

LEADERSHIP AND VOLUNTEERS' EXPERIENCES IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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This systematic literature review explores the critical role of leadership in influencing volunteer retention and intent to remain within Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs). Despite the essential contribution of volunteers to the sustainability of NPOs, research on how leadership influences these dynamics remains poor. This review aims to fill this gap by identifying the main approaches to leadership and their effects on volunteer outcomes. Following the PRISMA guidelines, 13 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024 were selected for analysis. A qualitative analysis of these studies was conducted using the T-Lab software to analyze semantic associations. Findings suggest that Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, servant, and transformational leadership are the most prevalent approaches used to explain volunteers' intentions to remain. The review also underscores the significant mediation role of work-related and individual factors, such as job satisfaction and volunteers' motivation, which are influenced by these leadership styles. Effective leadership enhances volunteer retention and fosters deeper organizational commitment and satisfaction, contributing to the sustained volunteer engagement and operational success of NPOs. This study emphasizes the need for tailored leadership strategies to nurture and retain volunteer workforces, which are essential components of NPOs.

Keywords: Volunteer retention; Leadership; Job resources; Nonprofit organization; NPO.

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NonProfit Organization (NPO) is a term that defines value-driven organizations that are focused on pursuing social needs rather than making a profit (Clary et al., 1998; Kong, 2008). NPOs face challenges in securing resources to achieve their goals and financial balance due to factors such as rising competition among NPOs, a decline in public funding, and rising demand for intervention (Benevene, Kong, et al., 2018; Kong, 2008; Tuckman, 1998).

NPOs face the challenge of managing both paid staff and volunteers (Dal Corso et al., 2019). To retain them effectively, NPOs need to recognize the differences between these two categories of workers and adapt their retention strategies accordingly. Therefore, leaders in the nonprofit sector must understand these distinctions and develop effective strategies to manage them. Although volunteers and paid employees share some similarities (Handy et al., 2008), they exhibit significant differences in job attitudes, motivation, satisfaction, and the likelihood of leaving their organizations, highlighting the need for separate considerations in retention management (Dal Corso et al., 2019; Pearce, 1983). Unlike paid employees, volunteers offer their services without financial expectations and are motivated by

factors other than monetary compensation. This orientation places a greater emphasis on the perceived fit within the organization and the quality of relationships with colleagues and leaders as factors influencing their decision to stay (Holtrop et al., 2024). Furthermore, volunteers are characterized by seeing their action as a chance to practice knowledge, bond with others, express concern for others, maintain a certain level of career-related skills, grow their ego, and defend it from negative sides of the self (Clary et al., 1998). In addition, since volunteers are not bound by the same contractual constraints as salaried employees, they tend to leave their organization more easily. These distinctions are further emphasized by Forner and colleagues (2024), who argue for the necessity of differentiating the literature concerning each group.

Management of NPOs is challenged by attracting and retaining volunteers since many of these organizations rely partially or almost entirely on the availability of volunteers to carry out their tasks. Volunteers are engaged in various modes and levels of work, meaning that NPOs' chances of development and survival highly depend on this category of workers. This leads NPOs to seek long-term commitments from volunteers (Benevene, Kong, et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of volunteers is crucial for creating effective strategies for NPOs to engage and retain them, which can ultimately lead to the long-term success of these organizations (Kong, 2008). Understanding the dynamics between volunteers and the organization is crucial, as volunteer management is one of the biggest challenges NPOs have to face. Indeed, a high volunteer turnover rate could affect NPOs, especially those that rely heavily either on workers with a special set of skills or on long-term commitments (Benevene, Kong, et al., 2018; Kong, 2008; Skoglund, 2006; Wymer & Starnes, 2001).

Existing research on volunteer retention is less developed than that on paid employees. The differences between these groups show why volunteer retention strategies cannot be combined with those designed for paid employees. It is a fact that the literature on volunteerism shows significantly lower numbers than that of paid workers. This gap suggests the critical need for a deeper exploration of the factors that influence volunteers' intentions to continue with the same NPO, thereby helping NPOs achieve their mission, refine their volunteer management practices, and, consequently, improve volunteer retention.

The relevance of leadership in retaining volunteers is increasingly recognized in organizational studies (Holtrop et al., 2024; Rowold & Rohmann, 2009; Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). Despite the substantial impact that leadership has on volunteers, research specifically investigating its effectiveness in volunteer retention remains limited (Benevene, Kong, et al., 2018). Conversely, the effects of leadership on nonvolunteer workers have been extensively explored, often linking various leadership styles to turnover intentions (Alatawi, 2017; Jia & Li, 2024; Jun et al., 2023; Kharabsheh et al., 2017; Kim & Beehr, 2020; Xiong & Sui, 2023). In this regard, among leadership styles, transformational leadership positively influences employees' intentions to remain with an organization (Cowden et al., 2011; Kiwanuka et al., 2021). Interestingly, the influence of leadership approaches extends to key factors associated with volunteer retention, such as job satisfaction and commitment. Empirical studies have established a link between leadership and higher levels of volunteer job satisfaction and commitment (Benevene et al., 2020; Catano et al., 2001; Dal Corso et al., 2019; Dwyer et al., 2013; McMurray et al., 2010).

An engaging leadership is a significant job resource according to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001). This model posits that job resources, such as supportive and inspiring leadership, enhance employee engagement by fulfilling their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Schaufeli, 2017). Engaged volunteers who experience higher job satisfaction and commitment are likelier to remain with nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (Vecina et al., 2012). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that these engaged volunteers will likely continue their service

in NPOs. This underscores the importance of effective leadership in fostering volunteer retention and enhancing organizational stability.

Research indicates that while specific findings from studies of paid employees may not apply directly to volunteers, the fundamental aspects of effective leadership could also be important for volunteer management (Cuskelly et al., 2006). In other words, although volunteers and paid employees have different motivations and rewards, the fundamental principles underlying good leadership could be equally effective in influencing volunteers' satisfaction and their decision to stay in NPOs. This suggests a valuable insight into whether and how these leadership approaches can be specifically adapted to the context of volunteer management.

The present review aims to present the state of the art in the literature regarding the impact of leadership on volunteers' intention to stay and their retention in NPOs. Despite the crucial role that volunteers play in the sustainability of NPOs, research in this area has been notably lacking. Specifically, the objective is to identify which leadership approaches (theories, styles, characteristics, and behaviors) were associated with volunteer outcomes and which factors intervene in the relationship by influencing the dynamics between leaders and followers.

The systematic review ensures a rigorous process of selection and critical appraisal of studies, excluding work that did not meet the predetermined quality criteria, such as those belonging to the gray literature, and focusing on studies that could provide reliable results, delineating leaders' and volunteers' dynamics. Moreover, this approach has been preferred in order to ensure the study's replicability through a transparent and detailed methodological protocol that can be replicated by other researchers. This rigorous process increases the robustness of the results and also ensures that the methods used are applicable in future systematic studies on the topic (Munn et al., 2018).

METHODS

This systematic literature review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). The review aimed to select the existing body of literature on leadership and its impact on volunteer retention by employing a qualitative data analysis approach. To this end, T-Lab, a qualitative data analysis software, was utilized to scrutinize the text of selected studies, identifying prevalent terms and themes within the leadership literature as it pertains to volunteering. In this regard, previous studies employed a qualitative methodology under the scope of a systematic review (e.g., Erfani & Abedin, 2018; Jarden et al., 2020).

Information Sources and Search Strategy

EBSCOhost search engine and specifically the PsycINFO database, were employed for this research. The results were subsequently supplemented by Google Scholar for a broader reach. Regarding the eligibility criteria, the review focused on academic journal papers that were peer-reviewed and published in English between 2000 and 2024. Using PsycINFO database, the primary search terms combined aspects of volunteering and leadership, specifically:

“volunteering” OR “volunteer” OR “volunteerism” OR “volunteer retention” OR “volunteer turnover” OR “volunteer intention to stay”

AND
“leadership” OR “leadership skills” OR “leader” OR “leadership role” OR “leadership styles” OR
“leaders.”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were set to select studies employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodologies, with a clear focus on volunteers as participants. Conversely, the review excluded case studies, conceptual papers, and studies where volunteer retention was not directly linked to leadership but rather to other organizational aspects.

Data Collection Process and Study Selection

All identified references were collated in a Zotero database. Two researchers used the search features of EBSCOhost (PsycINFO) to comply with the eligibility criteria, conducting two independent manual screening processes based on the relevance of the papers’ titles and abstracts. Subsequently, the researchers compared the results of the two screenings to identify overlaps and form the final list of eligible articles. Papers not fitting the review’s scope, such as theoretical position papers, prescriptive approaches, case studies, or those lacking empirical research, were excluded. Additionally, the reference sections of selected papers and Google Scholar’s “cited by” feature were examined to identify further studies meeting the eligibility criteria.

Finally, after applying the inclusive and exclusive criteria, 13 papers were deemed suitable for this review (Figure 1). Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the selected studies.

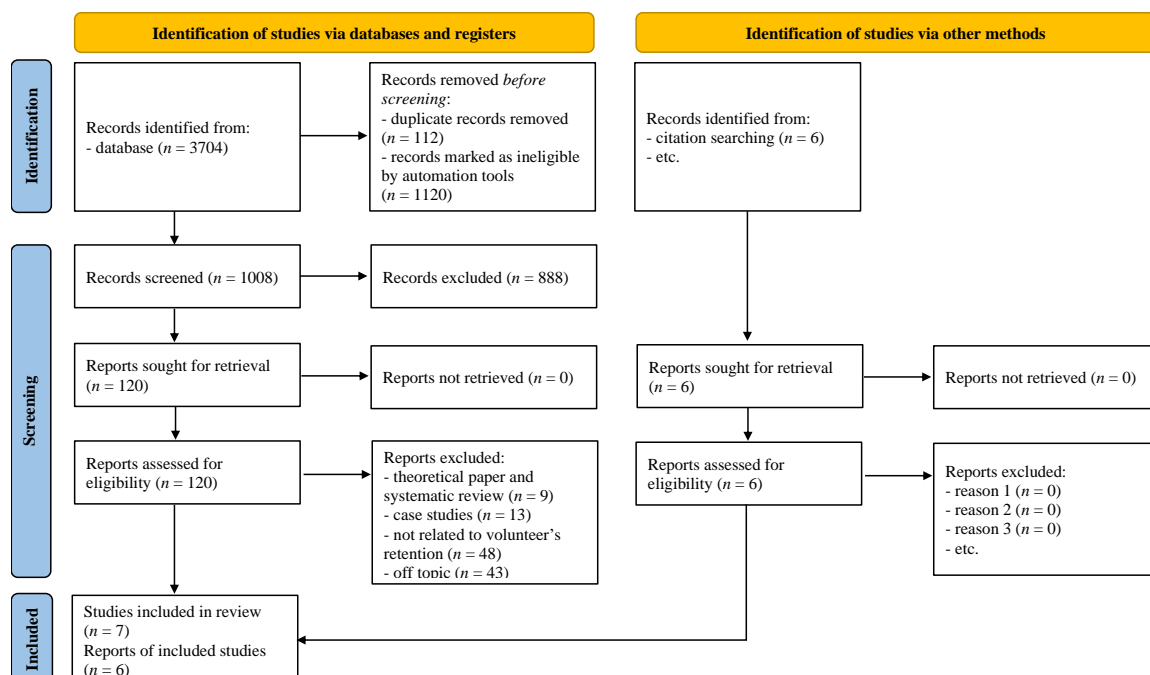


FIGURE 1
Study selection workflow

TABLE 1
Studies characteristics

Years	Authors	Methodology	Country	Sample	Leadership type	Outcomes	Mediators /Moderators
2011	Bang	Quantitative	U.S.A.	258 leader volunteers and volunteers	Leader-member exchange (affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect)	Intention to stay (leaders' professional respect)	–
2011	Schneider & George	Quantitative	U.S.A.	110 volunteers	Servant leadership, transformational leadership	Intention to stay	Empowerment (<i>mediator</i>)
2015	Bang	Quantitative	U.S.A.	214 volunteers	Leader-member exchange (affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect)	Intention to stay (professional respect)	Job satisfaction (<i>mediator</i>), age of volunteers (<i>moderator</i>)
2016	Senses-Ozyurt & Villicana-Reyna	Mixed	U.S.A.	141 volunteers	Leadership characteristics (integrity, inclusiveness)	Retention (inclusiveness)	–
2018	Benevene, Dal Corso, et al.	Quantitative	Italy	198 volunteers	Ethical leadership	Intention to stay	Job satisfaction (<i>mediator</i>)
2019	Bauer & Lim	Quantitative	U.S.A.	79 volunteers	Leader-member exchange	Intention to continue	–
2019	Usadolo & Usadolo	Quantitative	South-Africa	196 volunteers	Leader-member exchange	Intention to stay	Supportive supervisor communication (<i>mediator</i>)
2020	Almas et al.	Quantitative	Spain	417 volunteers	Transformational leadership	Intention to remain	Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, role identity (<i>mediator</i>)
2022	Joseph & Carolissen	Qualitative	South-Africa	70 volunteers	Volunteer leadership	Retention	–
2022	Ngah et al.	Quantitative	Malasya	361 volunteers	Servant leadership	Retention	Job satisfaction (<i>mediator</i>)
2023	Usadolo et al.	Quantitative	Australia	213 volunteers	Leader-member exchange, relationship with immediate supervisor	Intention to stay	Volunteers' motive fulfilment (<i>mediator</i>)
2023	De Clerck et al.	Quantitative	Belgium	355 volunteers	Leaders' autonomy-supportive chaotic leadership	Turnover intention (chaotic leadership)	Need frustration (<i>mediator</i>)
2024	Huynh et al.	Quantitative	Australia	126 volunteers	Supervisor support	Retention	–

Note. Studies are ordered according to the year of publication.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was structured to offer a comprehensive synthesis of the identified literature. The abstracts and the results sections of the 13 selected papers were imported into T-Lab for in-depth qualitative analysis. The initial step involved preprocessing the text to clean and organize the data, followed by the application of text mining techniques to extract frequently occurring terms and concepts related to leadership in volunteerism. This analysis facilitated the identification of dominant themes and patterns across literature.

Subsequently, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted to categorize these themes into coherent clusters, enabling an understanding of the relationship between leadership and volunteer retention. This involved coding the text data, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the significance of these themes in the context of existing research. The findings from this thematic analysis were then synthesized to construct a narrative that highlights key insights on leadership and volunteer retention in literature.

RESULTS

Types of Leadership (Styles, Theories, Characteristics) Adopted by the Studies

The selected studies adopted a wide range of leadership approaches, covering different, styles, theories, and characteristics. While these approaches show commonalities, they generally exhibit significant differences. It is also interesting to note that some studies included the same leadership style using different theories and measurement methods to examine it. Systematizing these leadership approaches is crucial for understanding their impact on volunteer dynamics, especially in terms of their retention. Below, a brief description of the types of leadership adopted by the 13 studies is provided.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory emerges prominently across several studies, emphasizing that LMX involves a dyadic relationship built on mutual respect, trust, and resource exchange between leaders and members. Despite this, studies like those by Bang (2011, 2015) adopted a multidimensional perspective in which affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect are considered core elements (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). While Usadolo and colleagues (2023) and Usadolo and Usadolo (2019) emphasized the LMX is grounded in reciprocal social exchanges (Blau, 1964) and in-group and out-group dynamics (Graen & Scandura, 1987), underscoring the significance of high-quality exchange with the leader. Bauer and Lim (2019) did not delve deeply into the specific mechanisms of LMX, instead, they framed LMX within broader communication practices between leaders and volunteers, emphasizing mutual trust, respect, and support.

Almas and colleagues (2020) and Schneider and George (2011) used transformational leadership. This approach underscores the role of visionary leadership in fostering organizational commitment and innovation. From this perspective, leaders inspire and motivate followers to exceed their self-interests in the group's well-being, thus fostering high levels of performance and innovation (Bass, 1985).

Servant leadership, highlighted by Schneider and George (2011) and Ngah and colleagues (2022), emphasizes that a leader's primary role is to serve others first. This approach is characterized by its focus on fulfilling the needs of others and fostering individual and community growth (Ehrhart, 2004; Van Dierendonck et al., 2017).

Ethical leadership, as explored by Benevene, Dal Corso, et al. (2018), emphasizes conduct that is normatively appropriate and ethically grounded. Defined by the ability to inspire ethical behavior through example and communication, this leadership style relies on fairness and accountability to foster an organizational culture of trust and ethical integrity (Brown et al., 2005).

Similarly, Senses-Ozyurt and Villicana-Reyna (2016) adopted an approach that closely aligns with the principles of ethical leadership, focusing on two specific leadership characteristics. Integrity is a leader's ability to maintain ethical behavior despite outside pressures, highlighting honesty, reliability, and adherence to ethical principles. Inclusiveness refers to making individuals feel an integral part of organizational processes, ensuring that leaders are perceived as accessible to others.

De Clerck and colleagues (2023) introduce a dichotomy between autonomy-supportive and chaotic leadership based on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci et al., 2017). Autonomy-supportive leadership is characterized by its fostering of volunteer autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging, thus

creating an empowering environment where volunteers feel valued and motivated. Conversely, chaotic leadership is distinguished by its inconsistency and lack of clear guidance, which potentially leads to dysfunctional behaviors among volunteers.

Huynh and colleagues (2024) conceptualize leadership in terms of supervisor support, situating this construct within the framework of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). They underscore the critical role of supervisors in demonstrating care for the welfare of volunteers and acknowledging their contributions. Lastly, a final study by Joseph and Carolissen (2022) conducted a qualitative analysis through interviews to identify the fundamental factors that constitute effective volunteer leadership, founding six key characteristics in volunteer settings: efficiency, regular and effective communication, organization, passion and dedication, supportiveness, and facilitating volunteer growth.

T-Lab Analysis

Particularly, the analysis identified five main clusters with their correlates: leader-member exchange (Figure 2), servant (Figure 3), transformational (Figure 4), retention (Figure 5), and intention to stay (Figure 6).

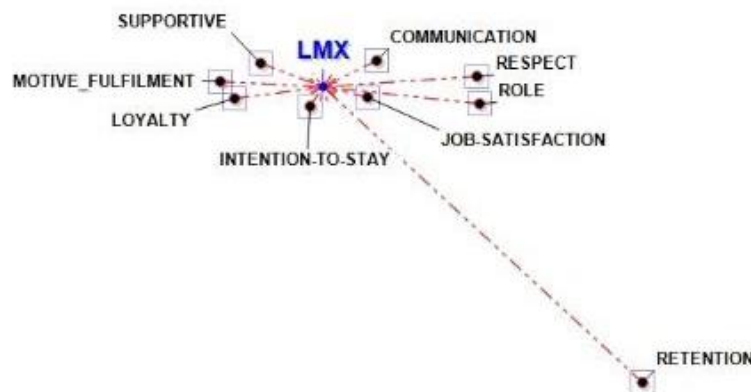


FIGURE 2
Leader-member exchange cluster from T-Lab

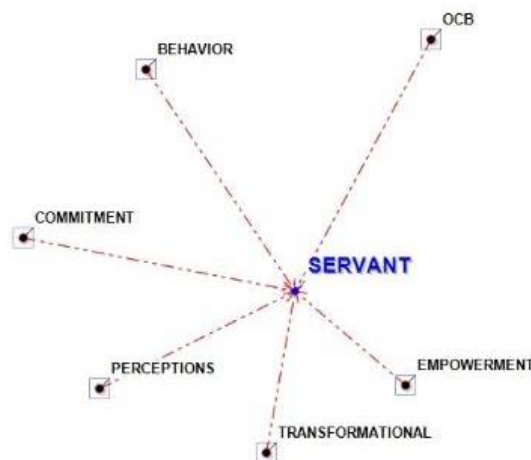


FIGURE 3
Servant cluster from T-Lab



FIGURE 4
Transformational cluster from T-Lab

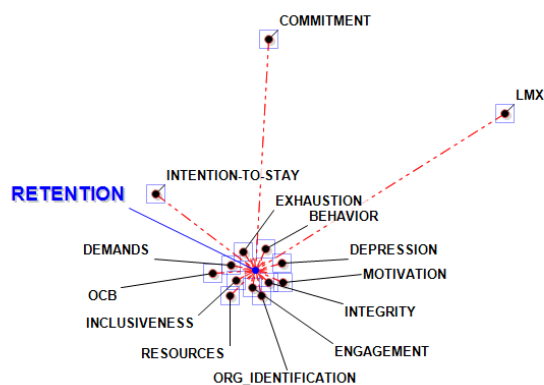


FIGURE 5
Retention cluster from T-Lab

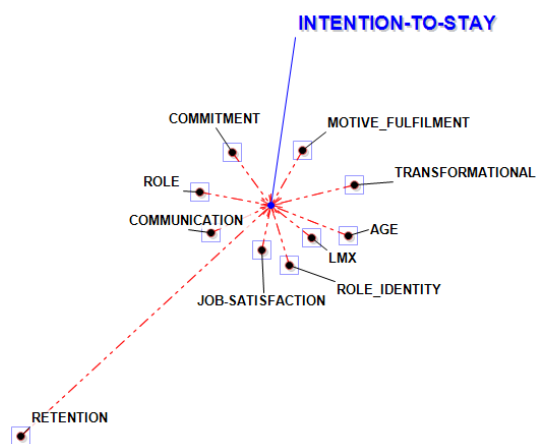


FIGURE 6
Intention to stay cluster from T-Lab

Relationship between Leadership and Volunteers' Intention to Stay and Retention

This category of findings explores the nuanced mechanisms through which various leadership theories, styles, and characteristics influence volunteers' decisions to remain in NPOs. The adoption of the LMX theory across varied studies offers in-depth insights into volunteers in NPOs. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 2, the semantic association between LMX and intention to stay was significantly stronger than the association between LMX and retention. In the works of Bang (2011, 2015), only one dimension of LMX, the dimension of professional respect, showed a distinctive effect but was different depending on the source — whether from leaders toward volunteers or vice versa. Bang (2011) focused on the professional respect that volunteer leaders have for their followers. This study underscored the significant influence of leaders' recognition and valuation of their followers' professional capabilities on the leaders' intentions to remain within the organization. Conversely, Bang (2015) shifted the perspective to the volunteers' professional respect toward their leaders, highlighting that volunteers' respect for their leaders' professional competencies significantly predicts the volunteers' intentions to stay with the organization.

This double perspective, offered by the two studies, underscores the bilateral nature of professional respect within LMX theory, emphasizing that mutual recognition of professional competencies is essential for sustaining volunteer engagement and retention. By integrating these results with those provided by Bauer and Lim (2019), Usadolo and colleagues (2023), and Usadolo and Usadolo (2019), a comprehensive view of the LMX's impact is offered. In Bauer and Lim (2019), LMX (as operationalized through the relationship with one's supervisor) and volunteers' intention to stay showed a significant association. Quality supervisor-volunteer relations are associated with a higher level of organizational identification and, in turn, the volunteers' intention to continue. The critical role of high-quality interactions between supervisors and volunteers is also supported by Usadolo and colleagues (2023) and Usadolo and Usadolo (2019). They specifically considered volunteers within community-based organizations in South Africa, finding that the quality of LMX relationships — characterized by mutual respect, trust, and support — directly influences volunteers' intentions to remain with their organizations.

Switching focus to leadership styles, the research identifies transformational, servant, and ethical leadership as prominent factors explaining volunteers' intention to stay and continue within NPOs. Autonomy-supportive and chaotic leadership styles were used to explain volunteers' turnover intention.

Transformational leadership is a significant predictor of volunteers' intention to remain. This significant association is also supported at the semantic level (Figures 2 and 4). Transformational leaders who are adept at articulating the vision of the organization, challenging the status quo, and inspiring and motivating volunteers foster a volunteering environment that encourages volunteers to stay engaged and committed to the organization over time (Almas et al., 2020). Interestingly, while transformational leadership plays a role in influencing volunteers' intentions to remain engaged with their organizations, the study by Schneider and George (2011) presents a more complex picture. The study contrasts the impact of transformational and servant leadership on the intention of volunteers to remain, revealing a connection between these factors (as shown in Figure 4).

However, the findings indicate that servant leadership emerges as the preferable style for fostering volunteer intention to stay. Servant leadership is characterized by a high moral responsibility and respect for followers, motivating volunteers to grow personally, professionally, and ethically (Ngah et al., 2022). This effectively fosters an environment where volunteers feel valued, supported, and empowered, positively influencing volunteer intention to stay (Schneider & George, 2011) and volunteer retention (Ngah et al., 2022). Similarly, practices and behaviors of ethical leadership — such as fairness, integrity, and concern for the

well-being of volunteers — contribute to a fulfilling volunteer experience and, ultimately, influence volunteers' decisions to remain with the NPO (Benevene, Dal Corso, et al., 2018).

At the same time, a leadership approach oriented to autonomy and support may significantly reduce turnover among volunteers. On the contrary, a chaotic leadership style, characterized by unpredictability and inconsistency, contributes to a work environment where volunteers' basic psychological needs are hindered and directly increases volunteers' turnover intention (De Clerck et al., 2023). However, when both leadership styles were analyzed simultaneously, the negative influence of chaotic leadership was stronger and more significant compared to the potential positive impact of autonomy-supportive leadership (De Clerck et al., 2023). These findings emphasize the need for leaders of voluntary organizations not only to engage in positive behaviors but also to avoid harmful leadership practices that can invalidate the positive effects of autonomy and support.

Regarding volunteer retention, two papers found that several leadership characteristics could have a positive impact. Effective volunteer leadership, characterized by efficiency, effective and regular communication, organizational skills, passion, dedication, supportiveness, and the facilitation of volunteer growth, is central to fulfilling volunteers' expectations and mitigating demotivating factors. Effective volunteer leadership not only meets but exceeds volunteers' expectations by embodying these qualities, thereby enhancing volunteers' satisfaction and commitment to the organization. Conversely, poor leadership practices, characterized by a lack of organization, poor communication, and insufficient support for volunteers, serve as significant demotivating factors that can lead to decreased volunteer satisfaction and increased intentions to leave the organization (Joseph & Carolissen, 2022). Furthermore, creating an inclusive environment where volunteers' contributions are valued and integrated into the decision-making processes substantially enhances volunteer retention. Specifically, leadership inclusiveness emerged as a more crucial determinant of volunteer retention compared to integrity, emphasizing the value of fostering a sense of belonging among volunteers to ensure their prolonged engagement with the organization (Senses-Ozyurt & Villicana-Reyna, 2016).

Only a study found that supervisor support did not significantly impact volunteer retention, distinguishing organizational support as more crucial for long-term volunteer retention. This discrepancy might depend on the limited interactions between firefighters and their supervisors during challenging situations, suggesting that direct supervisory support is less critical for them. Instead, the close connections within the firefighting teams, in terms of camaraderie and support from fellow volunteers, emerge as more crucial factors for retention among volunteer firefighters (Huynh et al., 2024).

Individual and Work-Related Factors Influencing the Relationship between Leadership and Volunteer's Intention to Stay and Retention

The relationship between leadership and volunteers' intention to stay and their retention in NPOs is complex and multifaceted, encompassing several intermediate factors that influence the dynamics between leaders and followers differently. Several studies have shown how the combined effect of leadership and job satisfaction positively influences the intention to remain within an organization. In this regard, job satisfaction emerges as the most crucial mediator factor, referring to more leadership styles (Almas et al., 2020; Bang, 2015; Benevene, Dal Corso, et al., 2018; Ngah et al., 2022). The association between job satisfaction and intention to stay is also supported by the semantic analysis (Figure 6).

In the first case, job satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and volunteers' intention to stay. This means ethical leadership does not directly affect volunteers' intentions to

remain with an NPO. Rather, it influences their intention by increasing job satisfaction. Essentially, the effectiveness of ethical leadership in encouraging volunteers to stay depends on their satisfaction with their roles (Benevene, Dal Corso, et al., 2018). In other instances, studies have indicated the necessity of considering additional aspects to more comprehensively understand and elucidate the impact of job satisfaction.

In light of Bang's (2015) findings, age moderates how job satisfaction affects volunteers' decision to remain in an organization. Essentially, for younger volunteers, satisfaction is strongly influenced by the degree of esteem and respect for their skills from their leader, a concept related to their professional interactions. Older volunteers, on the other hand, place more importance on job satisfaction when deciding whether to continue volunteering. This difference suggests that while younger volunteers value recognition of their professional skills, older volunteers are more influenced by the overall satisfaction they derive from their role. Therefore, the impact of leadership on job satisfaction and, in turn, volunteer intention to stay varies with age. The link between age and intention to stay is also shown in Figure 6.

Job satisfaction may significantly affect other work-related outcomes, such as organizational commitment and the development of a strong role identity among volunteers (Almas et al., 2020). Specifically, it was shown that transformational leadership enhances job satisfaction among volunteers who feel valued and connected to the organization's goals. This increased job satisfaction then leads to a deeper organizational commitment, where volunteers recognize their participation as meaningful and integral to the organization's success. Finally, as volunteers become more committed, they develop a stronger sense of role identity, viewing their volunteer role as a key part of their self-concept and life.

Regarding volunteer retention, mixed results of the role of job satisfaction are reported. Job satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between servant leadership and volunteer retention, highlighting the importance of fulfilling and satisfying volunteer experiences for the long term (Nghah et al., 2022). These findings were however not supported by Senses-Ozyurt and Villicana-Reyna (2016), revealing no significant association between the two variables. Insights from qualitative interview analyses indicate that intrinsic motivation might be a more reliable predictor of volunteer retention than job satisfaction. Volunteers, driven by a deep-seated desire to contribute to disadvantaged communities, could find intrinsic value and fulfillment in their service, aspects not fully captured by job satisfaction measures.

In the context of NPOs, satisfying the volunteers' intrinsic motivation emerges as prominent. The motivational needs refer to values, personal growth, self-enhancement, social connections, and career aspirations. As shown, volunteers' intrinsic motivations significantly influence the effectiveness of leader-member exchange (LMX) dynamics on retention, highlighting the central role of motive fulfillment as a mediator in this process (Usadolo et al., 2023). This underscores the need for leadership strategies attuned to meeting these motivational needs, highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing the different reasons volunteers are attracted to and stay in their organizations.

In a complementary view, De Clerck and colleagues (2023) introduce the critical role of basic psychological needs, that is, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in sustaining volunteers' well-being and optimal functioning. Their findings reveal the detrimental effects of chaotic leadership on these needs, resulting in increased volunteer turnover intentions. Conversely, while autonomy-supportive leadership is positively associated with need satisfaction, its beneficial impact is overshadowed by the adverse effects of need frustration. This presents a leadership challenge within volunteer contexts: nurturing supportive environments by avoiding behaviors that inadvertently frustrate volunteers' needs.

Additionally, empowerment emerges as a vital mediator in the relationship between leadership styles, specifically transformational and servant leadership, and volunteer retention (Schneider & George, 2011). Volunteers' empowerment, characterized by perceptions of control, competence, and meaningful

involvement, significantly solidifies their intentions to continue their voluntary service. This emphasizes the profound impact of leadership approaches that empower volunteers, affirming their critical role within the organization and fostering a sense of belonging and significance.

In this context, supportive supervisor communication further solidifies its role as a crucial element in shaping volunteers' workplace experiences. This form of communication, which encompasses empathy, recognition, and responsiveness to volunteers' needs, is fundamental in building positive relationships between supervisors and volunteers, thereby enhancing their satisfaction and organizational loyalty (Usadolo & Usadolo, 2019).

DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to the enrichment of the literature on volunteering by systematizing the body of research about the effects of leadership approaches on volunteer intention to stay and retention in NPOs. To this end, we conducted further analysis using T-Lab, which sheds light on significant relationships from a semantic point of view. Although it does not provide quantitative results on the associations between variables, it offers valuable insights into the meaning of these relationships. Semantic analysis enriches our understanding by highlighting the nuances by which leadership influences volunteer dynamics, adding a level of depth to the understanding of the literature in this field. In addition, this study focuses on exhibiting a gap in the literature that future studies might fill.

The first point concerns the definition of "intention to stay or continue" and "retention." For example, Huynh and colleagues (2024) adopt Macdonald and colleagues' (2009) definition, describing volunteer retention as the degree to which volunteer firefighters plan to continue their association with the same organization. However, the authors acknowledge a limitation in their study regarding the measurement of this construct, which is based primarily on volunteers' self-reported intention to continue. This highlights a significant gap in the existing literature: the challenge of clearly distinguishing between retention and intention to stay among volunteers. Consequently, although the studies reviewed do not clearly separate the two notions, our analysis consistently uses the original terminology employed in the studies cited above to describe our findings.

Our study examined which leadership models are associated with volunteers' outcomes. Firstly, we defined each model under consideration. This involved a detailed description of the differences among these models, paying close attention to the nuances and specific aspects that various authors have emphasized in their research. Our analysis revealed that the LMX model is the most frequently utilized approach within nonprofit organizations, corroborating earlier findings that position LMX as a significant predictor of volunteer turnover (Forner et al., 2024). Additionally, we observed that both transformational and servant leadership styles have been mostly applied, demonstrating their effectiveness in explaining the phenomena under study. This is in line with the existing literature on paid workers, where these leadership styles have been shown to have a significant impact, reinforcing the idea that the principles underlying transformational and servant leadership are equally relevant and influential in both volunteer and paid work contexts (Alatawi, 2017; Jia & Li, 2024; Kharabsheh et al., 2017; Kim & Beehr, 2020; Xiong & Sui, 2023). The wide use of LMX in the studies highlights its effectiveness in addressing the specific needs and motivations of volunteers through personalized attention and support, setting it apart as a crucial strategy for enhancing volunteer satisfaction and retention in the NPO sector. LMX distinguishes itself by emphasizing the quality of the dyadic relationships between leaders and each volunteer, focusing on mutual trust, respect, and personalized interactions (Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). This individualized approach allows for a deeper

connection and understanding between volunteers and leaders, potentially enhancing their satisfaction and intention to stay (Bang, 2011; Usadolo & Usadolo, 2019). Comparing LMX and leadership styles, transformational leadership operates on a broader scale, inspiring volunteers through a collective vision and motivation, fostering a shared commitment to organizational goals. Servant leadership, with its focus on prioritizing the growth and well-being of volunteers, shares common ground with LMX in terms of nurturing positive relationships; however, it leans more toward creating a communal spirit rather than individualized interactions. Ethical leadership, which builds trust and integrity across the organization, complements LMX by ensuring ethical standards guide these personal exchanges. Meanwhile, the dichotomy of autonomy-supportive versus chaotic leadership underscores the importance of stable and clear guidance provided in high-quality LMX relationships, as opposed to the disengagement fostered by chaotic leadership practices.

Moving on to the next stage of our analysis, we aimed to explain the complex interaction between leadership and volunteer retention by identifying and understanding the key factors mediating this relationship. Thus, the current research defined the main intervening factors in the relationship between leadership and volunteers' intention to stay and retention.

Our findings highlight the significant influence of work-related factors. Volunteer job satisfaction plays a crucial mediating role in the dynamics between leadership styles and volunteer outcomes, such as retention and the intention to stay, highlighting its importance, especially during the early months of volunteering (Almas, 2021; Almas et al., 2020; Bang, 2015; Benevene, Dal Corso, et al., 2018; Ngah et al., 2022). The literature confirms that managing volunteer satisfaction is essential for minimizing turnover risks (Chacón et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2019; Vecina et al., 2010). This is further supported by findings that leadership behaviors that enhance a sense of collective identity and foster trust and cooperation can also boost satisfaction through increased work engagement (Dal Corso et al., 2019). Additionally, factors such as the opportunity to form friendships, effective communication, and support groups within the workplace have been found to improve satisfaction (Wymer & Starnes, 2001). Kim and colleagues (2019) found that high volunteer satisfaction motivates volunteers to continue their service and encourages them to promote volunteering through positive word-of-mouth. This satisfaction is influenced by the fulfillment of general needs and the effectiveness of volunteer management practices, with a significant impact seen when volunteers are actively involved in their roles. These insights suggest that a focus on enhancing volunteer satisfaction can not only retain existing volunteers but also attract new ones, thus boosting the NPO's ability to secure essential human resources.

At the same time, variables such as organizational commitment and role identity significantly mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and volunteers' intention to remain in their organizations (Almas et al., 2020). On one hand, this finding aligns with prior research, which identifies organizational commitment as a crucial variable for understanding the dynamics between volunteers and their organizations, particularly in terms of absenteeism, intention to quit, and overall performance (Meyer et al., 2002; Park & Kim, 2009; Rodell et al., 2017; Vecina et al., 2012; Ward & Greene, 2018). Additionally, Grube and Piliavin (2000) suggest that the volunteering experience can be significantly enhanced by opportunities for volunteers to develop a role identity, which they describe as an individual's self-concept about their social roles. This enhancement in role identity deepens the volunteer's engagement and potentially increases their commitment and satisfaction, thereby influencing their long-term association with the organization.

Overall, the interconnected roles of satisfaction, commitment, and role identity in influencing volunteers' intention to stay are structurally outlined in the Three-Stage Model of Volunteers' Duration (TSMVD; Chacón et al., 2007; Vecina et al., 2010). Vecina (2001) originally proposed this model to delineate the entirety of the volunteer experience, characterizing it as a process that includes antecedent variables

such as motivation, process variables such as conflict and satisfaction, and consequences like the actual duration of involvement in the organization. This model, significantly enhanced by the inclusion of the intention to stay, conceptualizes volunteer retention as a sequence of stages, each dominated by different predictors.

According to TSMVD, satisfaction is identified as the primary predictor of a volunteer's intention to remain within the organization during the first six months (Stage 1). As the volunteer continues into the first year, organizational commitment becomes more influential (Stage 2). By the second year, role identity emerges as the key factor sustaining volunteer engagement (Stage 3). Finally, this review provides further evidence for the volunteer turnover model (Forner et al., 2024), which considers organizational commitment, job satisfaction, affective commitment, role identity, engagement, and burnout as strong work-related predictors of volunteer turnover.

Our findings also reveal that individual factors of volunteers influence leadership impacts. The factors include aspects such as volunteers' motive fulfillment (Usadolo et al., 2023), empowerment (Schneider & George, 2011), and age (Bang, 2015), which play crucial roles in influencing a volunteer's decision to remain with an organization. Moreover, the concept of need frustration emerges as a critical mediator, particularly under the influence of chaotic leadership styles, which can significantly propel turnover intentions (De Clerck et al., 2023).

This body of research underscores the importance of addressing the underlying motivations that drive volunteers to engage with NPOs, highlighting that beyond interpersonal exchanges, a deeper understanding of what motivates volunteers is essential to maximizing retention outcomes (Chacón et al., 2007; Holtrop et al., 2024). The essence of volunteering is deeply grounded in intrinsic motivation and the desire to contribute to a cause greater than oneself (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). This reality requires a leadership style that is both empowering and sensitive to volunteers' individual needs. Therefore, it is a challenge for leaders to create an environment in which volunteers find fulfillment in their roles and are protected from the negative impacts of unmet psychological needs (Holtrop et al., 2024; Joseph & Carolissen, 2022).

Building on this, it is clear that the essence of proficient volunteer management fundamentally resides in a profound respect for their motivations and experiences. Leaders are tasked with being architects of an environment that not only satisfies volunteers' psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, but also protects them from the disengagement and dissatisfaction that can result from the frustration of these needs (De Clerck et al., 2023). The JD-R model supports this by emphasizing that job resources, such as effective leadership, play a crucial role in mitigating job demands and enhancing engagement (Schaufeli, 2017). By fostering an environment that addresses these psychological needs, leaders can significantly boost volunteer engagement and retention, thereby ensuring a committed and sustainable volunteer workforce.

In this sense, leadership practices should not only offer supportive communication but also recognize and address the myriad motivations driving volunteers' commitment. Supervisors must deliberate effort to understand and appreciate their volunteers' individual needs, ensuring that their contributions are valued and their motivations are fulfilled, thereby fostering a positive and supportive volunteering environment (Usadolo & Usadolo, 2019).

LIMITS AND CONCLUSION

It is necessary to recognize some limitations of the current study. First, few relevant articles were found in the leadership literature. In this regard, the decision to exclude the gray literature (conference

proceedings, international reports, organizational reports, doctoral dissertations) represents a loss of important information. This decision is due to different levels of peer review, quality control, and a lack of indexing in standard databases compared to the academic literature. In these papers, the lack of variety in approaches to leadership was another restriction on the results. This highlights the need to enrich the literature on volunteerism with more studies that include a greater variety of constructs. Moreover, as discussed, the difficulty in clearly separating retention and intention to stay did not permit a neat interpretation of the results. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies lay the groundwork for a clear differentiation between the two constructs, intending to find collective agreement among researchers.

In conclusion, leadership within volunteer organizations presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Unlike profit work environments, volunteer settings often rely on intrinsic motivation and a shared sense of purpose to engage participants. The role of leadership, therefore, extends beyond mere management of tasks; it encompasses inspiring, guiding, and supporting volunteers toward achieving collective goals. The leadership styles adopted can significantly impact volunteer dimensions such as satisfaction, commitment, and, ultimately, retention. By integrating the JD-R model, we can see that caring and people-centered leadership approaches not only foster a volunteer community but also enhance organizational stability through increased volunteer retention. This synthesis provides a comprehensive overview of how different leadership styles contribute to the sustenance and growth of volunteer-driven organizations, highlighting the importance of effective leadership in fostering an engaged volunteer workforce.

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