

Spiritual Leadership and Meaningful Work: The Roles of Intrinsic Motivation and Gender

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Abstract: In recent years, many employees have come to view their work not only as a means to earn a living but also as a source of personal fulfillment and purpose. This shift in perception is driven by various factors, including changes in societal values and the human desire to make a difference in the world. As such, organizations with insufficient knowledge of employees' need for meaningful work suffer reduced performance and productivity, higher employee turnover, and employees' physical and mental work-related health conditions. Although prior studies have found that spiritual leadership positively and significantly influences employees' meaningful work, relatively little is known about the underlying mechanism and the condition under which this relationship occurs. This empirical study aims to investigate how and when spiritual leadership relates to employees' meaningful work focusing on intrinsic motivation as a mediator and employee gender as a moderator using data from employees of public and private commercial banks in Kenya. The study's cross-sectional design adopted a self-reported data collection approach. The banks were stratified into three tiers: 1, 2, and 3, and 532 questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected respondents from the tiers, and 448 valid responses were received. A semi-structural equation modeling using SmartPLS 4 was used to analyze the data. The results reveal that spiritual leadership, directly and indirectly, impacts meaningful work partially mediated by intrinsic motivation, while gender moderates this relationship. The study contributes to theory by examining intrinsic motivation and gender as the underlying mechanisms of how and when spiritual leadership translates into employees' meaningful work. Practically, the findings suggest that incorporating spiritual leadership as a potential leader behavior in the banking sector and paying attention to employees' gender can improve the perception of meaningful work, which has been found to relate to employees' well-being and positive job outcomes. Implications of our findings and recommendations for future research are further discussed.

Keywords: Spiritual leadership, Meaningful work, Intrinsic motivation, Gender

1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and competitive business environment, the concept of meaningful work—defined as the perception of fulfillment, personal growth, and connection between one's job and broader goals or values—and its influencing factors hold significant importance among researchers and practitioners (Bailey *et al.*, 2019; Lips-Wiersma, Haar and Wright, 2020). This importance is attributed to the changing perception of employees, who now perceive their work not only as a source of livelihood but also as an opportunity for personal significance, satisfaction, and creating a positive impact in the world (Frémeaux and Pavageau, 2020; Kubiak, 2022). Consequently, organizations must cultivate a work environment and adopt leadership practices that foster employees' sense of purpose and meaning in their work, as employees' perception of meaningful work is vital for the long-term sustainability of organizations (Steger and Dik, 2009, 2010; Haque *et al.*, 2021).

Existing research has demonstrated a significant correlation between employees' perception of meaningful work and various positive outcomes, including life satisfaction, a heightened engagement, a sense of accomplishment, a positive self-concept, intrinsic motivation, organizational commitment, and healthy physical, emotional, and psychological stability (Allan *et al.*, 2019; Widodo and Suryosukmono, 2021; You *et al.*, 2021). On the contrary, a lack of meaningful work has been associated with reduced motivation, reduced productivity, suboptimal performance, job dissatisfaction, job burnout, high levels of employee turnover, and physical, emotional, and psychological work-related health conditions, (Bailey *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Hunsaker, 2019; Haque *et al.*, 2021).

Studies have also indicated that leadership plays a significant role in predicting and enhancing employee perception of meaningful work (Frémeaux and Pavageau, 2022). Specifically, the research has accentuated the important role of leadership in clarifying and fostering employees' experience of meaningful work (Lysova *et al.*, 2019). Leadership attributes and practices like listening, honesty, attention, conscience, and empathy have been linked with the leaders' success in creating a work environment that supports employees' pursuit and experience of meaningful work (Frémeaux and Pavageau, 2022). In this context, spiritual leadership—typified

by vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love—emerges as a potential leadership paradigm for understanding how different leadership can enhance meaningful work (Allan *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, research suggests that spiritual leadership positively influence employee meaningful work (Baykal, 2019; Widodo and Suryosukmono, 2021) by promoting calling (purpose in life) and membership (mutual support, care, and appreciation) (Fry, 2008; Yang, Huang and Wu, 2019).

However, relatively little is known about how and when spiritual leadership influences employees' perception of meaningful work (Bailey *et al.*, 2019). Particularly, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the mechanisms and underlying conditions, for instance, individual attributes like gender, through which spiritual leadership impacts employees' experience of meaningful work (Oh and Wang, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to investigate further how spiritual leadership relates to employees' perception of meaningful work and the determinants of this perception within the organizational context (Bailey *et al.*, 2019).

This study aims to investigate how and when spiritual leadership influences employees' perception of meaningful work, with a specific focus on examining the mediating role of intrinsic motivation and the moderating influence of employee gender in the relationship. This study draws data from employees working in public and private commercial banks in Kenya. The banking sector is known for prevalent work-related employees' physical, emotional, and psychological issues (Hunsaker, 2019; Iqbal and Zaidi, 2021).

The study contributes to spiritual leadership and employees' meaningful work literature by examining intrinsic motivation and gender differences as the underlying mechanisms of how and when spiritual leadership translates into employees' meaningful work. Practically, the findings suggest that incorporating spiritual leadership as a potential leader behavior in the banking sector and paying attention to employees' gender can improve the perception of meaningful work, which has been found to relate to employees' well-being and positive job outcomes (Allan *et al.*, 2019).

The structure of the study is as follows. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical foundation and hypothesis development. Then, it presents the research design/methodology, followed by the results, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This study is anchored on self-determination theory (SDT), which posits that individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Autonomy refers to the desire for freedom and self-determination in engaging in activities aligned with personal values and interests (Gagné and Deci, 2005). Whereas Competence involves the pursuit of mastery, confidence, and achievement in challenging tasks that are considered meaningful (Deci and Ryan, 2000), relatedness refers to the need for meaningful connections and a sense of belonging within a group or organization (Deci and Ryan, 1980, 1985). SDT distinguishes between autonomous or self-determination, driven by personal choice and intrinsic interests and controlled motivation influenced by external factors (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Autonomous motivation has been associated with positive outcomes, such as improved performance and greater job satisfaction and overall well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Yang, Yang and Gao, 2020; Haque *et al.*, 2021), while controlled motivation has been linked with adverse outcomes, including reduced efforts, lower job satisfaction, and work-related physical and mental maladies (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000).

3. Spiritual Leadership

The theory of spiritual leadership is a value-based motivation theory that emphasizes the importance of leaders' values, attitudes, and behaviors in fostering intrinsic motivation among leaders and their followers (Fry, 2003). This theory comprises Vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love. Vision denotes a compelling and meaningful future aspiration that guides leaders and followers (Fry, 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2023). Hope/faith signifies leaders' positive outlook and unwavering belief in the vision, which inspires and motivates followers to work toward its realization (Fry, 2003, 2008). Altruistic love represents leaders prioritizing the well-being of their followers and demonstrating genuine care and concern for their social and professional well-being (Fry *et al.*, 2017). Altruistic love is typified by selflessness and the intention to empower others, and it is built upon the values of integrity, appreciation, compassion, persistence, modesty, acceptance, and unwavering conviction (Fry, 2003; Haque *et al.*, 2021). These values stimulate the leaders' behavior and contribute to a positive and constructive work environment that facilitates employees' experience of meaningful work (Fry *et al.*, 2017; Joelle and Coelho, 2019).

From the context of SDT, employees who feel a sense of autonomy in their work are more likely to perceive the work as interesting, important, and purposeful (Yang *et al.*, 2020). Through their altruistic attitude, spiritual leaders can instill confidence in the organization's vision among employees (Fry *et al.*, 2017). By exemplifying spiritual leadership behaviors such as care and inspiration, leaders are likely to satisfy employees' need for autonomy, thereby enhancing their perception of meaningful work (Zhang and Yang, 2020).

4. Spiritual Leadership and Employees' Perception of Meaningful Work

Meaningful work signifies the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment individuals derive from performing and completing their work (Thory, 2016; Jeon and Choi, 2020). It also delineates the belief that their work has a purpose, brings personal significance, and makes a difference in the lives of others (Lysova *et al.*, 2019). In leadership, the literature supports the proposition that leaders' behavior is an important factor that predicts the employees' sense of meaningful work (Steger and Dik, 2009). Particularly, the literature indicates that spiritual leadership predicts employees' perception of meaningful work (Widodo and Suryosukmono, 2021). Spiritual leadership theory provides a significant perspective on how spiritual leaders can influence their followers' or employees' experience of meaningful work (Fry *et al.*, 2017; Zhang and Yang, 2020). According to the theory, when leaders communicate and promote a meaningful vision for the organization, they motivate employees by inspiring a sense of calling (purpose) and membership (sense of belonging) cultivated by the feeling that their work is meaningful and impactful, particularly in promoting the wellbeing of others (Zhang and Yang, 2020). Furthermore, the altruistic characteristics of spiritual leaders create a work environment that fosters a strong sense of belonging, understanding, appreciation, and support among employees, thus reinforcing the employees' sense of belonging, thereby inspiring their experience of meaningful work (Fry, 2003; Hunsaker, 2021).

In support of the above arguments, in a study involving 150 employees in the city of Bengkulu, Indonesia, it was established that spiritual leadership positively and significantly impacted employees' meaningful work (Widodo and Suryosukmono, 2021). Another research involving 190 Turkish academicians revealed that spiritual leadership significantly impacted work meaningfulness, which also partially mediated the influence of spiritual leadership on organizational commitment (Baykal, 2019). Given the preceding discussions, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Spiritual leadership positively relates to employees' perception of meaningful work.

5. The Mediating Role of Intrinsic Motivation in Spiritual Leadership and Meaningful Work Relationship

Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal drive to engage in an activity purely for the inherent satisfaction, enjoyment, and personal fulfillment it brings rather than for external rewards or pressure (Bawuro *et al.*, 2019; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Fishbach and Woolley, 2022). It signifies the enthusiasm and commitment to the task arising from one's desires, interests, and values in the tasks (Guo *et al.*, 2014). Extant literature indicates that intrinsic motivation contributes positively to individual well-being and organizational success; it plays a significant role in fostering creativity, long-term engagement, personal development, and overall satisfaction in one's work (Jeon and Choi, 2020; Nehra *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Drawing on SDT, we contend that spiritual leadership influences employees' intrinsic motivation, which, in return, influences employees' perception of meaningful work. Spiritual leaders who articulate a significant vision and emphasize employees' contributions to the realization of the goal foster employees' intrinsic motivation, which would lead to employees' increased engagement in their work, job satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment from the work (Bawuro *et al.*, 2019; Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; Haque *et al.*, 2021).

Similarly, we posit that spiritual leaders foster intrinsic motivation by instilling faith and hope in the followers, boosting their confidence to overcome challenges and achieve organizational goals (Afsar, Badir and Kiani, 2016; Fry *et al.*, 2017). Also, through altruistic love, spiritual leaders can create a sense of belonging and ownership, thus fulfilling the followers' need for relatedness, which is central to intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2012). Also, empirical studies have confirmed that spiritual leadership influences intrinsic motivation. For instance, a study based on 130 hospital employees in Indonesia established that spiritual leadership significantly correlates with intrinsic motivation (Sugiardi, 2021). Yet, another study examining data from 427 employees of private banks in Pakistan found that spiritual leadership has a positive and significant effect on intrinsic motivation and workplace spirituality (Iqbal and Zaidi, 2021). Based on Fry and colleagues (Fry, 2003; Fry *et al.*, 2017), spiritual leaders' altruism can create mutual support between the leaders and followers, leading to intrinsic motivation, and, in return, enhances the followers' self-esteem, purpose, and job

satisfaction, typical of outcomes of perceived meaningfulness (Hunsaker, 2020). Given the above discussions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H₂: Spiritual leadership positively relates to intrinsic motivation.

H₃: Intrinsic motivation positively relates to employees' perception of meaningful work.

H₄: Intrinsic motivation mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' meaningful work.

6. The Moderating Effect of Gender Differences

Studies have found that gender (i.e., female vs. male) plays a significant role in the perception of leadership behavior (Dastane, 2020). Specifically, Dastane examined data from 211 employees of a multinational corporation in Malaysia and found that the impact of transformational leadership was stronger in males than in female employees. On the contrary, the effect of laissez-faire leadership on employees' performance was more pronounced in females than in males. Consistent with previous literature, we posit that gender is an important underlying factor that influences the effects of spiritual leadership on employees' meaningful work, thus suggesting the following hypothesis:

H₅: Gender moderates the impact of spiritual leadership on employees' perception of meaningful work, such that being female strengthens the relationship while being male reduces it.

Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework and hypotheses.

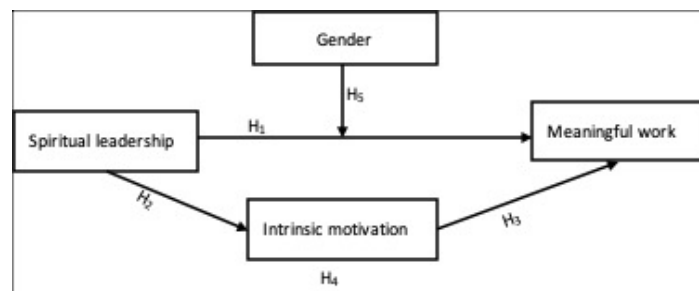


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

7. Methodology

Data for this study came from employees of commercial banks in Kenya and were collected using a survey questionnaire we developed using KoBoToolBox and distributed to participants via email and WhatsApp. We used a stratified sampling technique to determine the proportion of the banks by their categories based on their weighted composite index (WCI), encompassing net assets, customer deposits, capital and reserves, as well as the deposit and loan accounts. Specifically, banks were classified into three tiers based on their WCI values: Large (aka tier 1) comprised those with a WCI above 5%, medium (aka tier 2) are those with a WCI ranging between 1% and 5%, and small size (aka tier 3) encompasses those with a WCI lower than 1% (CBK, 2022). We then randomly selected participants from banks in each tier. Out of a sample of 532 participants, 448 valid responses were received, representing an 84.2% response rate.

The respondents' profiles show that 52% were male and 48% were female. Age stratification ranged between 19 and 57 years. Their academic qualifications were secondary school level (0.7%), college certificates and diplomas (6%), undergraduate degree (62.3%), and postgraduate (31%). In terms of roles held in the banks, 46.2% held managerial positions, whereas the rest held supervisory, clerical, and other responsibilities. The work experience indicates that 33.7% had worked for their respective bank for less than 5 years, 33.5% for 5-10 years, 24.1% for 10-15 years, 5.4% for 15-20 years, and 3.3% above 20 years.

To operationalize the variables of this study, we adapted measurements from previous research and used a 6-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree to 6= strongly agree) to measure the variables. Spiritual leadership was measured using (Fry, 2008) scale consisting of 14 statements, including the item "My leader understands and is committed to his/her vision." Intrinsic motivation was measured using three items from Grant's (2008) scale, with a sample item being "I enjoy the work I do because it is fun." Employees' perception of meaningful work was measured using a scale from Fry (2008) consisting of six statements, with the sample item "My job activities are personally meaningful to me," and "The work I do makes a difference in people's lives."

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis using SmartPLS 4.0 version to assess the validity, reliability, and collinearity of our data. To achieve convergent validity and composite reliability, we followed the guidelines that Cronbach's alpha and composite measures should be above 0.70 (Sheko and Spaho, 2018) and for discriminant valid, the average variance extracted (AVE) should exceed 0.5 (Hair, 2014). Our results met the required threshold values, indicating validity and reliability. Table 1 presents the reliability, discriminant, and convergent validity results.

Table 1: Reliability, Discriminant, and convergent validity results

Construct	Factor loading	Cronbach α	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
Employees' Meaningful Work (EMW)		0.951	0.765	0.952
EMW01	0.876			
EMW02	0.847			
EMW03	0.919			
EMW04	0.843			
EMW05	0.835			
EMW06	0.924			
Intrinsic Motivation (IM)		0.932	0.776	0.934
IM01	0.907			
IM02	0.826			
IM03	0.889			
IM04	0.901			
Spiritual Leadership (SL)		0.970	0.694	0.970
SL01	0.808			
SL02	0.773			
SL03	0.821			
SL04	0.787			
SL05	0.834			
SL06	0.884			
SL07	0.899			
SL08	0.903			
SL09	0.871			
SL10	0.758			
SL11	0.829			
SL12	0.880			
SL13	0.784			
SL14	0.815			

After ascertaining the reliability and validity of the measurement model, we further assessed the significance of the correlation coefficients using a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples from the original data, and a stepwise mean analysis to test the hypothesis. The results showed that all the direct relationships are positive and significant, thus supporting Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Moreover, the results indicated positive and significant intervening effects of intrinsic motivation in the relationship between spiritual leadership and

intrinsic motivation ($\beta = 0.581, p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 4 that intrinsic motivation mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' perception of meaningful work.

To assess the moderating effects of gender on the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' perceptions of meaningful work, we estimated models 1, 2, and 3, as presented in Table III. Model 1 incorporates the control variables that influence employees' perceptions of meaningful work. Model 2 includes our variables of interest – spiritual leadership and gender—to assess their individual influence on employees' perceptions of meaningful work in the presence of the control variables to prevent bias. Model 3 includes the interaction term of spiritual leadership and gender to ascertain the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' perceptions of meaningful work. The results showed that both spiritual leadership ($\beta = 0.696, p < 0.01$) and gender ($\beta = 0.111, p < 0.05$) have a positive and significant impact on employees' perception of meaningful work, while the interaction of spiritual leadership and gender ($\beta = -0.275, p < 0.01$) on the relationship between spiritual leadership and meaningful work was negative. Table 2 presents the details of mediation and moderation results.

Table 2: Mediation effects

Mediation test	Path coefficient		Decision
	Direct without a mediator	Direct with IM as the mediator	
H ₁ : SL -> EMW	0.725*** (0.043)	0.143** (0.065)	Supported
H ₂ : SL -> IM	0.756*** (0.036)	0.757*** (0.036)	Supported
H ₃ : IM -> EMW	0.876*** (0.021)	0.768*** (0.059)	Supported
H ₄ : SL -> IM -> EMW		0.581*** (0.052)	Partial Mediation

Table 3: Moderating effects of employees' gender

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	0.101 (0.096)	0.063* (0.050)	0.062* (0.048)
Education	0.061 (0.051)	0.043* (0.032)	0.053** (0.031)
Tenure	-0.075 (0.073)	-0.062 (0.053)	-0.057 (0.051)
SL		0.696*** (0.043)	0.826*** (0.064)
Gender		0.111** (0.067)	0.112** (0.068)
SL * Gender			-0.275*** (0.119)

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$ and *** $p < 0.01$ denotes confidence level of 10%, 5% and 1%, respectively.

To further illustrate the moderating effect of gender, we used the Process Method for simple slope analysis. The results indicated that the increase in spiritual leadership has a greater effect on female employees' experience of meaningful work than male employees. This further supports Hypothesis 5, that employees' gender moderates the influence of spiritual leadership on employees' perception of meaningful work, such

that the effect increases among female employees and diminishes among male employees. Figure 2 shows the nature and form of interaction.

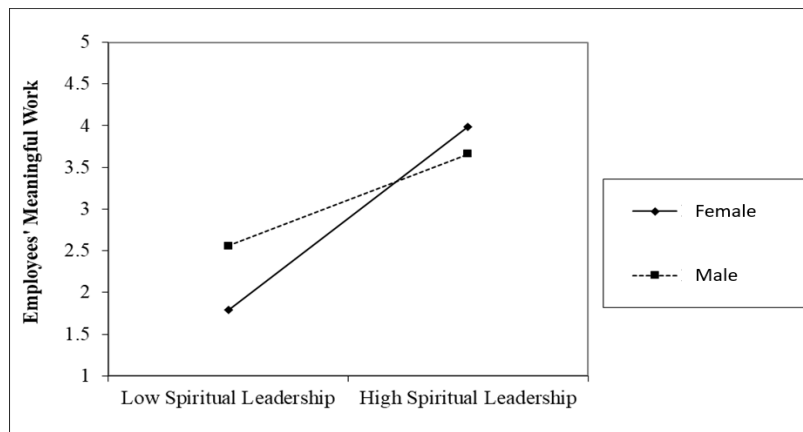


Figure 2: Gender moderation slope

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating role of intrinsic motivation and the moderating effect of gender in the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' perception of meaningful work. The results reveal that spiritual leadership influences employees' experience of meaningful work, and intrinsic motivation partially mediates the relationship. These findings confirm the conceptualization that spiritual leadership satisfies the human quest for purpose in life and the quest for well-being (Fry, 2003). The study also establishes the moderating effect of gender in the relationship, with female employees responding more positively to spiritual leadership than their male counterparts. This affirms the arguments that individual characteristics such as gender may have a significant influence on leadership styles (Dastane, 2020) and leadership outcomes (Oh and Wang, 2020).

This study contributes to spiritual leadership research by highlighting the intervening role of intrinsic motivation and interactive effects of gender in the relationship between spiritual leadership and individual outcomes (Oh and Wang, 2020; Widodo and Suryosukmono, 2021). Practically, the results of this study suggest that managers can enhance their employees' experience of meaningful work by including spiritual leadership perspectives in their leadership kit. Managers and practitioners can seek to develop attitudes, skills, and competencies related to these traits—a sense of meaning, purpose, autonomy, competence, and positive relationships, given their positive influence on employee engagement and performance.

This study, however, has some limitations. Due to time and resource constraints, this study focused only on a few studied variables. Future studies should explore other outcomes, including additional mediating and moderating constructs. Also, the study was cross-sectional, thus raising the issue of inverted relationships (Zhang and Yang, 2020). Future studies should consider longitudinal surveys. Finally, the data for this study came from the banking sector in Kenya. Future research should consider other sectors of the economy and context to enhance the generalizability of the results.

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