.

Thriving at work, the joint experience of vitality and learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005), is associated with lower burnout and absenteeism, stronger organisational commitment, and greater creativity and citizenship behaviour (Porath et al., 2012; Kleine et al., 2019). Among its antecedents, servant leadership has attracted particular attention because of its explicit orientation toward follower growth and wellbeing (Jang et al., 2022; Jiang & Wei, 2024; Pratama & Putranta, 2025). Servant leaders prioritise followers' needs ahead of their own interests, empower and develop subordinates, and act with humility, authenticity and stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). Such behaviour is theoretically well suited to environments, like Nigerian public universities, in which employees face chronic resource constraints and require leaders who actively replenish, rather than deplete, their psychological resources.

These conditions do more than establish a setting; they alter what leadership can be expected to accomplish, and conservation of resources (COR) theory makes the alteration precise. COR holds that resource loss is disproportionately more salient than equivalent gain, and that individuals whose reserves are already depleted are both more vulnerable to further loss and less able to initiate gain spirals, since investment presupposes a surplus available to invest (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Nigerian public universities constitute a sustained loss environment of this kind. Where the institution supplies few of the resources that sustain vitality and learning, such as reliable income, functioning infrastructure, predictable career progression, and funded development, the immediate academic leader becomes a substitutive rather than a supplementary source of autonomy, recognition, developmental support and advocacy. Servant leadership is therefore not one more positive influence in this setting; for extended periods it is the principal resource channel still operating.

This substitutive role has implications for how that influence is distributed, not merely for its strength. If leader-supplied resources are largely consumed in offsetting ongoing loss, much of their association with thriving should be realised directly, through immediate provision, while their conversion into durable personal resources should be correspondingly constrained, since the accumulation of personal resources is itself an investment process that chronic scarcity inhibits. Psychological capital should therefore partially mediate the servant leadership–thriving relationship, and to a more limited extent than evidence from better-resourced settings would suggest.

Psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007) is the mechanism at issue, and explaining how it operates requires two frameworks that have most often been used separately. The socially embedded model of thriving at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005) specifies which contextual features generate thriving – decision-making discretion, information sharing, trust, respect, civility – and the agentic behaviours through which vitality and learning are jointly produced, but is comparatively silent on the personal resource stock that determines whether an employee can act agentically at all. COR theory supplies precisely that, explaining how contextual resources are internalised as personal resources and why existing reserves govern subsequent investment; it is in turn silent on which contextual conditions constitute resources in a given setting.

This study therefore examines the mediating role of psychological capital in the relationship between servant leadership and thriving at work among academic staff of two public universities in Plateau State. It addresses four

objectives: to examine the association between servant leadership and thriving at work; to assess its association with psychological capital; to determine the association between psychological capital and thriving at work; and to establish the mediating role of psychological capital in that relationship.

The study makes two contributions. Theoretically, it moves beyond establishing that these constructs are related, a pattern already demonstrated in several settings, by specifying the conditions under which the mediated pathway should operate fully and the conditions under which it should not. Treating resource scarcity as a boundary condition on the internalisation of contextual resources yields a prediction about the distribution of associations rather than their existence alone, explaining why the psychological capital pathway may carry less of servant leadership's association with thriving in resource-constrained institutions than the literature implies. Practically, it provides the first test of this model among Nigerian academic staff and clarifies how leadership development and wellbeing interventions might be designed where institutional resources cannot be relied upon.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Thriving at work, servant leadership and psychological capital

Thriving at work is a psychological state in which individuals experience both vitality and learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Vitality is the affective component, capturing energy and aliveness; learning is the cognitive component, reflecting the acquisition and application of knowledge that builds capability (Porath et al., 2012). Both must be present: an employee who is energised but not learning, or learning but depleted, is not thriving. Because it spans hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, thriving is a more complete indicator of positive functioning than single-dimension constructs, and it has been linked to reduced burnout, improved performance and greater creativity (Prem et al., 2017; Kleine et al., 2019).

Servant leadership rests on Greenleaf's (1977) premise that the great leader is servant first, with legitimacy resting on whether followers grow as persons. Subsequent scholarship has rendered this measurable: van Dierendonck (2017) condensed an eight-dimension model into the cross-culturally validated 18-item Servant Leadership Survey, covering empowerment, humility, standing back, authenticity and stewardship. Eva et al. (2019) define it as an other-oriented approach distinguished from transformational leadership by its explicit emphasis on humility, authenticity and interpersonal acceptance. A meta-analysis of 130 studies establishes its incremental validity over transformational, authentic and ethical leadership (Lee et al., 2020).

Psychological capital is a positive psychological state of development comprising self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). Unlike stable traits, it is state-like and developable, which is what makes it a plausible conduit rather than a confound: it can be built by organisational conditions and depleted by their absence.

2.2 Integrating Conservation of Resources Theory with the Socially Embedded Model

The two frameworks used here have most often been applied separately, and each leaves a gap the other fills. The socially embedded model (Spreitzer et al., 2005) holds that thriving is generated through interaction with leaders, colleagues and the work environment: enabling contexts characterised by decision-making discretion, information sharing, trust, respect and civility foster the agentic behaviours – task focus, exploration, and heedful relating – through which vitality and learning are jointly produced. The model specifies which contextual features matter for an employee to act agentically. COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) supplies exactly that. Individuals seek to obtain, protect and build resources; wellbeing improves through resource gain and gain spirals. Servant leadership functions as a resource-enriching condition, supplying socio-emotional and developmental resources that are progressively internalised as psychological capital. But COR is itself largely silent on which contextual conditions constitute resources in a given setting, which is what the socially embedded model specifies.

The socially embedded model supplies the contextual specification and the behavioural route to thriving, while COR supplies the conversion mechanism and, critically for this study, its boundary condition. Because gain spirals

require a surplus available for investment, the conversion of contextual into personal resources should be constrained where reserves are chronically depleted. This yields a prediction about the distribution of associations, not merely their existence.

2.3 Servant Leadership and Thriving at Work

Recent studies establish servant leadership as a predictor of thriving through several mechanisms. Jang et al. (2022) found that work meaningfulness mediated the relationship, with perceived interpersonal justice as a boundary condition. Jiang and Wei (2024), applying self-determination theory, showed that satisfaction of autonomy, competence and relatedness needs carries the association, and that power distance attenuates it. Pratama and Putranta (2025) found that perceived insider status mediates the association, with a psychological climate for caring strengthening the relationship.

Lee et al. (2019) report that servant leadership's associations vary substantially by national culture and industry. Nigerian public universities are characterised by high power distance and weak procedural justice. Where academic staff face sustained resource loss, and the institution supplies few replacements, the empowerment, recognition and developmental support of an immediate leader substitute for what the institution fails to provide. Accordingly:

H1: Servant leadership is positively associated with thriving at work among academic staff of universities in Plateau State.

2.4 Servant Leadership and Psychological Capital

A parallel stream links servant leadership to the development of psychological capital. Safavi and Bouzari (2020), Bouzari and Karatepe (2017), Qamar and Soomro (2025) and Abdou (2025) all document positive associations, frequently with full mediation in hospitality and service settings where institutional resources function. Two features deserve note: the evidence is drawn overwhelmingly from better-resourced settings, and mediation is frequently full rather than partial. Accordingly:

H2: Servant leadership is positively associated with psychological capital among academic staff of universities in Plateau State.

2.5 Psychological Capital and Thriving at Work

Psychological capital has been established as a direct antecedent of thriving (Basinska & Rozkwitalska, 2020; Kleine et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2025). These findings support the theoretical expectation, derived from COR theory, that psychological capital operates as a personal resource positively associated with vitality and learning. Accordingly:

H3: Psychological capital is positively associated with thriving at work among academic staff of universities in Plateau State.

2.6 The Mediating Role of Psychological Capital

Integrating the two frameworks suggests that servant leadership is associated with thriving both directly and through the psychological capital it helps build. The scarcity argument yields a directional expectation: the indirect route should operate but carry a smaller share of the total association than evidence from better-resourced settings would suggest. Mediation is therefore predicted to be partial:

H4: Psychological capital significantly mediates the relationship between servant leadership and thriving at work among academic staff of universities in Plateau State.

2.7 Conceptual framework

Figure 1 presents the hypothesised model. Servant leadership is the exogenous construct, psychological capital the mediator, and thriving at work the endogenous outcome.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

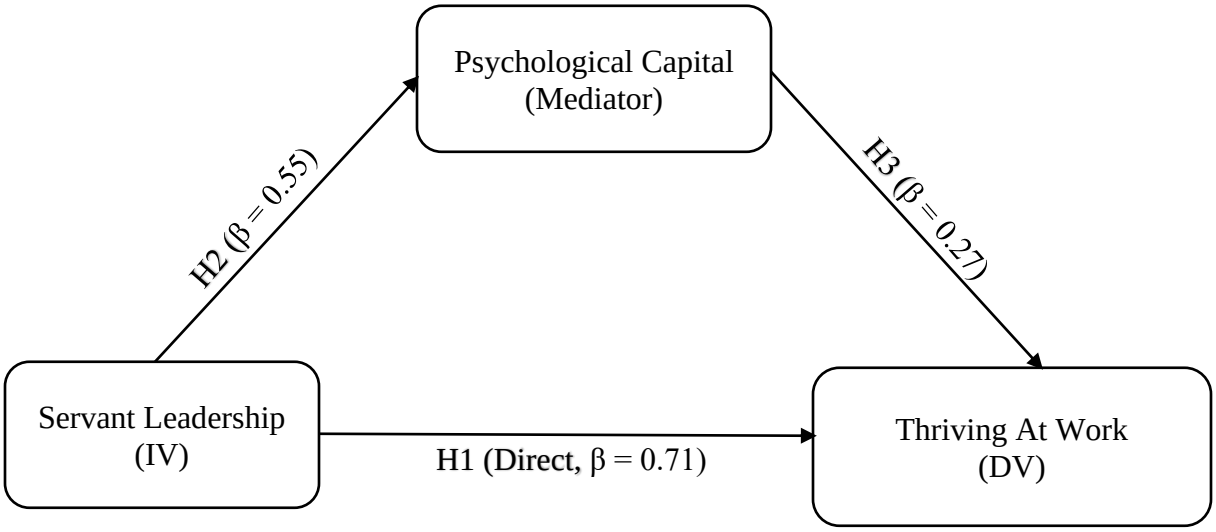


Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

Source: Authors' construction (2026)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study adopts a positivist paradigm and a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design appropriate for testing hypothesised structural relationships among latent constructs at a single point in time. Because servant leadership, psychological capital and thriving at work are perceptual states, self-report measurement was the appropriate method. The cross-sectional design permits examination of associations and predictive relationships but does not support strong causal claims; language throughout is therefore framed in terms of statistical association and prediction rather than causation.

3.2 Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The population comprised all full-time academic staff of two public universities in Plateau State, designated University A (1,436) and University B (169), a total of 1,605 as at March 2025. Applying Yamane's (1967) formula at 95 per cent confidence and a 0.05 margin of error yielded a minimum sample of 320, allocated proportionately and selected by proportionate stratified random sampling. Of the 320 questionnaires administered, 318 were retrieved and 313 were found valid and usable.

The achieved sample of 313 exceeds the minimum recommended by the 10-times rule for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022). More conservative guidelines that take into account the number of indicators and expected effect sizes similarly indicate adequate statistical power for detecting medium-to-large path coefficients in a model of this complexity (Hair et al., 2022; Kock & Hadaya, 2018). Confining the study to two universities is a deliberate design

choice: together they represent the two governance and funding regimes under which Nigerian public university academics work.

3.3 Measurement

All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) using previously validated instruments.

Table 1

Measurement scales

Construct	Source of scale	Items	Sample item
Servant leadership	van Dierendonck et al. (2017), SLS-18	18	"My supervisor gives me the information I need to do my work well"
Psychological capital	Lorenz et al. (2016), CPC-12	12 (8 analysed)	"I am optimistic about what will happen to me in the future regarding work"
Thriving at work	Spreitzer et al. (2005)	10	"I feel alive and vital"; "I find myself learning often"

Note: SLS-18 measures empowerment, humility, standing back, authenticity and stewardship. CPC-12 measures self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in the SEMinR package for R. PLS-SEM was selected because the research objective is predictive and explanatory, the sample is modest relative to the number of indicators, indicator distributions depart from multivariate normality, and the model includes a mediated pathway estimated by bootstrapping. Analysis proceeded in two stages: measurement model assessment followed by structural model assessment. Hypotheses were tested by bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

3.5 Common Method Bias: Procedural and Statistical Remedies

Procedural remedies included assurance of anonymity, separation of predictor and criterion items, and absence of personally identifying information. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test showed the first component accounting for 50.28% of variance (marginally above the conventional 50% criterion). The more discriminating full-collinearity assessment of Kock (2015) yielded VIFs well below 3.3 (servant leadership = 2.13; thriving at work = 2.26; psychological capital = 1.60). Taken together, common method bias is unlikely to account for the relationships reported, although self-report data cannot exclude it entirely.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Responses are anonymous. Data are stored on password-protected devices and will be retained for five years from publication, after which electronic files will be permanently deleted. Findings are reported objectively regardless of whether they support the hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1 Response Rate and Respondent Profile

Table 2

Questionnaire Response Rate

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Questionnaires administered	320	100%

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Questionnaires retrieved	318	99.4%
Usable questionnaires	313	98.0%
Not retrieved / retrieved but excluded (screening)	7	2.2%

Source: Field Survey (2026)

Table 3

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 313)

Variable	Category	Freq.	Percent
Gender	Male	228	72.8
	Female	79	25.2
	Prefer not to say	6	1.9
Age	Below 30 years	39	12.5
	30–39 years	87	27.8
	40–49 years	68	21.7
	50–59 years	84	26.8
	60 years and above	35	11.2
Qualification	Master's Degree	68	21.7
	PhD	168	53.7
	Postdoctoral	72	23.0
	Others	5	1.6
Academic Rank	Graduate Assistant	3	1.0
	Assistant Lecturer	61	19.5
	Lecturer II	68	21.7
	Lecturer I	43	13.7
	Senior Lecturer	50	16.0
	Reader/Associate Professor	59	18.8
	Professor	29	9.3
Institution	University A	203	64.9
	University B	110	35.1

Source: Field Survey (2026)

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Common Method Bias

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics

Construct	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Thriving at Work	313	3.98	0.57	0.42	−0.49
Servant Leadership	313	3.97	0.65	0.05	−0.74

Construct	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Psychological Capital	313	3.94	0.71	−0.31	−0.21

Source: SPSS Version 26 (2026)

4.3 Measurement model

Table 5

Measurement model assessment

Construct	Items	Loading range	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Servant leadership	18	0.687 – 0.894	0.97	0.98	0.69
Thriving at work	10	0.614 – 0.850	0.91	0.92	0.55
Psychological capital	8	0.774 – 0.911	0.94	0.95	0.70

Source: SEMinR Output (2026). Five indicators with loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 were retained because their removal would not have improved AVE or composite reliability above the already satisfactory thresholds, and the items were theoretically central to the constructs (Hair et al., 2022). The high composite reliability values for servant leadership (0.98) and psychological capital (0.95) are consistent with the large number of homogeneous indicators in these scales. Although high reliability is desirable, values of this magnitude (particularly the 0.98 for servant leadership) may signal potential item redundancy or overlap among indicators. This warrants closer examination of item similarity in future research to confirm that the high composite reliability does not compromise the distinctiveness of the measures.

Table 6

Heterotrait–monotrait ratio with bootstrap confidence intervals

Construct pair	HTMT	95% CI lower	95% CI upper	Below 0.85
Servant leadership – Psychological capital	0.557	0.383	0.687	Yes
Psychological capital – Thriving at work	0.608	0.471	0.719	Yes
Servant leadership – Thriving at work	0.752	0.620	0.849	Yes

Note: bootstrap with 1,000 resamples, percentile confidence intervals.

4.4 Structural model

Table 7

Collinearity, explanatory power and effect size

Path/construct	Inner VIF	f^2	Effect size	R^2	Interp.
Servant leadership → Thriving at work	1.43	0.497	Large	–	–
Servant leadership → Psychological capital	1.00	0.426	Large	–	–
Psychological capital → Thriving at work	1.43	0.120	Small	–	–
Thriving at work (endogenous)	–	–	–	0.557	Moderate
Psychological capital (endogenous)	–	–	–	0.299	Weak

Source: SEMinR Output (2026). Blindfolding Q^2 indicates predictive relevance (in-sample); full out-of-sample assessment would require PLSpredict.

4.5 Hypothesis Testing

Table 8

Path coefficients and hypothesis testing

Hyp.	Path	β	SE	t	95% CI	Decision
H1	SL → TAW (direct)	0.560	0.083	6.77	[0.395, 0.720]	Supported
H2	SL → PsyCap	0.547	0.071	7.66	[0.401, 0.680]	Supported
H3	PsyCap → TAW	0.275	0.084	3.27	[0.112, 0.439]	Supported

Note: bootstrap with 5,000 resamples. SL = servant leadership; PsyCap = psychological capital; TAW = thriving at work.

4.6 Mediation Analysis

Table 9

Decomposition of the association of servant leadership with thriving at work

Effect	β	SE	t	95% CI	Conclusion
Direct (c′)	0.560	0.083	6.77	[0.395, 0.720]	Significant
Indirect (a × b)	0.150	0.047	3.21	[0.064, 0.246]	Significant
Total (c′ + a × b)	0.710	0.055	12.95	[0.595, 0.813]	Significant
Variance accounted for	21.1%	–	–	[8.5%, 37.2%]	Complementary mediation

Note: Both direct and indirect paths significant and in the same direction → complementary (partial) mediation within the specified model (Zhao et al., 2010). Cross-sectional design cannot establish independent causal mechanisms.

Figure 2

Structural model with standardised path coefficients. Source: authors' analysis.

5. Discussion

The four hypotheses were supported, but the interest of the result lies less in whether the paths are significant than in how the total association is distributed between them, which is what the theoretical argument predicted and what the data bear out.

Servant leadership exhibited a large association with thriving at work ($f^2 = 0.497$). In settings from which most servant leadership evidence derives, leaders operate alongside functioning institutional systems. Nigerian public universities do not supply those alternatives reliably. When an academic's promotion has been stalled for years, research funding is irregular and industrial action has interrupted income, the head of department who grants autonomy, advocates upward, shares information candidly and treats development as an obligation is not adding to an adequate resource base but substituting for an institution that is not providing one. COR theory explains exactly this: where loss is chronic, the salience of any resource gain is heightened.

Jiang and Wei (2024) report that power distance attenuates servant leadership's association with thriving. The scarcity argument suggests why attenuation may not appear here: where the leader is the only functioning resource channel, hierarchical distance is offset by the absence of alternatives.

The most informative result is the modest mediation. Psychological capital carried only 21.1% of the total association. COR theory holds that building personal resources is itself an act of investment that presupposes surplus. Academic staff under sustained loss have little surplus to invest. Leader-supplied resources are therefore consumed largely in offsetting ongoing depletion rather than accumulating into durable psychological capital. The consequence is a strong direct path and a narrow indirect one – precisely the pattern observed.

Studies reporting full mediation are drawn predominantly from hospitality and banking settings in which institutional systems function. The present result does not contradict those findings; it identifies a boundary on them. Where institutional resources are adequate, leader-supplied resources can be invested in building personal capacity. Where they are not, the same leadership behaviour is spent on maintenance. Given the cross-sectional design, these patterns of association should not be interpreted as establishing independent causal mechanisms.

6. Implications, Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes in two ways. First, it specifies how conservation of resources theory and the socially embedded model of thriving complement one another: the socially embedded model identifies which contextual conditions generate thriving, while COR explains how those conditions are converted into personal resources. Second, it treats resource scarcity as a boundary condition on that conversion, generating a prediction about the distribution of associations rather than their existence. The prediction is borne out: a large direct association alongside a narrow mediated pathway.

6.2 Practical implications

First, leadership development should target heads of department and deans who supply resources directly. Because the direct path dominates, the behaviours that matter most are those enacted in day-to-day interaction: granting decision-making discretion, sharing information candidly, advocating upward on promotion and workload, and reducing incivility.

Second, psychological capital interventions should not be expected to carry leadership's association and should not be substituted for it. Resilience and efficacy training will have limited reach while the resource environment remains depleted.

Third, the most effective institutional lever is restoring predictability in the systems that determine whether staff have any surplus at all – timely promotion exercises, reliable salary payment, and protected time for research. Leadership development cannot compensate for their absence indefinitely.

6.3 Conclusion

Servant leadership is significantly associated with thriving at work among academic staff of universities in Plateau State, both directly and, to a more limited extent, through psychological capital. The distribution of that association is the study's substantive finding: the direct pathway dominates, and the mediated pathway is narrower than evidence from better-resourced settings would suggest. This is consistent with a resource-conversion account in which chronic scarcity constrains the internalisation of contextual resources into personal ones.

6.4 Recommendations

1. Universities should incorporate assessment of servant leadership behaviours (empowerment, information sharing, upward advocacy, follower development) into the appointment, reappointment and appraisal of heads of department and deans.
2. Structured development for academic leaders should focus on the specific behaviours that supply resources directly: delegating decision authority, communicating institutional decisions promptly, and representing staff interests in promotion and workload decisions.
3. Psychological capital development programmes should be implemented alongside, not instead of, improvements in institutional provision, with realistic expectations about their reach under current resource conditions.

4. University governing councils and regulators should treat the predictability of promotion exercises, salary payment and research funding as a determinant of academic staff functioning, on the evidence that leadership cannot substitute for these indefinitely.

6.5 Limitations and future research

The cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction. Multi-wave designs are needed. The study samples two universities in one state and does not support generalisation beyond that population. The interpretation that institutional resourcing conditions the strength of the mediated pathway is consistent with the data but not tested by them; a multi-site design treating institutional provision as a moderator would convert the interpretation into a testable proposition. Predictive relevance was assessed via blindfolding; future studies may apply PLSpredict. Psychological capital was examined as the sole mediator; modelling both accumulative and interpretive mechanisms together is a natural next step.

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