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# Transformational leadership and work engagement: Exploring the mediating role of structural empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the mediating role of structural empowerment in the positive relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement. Based on self-reported questionnaires from 240 employees working in the tourism sector in Galicia (northwest of Spain), the findings reveal that the linkage between transformational leadership and work engagement is partially mediated by structural empowerment. These results imply that transformational leaders foster work engagement by enabling access to information, opportunities, support and adequate resources. This empirical study is one of the first to examine the role of structural empowerment as a mediator between transformational leadership and work engagement and may serve as a reference for promoting work engagement in service organizations. A number of contributions and practical implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Work engagement has become a very popular term and a subject of great interest in the field of management and positive psychology over the past 20 years. Having an engaged workforce is a competitive advantage for organizations as it is associated with favourable organizational outcomes (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002).

Leadership is a critical component that influences the work environment and the way employees perceive their work (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Specifically, transformational leadership behaviours such as intellectual stimulation and individual consideration may engender a supportive organizational climate that stimulates high levels of work engagement (Avolio & Bass, 1995) and enhances followers' internal motivation (Avolio & Yammarino, 2002). Further, transformational leaders who set clear expectations, praise employees for good performance, are fair, and are concerned about employees may play a part in bringing about feelings of attachment to one's work and psychological safety (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Structural empowerment refers to having access to information,

support, enough resources and opportunities to learn and grow at work (Kanter, 1977). Moreover, leaders play an important role in creating empowering workplace conditions that may result in positive personal and organizational outcomes (Cummings et al., 2010). Bakker and Demerouti (2008) suggested that engaged employees are more imaginative, productive and more willing to go the extra mile. Therefore, the embedded understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership and structural empowerment is a key to increasing work engagement in today's highly competitive business environment.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the mediating role of structural empowerment in the positive relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement in the Galician tourism sector (northwest Spain). The tourism sector in Galicia is one of the pillars of the economy, being one of the most powerful industries that generates employment. In the past few years, efforts have focused on the promotion of competitiveness, innovation and the internationalization of this industry, which makes this a relevant context for this study.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Transformational leadership and structural empowerment

Empowerment is a key component of organization effectiveness that may increase when control and power are distributed (Keller &

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Dansereau, 1995). Empowerment has been analysed from a two-fold perspective. The first standpoint describes structural empowerment as the presence of practices, social structures and organizational resources in the workplace, such as equipment, infrastructures, good relationship with peers, information and knowledge sharing (Kanter, 1977, 1993). Kanter (1977, p. 166) conceptualizes power as the 'ability to get things done, to mobilize resources'. According to Kanter (1977), power is gained when employees have access to the necessary information, learning and development opportunities, support and resources at work. Such workplace structures should include access to information such as knowledge about policies, organization results and organizational changes through open communication systems. The opportunity for learning and development is another dimension that enables employees' career advancement in the organization. Support encompasses receiving feedback and guidance from subordinates, colleagues and supervisors. Resources refer to gaining access to materials and equipment, time and financial resources that are necessary to achieve organizational goals (Kanter, 1977, 1993; Laschinger, 2008). Accordingly, when leaders provide employees with these social structures, they feel empowered and allow them to accomplish their work in meaningful ways (Kanter, 1993).

The second perspective, psychological empowerment, alludes to the psychological state derived from the structure of organizations. Psychological empowerment was defined by Spreitzer (1995, p. 1444) as 'a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact'. Meaning refers to the degree to which individuals feel their work is important. Competence or self-efficacy indicates one's ability or personal mastery to perform work activities. Self-determination concerns an individual's sense of freedom or level of autonomy to start and carry out tasks. Impact refers to the degree to which individuals believe their work can influence organizational outcomes. The rationale that underlies psychological empowerment stems from its key antecedent, structural empowerment, which provides the necessary job resources in the workplace (Laschinger, Finegan, Shamian, & Wilk, 2001). This study focuses on structural empowerment, as it has not received much empirical attention compared to psychological empowerment and as it seems to be a precondition for psychological empowerment.

Previous research has explored the pivotal role of leadership in the creation of empowered structures at work, but the relationship between transformational leadership and structural empowerment remains unclear in the literature. The concept of transformational leadership was originated by Burns (1978) in his seminal work and further developed by Bass (1985, 1999). Transformational leadership promotes organizational change and innovation, and this type of leader communicates a clear vision, inspires followers and creates trust (Bass, 1985). Therefore, subordinates tend to act beyond their own expectations in such a way that they foster organizational effectiveness and achieve improved performance (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Yukl, 1981). Transformational leaders produce changes in their followers, encourage them to go beyond their personal interests by considering the organizational objectives and make them think from different perspectives (Avolio & Bass, 1995). In contrast, transactional leadership entails contingent reward and management by exception (Bass, 1985; Howell & Avolio, 1993).

The analysis by Rafferty and Griffin (2004), adapted from the work of House (1971) and Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990), identifies five characteristics of transformational leadership, namely inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation, supportive leadership, personal recognition and vision. Inspirational communication refers to the use of positive and encouraging discussions that motivate followers and build confidence. Intellectual stimulation is experienced when leaders

question old assumptions and encourage employees to think in new ways to become more innovative and creative so that they redefine the problems and face them differently. This dimension helps develop employees within the organization. Supportive leadership occurs when the leader expresses concern for subordinates, takes into account followers' individual needs regarding their personal and professional development, provides individualized support and acts as mentors (Bass, 1990, 1999). Personal recognition refers to praise for work achievements and it is shown when the leader acknowledges followers' efforts. Vision encompasses leaders who envision a promising future, lead by example and set clear goals and high standards of performance.

These dimensions are fundamental to the creation of empowering structures in small organizations where managers are more approachable because transformational leadership provides a learning environment by inspiring, stimulating, supporting and recognizing followers (Bass, 1985). For example, by means of inspirational communication, transformational leaders provide meaningfulness and develop a sense of enthusiasm. Intellectual stimulation enhances employees' participation in the decision-making process that promotes critical thinking, problem solving and learning and development opportunities. Practices and working conditions that promote structural empowerment provide employees with greater autonomy and participation by giving them control over their work.

Despite the significant number of studies on transformational leadership over the past decades, only a few have examined how transformational leadership predicts empowerment. Several studies have confirmed the positive association between transformational leadership, psychological empowerment and personal resources (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Barroso Castro, Villegas Perinan, & Casillas Bueno, 2008; Dust, Resick, & Mawritz, 2013; Fuller, Morrison, Jones, Bridger, & Brown, 1999; Joo & Lim, 2013), but few studies have examined the effect of transformational leadership on structural empowerment. Laschinger, Sabiston, and Kutzcher (1997) argue that job activities that enable personal recognition and development of strong relationships among employees may increase structural empowerment. Greco, Laschinger, and Wong (2006) found that leader's empowering behaviours affect engagement (positively) and burnout (negatively) through structural empowerment and the six areas of work life among nurses. They argue that when leaders use empowering behaviours such as enhancing meaningful work or fostering autonomy, they develop supportive organizational structures that empower employees in a way that creates positive attitudes and promotes organizational goals. There is also evidence that transformational leadership has a positive impact on structural empowerment, which, in turn, results in higher job satisfaction and reduced adverse patient outcomes (Boamah, Laschinger, Wong, & Clarke, 2018). These arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** (H1): Transformational leadership is positively associated with high levels of structural empowerment.

## 2.2. Transformational leadership and work engagement

The burgeoning significance of leadership development activities in promoting engagement has been acknowledged by both academics and practitioners, culminating in studies that explore employee perceptions concerning those activities (Bal, De Cooman, & Mol, 2013; Bass et al., 2016; Guest, 2014; Schmitt, Den Hartog, & Belschak, 2016; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). For example, two studies examined the mediating role of self-efficacy between transformational leadership and work engagement (Salanova, Lorente, Chambel, & Martínez, 2011; Tims et al., 2011). Zhu,

Avolio, and Walumbwa (2009) found that follower characteristics moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and follower work engagement. When leaders perceived follower's characteristics less positively, work engagement levels were lower. Song, Kolb, Hee Lee, and Kyoung Kim (2012) showed that work engagement mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational knowledge creation practices in Korea. Breevaart et al. (2013) showed that naval cadets were more engaged when their leader showed more transformational leadership and provided contingent reward (a component of transactional leadership). In a study conducted by Ghadi, Mario, and Caputi (2013), employees' perceptions of meaning in work partially mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement in an Australian context.

Kahn was the first scholar who conceptualized personal engagement and acknowledged three psychological conditions that may influence how people engage personally (i.e. meaningfulness, safety and availability). Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) defined work engagement as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption'. Rather than being a specific and temporary state, it refers to a cognitive-affective state that is more persistent over time. In line with the initial definition of engagement, this study assesses engagement as a trait and not as a variant state (Sonnentag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010; Xanthopoulou & Bakker, 2013). Vigour refers to high levels of energy, mental resilience and dedicating time and effort in one's work. Dedication is characterized by eagerness, pride, stimulus and meaningful involvement in their work. The last dimension, absorption, is about being completely focused and engrossed in one's work, thereby time flies and it is difficult to detach oneself from work (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

This study draws on the job demands–resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) to examine the association of two specific job resources, namely transformational leadership and structural empowerment, with work engagement. This framework postulates that working conditions can be divided in two main categories: jobs demands and job resources. Job demands (e.g. workload) refer to 'those physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs' (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Job resources, on the other hand, refer to the job characteristics that 'may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, (c) stimulate personal growth and development' (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501).

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2008), job resources are the main drivers of work engagement. Job resources allude to the physical, social or organizational characteristics that may be embedded in a job. Supervisor and social support, feedback, coaching, voice, opportunities for learning and development and task variety are some examples of job resources. In fact, appropriate feedback promotes learning and support from peers raises the probability of meeting one's work aims (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

In light of the above considerations, the first requirement is:

**Hypothesis 2.** (H2): Transformational leadership is positively associated with work engagement.

### 2.3. Structural empowerment and work engagement

Work engagement is likely to increase when job resources such as job control, feedback and task variety are high (Bakker, 2011;

Halbesleben, 2010; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008). For example, Kahn (1990) stated greater levels of work engagement are achieved when work includes social support such as rewarding relations with colleagues. Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) suggested that employees would be more engaged at work when their leaders and organizations cover their basic needs.

Several studies have used the job demands–resources model (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009) to examine the positive relationship between job resources and work engagement. Hakanen et al. (2006) found that job resources such as job control, supervisory support, information, social climate and innovativeness may predict organizational commitment through work engagement. Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) showed in their diary study that employees working in fast-food restaurants were more engaged on days they had access to available resources. Another study demonstrated that organizational resources and work engagement predicted service climate in Spanish hotels and restaurants, which, in turn, predicted employee performance and customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005).

Further research has also revealed that structural empowerment is related to positive organizational outcomes including job satisfaction (Laschinger, 2008; Stam, Laschinger, Regan, & Wong, 2015), commitment (Wilson & Laschinger, 1994), decreased burnout (Greco et al., 2006) and reduced job strain (Laschinger et al., 2001). Laschinger and Finegan (2005) found that structural empowerment has a positive influence on work engagement through five of the six areas of work life (i.e. control, value congruence, reward, community and fairness). A study conducted by Boamah and Laschinger (2015) demonstrated that structural empowerment and psychological capital are related to greater work engagement. Laschinger, Wilk, Cho, and Greco (2009) found a strong positive relationship between structural empowerment and work engagement in their study among new graduates and experienced nurses. These studies underline the significance of empowering practices and working conditions in the promotion of work engagement. Based on this argumentation, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 3.** (H3): Structural empowerment is positively related to work engagement.

Social exchange theory provides a theoretical basis to explain how the acceptance of the leadership style and structural empowerment may relate to work engagement (Blau, 1964; Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013). This theory explains social exchange as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties that entail reciprocity. That is, when relationships between leaders and employees are formed, certain reciprocal obligations are generated, such as psychological meaningfulness, safety or availability when leaders show genuine personal recognition or supportive leadership (Zhu et al., 2009). Moreover, employees may feel compelled to reciprocate with high levels of engagement when organizations provide resourceful work environments and job resources such as support, information or feedback. Although both transformational and transactional leadership may contribute to work engagement (Breevaart et al., 2013), we argue that it is the acceptance of transformational leadership that mainly related to work engagement because of the enhancement of structural empowerment. A number of studies applied social exchange theory to explain the relationships between leadership styles, work engagement and other motivational constructs (Agarwal, Datta, Blake-Beard, & Bhargava, 2012; Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2013; Rayton & Yalabik, 2014; Song et al., 2012). Thus, in line with prior theoretical and empirical work, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**Hypothesis 4.** (H4): Structural empowerment mediates the positive relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and procedure for data collection

The sample consisted of 240 Spanish employees (132 females-55% and 108 males- 45%) from organizations in the tourism sector. All organizations were small- and medium-sized enterprises except for one large travel agency. Organizations were composed of small teams characterised by open communication and low hierarchical structures. Fifty eight per cent of participants were younger than 45, and the organizational tenure was between 4 and 10 years ( $SD = 1.40$ ) on average. They were employed in various jobs and occupational fields such as travel consultants, receptionists, guest services, marketing and human resources (HR). The questionnaire was distributed at the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018 by professionals of the HR departments of the organizations that participated in the study.

We first contacted organizations to gain access and explain to the HR department of each organization the purpose and scope of the project, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Upon agreement, we sent a cover letter to the management team by e-mail along with the online questionnaire requesting them to distribute it to the employees in their organizations. The questionnaire could be accessed through an e-mail that was sent to all employees within the organizations encouraging them to complete it online.

The questionnaire comprised 36 items measuring transformational leadership, structural empowerment and work engagement as well as demographic characteristics such as age, gender, seniority and type of contract. A total of 674 questionnaires were sent and a total of 240 completed questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 35.60%.

#### 3.2. Measures

**Transformational leadership.** We used Rafferty and Griffin's (2004) scale to measure transformational leadership. The original scale is comprised of 15 items assessing the dimensions of inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation, personal recognition, supportive leadership and vision. All items were translated into Spanish as the original scale is in English. Participants indicated their responses on a five-point scale with anchors (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. It is important to mention that employees had different leaders. Example items are: 'my leader says things that make employees proud to be a part of this organization' (inspirational communication); 'my leader challenges me to think about old problems in new ways' (intellectual stimulation); and 'my leader behaves in a manner which is thoughtful of my personal needs' (supportive leadership). Cronbach's alpha was .74, showing a high degree of internal consistency in the responses (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008; Nunnally, 1978).

**Structural empowerment** was measured with the 12-item Spanish structural empowerment scale (Jáimez Román & Bretones, 2013), adapted from the Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire II developed by Laschinger et al. (2001). This scale captures four dimensions, namely opportunity, information, resources and support and has been used in a growing number of studies (e.g. Ayala Calvo & García, 2018; Boamah et al., 2018; Boamah & Laschinger, 2015; Stam et al., 2015). The respondents were asked

to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statements about their job characteristics at work. A five-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree was used. Example items are: 'I have the chance to gain new skills and knowledge on the job' (opportunity); 'I have information about the current state of the organization' (information); and 'I have time available to accomplish job requirements' (resources). Overall, Cronbach's alpha was .89.

**Work engagement.** We used the shortened nine-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002) to assess work engagement, using a 5-point scale with anchors from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. This scale assesses the three engagement dimensions of vigour, dedication and absorption. Example items are: 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy' (vigour); 'I am proud of the work that I do' (dedication); and 'I am immersed in my work' (absorption). Internal consistency for the overall scale was .91, meeting the .70 threshold.

**Control variables.** We controlled for age, in line with previous research (Avolio et al., 2004; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008). Age was measured as a categorical variable as specified in Table 1.

#### 3.3. Data analyses

Hypotheses were tested by means of structural equation models with maximum likelihood estimation using Amos version 25 (Brown, 2006). First, we investigated the fit of the measurement model by means of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs), and then, we tested the hypothesized model. Before fitting the structural models, we checked for multivariate normality and outliers, while missing values were removed. Absolute values of skewness should be lower than 2 (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Additionally, consistent with previous studies (Tims et al., 2011; Wong & Laschinger, 2012), we calculated a composite score for each sub-dimension of each factor by summing and averaging the items scores to measure the levels of transformational leadership, structural empowerment and work engagement (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994; Kline, 2011). The indicator of vision from the transformational leadership scale was removed in our study because loadings were non-significant, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010). The mean value of this dimension was lower than the other especially for employees on a temporary contract. We also run a model where all dimensions of transformational leadership were included as related manifest variables with unique paths to

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics.

Category	Frequency	Per cent %
<i>Age</i>		
Under 30	49	20.40
31–45	89	37.10
More than 46	102	42.50
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	132	55
Male	108	45
<i>Type of contract</i>		
Temporary	113	47.10
Permanent	127	52.90
<i>Organizational tenure</i>		
<12 months	45	18.80
1–3 years	49	20.40
4–10 years	58	24.20
11–20 years	49	20.40
21 + years	39	16.30

Note. N = 240.

structural empowerment.

As suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we used a two-step modelling approach. First, the fit of the measurement model to the data was examined. The measurement model consisted of three latent variables and 12 manifest variables comprising four dimensions of transformational leadership, four dimensions of structural empowerment, three indicators of work engagement and the control variable age. Thus, there are  $12(12 + 1)/2$  unique elements of the observed covariance matrix (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Therefore, the model can be estimated as it meets the criteria of degrees of freedom ( $df > 0$ ) (Bollen, 1990; Kline, 2011).

We then tested the fit of the structural model, as depicted in Fig. 1 (Kline, 2011). To test the mediating hypothesis, we compared a full mediation model to a partial mediation model to investigate whether there was a significant variation in model fit with or without the direct path from transformational leadership to work engagement. Then, we examined the conditions for mediation suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986): a) the independent variable should be associated with the outcome variable, b) the independent variable should be associated with the mediating variable, c) the mediator should be associated with the outcome variable, and d) if the predictor-outcome path is non-significant, there is full mediation, and if it is significant, there is partial mediation. Bootstrapping was performed using 2000 resamples to test the significance of the indirect effect (Hayes, 2009). This approach is a re-sampling procedure that uses a number of sub-samples of the dataset and produces bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effect.

Finally, multiple measures were used to assess model fit to determine whether the proposed model indicates good fit to the data, in line with Bollen (1989) and Bentler (1990). First, we used the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test, which compares the model-implied covariance matrix of the observed variables to the observed covariance matrix. A significant value of  $\chi^2$  means that the observed covariance matrix is significantly different from the estimated covariance matrix. However, a major drawback is that the  $\chi^2$  statistic is highly sensitive to sample size, yielding potentially misleading conclusions as plausible models might be rejected based on a significant  $\chi^2$  value. Furthermore, the more complex the model is, the smaller the  $\chi^2$  value on account of the reduction in

degrees of freedom (Bollen, 1989). We therefore also used additional criteria to evaluate model fit.

The most commonly reported fit indices are the  $\chi^2/df$ , the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and the Bentler Comparative Fit Index (CFI).  $\chi^2/df$  values of 3 or less (Kline, 2011) indicate good model fit although Ullman (2001) proposed a cut-off of 2 or less. Hu and Bentler (1998, 1999) suggest, as a rule of thumb, RMSEA values approximately .06 or less as a cut-off value for a good fit. However, Browne and Cudeck (1993) recommend RMSEA values smaller than .05 considered as a good fit, values between .05 and .08 indicating adequate fit and values greater than .10 indicating poor model fit. GFI values higher than .90 indicate good fit. TLI and CFI values greater than .95 appear to be the most common indicator of good fit (Bentler, 1990; Hu & Bentler, 1995, 1999).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, correlations between the study variables and Cronbach's alphas. The correlation matrix reveals that Pearson's correlations among the constructs were positive and moderate in magnitude, and statistically significant at the .01 level, thus providing initial support for our hypotheses. Additionally, age and work engagement were positively related ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ) while correlations among the different variables were moderate to strong and significant at the .01 level and consistent with discriminant validity. Transformational leadership dimensions had moderate correlations with structural empowerment, ranging from .29 to .58, being vision the dimension with the lowest correlation. Cronbach's alpha of all items and CR values range from .74 to .91 for each latent variable. Thus, all internal consistencies meet the .70 criterion (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Nunnally, 1978).

### 4.2. Measurement model

The measurement model was tested to analyse the relationships among the constructs and their indicators. Two measurement

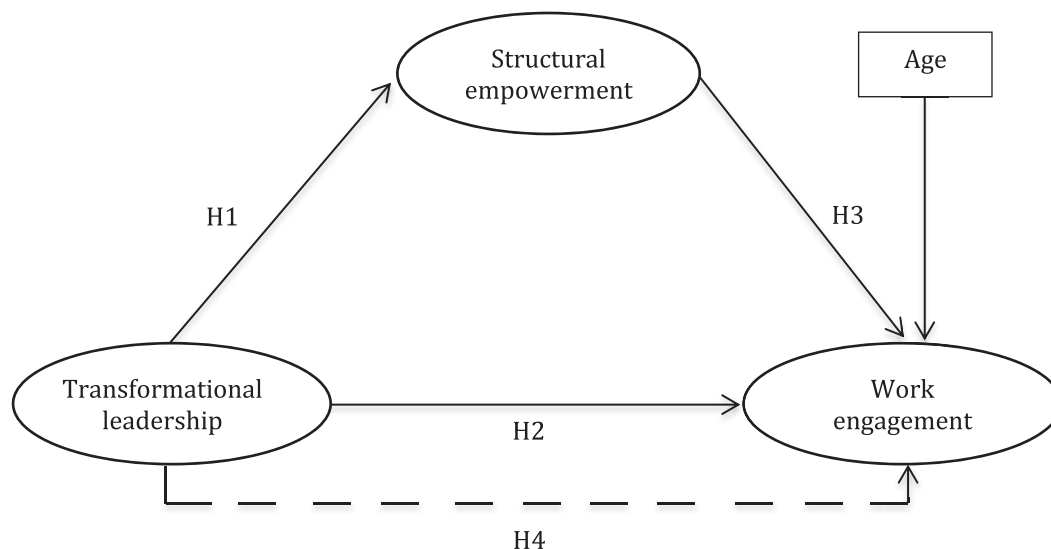


Fig. 1. The research model.

Note: The dashed line represents the indirect effect of transformational leadership on work engagement once the mediator has been introduced in the model.

**Table 2**  
Means, standard deviations, correlation matrix and Cronbach's alpha for study variables (N = 240).

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Age	2.22	.76	–						
2 Gender	1.45	.50	.17**	–					
3 Type of contract	1.53	.50	.47**	.23**	–				
4 Organizational tenure	2.95	1.35	.62**	.26**	.82**	–			
5 Transformational leadership	4.02	.68	.10	.01	.06	.02	(.74)		
6 Structural empowerment	3.39	.82	-.01	.05	-.06	-.12	.56**	(.89)	
7 Work engagement	4.05	.69	.25**	.01	.07	.06	.53**	.54**	(.91)

Notes: \*\* $p < .01$ . Cronbach's alpha values on the diagonal (where appropriate); age: 1 = Under 30, 2 = 31–45, 3 = 46 or more; gender: 1 = female, 2 = male; type of contract: 1 = temporary, 2 = permanent; organizational tenure in years: 1 = <1, 2 = 1–3, 3 = 4–10, 4 = 11–20, 5 = >21.

models were evaluated to validate the hypothesized model. First, all indicators loaded on a single factor and CFA results indicate poor fit ( $\chi^2 = 503.37$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 11.44$ ; GFI = .68; RMSEA = .21; TLI = .63; CFI = .70). Then, the proposed three-factor model was assessed. All factor loadings are higher than .50, and all  $\lambda$ 's are significantly different from zero at the .01 level with t-values that exceed the 1.96 threshold (Hair et al., 2010). Average variance extracted of each factor exceeds the minimum acceptable value of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and CFA results also show acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 100.49$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.45$ ; GFI = .93; RMSEA = .08; TLI = .95; CFI = .96).

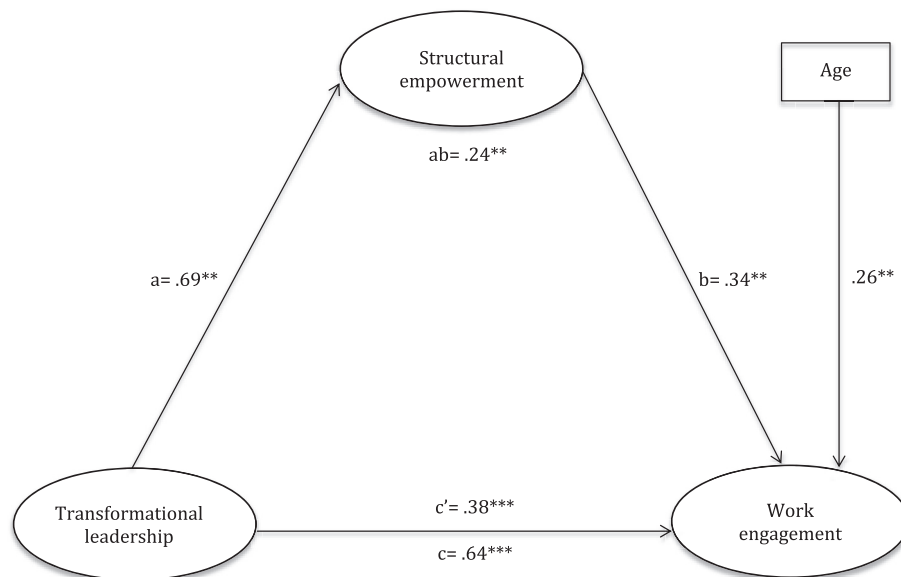
#### 4.3. Hypothesis testing

Two structural models were tested. The first one tested a two-factor model where transformational leadership was the sole predictor of work engagement and results indicate poor fit ( $\chi^2 = 237.34$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 5.39$ ; GFI = .88; RMSEA = .14; TLI = .80; CFI = .87). The second model, illustrated in Fig. 2, tested the mediating effect of structural empowerment between transformational leadership and work engagement. All path coefficients are significant at the .01 level, and the effects are in the expected direction. Results showed that the hypothesized partial mediating model fit well to the data ( $\chi^2 = 143.61$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.97$ ; GFI = .93; RMSEA = .06; TLI = .95; CFI = .97), meeting all criteria for model fit.

We then compared the partial mediating model (M1) with the

full mediating model (M2). Table 3 provides us with some of the absolute and relative goodness-of-fit statistics we performed. Model 1 was statistically better than Model 2 and goodness-of-fit indices of the partial mediating model seem more favourable than those of the full mediating model.  $\Delta\chi^2$  denotes the chi-square difference between Model 2 and Model 1, which is more constrained and thus has fewer parameters and more degrees of freedom.  $\Delta df$  indicates the degrees of freedom difference of the models in question (Bentler, 1990; Bollen, 1989). Based on these results, the first model that assumes that empowerment partially mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement is retained as the best model. Multi-group analyses were performed to test differences between male and female, among age groups and tenure, but there were no significant differences across groups. The proposed model accounted for 52.80% of the variance in work engagement.

All hypotheses were tested on the basis of the best-fitted partial mediating model. Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive direct association between transformational leadership and work engagement. As expected, the direct effect of transformational leadership on work engagement was significantly different from zero ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), providing strong support for H2. Results also show that transformational leadership was positively related to structural empowerment ( $\beta = .69$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and empowerment influences positively work engagement ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ), providing support for H1 and H3, respectively.



**Fig. 2.** Structural regression model.

Notes. \*\*:  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < .001$ ; c: direct effect before mediator is introduced; c': indirect effect.

**Table 3**  
Goodness-of-fit indices of the examined models.

Models	$\chi^2$	Df	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	RMSEA	NFI	TLI	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
Partial mediation	143.61***	73	1.97	.93	.06	.93	.95	.97	–	–
Full mediation	159.81***	74	2.16	.92	.07	.92	.94	.96	16.20***	1

Notes.  $\chi^2$  = Chi-square; df = degrees of freedom; GFI = Goodness-of-Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; NFI = Normed Fit Index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis Index; CFI = Comparative Fit Index;  $\Delta\chi^2$  = chi-square difference;  $\Delta df$  = degrees of freedom difference; \*\*\*:  $p < .001$ .

To test H4, we examined the indirect effect produced between the independent and the dependent variable through the mediator using a bootstrap approximation obtained by constructing two-sided bias-corrected confidence intervals (99%). To do so, we first added a path from transformational leadership to work engagement to estimate the direct effect before adding the mediator and the two additional paths (Hair et al., 2010). This relationship was significantly different from zero at the .001 level ( $\beta = .64$ ). The path *c* represented in Fig. 2 is reduced to *c'* when the mediator was included in the model, but it remained statistically significant ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), consistent with H3. Table 4 displays the decomposition of direct, indirect and total effects. Accordingly, these findings suggest that the effect of transformational leadership on work engagement is partially mediated through structural empowerment, controlling the effects of age.

## 5. Discussion

Structural empowerment refers to the practices, social structures and organizational resources that are present in the workplace such as having access to the necessary information, learning and development opportunities, support and resources (Kanter, 1977, 1993). The present study aimed to examine the contribution of structural empowerment as a mediator and provide insights into the interplay between transformational leadership and work engagement. The proposed research model was tested and broadly supported on a data set comprising 240 employees from the tourism sector in northwest Spain.

The findings of the current study demonstrated that transformational leadership and structural empowerment are significant predictors of work engagement in the Spanish tourism sector context. Consistent with our prediction, transformational leadership is related positively to structural empowerment and, consequently, work engagement. Specifically, we found that structural empowerment acted as a partial mediator in the positive relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement. Results showed that the mediating model fit better than the two-factor model, where transformational leadership is used as the sole predictor of work engagement. Therefore, high levels of transformational leadership result in greater feelings of structural empowerment, which, in turn, lead to work engagement. These findings could further help line managers, HR, employees and service organizations utilize the significant interplay among these constructs to develop training programmes that increase levels of work engagement.

By linking transformational leadership with structural empowerment and work engagement, we shed light on the processes that explain why transformational leaders enhance their followers work engagement. The magnitude of the effect of transformational leadership on structural empowerment underlines the significance of that type of leadership in creating empowering conditions at work in the tourism sector. Similarly, employees reported moderate levels of structural empowerment. This indicates that employees feel somewhat empowered, thereby contributing to work engagement. These results corroborate previous research that linked structural empowerment to job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Laschinger, Leiter, Day, & Gilin, 2009), and work engagement (Boamah et al., 2018; Laschinger, Leiter, et al., 2009).

The significance of this study lies in the examination of the mediating effect of structural empowerment in the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement. This is the first study that tests a mediating mechanism between transformational leadership and work engagement in the tourism sector in Spain. This study demonstrates that both transformational leadership and structural empowerment are considered critical job resources that may predict work engagement and the job demands–resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) helps rationalize the positive association among these constructs. When transformational leaders facilitate access to resources, information, feedback, and learning and development opportunities, employees are more likely to be highly vigorous, dedicated and engrossed at work. Although most previous research has focused on psychological empowerment (Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003; Krishnan, 2012; Özaralli, 2003), this study shows that structural empowerment plays an essential role in increasing the levels of work engagement.

This study lends support to previous findings in the leadership–work engagement literature, and the empirical link between these constructs and structural empowerment is an important contribution to existing theories. For example, this research helps understand the underlying influence of transformational leadership on work engagement by identifying structural empowerment as a factor that mediates that key relationship, thus contributing to expanding the job demands–resources theory.

### 5.1. Managerial implications

The results of this empirical study have potential implications for practice. In an economic climate of increased flexibility, high technology, organizational change and short-term contracts,

**Table 4**  
Decomposition of direct, indirect and total effects ( $\beta$ ).

	Standardized path coefficients		
	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Age → work engagement	.26***	–	–
Transformational leadership → structural empowerment	.69**	–	–
Transformational leadership → work engagement	.38***	.24**	.62***
Structural empowerment → work engagement	.34**	–	–

Notes. \*\*:  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < .001$ .

employees nevertheless showed high levels of work engagement when transformational leadership is present. From a practical standpoint, organizations should be aware of the critical role of the leader in stimulating work engagement. Organizational interventions that promote the development of transformational leadership and structural empowerment in the workplace may be valuable to enhance work engagement. Creating transformational leaders is therefore just a start to developing empowering working conditions in organizations that generate organizational change by promoting inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individual consideration and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985). Thus, organizations should invest in developing transformational leaders through a comprehensive training programme. Previous research has demonstrated that transformational leadership training is effective (Barling, Loughlin, & Kelloway, 2002; Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002).

Moreover, as most organizations in this study are small- and medium-sized enterprises, it is certainly worth exploring how leaders in less hierarchical organizations empower their employees. For example, it is important to reinforce the role of the leader in stimulating zeal among employees through conversations that inspire them, with positive messages about the organization which make them feel proud of being part of the organization and being an active listener (inspirational communication dimension) (Yukl, 1981). Extensive two-way communication and transfer of information are also key factors (Guest, 2014) that are easily achievable when managers are more approachable. According to Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011), good and open communication strategies play a critical role in the development of positive work engagement.

Therefore, job and organization restructuring efforts should focus on creating resourceful work environments. These findings highlight the importance of effective HR management that should create practices that enhance intangible motivators to boost levels of work engagement. Leaders should acknowledge good work, praise employees for their achievements, thank them for their effort (personal recognition), facilitate appropriate resources and development opportunities, provide formal or informal feedback on a regular basis (support) and nurture strong social relationships and a climate of support based on trust and teamwork via emotional support, help or information (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2010). Additionally, if employees feel they do not have enough information, support or resources, they can craft resources by asking to get feedback for instance (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). All these implications may fuel levels of structural empowerment and work engagement.

### 5.2. Limitations and directions for future research

This research has a number of limitations that need to be addressed. The main limitation is that there is a chance of common method bias as we used self-report questionnaires as a single source to measure all factors based on employees' perceptions (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Although CFA confirmed that the multi-factor model fitted the data well, we carried out Harman's single-factor test to explore discriminant validity and assess the presence of common method bias. This tests if the majority of the variance can be explained by a single factor by constraining the number of factors in our CFA into one and examining the unrotated solution. The single factor did not account for the majority of the total explained variance; hence, common method bias is not a concern in our study. We propose that future studies should take account of leaders' perceptions when collecting data.

Another potential limitation is associated with the cross-

sectional nature of the study, which impedes causal inferences. Despite applying theoretical frameworks that strongly support the causal directions of our hypotheses, we suggest that future research should use longitudinal designs for making causal inferences about work engagement and for exploring variations over time (Christian et al., 2011; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Another avenue for further research is to study state engagement rather than trait engagement to examine within-person fluctuations (Xanthopoulou & Bakker, 2013).

Additionally, the variable executive position was not controlled in the analysis. It is important that future research controls for potential confounding variables, specifically, the effects of managerial and non-managerial positions on work engagement.

A further limitation is that this study did not examine the type of psychological contract. Rousseau (1995) delineated the psychological contract as the 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization' (p.9). Thus, employees are likely to become more engaged at work when they perceive the employer fulfils its obligations. Relational contracts refer to long-term relationships, foster mutuality, autonomy of the parties, loyalty and stability. Conversely, transactional contracts are short-term and focus on economic exchange, and employee involvement is limited (Rousseau, 2004). A promising direction for future research would be to further examine the extent to which psychological contract breach or fulfilment moderates the relationship between structural empowerment and work engagement.

Finally, data were obtained from the tourism sector only, and this may limit the generalizability of the findings. Two distinctive features of the Spanish hospitality industry are the seasonality and the proportion of temporary contracts, but these facts did not hinder high levels of work engagement. We therefore encourage future studies to examine the interplay among these constructs in different sectors and countries where culture and power distance vary to take account of different contexts as well as include psychological empowerment as predictor of work engagement and organizational outcomes such as job performance, turnover or absenteeism.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate structural empowerment as an underlying mechanism explaining the positive link between transformational leadership and work engagement drawing on the job demands–resources model. Findings illustrated that structural empowerment is an important antecedent of work engagement and emphasized the importance of transformational leadership on the creation of empowering working conditions. Such social structures, in turn, bring out high levels of work engagement.

### Declarations of interest

None.

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