Influence of Leader Gratitude Expression on Employees' Intention to Stay: A Study of Private Colleges and Universities in Zhengzhou, China

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Abstract

This research aims to study the influence of leader gratitude expression on employees' intention to stay. Based on the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions, Sources of Social Information Processing Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the author finds the key factors in the relationships between the leader gratitude expression and employees' intention to stay as presented below: No significant positive relationship between leadership gratitude expression and the employees' intention to stay. However, expressing gratitude for leadership has a considerable positive impact on affective commitment. The affective commitment has a positive impact on employees' intention to stay. Leader gratitude expression has a positive impact on employees' organization-based self-esteem. Employees' Organization-based self-esteem has a positive impact on their intention to stay. Leader gratitude expression positively impacts employees' intention to remain through the employees' affective commitment and the employees' organization-based self-esteem.

Keywords: Affective Commitment, employees' Intention to Stay, employees' Organization-based self-esteem, leader Gratitude Expression

1. Introduction

Expressing gratitude is a low-cost way to smooth interpersonal relationships and improve individual happiness. Gratitude can permeate

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all aspects of interpersonal interaction, such as customers 'gratitude to front-line employees' service, employees 'gratitude for colleagues' help, and leaders' gratitude for the contribution of subordinates. The expression of gratitude can also occur between doctors and patients, lecturers and students, classmates, friends, husband and wife, etc. In short, expressing gratitude in either relationship can lubricate interpersonal relationships and improve individual happiness. Expressing gratitude can positively affect individuals (persons who express their gratitude, grateful persons, bystanders), interactively (Vollmann et al., 2019), and groups. Moreover, verbal gratitude can be expressed in several minutes or even seconds, and the cost is negligible. However, it can have a profound impact on interpersonal relationships. Therefore, expressing gratitude is a low-cost act of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Kumar et al., 2019). Leadership gratitude expression is an act of leaders within an organization. Leadership gratitude expression is a kind of positive affective expression in which the leader expresses gratitude for the help or contribution, showing the respect, recognition, and appreciation of the leader for the help or contribution of the employee (Grant & Gino, 2010).

Most current studies have focused on the expression of gratitude in general social relations, with the field of organizational management paying minimal attention to it. Very little is known about gratitude and its role in the workplace. Especially in private higher education, there is no relevant study on whether gratitude affects employees' intention to stay. This paper explores whether private university administrators can use gratitude as a low-cost management method to reduce the resignation rate and improve the employee retention rate.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Hypothesis

According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions, when leaders express their gratitude to employees, employees perceive their value in the organization, increase their pride, and are grateful to the leaders. Gratitude is a typical positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2013), affecting employees' performance and willingness to stay. Based on the Social Exchange Theory, when leaders express gratitude to employees,

the employees in "dripping grace when yongquan" belief, will reduce the negative emotions (Zhang et al., 2018), increase affective commitment (Ford, 2018), improve work input (Lee et al., 2019), increase upward advice (Sun et al., 2018) and improve work performance to return leadership gratitude. Leader expression of gratitude leads to higher job satisfaction and lower willingness to leave; leader expression of gratitude indirectly reduces the willingness of followers to leave leaders (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019). Zhu (2022) took organization-based self-esteem and affective commitment to leaders as the study of the relationship between leaders' gratitude expression and employees' resignation intention. The result of the research showed that the leader's gratitude expression within the organization had an inhibitory effect on employees' resignation intention.

Hom et al. (2017) believed that organizational environment and leadership behavior were the key factors affecting employees' resignation intention. Related research on leadership also provides us with some references. Domestic and foreign scholars believe that service leadership (Tian Yanhui, etc., 2020), change leadership (Almandeel, 2017), authentic leadership (Azanza, 2015), dual leadership (Yu, 2023), charming leadership (Your, 2023), authentic leadership (Liu, 2021), autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire leadership (Wei, 2015), benevolent leadership and virtuous leadership (Tu, 2021) are related to resignation intention. Given the inverse relationship between intention to stay and willingness to leave, we assume that:

Hypothesis 1: The leader's gratitude expression significantly impacts employees' intention to stay.

The leader expresses gratitude to their subordinates, making them feel recognized and that the leader supports their actions. According to the research of Ryan et al. (2018), sensory ability and needs are crucial for individuals. Expressing leadership gratitude is significant in helping employees develop positive self-awareness and self-concept. After receiving expressions of gratitude from leaders, employees often believe that they have the ability, importance, and value to the organization, and then increase their commitment to the organization.

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The expression of gratitude by leaders has many benefits to the organization, increasing the affective commitment of employees (Zhu et al., 2022), work engagement (Lee et al., 2018), and prosocial behavior (Sun et al., 2019). Although not much literature directly supports the idea that leader gratitude expression positively impacts employee affective commitment, related research on leadership still provides some references. For example, research found that the appropriate leadership behavior can have a direct response to the attitude of employees, stimulate the potential and improve their loyalty to the organization, thus having a positive impact on the development and strong affective dependence of the organization (Wang et al., 2023). Service-oriented leaders can provide adequate resources for employees to meet their affective needs (Cheng, 2020). Service-oriented leadership is positively correlated with affective commitment (Li, 2017). Therefore, the hypothesis assumes that:

Hypothesis 2: The leader's gratitude expression significantly impacts the affective commitment.

Su (2023) shows that affective commitment has a positive role in promoting the willingness of post-1990 employees. The deeper employees' affective commitment to the organization or enterprise, the more they rely on it, the more they want to stay in the organization or enterprise, the higher the intention to stay. When employees have positive affective attachment to the organization, form positive evaluation and produce positive working attitude, thus promote them to achieve high loyalty, innovation performance (Tajeddini et al., 2022), more, organizational citizen behavior (Putri, Sis Prabowo, 2022), knowledge sharing behavior (Wei & Wang, 2020), etc. However, when employees have negative emotions at work, it will affect their attitude towards the company, leading to their resignation behaviors, such as dull and bland working environment making it easier for employees to feel tired, unable to realize self-worth, and their willingness to stay gradually decreases (Li & Guo, 2020). Yu (2020) confirms that affective commitment enables employees to work within the organization for a long time, effectively

reducing employees' willingness to leave and enhancing their willingness to stay. Li and Guo (2020) pay attention to the retention of employees, and the affective commitment has a significant positive impact on the retention intention of the new generation of employees in the hotel industry. Therefore, the hypothesis assumes that:

Hypothesis 3：The affective commitment has a significant impact on their intention to stay.

As a positive affective communication behavior, leadership gratitude expression influences the concept of "self" and "relationship", thus reducing the employees' willingness to leave (Zhu, 2022). From the perspective of "relationship", the leaders' gratitude helps the employees to form a positive evaluation of the leaders and increase the recognition and acceptance of the leaders, that is, their gratitude to enhance the affective commitment to the leaders; the employees' affective commitment to the leaders will motivate the employees to stay in the organization to contribute to the leaders, thus reducing their resignation intention (Zhu, 2022).

Hypothesis 4：Employees' affective commitment plays an intermediary role in the leader's expression of gratitude and the employee's intention to stay.

Research on leadership shows that authorized leaders' recognition and encouragement of employees will increase organization-based self-esteem (Zhang, 2018), and the support, care, and respect of good leadership-member exchange relationships can also positively impact organization-based self-esteem (Heck, 2005). Social Information Processing Theory holds that the social information the surrounding environment provides influences individual attitudes and behaviors. Leaders are the authoritative figures in the organization and the team, so leaders are often one of the important sources of environmental information for team members. Zhu (2022) believes that the gratitude of leaders can convey the recognition and appreciation of the contribution and help of employees, and employees will process the information of gratitude (such

as respect, recognition, and appreciation). From the perspective of "self", leadership gratitude can affect the psychological process of employees, let employees feel capable and valuable in the organization, and improve employees' organization-based self-esteem. Thus, the hypothesis assumes that:

Hypothesis 5: The leader's gratitude expression has an important impact on employees' organization-based self-esteem.

Few studies have verified the direct relationship between employees' organization-based self-esteem and intention to stay. However, the relationship between organization-based self-esteem and the intention to leave has been verified. Pierce (2004) and other studies have shown a negative correlation between organization-based self-esteem and intention to leave. Zhu (2022) verified that organization-based self-esteem significantly negatively affected employees' turnover intention. Organization-based self-esteem helps employees to form positive self-perception and self-concept. Employees with high self-esteem tend to think they are capable and important in the organization; when employees feel competent, their needs for ability can be satisfied (Zhu, 2022). At the same time, when employees feel that they are important in the organization and are needed by the organization, they will strongly feel that they are a part of the organization and greatly meet their belonging needs. An important reason for employee turnover is that employees' satisfaction is reduced in the organization (Weitz, 1995). However, organization-based self-esteem can reduce the psychological experience of reduced employee satisfaction by meeting the needs of their abilities and belonging. As a result, their motivation to leave the organization will decrease, and they will show less interest and attention to the material incentives provided by other organizations. The intention to stay will increase accordingly. Thus, the hypothesis assumes that:

Hypothesis 6: Employees 'organization-based self-esteem has an important impact on employees' intention to stay.

According to the previous analysis, leadership gratitude expression is a positive emotional expression behavior during the interaction between

leaders and employees, which conveys information of respect, encouragement, and appreciation to employees. Processing this social information can encourage employees to conduct positive self-assessment, making them feel capable and needed in the organization, thus forming strong self-esteem (Zhu, 2022). Organization-based self-esteem can meet employees' ability and value needs, reduce their resignation motivation, and affect their turnover intention. Thus, the hypothesis assumes that:

Hypothesis 7: Employees' organization-based self-esteem is an intermediary between the leader's expression of gratitude and employees' intention to stay.

Based on the above theoretical assumptions, a model of the relationship between the leader's gratitude expression, affective commitment, employees' organization-based self-esteem, and employees' intention to stay was constructed, as shown in Figure 1.
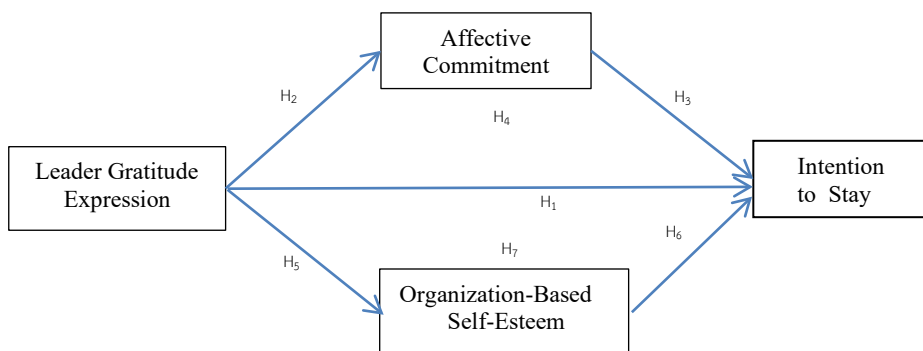
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the research.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to explore how leadership's expression of gratitude affects employees' intention to stay and to explore the underlying mechanisms of this effect. We collected the data through an online questionnaire survey. The target population of this study was lecturers who had worked for at least 1 year at a private university in Zhengzhou, China. The lecturers were randomly selected according to quota sampling.

The questionnaire contained two parts. Part 1 contained demographic information about the participants, and Part 2 included detailed questions measuring the variables in the proposed model. We used a 5-point Likert scale to measure these topic items, with scores ranging from 1= = strongly disagree to 5= = strongly agree. The questionnaire is mainly distributed through WeChat and collected online. Five hundred twenty-five participants filled out and returned the questionnaire, but 513 were valid.

Variable Measurement and Data Analysis

The scales selected for this study were derived from the Western maturity scale, and the authors adjusted some measurement items for the definitions used in previous studies and the needs of this study. To ensure the validity of the survey items, the questionnaire was sent to 3 experts for an IOC test. After pretesting and expert consultation, the authors again revised the questionnaire items. The questionnaire items and references in the research are shown in Table 1.

The theoretical model used in this research has been analyzed by partial least squares–structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) through Smart PLS V.4.0 software. (Hair et al., 2012).

Table 1. Research Variables and Measurements

Dimension	Descriptive statements	Sources
Leader gratitude expression	My immediate superiors expressed gratitude to me.	Ritzenhöfer et al.(2019)
	My immediate superiors expressed their gratitude to me.	
	My immediate superiors acknowledged my contribution.	
	My immediate superiors expressed their gratitude to me.	
	My immediate superiors expressed appreciation to me.	
Affective Commitment	I have a deep affinity for the current organization.	Revised on the scale of Meyer and A11en (1991)
	I am thrilled to spend the rest of my career in this organization.	
	This organization is of great significance to my career development and work achievements.	
	I think I am a member of the organization's family.	
	Affectionately, I feel like I belong to this organization.	

Organization-Based Self-Esteem	I am very influential around me.	Pierce et al. (1989)
	I am considered sincere.	
	I am important.	
	I am trusted.	
	There is confidence in me around me.	
	I am different.	
	I am valuable.	
	I am useful.	
	I am efficient.	
	I am cooperative.	
Intention to Stay	In the coming year, I will work in the current organization.	Revised on the scale of intention to stay developed by Su Lingling (2023)
	I will not consider leaving my current organization if there are other suitable job opportunities.	
	I have no thoughts or behaviors looking for a new job currently.	
	I plan to work at my present job for as long as possible.	
	I will not look for a new job for a while.	

4. Research Results

Descriptive Analysis

The valid questionnaires were analyzed for demographic data (N=513). In this study, there were 395 females and 118 males, all of whom were lecturers from private universities in Zhengzhou, China. Most participants surveyed were aged 20 to 49, at 95.71%. Most participants were Master's students, 445, accounting for 86.74%. Among them, the full professor accounted for 3.12%. Those who worked at the same universities for less than 5 years accounted for 69.01%.

Measurement Model Assessment

The following measures assessed the outer model in this research: the internal consistency and the reliability of each item, as well as the convergent and discriminant validity of each construct. In research,

construct reliability (CR) is defined as a measure of the consistency and reliability of the measurement variable representing the latent construct. Hair et al. (2012) suggested that the reliability of the constructs be assessed by examining Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The convergent validity of the construct refers to the extent to which the measurements of two theoretically connected constructs are related (Mehmood, 2017). Cronbach's alpha value should exceed 0.70 (Kline, 2015). The CR values should be greater than 0.6 to achieve reasonable reliability measures and high internal consistency (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). According to the proposed benchmark (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), the extracted mean variance should be greater than 0.50. An AVE value greater than 0.5 was considered the best indicator of convergent effectiveness. As suggested by many researchers, the load should be> 0.6~0.7.

Cronbach's alpha values should be greater than 0.70 (Kline, 2015). In research, construct reliability (CR) measures the consistency and reliability of the measured variables representing a latent construct. Construct reliability should be formed before construct validity can be determined. When measuring the variance captured by a construct about the variance due to random measurement error, the average variance extracted (AVE) measures the variance captured by that construct. The reliability of scales and constructs was also investigated using the CR and AVE measures. The CR values should be greater than 0.6 to obtain a good reliability measure and high internal consistency (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Moreover, according to the suggested benchmark, the average variance extracted should be greater than 0.50 (Bagozzi& Yi, 1988). AVE values of more than 0.5 are considered to be the best indicators of the validity of convergence. As suggested by many researchers, the loadings should be >0.6 to 0.7.

Table 2 shows the values of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. The constructs' reliability was evaluated by examining the Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) (Hair, J.et al, 2017). The results in Table 2 indicate that the Cronbach's alpha values fell between 0.927 and 0.949, which exceeded the suggested threshold value of 0.7. Additionally, the CR values fell between 0.940 and

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0.961, which exceeded the threshold value Of 0.7(Kline, R.B. 2015), and as per the readings in Table 4-17, the AVE values fell between 0.614 and 0.831, Which exceeded the suggested threshold value of 0.5(Bagozzi& Yi, 1988). We can also see in Table 2 that the Factor loadings of all constructions were above the threshold value of 0.697(>0.6). All the results confirmed that reliability and convergent validity were valid according to the criteria stated by Hairetal (2017).

Table 2. Reliability and validity results.

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
LGE	LGE1	0.895				
	LGE2	0.914				
	LGE3	0.886	0.932	0.933	0.949	0.787
	LGE4	0.885				
	LGE5	0.854				
AC	AC1	0.888				
	AC2	0.920				
	AC3	0.917	0.949	0.949	0.961	0.831
	AC4	0.918				
	AC5	0.915				
OBSE	OBSE1	0.697				
	OBSE2	0.758				
	OBSE3	0.863				
	OBSE4	0.839				
	OBSE5	0.812	0.929	0.932	0.940	0.614
	OBSE6	0.705				
	OBSE7	0.838				
	OBSE8	0.841				
	OBSE9	0.742				
	OBSE10	0.717				
IS	IS1	0.846	0.927	0.929	0.946	0.777
	IS2	0.797				

IS3	0.926	
IS4	0.912	
IS5	0.920	

Abbreviations: LEG, Leader Gratitude Expression; IS, Intention to Stay; AC, Affective Commitment; OBSE, Organization-Based Self-Esteem.

Table 3. Fornell–Larcker criterion.

	LGE	AC	OBSE	IS
LGE	0.887			
AC	0.615	0.912		
OBSE	0.583	0.656	0.783	
IS	0.511	0.791	0.638	0.882

Three methods, the Fournell-Lack standard, the trait-to-trait ratio (HTMT), and cross load, were used to measure discriminant validity.

The Fornell-Lack standard. An AVE was used to test the differential validity according to the recommendations of Fornell & Larcker (1981). This is achieved by comparing each construct's AVE with the pairwise construct's square correlation. The discriminant validity of the reflected structure occurs if the structure item load is an order of magnitude higher than the structure load (load above 0.1) and the square root of the AVE per structure is well above the correlation between the structure pair and above 0.5. The discriminative validity was calculated by evaluating other reflex indicators in the cross-loading tables according to the criteria established by Joseph and colleagues (2013). First, Fornell and Larcker (1981) recommend using an AVE of 0.50 or higher when assessing discriminant validity. When trying to obtain good discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE must be greater than the correlation between the latent structures. Based on the results in Table 3, the discriminant validity values varied between 0.783 and 0.912 and were considered acceptable. Comparing the correlation between constructs with the square root of AVE, we found that the square root of AVE for all constructs was greater than the correlation between the latent constructs, indicating that this construct has sufficient discriminant validity.

Heterotrait- Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). Discriminant validity was assessed using a convergent validity test following a standard HTMT ratio. This criterion was widely accepted and used by some authors in previous studies (Koo et al., 2020; Kuvaas et al., 2017). Table 5 shows this measurement model has sufficient HTMT discriminant validity because the highest reached HTMT ratio is 0.843. According to the previous study (Verkijika & De Wet, 2018), the maximum realized value of HTMT should be less than 0.85. Therefore, this study met the criteria for the HTMT ratio.

Furthermore, discriminant validity was assessed using a convergent validity test following the one-criterion HTMT ratio. This criterion is widely accepted and used by several authors in prior studies (Koo et al., 2020). Table 4 shows the measurement model has adequate HTMT discriminant validity because the highest achieved HTMT ratio is 0.843. According to the recommendations from the prior studies (Verkijika & De Wet, 2018), the maximum achieved value of HTMT should be less than 0.85. Thus, this study meets the criterion for the HTMT ratio.

Table 4 Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	LGE	AC	OBSE	IS
LGE				
AC	0.653			
OBSE	0.621	0.690		
IS	0.550	0.843	0.679	

Cross loadings. By examining the load of the other latent variables, it was determined that we constructed the appropriate latent variables to ensure that the observed variables had larger loadings in the target latent variables. In contrast, the other latent variables had no or minor loadings. Cross-load is the load of the observed variable on the non-target latent variable. When constructing the structural equation model, the overall situation assumes that the observed variables are mainly related to the target latent variables. In contrast, other non-target latent variables should be small or near zero.

The magnitude of the cross-load can provide insight into the correlation between observed and latent variables. Suppose an observed variable has a higher load on an unrelated latent variable. In that case, it may indicate that the observed variable is not fit to represent the target latent variable or that we may need to reconsider our theoretical model. Table 6 shows that all factor loads are larger than cross loads, indicating the model has good discriminant validity. In the first column, the minimum coefficient loading is 0.854, and the maximum cross-loading is greater than that of the column, which is 0.611. The second column's minimum coefficient load is 0.888, greater than the maximum cross load of 0.723. In the third column, the minimum coefficient loading is 0.697, greater than the maximum cross-load of 0.608 in the column. In the fourth column, the minimum coefficient loading is 0.797, greater than the maximum cross-load of 0.744 in the column. Therefore, this study met the criteria for cross-loading. As shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Cross Loadings

	LGE	AC	OBSE	IS
LGE1	0.895	0.515	0.502	0.458
LGE2	0.914	0.553	0.504	0.466
LGE3	0.886	0.569	0.502	0.450
LGE4	0.885	0.509	0.520	0.437
LGE5	0.854	0.579	0.552	0.454
AC1	0.611	0.888	0.590	0.676
AC2	0.574	0.920	0.594	0.744
AC3	0.554	0.917	0.608	0.744
AC4	0.536	0.918	0.593	0.729
AC5	0.529	0.915	0.604	0.709
OBSE1	0.554	0.422	0.697	0.422
OBSE2	0.435	0.556	0.758	0.556
OBSE3	0.491	0.484	0.863	0.484
OBSE4	0.521	0.590	0.839	0.590
OBSE5	0.455	0.533	0.812	0.533
OBSE6	0.383	0.367	0.705	0.367
OBSE7	0.422	0.460	0.838	0.460
OBSE8	0.431	0.461	0.841	0.461

OBSE9	0.402	0.439	0.742	0.439
OBSE10	0.427	0.610	0.717	0.611
IS1	0.443	0.694	0.604	0.846
IS2	0.445	0.645	0.522	0.797
IS3	0.462	0.704	0.542	0.926
IS4	0.451	0.723	0.586	0.912
IS5	0.450	0.715	0.555	0.920

Note 1: Yellow cells represent each construct's factor loadings of scale items.

Structural Model Assessment

The inner model was assessed through a 10,000-re-sample bootstrapping procedure and a blindfolding procedure using SmartPLS 4.0 software. We obtained the path coefficient, standard beta (β), t-value, p-value, and coefficient of determination (R^2). The hypothesis testing results are shown in Table 6 and Figure 2.

Table 6. Path coefficients

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Results
H_1	LGE -> IS	-0.023	-0.023	0.035	0.668	0.504	Reject
H_2	LGE -> AC	0.615	0.615	0.029	21.335	0.000	Support
H_3	AC -> IS	0.663	0.660	0.052	12.773	0.000	Support
H_5	LGE->OBSE	0.582	0.583	0.031	18.498	0.000	Support
H_6	OBSE -> IS	0.217	0.219	0.057	3.788	0.000	Support

H4	LGE->AC->IS	0.408	0.406	0.041	9.947	0.000	Support
H7	LGE->OBSE->IS	0.126	0.128	0.035	3.573	0.000	Support
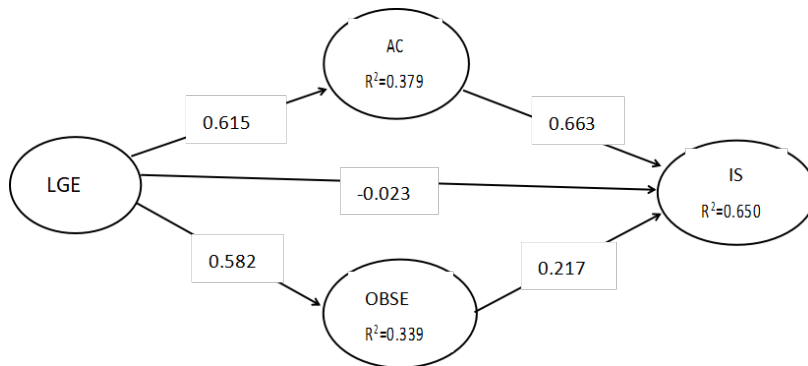
Figure 2. Standardized Path Coefficients and Significance

In PLS, the pathway structure between the structures constitutes the internal model. The model was used to estimate the pathway coefficients and the t-values. The path coefficients represent the strength and direction of the relationship between variables to indicate the causal relationship between observed and latent variables. On the other hand, the R^2 value is the percentage of the dependent variable that can be explained and represents the model's predictive power. The path coefficient is generally 0.3-0.7; $R^2 > 0.3$. The $t > 1.96$ was statistically significant; $t > 3.29$, indicating significant values at the $p < 0.001$ level. The results of hypothesis testing are shown in Table 6 and Figure 2.

As can be seen from Table 7 and Figure 2, leadership gratitude expressed LGE (LGE-> IS, path coefficient = -0.023, β=0.035, t=0.668 <1.96, P=0.504> 0.05) was not significantly related to employee intention IS, so the first hypothesis of this study was rejected (H1). Leadership gratitude expression significantly positively affected emotional commitment, supporting H2 (LGEAC; path coefficient =0.615, β=0.029, t=21.335,

$p<0.001$). Emotional commitment positively affected the willingness to stay, supporting H3 (AC-> IS, path coefficient =0.663, β=0.052, t=12.773, p <0.001). Consistent with H5, the results showed that LGE had a significant positive effect on OBSE, supporting H5 (LGE-> OBSE; OBSE =0.582, β=0.031, t=18.498, p <0.001). The organization-based OBSE significantly affected the willingness to stay, supporting H_6 (OBSE-> IS; IS path coefficient =0.217, β=0.057, t=3.788, p <0.001).

Consistent with H_4, and H_7, the leader gratitude expression was positively related to employees' intention to stay through the mediators affective commitment (coefficient =0.408, β = 0.041, t= 9.947； p< 0.001), and organization-based self-esteem (path coefficient =0.126, β = 0.035, t= 3.573； p< 0.001). Hence, H_4 and H_7 are confirmed (see Table 6). Therefore, the hypothesis of H_2, H_3, H_4, H_5, H_6 and H_7 were accepted. However, the H_1 hypothesis was rejected.

As we can see from the (R^2) results, leader gratitude expression explains 37.9% of the variance in affective commitment and 33.9% in organization-based self-esteem (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the leader's gratitude expression, affective commitment, and organization-based self-esteem explain 65% of the variance in employees' intention to stay. According to the values of (R^2) suggested by Chin (1998), the (R^2) values obtained in this study are acceptable.

5. Findings and Discussion

Based on the generalized construction theory of positive emotions, social information processing theory, and social exchange theory, this study examines the influence of the gratitude expression of leaders of private universities on employees' resignation intention. The study and analysis of PLS-SEM found no significant positive relationship between leadership gratitude expression and employee turnover intention. This conclusion is less in agreement with previous studies. However, the results verified the other hypotheses proposed (H_2, H_3, H_4, H_5, H_6, H_7). As a positive emotion, leadership gratitude conveys respect, encouragement, and appreciation to employees, so subordinates can feel cooperative, friendly,

considerate, and warm to others, and feel the respect of leaders. According to the social information processing theory, employees process information (such as gratitude, recognition, and appreciation), perceive their ability and value in the organization, and then increase their emotional commitment. Therefore, the leader's expression of gratitude significantly impacts the employees' emotional commitment. Emotional commitment has a positive impact on the employees' intention to stay. When employees have a positive emotional attachment to the organization, form a positive evaluation and have a positive working attitude, thus promotes them to achieve high loyalty (Daedini et al., 2022), more organizational citizenship (Putri, Sis Prabowo, 2022) and Yu (2020) confirmed that emotional commitment enables employees to work in the organization for a long time, which can effectively reduce employees' willingness to leave and improve their willingness to stay. Leadership gratitude expression has a positive impact on employees' organization-based self-esteem. Leadership recognition and encouragement will improve organization-based self-esteem (Zhang, 2018). Leaders are the authoritative figures in the organization and the team, so leaders are often one of the important sources of environmental information for team members. Zhu (2022) believes that the gratitude of leaders can convey a message of recognition and appreciation of employees' contribution and help, make employees feel their ability and value in the organization, and improve employees' organization-based self-esteem. Employee organization-based self-esteem had a positive impact on their willingness to stay. Pierce (2004) and other studies have shown a negative correlation between organization-based self-esteem and willingness to leave. Zhu (2022) confirmed that organization-based self-esteem significantly negatively impacts employees' willingness to leave. Organization-based self-esteem can help employees form a positive self-perception and self-concept. When employees feel that they are important in the organization and the organization needs them, they will strongly feel that they are part of the organization, enormously satisfying their belonging needs. Their intention to stay will also increase.

Organization-based self-esteem can meet employees' ability and value needs, reduce their resignation motivation, and affect their willingness to leave. Therefore, the employee's organization-based self-esteem is an intermediary between the leader's expression of gratitude and the employee's willingness to stay. That is, leaders' expression of gratitude affects employees' willingness to stay by improving their organization-based self-esteem.

In conclusion, this study verified that employee emotional commitment and organization-based self-esteem were positively associated with employee willingness to stay. Leadership gratitude positively correlates with employees' willingness to stay through their emotional commitment and organization-based self-esteem.

Contributions

Theoretical implication: First, most existing studies address gratitude in general social interaction, such as peer relationships (Williams & Bartlett, 2015) and intimacy (i. e. lovers or close friends) (Lambertetal., 2010); fewer studies examine the impact of gratitude in an organizational context (Lu & Bai, 2019). In particular, it ignores the expression of gratitude between different levels prevalent in the organization (Locklear et al., 2023). Based on the theories of positive emotion expansion construction, social information processing, and social exchange, this study discusses the influence of leadership gratitude expression on the willingness of employees to stay in the specific organizational environment of private universities. This study expands the theoretical research of leadership emotion expression and enriches the factors influencing employees' intention to stay. Second, most studies discuss the effects of gratitude characteristics and states on human behavior and outcomes from the perspective of individual characteristics and states (Lu & Bai, 2019), while they rarely discuss the influence of gratitude expression from the perspective of behavior. This study enriches previous research by exploring the effects and mechanisms of leaders' gratitude expression behavior on the intention to stay. Finally, for the first time, we take the lecturers in Zhengzhou Private Universities as an example to study the impact of

leaders' gratitude expression on employees' willingness to leave. Currently, most empirical studies on the expression of leadership gratitude are limited to enterprises, and less attention is paid to special groups of lecturers, especially university lecturers. The previous introduction shows us that the lecturer's work, personality, and demand characteristics are very different from those of employees in other industries. Therefore, it is of particular theoretical significance to study the response of private university lecturers to leaders' expressions of gratitude. This study opens a new perspective.

Practical implication: First, this study helped organizational leaders recognize the importance of expressing leadership gratitude in organizational management. The relationship between leaders 'expressions of gratitude and employees' willingness to stay suggests that organizational leaders can increase their willingness to stay by enhancing their emotional commitment to the organization and their organization-based self-esteem, by regularly increasing their gratitude to employees. Organizational leaders can express their gratitude to employees with words or actions, so that employees can feel recognized and enhance their emotional commitment to the organization. On the one hand, organizations can improve employees' self-esteem and emotional commitment from multiple dimensions, such as work design, positive feedback, and rewards. On the other hand, organizations can help leaders demonstrate and express their gratitude through specific training and socialization programs (Lee et al., 2019). Organizations should also pay attention to the gratitude qualities of managers when recruiting and selecting managers. Organizations can even use gratitude expression as an intervention strategy to improve employee well-being (Fehr et al., 2017).

Second, this study could help organizations reduce the cost of HRM. Expressing leadership gratitude only requires a word or even an email to motivate employees to stay in the organization, helping the organization to save the cost of material incentives, recruitment costs, and training costs, while saving managers time and energy. Verbal gratitude can be expressed in minutes or even seconds, at a negligible cost. However, it

can have a profound impact on interpersonal relationships. Expressing gratitude can positively impact individuals (those who express gratitude, those who are appreciated by others, bystanders), two sides of interaction (Vollmann et al., 2019), and groups. Therefore, expressing gratitude is a low-cost behavior of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Kumar et al., 2019). The organization can actively create a grateful environment, promote effective communication between leaders and employees, improve the sense of identity and happiness of employees, and improve the employees' willingness to stay, thereby reducing the management cost of the organization.

Limitations and Future Research

First, the study methodology. This study used the quantitative analysis method of questionnaire survey and a one-time collection of questionnaires, ignoring the fact that gratitude expression may be subject to daily differences as an emotional expression behavior. To some extent, it affects the reliability of causality inference between variables. In the future, qualitative studies such as interviews, observations, and experiments can be used to provide more sufficient causal evidence for the model. Second, the measuring tools. The measurement tool of this study adopted mature scales developed abroad, but the development of these scales was based on the Western cultural background. Due to specific differences in Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds, the direct application of the scale in the Chinese context may impact the scale's validity. If the basis of the original scale is combined with the Chinese situation, it may be possible to improve the accuracy of this study further. Future researchers can develop or revise variable measurement scales with Chinese characteristics. Third, the sample selection. In terms of the study samples, the samples selected were from private universities in Zhengzhou, China, and the respondents were all lecturers who grew up in a Chinese cultural background. China has a high power distance and is more responsive to leadership gratitude. However, Western countries tend to have low power distance, so it remains to be seen whether the results remain universal. Future studies will consider sample diversification.

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Fourth, the mediation variable. This study used the expansion and construction theory of positive emotions, the theory of social information processing, and the theory of social exchange to explain the internal mechanism between leaders 'gratitude expression and employees' willingness to stay, and only analyzed the intermediary role of emotional commitment and the organization-based self-esteem. In the future, we can explore other possible mechanisms. Future studies can explore other possible mediating mechanisms to enrich the role of leadership gratitude in employees' willingness to stay. Fifth, the boundary conditions. This study did not analyze the regulatory variables of the internal mechanisms between leadership gratitude expression and employees' willingness to stay. However, there are many factors regarding the actual work activities, such as employees' power distance and characteristics. Thus, the regulatory effect of the boundary conditions can be considered in the future.

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