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Self-Serving Spiritual Leadership and Adaptive Performance: The Role of Resilience and Ambivalence

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Grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study examines the paradoxical role of self-serving spiritual leadership in shaping employee ambivalence, resilience, and adaptive performance within dynamic IT settings. Time-lagged data were gathered from 428 software developers in Pakistan and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrate that spiritual leadership increases ambivalence and is associated with reduced resilience. Spiritual leaders trigger employees' ambivalence by conflicting moral and performance demands, while resilience is reduced by intensified emotional labor. Self-serving leadership moderates the relationship between spiritual leadership and both resilience and ambivalence. Interestingly, the coexistence of spiritual and self-serving leadership clarifies relational boundaries; in doing so, it mitigates resource strain and enhances adaptive performance via employees' resilience. This research found that, while employees' resilience positively predicts adaptive performance, employees' ambivalence—contrary to expectations—also shows a positive association with adaptive performance. Theoretically, the study adds to the COR theory by illustrating how spiritual leadership simultaneously depletes and activates resources. In practice, it advises managers to embrace spiritual leadership with caution and to implement monitoring policies and clear procedures to establish organizational boundaries.

1. Introduction

Spiritual leadership – defined as a leadership style that fosters vision, altruistic love and hope/faith (Fry, 2003) – is determinant of variety of positive outcomes at both individual and organizational levels, such as employee well-being, job satisfaction, and performance (e.g., Fry et al., 2005; Yusof, 2011; Chen & Yang, 2012; Yang et al., 2021). The majority of studies in the literature focus on the positive effects, while its potential darker side remains underexplored. The current research aims to address this gap by exploring both sides of spiritual leadership and their implications for adaptive performance. As new leadership theories move the field forward, few theorists have taken a step back to identify potential contingencies that may lead to negative impacts (Barling et al., 2008; Krishnakumar et al., 2015; Vedula & Agrawal, 2024). Vedula and Agrawal (2024) have recently drawn attention to the darker side of spiritual leadership that needs to be unearthed. Before drawing any conclusions about spirituality, it is essential to examine the paradox of spiritual leadership in greater detail, which is the primary focus of this research study, along with other key elements.

Recently, organizational practice and research have also started to embrace spirituality, spiritual leadership, and spiritual intelligence (Alvi et al., 2024; Fidelis et al., 2024) in educating future managers and leaders. Organisational managers and leaders have also started to focus on spirituality in the workplace (Alvi et al., 2024; Dik et al., 2024), and a few organizational leaders are also adopting spiritual interventions (Barik & Nayak, 2024). Few organizations are inclined to adapt their leadership development programs with the core emphasis on meaningfulness, love, inner core, wisdom, self-realization, growth, and purpose (Wadhwa, 2024). This highlights that we are already embracing spiritual leadership, considering unproven assumptions about the role of spirituality in organizations. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to unravel the paradox of spiritual leadership before we begin educating leaders and managers in it.

This research aims to examine the paradoxical effects of spiritual leadership on adaptive performance, with a focus on the information technology (IT) sector, which is dynamic, volatile, and fast-evolving. During the post-COVID-19 pandemic, the landscape of this industry has altered considerably, and leaders are trying to identify new methods of controlling, monitoring, and evaluating performance than before (Ojo et al., 2021). Changes in the external environment have necessitated investigating the paradoxical aspects of leadership styles, especially spiritual leadership. This research fills the gap in the literature on leadership to look at both the negative and positive consequences of spiritual leadership.

In the existing literature, many authors have begun to focus on the dark side of leadership (Eissa et al., 2017; Harris & Jones, 2018; Itzkovich et al., 2020), but spiritual leadership has not received adequate attention and is widely framed as positive. Recent studies, such as Vedula and Agrawal (2024), have clearly diverted attention towards this gap, which has become the foundation of this study to explore this paradox by emphasizing its adverse effects. Furthermore, literature on leadership shows that leadership does not always directly lead towards employee outcomes, but rather there are mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions (e.g., Bayraktar & Jiménez, 2020;

Wang et al., 2019). Therefore, based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, we test a model in which employee resilience and ambivalence mediate the effects of spiritual leadership, while self-serving leadership moderates them. This study aims to identify whether—and through which pathways—spiritual leadership translates into employee outcomes. These findings are valuable for organizational leaders and managers and policy makers in guiding and cautioning them about potential negative consequences of promoting spiritual leadership without a clear understanding of these mechanisms.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The Paradox of Spiritual Leadership

In organizational studies, paradox is defined as "contradictory yet interrelated elements—elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). This research presents spiritual leadership as an organizational paradox that brings both positive and negative outcomes simultaneously (Krishnakumar et al., 2015), which seems logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when they appear together. Spiritual leadership – defined as a leader demonstrating quality of vision, altruistic love and hope/faith (Fry, 2003) - has been shown to enhance a variety of positive outcomes at both individual and organizational levels, such as employee well-being, job satisfaction, and performance (e.g., Fry et al., 2005; Yusof, 2011; Yang et al., 2021). Although spiritual leadership is regarded as a highly valuable leadership style, its paradoxical aspects remain underexplored (Vedula & Agrawal, 2024), which is the focus of this study.

Nevertheless, there are few studies in the literature that slightly hint at the darker side of spirituality, setting the foundation for this paradox. The spiritual leadership may lead to disengagement, especially when employees struggle to practice spirituality at work, which does not match their personal values (Grant et al., 2004). Even a few employees may perceive spiritual leadership as manipulative or coercive (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009), while it also has the potential to create distrust and division (Cavanagh & Bandsuch, 2002). Similar to transformational leadership, spiritual leadership promotes manipulation, as at the end employees are expected to prioritize the organizational goals over personal ones (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). Even the blind devotion from followers of spiritual leadership is also identified as dangerous; therefore, a healthy leadership-follower distance is always recommended (Ashforth et al. 2014). Even spiritual leadership may foster accommodation, discrimination, and bias, which eventually give rise to legal and ethical issues (Morgan, 2004). Literature also identifies that spiritual leadership is also used as a tool to control the personal lives of employees (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006) and can compromise followers' freedom of belief (White, 2003; Rhodes, 2003). It demands holistic involvement from followers that may overlook individual needs, leading towards exploitation (Elmes & Smith, 2001). Many times, the spiritual leaders may misuse their role for their own personal benefits and self-centered ends (Bell & Taylor, 2004; Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007). So, spiritual leadership, which is defined in terms of its altruism and vision (Fry, 2003), also holds the potential for self-serving leadership within it. Sometimes, they demonstrate certain qualities

making them vulnerable to their own self-interest, especially when they are at lower levels of spirituality (Fry & Vu, 2024). Due to egoistic desire for recognition and control, spiritual leaders may manipulate the perceived altruism of spiritual leadership to serve their own agendas (Krishnakumar et al., 2015). Spiritual leaders inherently have a desire to serve others, but this does not mean that they are able to ignore their self-serving motives, and when the desire to serve others and their own self get intertwined, the paradoxical behavior occurs. Basically, this self-serving leadership is not merely an external factor, but it is an intrinsic inclination of spiritual leadership where the boundary between self and others' interests becomes blurred, and leaders become more inclined towards their own interests. Based on these arguments, this research focuses on the paradox that revolves around spiritual leadership, where self-serving leadership is studied as a boundary condition.

2.2 COR Theory

This research is based on the COR theory that states that individuals are inherently motivated to protect and acquire valuable resources (Hobfoll, 1989). While many studies view spiritual leadership as a resource facilitator (e.g., Tabor et al., 2020; Huang, 2022; Usman et al., 2024), a few, such as Bickerton and Miner (2023), highlight its potential to constrain resource acquisition. Leadership styles that demand high moral behavior, identify with high ideals, or place continuous pressure on followers to live out certain values can lead to emotional exhaustion**,** role conflict, or cognitive overload for example, a recent study found that ethical leadership, which is also positive leadership, may result in employees' emotional exhaustion. The higher moral expectations of leaders make it difficult for employees to live up to them, leading to emotional burden (Santiago-Torner et al., 2024). Employees may use a large part of their resources to internalize the values (e.g., altruistic love) transmitted by leaders or to live up to their expectations. Sometimes, this self-imposed pressure becomes the source of resource depletion in employees (Yang, 2014; Bandura, 1979). Similarly, employees may feel emotionally overburdened when they need to constantly engage in acts of compassion, often at the expense of their own well-being, implying the extra resource demands (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Likewise, when their own personal beliefs do not align with those of leaders, the resulting psychological tension also relates to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

2.3 Hypotheses Development

Resilience is defined as the ability of individuals to adapt effectively and restore equilibrium during periods of severe adversity (Cooke et al., 2019). Spiritual leadership is considered to enhance resilience by providing meaning and social support to employees that help them to cope with setbacks and enhance their sense of worth and the meaningfulness of their work (Ahmed et al., 2023; Hobfoll, 1989). Spiritual leaders can facilitate resource conservation (e.g., energy) and empower employees through feedback and a flexible environment, which enables them to develop coping mechanisms (Chen & Yang, 2012; Fisher, 2014). Similarly, they enable employees to protect and utilize resources to recover from challenging situations (Tabor et al., 2020). So, we hypothesize that:

H1: Spiritual leadership has a positive impact on employee resilience.

Adaptive performance is defined as a task-directed behavior in response to or anticipation of changes that are occurring in job-specific tasks (Jundt et al., 2015). Employee resilience is considered to be a predictor of adaptive performance as it can stimulate additional efforts in employees that can motivate them for enhanced adaptive performance. In times of crisis, resilient employees are more likely to respond positively and persevere (Peterson et al., 2011). Luthans et al. (2005) found that resilient employees, who are better equipped to handle organizational changes, exhibit higher performance. Cooper et al. (2019) reported a positive relationship between resilience and performance in a multilevel study of 561 employees from Chinese bank branches. From this, it can be analyzed that resilience, the ability to respond positively to change, is closely linked to adaptive performance (Park et al., 2020), which indicates that employee resilience can positively impact adaptive performance. So, we hypothesize that:

H2: Employee resilience has a positive effect on adaptive performance.

While existing literature lacks evidence for employee resilience mediating the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance, a few studies suggest this link. For example, it acts as a mediator for transformational and servant leadership (Kim et al., 2023; Batool et al., 2022) and adaptive performance. Drawing on COR theory, resilience is a personal resource that helps individuals convert the positive effects of spiritual leadership into adaptive performance (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). When employees are resilient, they are in a better position to manage pressure and stress, which enables them to demonstrate a higher level of adaptive performance (Luthans et al., 2006). So, we hypothesize that:

H3: Employee resilience positively mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance, such that increased resilience resulting from spiritual leadership enhances adaptive performance.

Leaders often act self-servingly, prioritizing their interests over others' (De Cremer, 2003; Stouten et al., 2005), known as self-serving leadership. The COR theory is based on the idea that resources are available in some ecological circumstances, which ultimately enable or inhibit the resource conservation process (Hobfoll, 2011). We use this concept to suggest that self-serving leadership mediates the spiritual leadership and employee resilience relationship, in that, when a spiritual leader is also predisposed to self-serving behavior, this may undermine their functionality in terms of the employee resilience of workers. Once spiritual leaders become personal and begin to concentrate on individual interests alone, they erode the positive impacts through depletion of resources (Wang et al., 2011). This makes self-served spiritual leaders a source of a threat to the psychological resources of employees; they exhaust their energy and abilities to revive any setbacks (Decoster et al., 2014), which are required among employees so that they can be resilient. So, we hypothesize that:

***H4**: Self-serving leadership negatively moderates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employee resilience, such that the positive effect of spiritual leadership on employee resilience is weakened under higher levels of self-serving leadership.*

Self-serving leadership that is defined by selfishness and power-oriented leadership (Stouten et al., 2005) turns out to be a drain on the psychological resources (Camps et al., 2012). There are also cases when the spiritual leaders and self-serving leadership style co-exists, which means increasing their concern with their own goal (Nullens, 2019). Employees feel manipulated when they understand this tendency. According to COR theory, the loss of this resource (e.g., psychological safety and trust) would lead to a downward spiral and increase difficulty in employees showing resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2018). As a few authors already highlighted, toxic leadership behaviours disrupt resource acquisition that eventually leads to negative outcomes (Bernerth, 2022). Following these arguments, self-serving leadership can weaken the positive effects of spiritual leadership on resilience, which ultimately diminishes its impact on adaptive performance. At one end, spiritual leadership emphasizes resource gain, while self-serving leadership exacerbates resource loss, hence it undermines its potential benefits. So, we hypothesize that:

H5. Self-serving leadership negatively moderates the indirect effect of spiritual leadership on employees' adaptive performance through employee resilience.

With reference to the potential darker side of spiritual leadership, it can also be a resource constraint (Bickerton & Miner, 2023), triggering ambivalence in followers. Ambivalence is defined as 'simultaneous existence of strong, polar opposite thoughts or feelings towards a given entity' (Lee et al., 2019, p. 1931). Spiritual leaders place conflicting demands on followers, creating ambivalence. At one end, spiritual leadership stimulates resource gains (e.g., inner satisfaction, purpose); it can also lead to resource depletion when demands become too intense (Krishnakumar et al., 2015; Hobfoll et al., 2016). The conflict or mixed feelings and thoughts result in confusion and emotional conflict, as followers may appreciate spiritual growth while feeling pressured or exhausted (Hobfoll & Freedy, 2017). Further, spiritual leaders' conflicting emotional experiences, which are part of their spiritual journey, can also affect followers, enhancing their ambivalence (Glasø et al., 2006). Thus, the conflicting demands of spiritual leadership trigger ambivalence, leading to both resource depletion and growth. So, we hypothesize that:

H6: Spiritual leadership has a positive impact on employee ambivalence.

Employees' ambivalence itself is not considered good for performance-related outcomes. Specifically, ambivalent employees tend to experience challenges in performance, as their cognitive bias is elevated, they become indecisive and experience procrastination and goal rumination (Nohlen et al., 2015; van Harreveld et al., 2009). It may decrease the level of confidence and decision-making power, as well as promote confirmation bias and behavioral rigidity (Rothman et al., 2017). According to Lee et al. (2019), ambivalence has a detrimental effect on task performance; since the present study focuses on adaptive performance, it implies

that these factors have a similarly negative impact on adaptive performance. So, we hypothesize that:

H7: Employee ambivalence has a negative impact on adaptive performance.

Besides the direct influence of adaptive performance, employee ambivalence is perceived to mediate the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance. All individuals desire consistency and avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), and the mixed cues and signals by the spiritual leaders disrupt the consistency, and employees develop ambivalence. In essence, the absence of consistency due to ambivalence may cause discomfort and mental stress (Pratt, 2016). This pressure reduces both the emotional and cognitive power to perform adaptively (Yeo et al., 2008). According to the COR theory, although resource investment is meant to be guided by spiritual leadership, it acts as a performance drawback when it sends incompatible cues and signals (Schultz and Schultz, 2017). Ambivalent employees find it difficult to remain positive and align themselves with the needs of the organization, which does not allow them to perform on a higher adaptive level (McDonald and O'Rourke, 2014). By stimulating ambivalence, spiritual leaders prevent the provision of the necessary psychological resources, including hope and faith, which conducive for adaptive performance (Fry, 2003). So, we hypothesize that:

H8: Employee ambivalence negatively mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance, such that increased ambivalence resulting from spiritual leadership reduces adaptive performance.

In self-serving leadership, the leader places higher priorities on his self-interest as compared to the team and the respective organization (Camps et al., 2012). In terms of COR theory, the leaders who put their own interests above those of their followers act as a barrier to the resource conservation process. This behavior enhances the ambivalence that is already triggered by spiritual leadership, as followers may start questioning the authenticity, fairness, and motives of such leaders who demonstrate self-serving tendencies. Consequently, this leads to a loss of trust and security, as well as emotional exhaustion (Fry & Vu, 2024; Peng et al., 2019), indicating psychological resource depletion. These factors are essential for managing ambivalence; hence, we hypothesize that:

H9: Self-serving leadership positively moderates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' ambivalence, such that the positive effect of spiritual leadership on employee ambivalence is strengthened under higher levels of self-serving leadership.

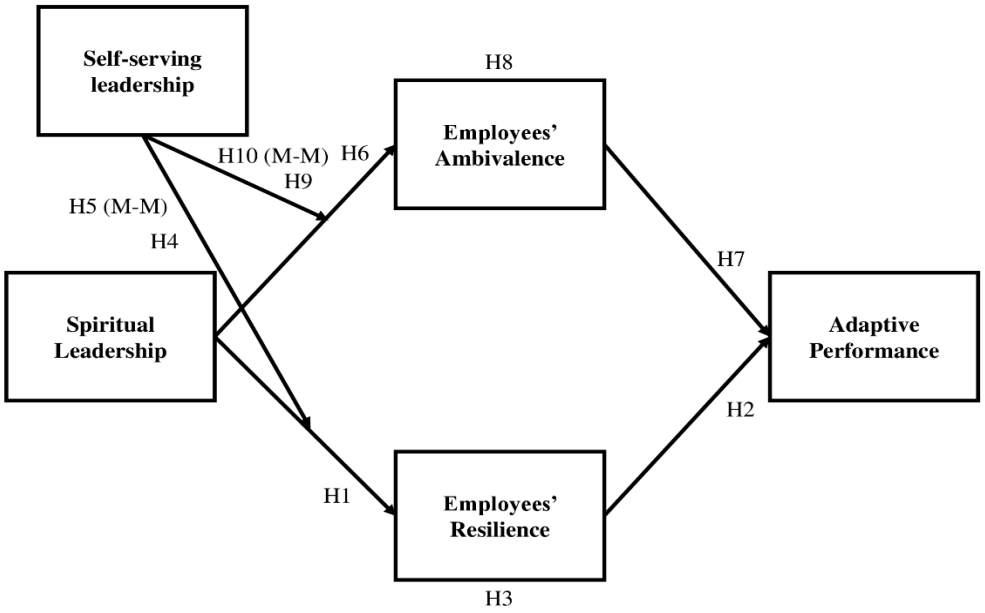
Spiritual leadership motivates employees through vision, love, and purpose (Fry, 2003), but ambivalence may hinder resource conservation, leading to cognitive biases and reduced adaptive performance (Hobfoll, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Previous studies already highlight that self-serving leadership has negative effects on organizational level outcomes (Bonner et al., 2016), as role conflict is created that enhances the ambivalence (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). According to COR theory, resource loss (e.g., trust) can trigger a downward spiral that can enhance ambivalence and reduce performance (Hobfoll, 2011; Nohlen et al., 2015; Rothman et al., 2017;

Lee et al., 2019). Self-serving leadership weakens the link between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance, which further enhances the ambivalence and reduces the performance, as toxic leadership disrupts resource utilization (Bernerth, 2022). So, we hypothesize that:

H10: Self-serving leadership positively moderates the negative indirect effect of spiritual leadership on employees' adaptive performance via employee ambivalence, such that under high self-serving leadership, the reduction in adaptive performance is more pronounced.

In summary, this study attempts to extend COR theory as it highlights that spiritual leadership can perform the role of resource maximizer and resource minimizer at the same time. The spiritual leadership is proposed as a paradox where it not only acts as a resource enhancer but can be a resource minimizer (Chen et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2023; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2019). However, this study contributes to COR theory literature as it introduces a dual role perspective and highlights that spiritual leadership, which acts as a resource maximizer and promotes resilience and performance (Ali et al., 2020; Tabor et al., 2020), can also lead to resource loss and can create employees' ambivalence. This research hypothesizes that spiritual leadership may unintentionally hinder resource conservation process where it can stimulate ambivalence in employees. This spiritual leadership, when combined with self-serving leadership, can exacerbate resource depletion; thus, it may prevent employees to access the resources that are necessary to demonstrate adaptive performance. In this way, the study not only expands the scope of COR theory but also sheds light on the complexity of leadership's impact on resource dynamics within the organizational settings. The framework developed is based on hypotheses, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure No 1: Conceptual Framework



Note. M-M: Moderated Mediation

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Approach

This research is conducted in Pakistan's software-development sector, which is quite volatile and complex, and it prompts firms to adopt interventions that are meant to enhance adaptive performance (de Souza Santos et al., 2023). Because project outcomes hinge on leadership (Khan et al., 2020), and styles range from positive (spiritual leadership; Rollins & Fry, 2013) to negative (self-serving leadership; Zhang et al., 2025), this context is well-suited to examine how leadership can paradoxically shape performance. We therefore sample Pakistani software organizations to study the leadership–performance paradox.

To mitigate common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), a two-wave survey with a two-month lag was administered to employees in Pakistani software-development firms. Wave 1 measured spiritual leadership, employee resilience, employee ambivalence, and self-serving leadership; Wave 2 captured adaptive performance and demographics. Out of 1,500 invited employees, 732 responded in Wave 1 (48%). After excluding 31 incomplete responses, 701 valid cases remained. In Wave 2, 436 matched responses were received (59.5%), and after removing 8 incomplete cases, the final matched sample comprised 428 participants.

3.2 Instrumentation

All constructs were measured with 5-point Likert scales. Spiritual leadership is measured using 25 items (Fry & Matherly, 2006; α=.94), of which one was removed due to a low factor loading (<.50; Shevlin & Miles, 1998). Employee ambivalence was measured by using 7 item scale developed by Han and Han (2020) (α=.90). Employee resilience is measured using 6 item scale (Smith et al., 2008; α=.91). Adaptive performance is measured using 8 item scale (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2015; α=.93). Finally, self-serving leadership scale had 4 items (Camps et al., 2012; α=.83).

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using WARP PLS 8.0, where we applied confirmatory composite analysis to assess reliability and validity. Structural model testing was used to teste the hypotheses. Moreover, we also tested the predictive relevance of the proposed model through Stone and Geisser's Q^2 Coefficient.

4. Findings

4.1 Characteristics of the Sample Population

The sample comprised more men than women, as the demographic distribution showed that there were 66.4% men and 33.6% women. Most respondents reported 16 years of education (44.9%), followed by 14 years (27.3%), a master's degree (24.3%), and a doctorate or higher (3.5%). Industry experience ranged from 0 to 35 years, where majority of participants were having experience of 1–5 years. The age distribution showed that there were more young individuals in the sample as 42.8% of participants were aged 20–29.

4.2 Measurement Model

Confirmatory composite analysis (CCA) assessed the reliability and validity of the model. Construct reliability is assessed through Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR), and values were greater than the threshold value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2017). We used AVE for convergent analysis and found all values were greater than the threshold, while spiritual leadership's AVE was 0.491 (Hair et al., 2017), which is slightly below the conventional 0.50 threshold, which typically raises concerns about convergent validity. There are several justifications for accepting AVE slightly below 0.5. Firstly, CR was excellently high (CR = 0.958), which means the construct's internal consistency is sufficiently strong to warrant retention because the indicators share sufficient true-score variance (Hair et al., 2017; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Secondly, we deleted one spiritual leadership indicator (SL14), which was having lower outer loading (<0.50), which is aligned with the recommendations to delete the items with below 0.50 loading if it can improve construct validity without harming content coverage (Hair et al., 2017). We deleted one item, 'The work I do makes a difference in people's lives', which was intended to measure 'meaningfulness dimension of spiritual leadership', and even after deleting, there were other items covering the meaningfulness (Fry, 2003). Thirdly, the discriminant validity remains satisfactory, which is assessed by comparing the square root of AVE with the inter-construct correlations (Table 1). For every construct, √AVE exceeded its highest absolute correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2017). Hence, discriminant validity among constructs is supported despite spiritual leadership borderline AVE. In summary, the results of confirmatory composite analysis (Table 1) show that the proposed theoretical model is statistically fit. Hence, structural equation modelling can be applied for hypotheses testing.

Table No 1: Confirmatory Composite Analysis

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
Spiritual Leadership	0.954	0.958	0.491	(0.70)				
Employee Resilience	0.877	0.909	0.628	-.031	(0.79)			
Employee Ambivalence	0.887	0.912	0.598	.128**	.173**	(0.77)		
Adaptive Performance	0.884	0.908	0.557	-.018	.293**	.140**	(0.74)	
Self-serving leadership	0.853	0.901	0.695	-.052	.278**	.164**	.211**	(0.83)

4.3 Structural Model Fitness

Structural model fitness refers to how well a hypothesized model fits the actual data in structural equation modelling (SEM) (Singh et al., 2024). In this study, the structural model's fitness with the data is ensured through various model fit indices (Table 2). The results indicate that the values of APC (0.112, p = 0.005), ARS (0.072, p<0.033), AARS (0.065, p<0.044), AVIF

(1.058), AFVIF (1.081), GoF (0.239), SPR (1.00), RSCR (1.00), SSR (0.900), NLBCDR (0.950), and SRMR (0.069) match the given criteria (Table 2). Hence, the structural model fits the data, so we can proceed to hypothesis testing.

Table No 2: Model Fit & Quality Indices

Index	Value	Criteria
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.113, $p = 0.005$	$p< 0.05$
Average R-squared (ARS)	0.072, $p<0.033$	$p< 0.05$
Average adjusted R-squared (AARS)	0.065, $p<0.044$	$p< 0.05$
Average block VIF (AVIF)	1.056	Acceptable if <= 5, ideally <= 3.3
Average full collinearity VIF (AFVIF)	1.082	Acceptable if <= 5, ideally <= 3.3
Tenenhaus GoF (GoF)	0.240	small >= 0.1, medium >= 0.25, large >= 0.36
Sympson's paradox ratio (SPR)	1.000	Acceptable if >= 0.7, ideally = 1
R-Squared contribution ratio (RSCR)	1.000	acceptable if >= 0.9, ideally = 1
Statistical suppression ratio (SSR)	0.900	acceptable if >= 0.7
Nonlinear bivariate causality direction ratio (NLBCDR)	0.950	acceptable if >= 0.7
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.069	Acceptable if <= 0.1

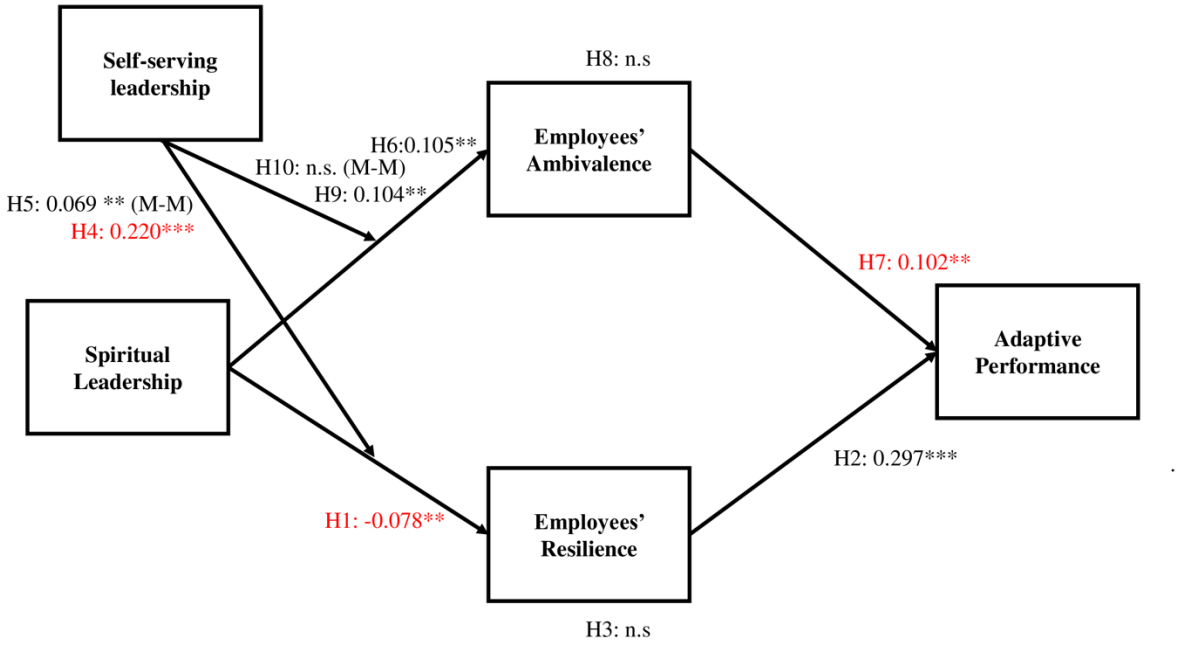
4.4 Hypotheses testing

Table No 3: Results of Hypotheses

Path	β	p-value	Result
H1. Spiritual Leadership →Employees' Resilience	-0.078	0.05	Not supported; Significant in the opposite direction.
H2. Employees' Resilience → Adaptive Performance	0.297	<0.001	Supported
H3. Spiritual Leadership →Employees' Resilience → Adaptive Performance	-0.024	0.242	Not supported
H4. Spiritual Leadership * Self-serving Leadership →Employees' Resilience	0.220	<0.001	Not Supported; Significant in the opposite direction
H5. Spiritual Leadership * Self-serving Leadership →Employees' Resilience → Adaptive Performance	0.069	0.022	Supported
H6. Spiritual Leadership →Employees' Ambivalence	0.105	0.013	Supported

H7. Employees' Ambivalence → Adaptive Performance	0.102	0.016	Not supported; Significant in the opposite direction.
H8. Spiritual Leadership →Employees' Ambivalence → Adaptive Performance	0.015	0.330	Not supported
H9. Spiritual Leadership * Self-serving Leadership →Employees' Ambivalence	0.108	0.015	Supported
H10. Spiritual Leadership * Self-serving Leadership →Employees' Ambivalence → Adaptive Performance	0.015	0.334	Not supported

Figure No 2: Path Analysis Results



Notes. * = p< 0.10, ** = p< 0.05, *** = p < 0.001, n.s = non-significant, M-M= Moderated Mediation, Significant effects in the opposite direction are shown in red

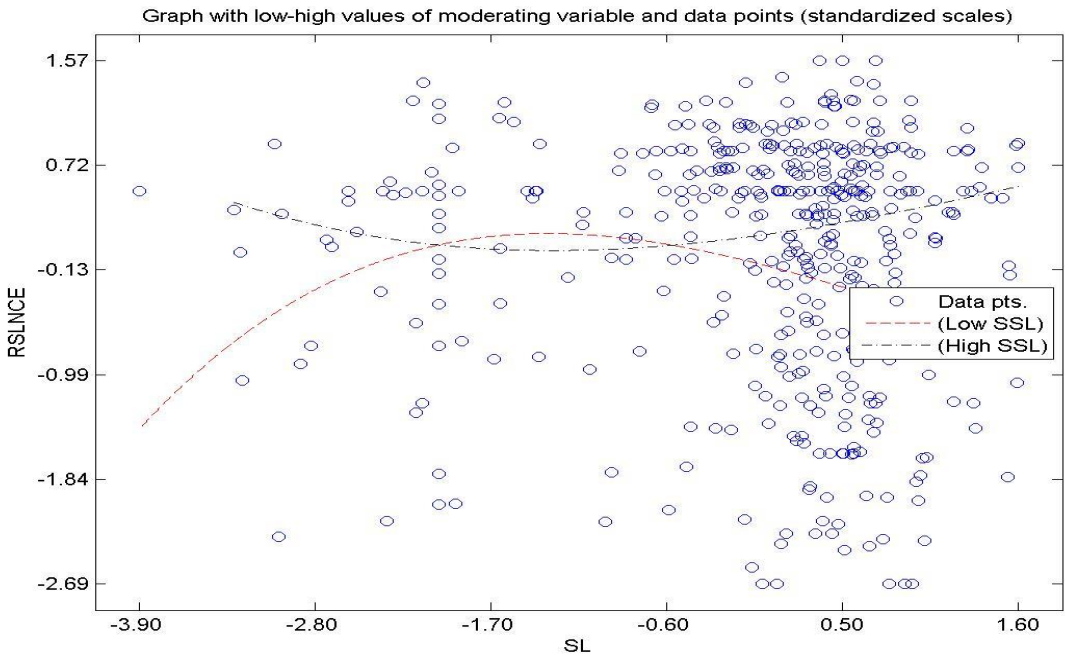
From Table 3: spiritual leadership was negatively related to employees' resilience (β = −0.077, p = .054), a marginal and non-significant effect opposite to H1 (thus, H1 not supported). Employees' resilience positively predicted adaptive performance (β = 0.297, p < .001), supporting H2. The indirect effect of spiritual leadership on adaptive performance via employees' resilience was not significant (β = −0.024, p = .242), so H3 was not supported.

The interaction effect of spiritual leadership and self-serving leadership on employees' resilience is positive and significant (β = 0.221; p < 0.001). This means H4 is not supported, as self-serving leadership moderates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' resilience, but in the opposite direction than hypothesized. Figure 3 illustrates this moderating

effect: the plot shows two regression lines, one for low self-serving leadership (red dashed line) and one for high self-serving leadership (black dashed line). As spiritual leadership increases, employees' resilience also increases, but this effect is more pronounced when self-serving leadership is high. Contrary to this, at low self-serving leadership levels, the relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' resilience is weaker, which indicates that high self-serving leadership levels can enhance the positive impact of spiritual leadership on employees' resilience. Thus, self-serving leadership acts as a positive moderator that amplifies the beneficial effects of spiritual leadership on employees' resilience.

In summary, there are a few counterintuitive findings reported above. When considered independently, spiritual leadership has a very weak but statistically significant negative relationship with employees' resilience (H1). This finding is contrary to the expected positive relationship, which highlights that spiritual leadership alone may not be sufficient to enhance employees' resilience in the absence of other exogenous factors. However, the moderating effect of self-serving leadership makes this relationship further complicated (H4), as spiritual leadership and self-serving leadership together can enhance employees' resilience, which was quite unexpected and novel.

Figure No 3: The moderating effect of Self-serving Leadership on the link between Spiritual Leadership and Employee Resilience



Notes: RSLNCE = Employees' Resilience; SSL= Self-serving leadership; SL= Spiritual Leadership

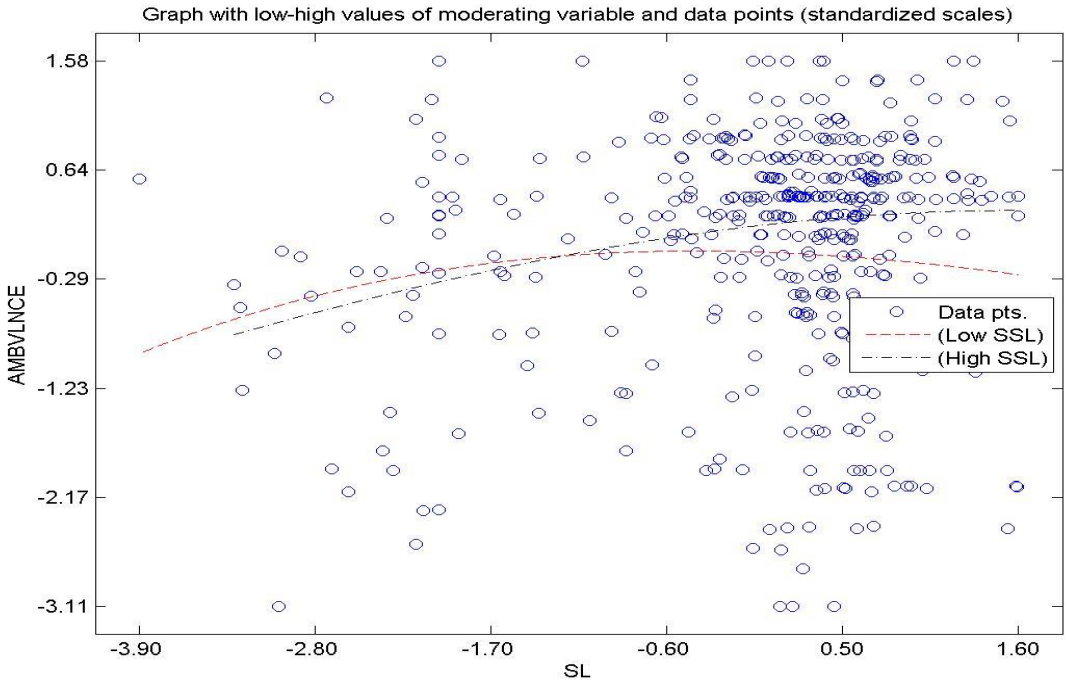
Furthermore, the interaction between spiritual leadership and self-serving leadership has a significant impact on adaptive performance through employees' resilience ($\beta = 0.069$; $p = 0.022$)

(H5). This indicates that employees' resilience mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance, where self-serving leadership acts as a moderator. Specifically, the impact of spiritual leadership on adaptive performance, via employees' resilience, is contingent upon the level of self-serving leadership, which means that the strength of this mediated effect varies based on whether self-serving leadership is low or high.

Furthermore, spiritual leadership positively predicted employees' ambivalence (β = 0.106, p = .013), supporting H6. Employees' ambivalence was positively related to adaptive performance (β = 0.102, p = .016), opposite to the hypothesized direction; thus, H7 was not supported. The indirect effect of spiritual leadership on adaptive performance via employees' ambivalence was non-significant (β = 0.015, p = .330), so H8 was not supported.

Though mediation was not supported, the moderating role of self-serving leadership has received support. The interaction effect of spiritual leadership and self-serving leadership on employees' ambivalence is positive and significant (β = 0.104, p = 0.015), confirming Hypothesis 9. When self-serving leadership is low (red dashed line), the positive relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' ambivalence is relatively weaker, indicating that spiritual leadership increases employees' ambivalence only modestly under low self-serving leadership (Figure 4). Conversely, when self-serving leadership is high (black dashed line), the positive relationship between spiritual leadership and employees' ambivalence becomes stronger, suggesting that the coexistence of spiritual and self-serving leadership amplifies employees' ambivalence.

Figure No 4: The moderating effect of Self-serving Leadership on the link between Spiritual Leadership and Employee Ambivalence



Notes: AMBVLNC = Employees' Ambivalence; SSL = Self-serving leadership; SL= Spiritual Leadership

Regarding mediated moderation, the path coefficient value (β) is 0.015 while the p-value is 0.334, which means the relationship is insignificant. Hence, H10 is not supported, and self-serving leadership does not moderate the mediated effect of employees' ambivalence in the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance.

4.5 Predictive Relevance

In this study, we also conducted the Stone and Geisser test that determines the predictive relevance of the research model. According to Hair et al. (2014), if the values of Q^2 of all endogenous constructs are greater than zero (> 0), it gives evidence of predictive relevance. Table 4 presents the Q^2 of all the endogenous constructs, i.e., employees' resilience, employees' ambivalence, and adaptive performance, and as of Q^2 values are greater than zero, it shows the model has predictive relevance.

Table No 4: Stone and Geisser's Q^2 Coefficient

Endogenous constructs	***Q^2 Coefficient***
Employees' Resilience	0.059
Employees' Ambivalence	0.036
Adaptive Performance	0.143

4.6 Discussion

Building on recent research calls on the dark side of spiritual leadership (Vedula & Agrawal, 2024), we treated spiritual leadership as a paradox, where the latter is defined as contradictory yet interrelated elements that coexist (Carmine & Smith, 2021). This study has provided empirical evidence that spiritual leadership is associated with lower resilience and heightened ambivalence, contrary to prevailing evidence, given their interrelation (Shastko et al., 2025). Moreover, this study has provided novel insights about the self-serving spiritual leadership, suggests that it moderates the relationship, hence it can enhance resilience and ambivalence. Similarly, self-serving leadership also moderates the indirect relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance through employees' resilience.

With reference to the context of the study, it can be analyzed that volatility and high-pressure characteristics of the Pakistani software development sector significantly amplify the "dark side" effects of spiritual leadership. The rapid evolution of technology, coupled with tight deadlines, shifting project goals, and high demands for innovation, which are basic characteristics of this industry, creates an inherently stressful and resource-draining environment for employees (Kriya, 2024). In such a dynamic and volatile context, even the positive intentions of spiritual leadership, such as vision and love, may unintentionally put excessive cognitive and emotional demands on employees. Other than this, the local cultural context also has an important role to

perform in explaining these findings. Pakistani culture is known to be a collectivist culture where there is higher emphasis on group orientation, respect for authority, harmony and loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). In such collectivist cultures, spiritual leaders are in better position to exploit and manipulate their followers (Krishnakumar et al., 2015). Particularly, the moral demands dictated by these spiritual leaders can create moral conflict and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Such pressures fom spiritual leaders may create ambiguity and confusion in employees also as it can blur the boundaries between professional and personal obligations (Hofstede, 2001; Eissa et al., 2017). Therefore, the paradox of spiritual leadership has greater relevance in the present study's context also.

In this study, the main constructs were spiritual leadership, employees' resilience, employees' ambivalence, adaptive performance, and self-serving leadership. All these constructs were measured based on adopted scales, and their confirmatory composite analysis proved their validity and reliability. Even though spiritual leadership's AVE was on the borderline, construct reliability was strong, and its discriminant validity was also sustained. Despite deleting one item, its content validity was not harmed. This indicates spiritual leadership is empirically distinct from other constructs, hence it was retained for further analysis. Although spiritual leadership was expected to stimulate employees' resilience, the results have contributed to the paradoxical nature of spiritual leadership, where it suggests that it can reduce employee resilience (H1), which provides new insights into the complexities of this leadership style. Spiritual leadership, while fostering moral vision, may lead to anxiety, frustration, and burnout. Most importantly, a morally infused vision that dictates 'what we ought to be' standards gives rise to evaluation apprehension and role overload (Deng et al., 2017), as employees strive to live up to the idealized expectations under the dynamic context of the IT sector. Likewise, if the vision is extremely challenging, difficult to achieve, or misaligned with employees' personal values, it stimulates emotional exhaustion (Mawritz et al., 2014). This frustration and exhaustion can lead to emotional labor (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), which are sources of resource depletion. Similarly, in their effort to foster love, these spiritual leaders may unintentionally cultivate a narrow mindset. There may also be overreliance on care and love among leaders, which is not always conducive to employees' resilience (Cregård, 2017). When the efforts of leaders to foster altruistic love and care clash with the organizational realities of the IT industry (e.g., tight deadlines and scarce resources) (Shah et al., 2014), it gives rise to cognitive dissonance. The mental discomfort caused by these clashes and frustrations makes it difficult for employees to demonstrate the ability to bounce back because these employees, who are exposed to cognitive dissonance, also start suffering mentally in their professional lives (Shah & Lacaze, 2025). Furthermore, when spiritual leaders function at lower levels of spirituality (see Fry & Vu, 2024, for details), they may obstruct resource conservation and reduce resilience (Chen et al., 2015). In line with COR theory, rather than conserving resources, spiritual leaders may trigger a downward spiral of resource depletion (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

This research has further found that employee resilience has a significant impact on adaptive performance (H2) that is similar to evidence from other contexts (Luthans et al., 2005;

Cooper et al., 2019). Resilient employees are better able to demonstrate an enhanced level of adaptive performance. These results provide valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers to have resilient employees in organizations. However, the expected mediation of resilience between spiritual leadership and performance (H3) has not obtained adequate support, which suggests that spiritual leadership does not aid in resource conservation that could lead to adaptive performance (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011).

This research has found that self-serving leadership, characterized by self-centeredness and power-seeking (Stouten et al., 2005), moderates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employee resilience positively, which means it can enhance the beneficial effects of spiritual leadership on resilience. This moderating effect was contrary to the hypothesis (H4) that suggested that self-serving leadership can reduce the positive impact of spiritual leadership on resilience. The paradoxical finding that self-serving leadership buffers the adverse effects of spiritual leadership can be understood as spiritual leadership demands emotional investment, which can potentially deplete resources. In contrast, self-serving leadership fosters cynical realism or self-protection in employees (Sedikides, 2012), and this enables employees to conserve resources rather than fully engage with spiritual leaders' draining demands. This self-protection enhances resilience and makes them better able to adapt to challenges and demonstrate better adaptive performance. Moreover, when the espoused leadership style is spiritual leadership, but they signal self-interest, followers get a clear social information cue that this relationship is economic and not relational (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). This cue can trigger an exchange-mode shift from socio-emotional to the transactional relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Blau, 2017), where employees start to lower the felt obligation to internalize the moral vision of leaders. Consequently, employees stop themselves from costly deep acting and they start regulating their emotions in a more instrumental manner, hence they avert the chronic depletion of resources associated with emotional labor.

Further, the credibility of spiritual leadership rhetoric is reduced through the behavioral-integrity gaps (Simons et al., 2022), and followers adopt self-protective boundaries, making them normatively defensible, which is needed for resilience. The boundary clarity enables adaptive self-regulation where employees psychologically detach themselves from the leader's emotional demands and better conserve their resources. Through this, they invest in recovery and problem-focused coping, which is an important pathway to bolster resilience (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Another plausible explanation for these counterintuitive findings is that when employees get exposure to spiritual leadership and self-serving leadership coexistence, it cultivates a paradox mindset, which is defined as a metacognitive orientation that tolerates tensions and supports flexible and resilient responses under change (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Similarly, self-serving leadership behavior reduces attributional ambiguity about the leader's motives and helps followers to stabilize their expectations and plan contingencies and craft their jobs towards resources, which eventually reinforces resilience (Petrou et al., 2012). In summary, self-serving leadership clarifies the exchange rules and legitimizes self-protection, and this clarity weakens the resource drain

occurring from spiritual leadership's moral and emotional demands, hence it amplifies the spiritual leadership and resilience linkage.

This research has found that when self-serving leadership is introduced as a moderator, the indirect relationship becomes significant (i.e., H5). This implies that when both leadership styles coexist, they encourage resilience and corrective action, which can further result in improved performance. Basically, individual employees start to believe that they need to take action for their own good, and they cannot solely rely on their leaders to acquire the resources. With self-serving leadership, employees encounter dissonance, and their trust in their leaders deteriorates (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), which can trigger a downward spiral of resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Bernerth, 2022), when leaders demonstrate their darker side, the resource acquisition and utilization process is disrupted, which gives rise to adverse outcomes. Instead of being a facilitator for resource gain for followers, leaders demonstrate resource-draining behavior that triggers resource loss. Henceforth, this leadership self-served spiritual leader becomes *'resource draining'*, and it makes individuals more proactive in bringing changes in themselves to adapt/improve their performance. According to COR theory, this resource-draining situation may trigger resource loss, which motivates individuals to protect and recover their resources, which eventually prompts them to take deliberate actions to enhance resilience and adaptive performance. This recovery process can strengthen resilience and make them more adaptive as followers develop better adaptive strategies in response to the darker sides of leadership.

Further, we found that spiritual leadership triggers ambivalence in employees (H6), particularly in South Asia, where spirituality and religion are deeply intertwined (Salman et al., 2017; Abbas et al., 2023), hence they have the potential to create ambiguity and tension in the workplace (Bandsuch & Cavanagh, 2005). Based on the results of this study, we believe that leaders' ingrained personal beliefs may impose moral and emotional obligations on followers, which can amplify ambivalence (Vedula & Agrawal, 2024). Further, other than the love and hope/faith from leaders, there is always some work-related pressure from leaders, which can cause psychological resource loss (Krishnakumar et al., 2015; Hobfoll et al., 2016; Namdar et al., 2019). Spiritual leaders' multiple roles, where their followers are expected to exert and preserve extra effort to do meaningful work, while leaders still emphasize ‘so-called’ kindness, hope, and love (Fry & Matherly, 2006). This can create confusion about the conflicting behavior from spiritual leadership. On one hand, their focus is on inner life and reflection, and on the other hand, their focus is on deadlines, work quality, and goals. This dual focus may stimulate emotional exhaustion, creating confusion about whether they should focus on the inner or outer world. This eventually leads towards ambivalence in followers who may be unsure whether their resources are being supported or drained by the spiritual leaders (Vasconcelos, 2017).

Contrary to expectation (H7), ambivalence has a positive impact on adaptive performance. In literature, there exists adequate evidence that ambivalence is not a preferred state because it can lead towards indecisiveness, procrastination, or rumination, but the findings of the present study

are counterintuitive because these suggest otherwise. We conclude that ambivalence is not merely a confusion-like phenomenon that can create problems rather it can act as a catalyst for adaptive performance. Firstly, ambivalence may trigger vigilant cognitive processing and sense-making through which it can function as an epistemic alarm, which can help to mobilize the resources needed for adaptive performance. Employees in the IT sector experience constant change and uncertainty, and ambivalence caused by their leaders forces these individuals to engage a more systematic and active cognitive process, and they become more likely to evaluate interrelated information (Maio et al, 1996). They start to consider multiple perspectives which allows them to sense, interpret, and respond to complex issues in a better manner (Van Harreveld et al., 2009). Now, they consider both the upside and downside of any course of action, and they ensure to rely on the systematic information processing and broader search before reaching any conclusion. This vigilant information processing and proactive sense making helps them to reconcile conflicting evaluation and make better decisions (Van Harreveld et al., 2015). Secondly, ambivalence provides heightened cognitive flexibility to individuals, and they become better able to adjust to the dynamic environment, which is important for adaptive performance. With the broader information search behavior, their option set is also enlarged, and they can adopt contingency planning in an uncertain and volatile environment. These individuals demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness and adapt themselves to respond to the changes in the external environment more actively, which is needed for adaptive performance (Plambeck & Weber, 2009). Thirdly, with reference to the affective side, emotional ambivalence can broaden associative thinking and foster novel re-combinations which trigger creative and adaptive responses to tasks. There exists evidence that mixed-affect states (simultaneous positivity and negativity) can enhance the attentional scope and cue exploratory problem solving, which is helpful in volatile and uncertain environments like the IT sector (Fong, 2006; Moss & Wilson, 2014; Wang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Thus, ambivalence becomes a catalyst for superior adaptive performance, particularly in the high-pressure IT sector of Pakistan.

The findings further suggest that employee ambivalence does not mediate the relationship between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance (H8). This suggests that the spiritual leadership's induced ambivalence does not explain adaptive performance through the resource conservation process (Schultz & Schultz, 2017; Sy et al., 2005; McDonald & O'Rourke, 2014). Moreover, it is found that self-serving leadership moderates the relationship between spiritual leadership and employee ambivalence (H9). It means that self-serving leadership strengthens the ambivalence by prioritizing leaders' interests over those of their followers. Spiritual leaders' self-centeredness, coupled with self-serving leadership, further increases ambivalence (Peng et al., 2019; Fry & Vu, 2024). Likewise, this research found that self-serving leadership does not moderate the mediation of employee ambivalence between spiritual leadership and adaptive performance (H10). Therefore, spiritual leadership, when combined with self-serving leadership, does not enhance adaptive performance through ambivalence.

5. Conclusion

This study has attempted to uncover the paradoxical effects of spiritual leadership on employee resilience, employee ambivalence, and adaptive performance. This study has introduced self-serving leadership as a moderator. Contrary to expectations, self-serving leadership does not merely worsen the adverse effects of spiritual leadership; rather, it moderates the relationship by enhancing resilience, as it encourages self-protection and cynical realism in employees. Similarly, the findings revealed that spiritual leadership enhances ambivalence and eventually increases adaptive performance rather than hindering it. These findings challenge traditional leadership models and highlight the complex interplay between leadership styles, ambivalence, and performance; hence, this study offers new insights for both theoretical and practical leadership applications. The counterintuitive findings of this study are that spiritual leadership reduces employees' resilience, but when spiritual leadership and self-serving leadership coexist, employees' resilience is enhanced. Similarly, employees' ambivalence enhances the adaptive performance of IT employees. These findings provide valuable insights for managers.

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study has presented the paradox of spiritual leadership where COR theory is used as its core foundation, and the darker side of spiritual leadership is explored. Contrary to our expectation that spiritual leadership would enhance ambivalence but reinforce resilience, the findings show that it increases ambivalence while it reduces resilience. This extends the nascent literature on the dark side of spiritual leadership (Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Tourish & Tourish, 2010; Krishnakumar et al., 2015) and directly answers recent calls for deeper inquiry into potentially adverse effects of spiritual leadership (Vedula & Agrawal, 2024).

Secondly, this study provides sector-specific evidence from Pakistan's software industry, a post-pandemic context that is characterized by rapid technological and organizational change, which heightens the salience of adaptive performance. A key contribution is the finding that employee ambivalence is positively associated with adaptive performance. Rather than treating ambivalence as uniformly detrimental, managers might view it as a cue for sense-making and adjustment—hence they need to consider it as something to be recognized and constructively channeled, and should not be reflexively suppressed.

Third, we contribute by extending research on employee resilience and ambivalence. In the post-COVID context, resilience has become central (Prayag et al., 2024). Using a software development sample, we show that leadership does not uniformly build resilience—spiritual leadership, in this setting, is associated with lower resilience. We also add to the emerging ambivalence literature (e.g., Liu & Liu, 2024; Han & Sears, 2024) by empirically studying its behaviorally relevant role in this sector, including a positive association with adaptive performance.

5.2 Practical Implications

This research has provided practical insights for leaders in software development organizations and other organizations, particularly in navigating the paradoxical impacts of spiritual leadership. Based on findings, leaders must understand that to maximize the benefits of spiritual leadership. Organizations should have *clear rules and procedures* through which the management should set the boundaries of what is permissible within the organizational environment. Every employee, including the organizational leaders, should have clarification on what is allowed and what is prohibited, so there is no wiggle room available. In case of any rule-breaking behavior, there should be negative reinforcement of self-serving spiritual behavior through proper consequences. Generally, by emphasizing resource conservation practices and balancing spiritual leadership with an awareness of its potential adverse outcomes, leaders in all sectors can foster an environment that is conducive to adaptive performance. These findings encourage a more thoughtful approach to leadership development programs, to ensure that organizations equip leaders with the skills needed to harness both the positive and potentially draining aspects of spiritual leadership.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The present research has utilized the spiritual leadership theory, as presented by Fry and Matherly (2006), which is defined in terms of hope/faith, vision, altruistic love, calling, and membership. Although it has served its purpose, it does not consider spiritual leadership as a process, as recommended by Fry and Vu (2024). They have recommended that spiritual leadership operates on five ontological levels, and once the leader advances to the upper level, they can become a genuine spiritual leader. The existing paradox of spiritual leadership may have arisen due to leaders being at lower levels, but this cannot be concluded with certainty due to the lack of empirical evidence. Although Fry and Vu's (2024) theory seemed more logical and convincing in understanding the paradox of spiritual leadership, it could not be considered for operationalization due to a lack of available measures. There is a need to develop a scale for this more convincing theory of spiritual leadership. Once validated scales are available, they should be used to study spiritual leadership and its related outcomes. Moreover, the present research is conducted in a South Asian context; hence, its findings cannot be generalized to other cultures. Therefore, future research studies should be conducted in different cultures. The study has examined the darker side, but focused on a few constructs only; future studies should also examine the different mediating variables, like workplace anxiety and employees' stress. There are other possible organizational-level moderators, like organizational climate, that can act as a boundary condition to spiritual leadership and adaptive performance linkage, so future studies should consider them.

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