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Workplace Buoyancy and Servant Leadership as Catalysts for Sustainable Disaster Management: Mitigating Emotional Exhaustion in Disaster Response Teams

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Abstract: Amid global crises like natural disasters and climate change, the emotional well-being of disaster response workers (DRWs) is a key factor in sustainable public health and disaster management. The study highlights the issue of emotional exhaustion among DRWs, which can impact organizational effectiveness and the health and well-being of affected communities. The study examines the roles of servant leadership (SL) and workplace buoyancy (WB) in addressing these issues. Using data from 336 DRWs involved in the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake, JD-R Theory is employed to study how these factors interact in high-demand scenarios. Analysis with the Smart PLS 4 program reveals that SL and WB play key roles in reducing emotional exhaustion (EE). Notably, WB partially mediates the relationship between SL and EE. These insights are vital for creating sustainable public health and disaster management strategies in times of growing conflicts and climate crises. By extending the JD-R Theory to encompass these elements, the study provides valuable suggestions for policymakers and managers to enhance the resilience and well-being of DRWs. The study deepens our understanding of public health challenges in disaster settings and highlights the need for integrated, sustainable responses to support those on the front lines of disaster relief efforts.

Keywords: servant leadership; emotional exhaustion; workplace buoyancy; disaster response/relief workers; disaster management; public health

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1. Introduction

Various crises, including natural disasters, epidemics, and climate change, pose threats to societies due to their devastating effects. Disaster response/relief workers (DRWs) are crucial in responding to and supporting communities affected by natural disasters. However, due to their busy work schedule, these workers often find it challenging to keep track of time. They operate in a work environment where mealtimes are often skipped, with a continuous pursuit of resources and flexibility to assist. They also need to explore new methods and manage high levels of uncertainty [1]. Responding to disasters, whether as paid staff or volunteers, exposes individuals to physical and psychological risks. At this stage, it is crucial to prioritize their well-being and offer support, aiming to minimize distress and damage for effective and sustainable public health and disaster management.

DRWs face immense challenges in their work, including long hours, demanding physical conditions, and exposure to traumatic events [2–5]. These factors can lead to burnout, which is a significant concern for the workers' well-being and the overall effectiveness of

relief efforts [1,6,7]. Burnout among DRWs can result in decreased job satisfaction and performance, increased turnover rates, and compromised mental health [8–12]. Eliminating or reducing the conditions contributing to burnout among DRWs is crucial to developing effective support systems and interventions to prevent the adverse effects of burnout on employees, victims, and the organization.

Employee burnout is usually defined in three dimensions in the literature: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment [13]. Preventing emotional exhaustion, in particular, can significantly prevent burnout and mitigate negative consequences [14]. Employees working in crises and natural disasters experience significant emotional exhaustion [15,16]. As tenure increases over the years, so does the incidence of shock and emotional exhaustion [17]. Taking steps to reduce emotional exhaustion will positively impact the work experiences, private lives, and performance of disaster response/relief workers, ultimately benefiting the lives of the victims, public health, and disaster management.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory suggests that job demands and resources have a significant impact on employees. The theory emphasizes the issue of high job resources mitigating the negative effects of high job demands. The JD-R model highlights that employee burnout is caused by high job demands and insufficient resources in the workplace [18,19]. These resources can be what both the organizational environment and the individual must have. Given that interaction in an organizational environment primarily involves leaders and their members (employees), servant leadership and workplace buoyancy could be two critical resources for reducing emotional exhaustion in the face of intense job demands at DRWs. Unlike other leadership approaches, servant leadership prioritizes employees, their needs, and their development. It offers essential resources for creating an organizational climate with trust, support, cooperation, and effective communication qualities that employees may require [20,21]. Again, as an individual resource, workplace buoyancy provides significant benefits. It enables employees to develop practical approaches to combat workplace-related stressors. Through its positive organizational climate and employee-oriented management approach, servant leadership reduces employees' emotional exhaustion [22–24]. Moreover, workplace buoyancy, as an individual resource, also reduces emotional exhaustion. However, there are limited empirical studies on this subject [25]. Additionally, the servant leadership approach, which prioritizes employees and empowers them to develop their organizational and personal resources [26,27], can enhance workplace buoyancy and increase capacity for growth.

Existing studies on servant leadership theory have not adequately addressed the concerns of follower well-being and health, despite the focus on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes that benefit the collective [28–32]. At this point, it is evident that studies should be conducted to understand the relationship between two variables, mainly focusing on employees' well-being and their individual workplace experiences, such as emotional exhaustion. It is essential to address the issue of servant leadership and emotional exhaustion in various sectors and contexts, such as workplace buoyancy, DRWs, and public service delivery [33–35]. Furthermore, there is a call to investigate the impact of workplace buoyancy on employee well-being elements, such as emotional exhaustion, especially in collectivist societies [36]. Examining the mediating effect of workplace buoyancy on DRWs' perception of servant leadership and their experience of emotional exhaustion will contribute to the existing literature. Workplace buoyancy is an essential individual resource that empowers employees to combat negative experiences at work. However, the literature review reveals a scarcity of studies providing results on workplace buoyancy.

In addition to daily stressors, DRWs experience heightened stress and psychological issues due to the critical nature of their jobs [37]. However, not all employees can handle these intense stressors equally, leading to significant emotional exhaustion [6,15,37]. The present study was carried out to understand the mechanism of interaction between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. This is especially crucial for DRWs. They often put their duties before their own well-being, and their performance has a direct effect on victims

and society. In order to develop sustainable disaster management strategies during times of growing conflicts, natural disasters, and climate crises, it is important to gain insights. This study aims to examine how servant leadership impacts the emotional exhaustion experienced by DRWs and how workplace buoyancy mediates this relationship. To achieve this goal, a study was conducted on DRWs involved in the 2023 Kahramanmaraş-centered Earthquake. The study is structured as follows. First, the extant literature on servant leadership and emotional exhaustion is examined in detail, and the potential impact of workplace buoyancy on this interaction is investigated. Subsequently, the research model and methodology have been shared, taking into account the extant literature. Finally, the empirical results of the research and key contributions are presented, along with a discussion of practical and theoretical implications.

The study's results substantially contribute by addressing the interaction mechanism between the leadership approach and emotional exhaustion, specifically in servant leadership, due to its different characteristics from other leadership approaches. It also expands the literature with studies on workplace buoyancy, a newly developing and vital personal resource. In addition, the study provides essential recommendations to policymakers and senior managers dealing with public health challenges in crisis and disaster settings and emphasizes the need for integrated and sustainable strategies to support those leading disaster relief efforts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Servant Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion

Research on a leader's crucial role has led to the concept of servant leadership, which emphasizes that a leader should primarily identify as a servant [38]. Servant leadership considers the interaction between the leader and their followers in multiple dimensions, focusing on the relational and ethical identity of this interaction while adopting an approach that does not neglect the emotional part [39]. Servant leaders focus more on ethics and virtue than being goal and result-oriented, engage with their followers in influencing them, listen, approach in an optimistic and supportive manner, and adopt a fair, change and development-supportive attitude [21,40–42].

Leadership theories generally focus on how the leader's basic approach should be channeled to the collective goal by influencing the behavior of their subordinates to a certain extent. However, servant leaders primarily focus on their subordinates' needs, expectations, and physical and psychological health [32].

Many positive features of servant leadership recall how this leadership approach differs from other post-modern leadership approaches. Servant leadership differs from different leadership approaches with its unique aspects and the extent of interaction between the leader and followers [43–45]. For example, it differs from transformational leadership, which is frequently studied in the literature, in that it prioritizes the psychological needs of employees rather than focusing on organizational goals and results [46–48]. Considering its difference from ethical leadership, Ethical leaders demonstrate appropriate behavior in personal actions and relationships and encourage such behavior to followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making [49]. The concepts of ethics, virtue, and morality discussed at this point connect ethical and servant leadership [50]. However, while servant leadership focuses on building fair, honest, ethical behavior based on interaction with its followers, ethical leadership emphasizes guiding and normative behavior according to organizational norms. Additionally, servant leadership emphasizes the development of followers and their intrinsic motivation [51]. At this point, while ethical leadership encourages compliance with a particular set of norms, with servant leadership, the leader pioneers and exemplifies moral values in the interaction between leader and follower and motivates the internal dynamics of the followers to change in the implementation of organizational ethical values. That is, it encourages adopting and implementing moral actions through intrinsic motivation. Moreover, unlike ethical leadership, it focuses on issues that directly concern followers at an individual level, such as

followers' empowerment and psychological health [51]. Additionally, in comparison to authentic leadership, servant leadership focuses more on fostering the growth of followers and advocating for their interests, in addition to the good of the wider society [51]. In terms of all these features, servant leadership is a unique approach compared to other leadership styles, as it prioritizes the development and expectations of its followers.

Burnout, on the other hand, is a long-lasting reaction to persistent emotional and interpersonal stressors experienced in the workplace [52]. Burnout refers to a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by chronic work-related stress [53]. It is a prevalent issue in many workplaces and can have detrimental effects on both individual employees and the overall organizational performance. Burnout is associated with decreased job satisfaction, reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover rates [8–12]. Three distinct dimensions of employee burnout were outlined [13]. The first dimension is *emotional exhaustion*, which refers to the feeling of being drained or depleted emotionally. The second dimension is *depersonalization*, which involves developing a negative attitude towards clients or customers, experiencing a sense of detachment, or losing sight of professional values and ideals. The third dimension is *reduced personal accomplishment and commitment* to one's profession, characterized by a diminished sense of personal achievement and a lack of dedication to one's work. Specifically, preventing emotional exhaustion, which is the initial stage of burnout, can significantly help halt the burnout process and its adverse effects [14]. Emotional exhaustion refers to the degree to which an individual feels depleted or lacks the physical and psychological resources necessary to cope with interpersonal stressors [54]. When experiencing emotional exhaustion, individuals often feel overwhelmed, as it depletes their mental and physical capacities. At an individual level, emotional exhaustion is associated with adverse outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and other health issues [55–59], highlighting its significant impact on stress-related health outcomes [54]. Within organizations, emotional exhaustion is characterized by a desire to quit a job, increased absenteeism, and low morale [60–62].

While many employees experience stress and related negative psychological and physical problems in the workplace, participating in operations, particularly during an earthquake or disaster, presents a unique challenge for DRW [37] and places significant pressure on employees. In the course of their duties, they are exposed, either directly or indirectly, to death, injured individuals, and the families of those awaiting assistance. They engage in operations that can last for extended periods and continue to provide their services while risking their own safety, potentially facing the risk of death at any moment [2,3]. Individuals working under these conditions, whether paid staff or volunteers, face physical and psychological risks when responding to disasters. They may experience burnout [6], compassion fatigue [63], sleep problems, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder [37]. It is reported that disaster response/relief workers, in particular, often experience significant emotional exhaustion and disorder [15]. The extended tenure of disaster response/relief workers can intensify the impact of incidents, leading to increased shock and emotional exhaustion [17]. In this regard, essential steps need to be taken. At this point, an issue to be suggested to reduce emotional exhaustion experiences will positively affect both the work experiences of disaster response/relief workers, their private lives, and their performance, which directly affects the lives of the victims.

When it comes to their job nature, DRWs are engaged in a stressful and risky occupation compared to others [64]. While some of these skilled and educated employees can manage this situation, a significant number of them struggle to effectively control these sources of stress [65]. Being able to assist everyone quickly, even at unexpected times and for extended periods, can have an adverse effect on sleep patterns and rest times. This can lead to increased stress levels [66] and the need for effective stress management. DRWs must effectively manage heavy workloads and high job demands since their work directly impacts both the lives of others and their own. According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, job demands and resources play a significant role in employees' performance at work [67]. Job demands refer to various factors that can include physical, social, psy-

chological, or organizational aspects, while job resources contribute to positive outcomes. The theory introduces two interaction processes: the buffering process, where high job resources mitigate the negative effects of high job demands, and the boosting process, where job demands enhance the positive impact of job resources on outcomes.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model highlights that employees tend to experience burnout in work environments with high job demands. This is often a result of inefficient work processes and insufficient or reduced resources in the workplace [18,19]. Burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion and disengagement, which can lead to a reduced capacity to fulfill job responsibilities [18]. To prevent emotional exhaustion, it is important to constantly support employees with the necessary resources aligned with job requirements. Unlike other leadership approaches, servant leadership uniquely emphasizes the growth and well-being of its followers [51,68–72]. Employee-focused attributes make servant leaders valuable and beneficial contributors to organizations and followers.

Servant leadership is characterized by genuine concern for followers' personal problems and well-being [73,74]. It involves supporting subordinates in developing competence in their duties and promoting their overall growth and empowerment in their roles. SL provides psychological safety for employees to behave more self-confidently, autonomously, and entrepreneurially, significantly contributing to their ability to perform their duties better [75,76]. Additionally, the servant leader (SL) demonstrates honesty and consistency in their leadership approach, prioritizing the needs of their subordinates. The positive and supportive organizational climate created by SL provides significant resources to prevent employees from experiencing emotional exhaustion, which results in the depletion of their resources or in reducing its impact. Servant leaders establish mutually beneficial relationships, are viewed as ethical and trustworthy, and show genuine concern for employee needs [68,69]. They value and support followers, which helps reduce emotional exhaustion. Emotional (caring and inspiration) and instrumental support (giving suggestions, supervisory behavior (i.e., task behavior, consideration, and vision), and support for solving problems) mitigated the adverse effects of burnout by increasing work engagement [77,78]. In this context, servant leadership is viewed as a job resource that is expected to positively impact employee performance.

With its employee-oriented leadership approach, servant leaders sincerely address the problems and expectations of their employees. They also seek support to meet job requirements and ensure work–life balance [51,68,69]. The literature shows that servant leadership's focus on employee well-being reduces their experience of emotional exhaustion [22]. A study conducted in 2023 explored the levels of work resilience, demonstrating its significant value for hospitality industry employees managing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic [23]. The research revealed that servant leadership boosted work resilience.

Moreover, the decrease in emotional exhaustion due to servant leadership played a significant role in this interaction. Another study revealed that among 418 frontline healthcare workers, servant leadership reduced hindrance stressors during the pandemic crisis, thereby lessening the experience of emotional exhaustion [24]. While no studies directly addressing DRWs were reached in the literature review, servant leadership significantly reduces emotional exhaustion, preventing employees from having negative experiences in crises. A study conducted on 309 employees in the service sector [79] and 2636 teachers in the education sector [36] revealed that SL reduces emotional exhaustion. Additionally, a study carried out on 345 nurses working in a high-stress hospital environment showed similar results, with SL reducing emotional exhaustion [34]. Given the existing literature and the JD-R theory, the following hypothesis has been proposed for examination:

H1. *Servant leadership negatively impacts emotional exhaustion.*

2.2. The Mediating Role of Workplace Buoyancy

Workplace buoyancy refers to the capacity to effectively handle the difficulties and setbacks that are inherent in the workplace and commonly experienced by many individuals [80]. Resilience is an individual's ability to navigate significant or chronic adversity, whereas workplace buoyancy is the ability to effectively manage work-related challenges and adversity [80]. In this respect, workplace buoyancy differs from resilience. It has been highlighted that individuals tend to adopt proactive strategies by focusing on positive aspects and downplaying extreme scenarios in challenging situations, drawing strength from their own abilities [81]. Workplace Buoyancy is defined as an individual's capacity to emphasize the positive side of resilience and manage their emotions accordingly, utilizing their own resources and capabilities adaptively to overcome difficulties [80,82,83].

Workplace buoyancy enhances work engagement. It encourages employees to direct all their resources toward achieving organizational goals. Additionally, it boosts their workplace well-being by enabling them to cope with individual challenges [84]. It is also shared that it increases individuals' motivation and primarily supports an increase in self-regulation, life satisfaction, sense of meaning, and self-esteem [85].

Servant Leadership (SL) is deeply invested in the development and empowerment of its followers [26]. SL also aims to increase employee voice by fostering an environment allowing self-expression in operational processes and career expectations [86]. Moreover, SL encourages employees to maintain a commitment to their superiors [87] and helps them find job satisfaction and career development support [27]. This SL approach significantly contributes to creating a positive psychological climate within the organization [88].

SL's approach to leadership, which is centered on employees, creates a supportive environment. This environment not only provides the psychological resources employees need but also fosters the development of their personal resources, such as workplace buoyancy [26,27,86,87]. In this study, within the scope of the J D-R model, servant leadership is examined as a workplace resource. This is expected to positively affect employee functioning. Personal resources such as workplace buoyancy are also considered, as they are thought to promote positive outcomes. It has been found that job resources positively predict personal resources, while job demands negatively predict them. Servant leadership can enhance employees' workplace buoyancy due to the supportive organizational environment and work experience it fosters.

Workplace buoyancy is a significant factor in aiding individuals to navigate major adversities, including challenges related to a pandemic or earthquake [89]. It equips individuals to manage difficulties without being overwhelmed by work-related issues [25]. Therefore, workplace buoyancy can be a crucial personal resource in mitigating emotional exhaustion, according to the scope of JD-R Theory. While there are no direct studies on the effect of servant leadership on workplace buoyancy, research indicates that supportive leadership tendencies can enhance it, thereby reducing emotional exhaustion [25].

Studies in the literature call for studies in different sectors and contexts to investigate the possible effects of various variables on employees and to understand the nature of this interaction mechanism to understand the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion [33,34,36]. There is also a need for empirical studies to evaluate the effect of workplace buoyancy on employee well-being, particularly in non-individualistic, collectivist societies [35]. To respond to the calls in the literature and to reduce the emotional exhaustion experience of DRWs, the following hypotheses were developed within the scope of the JD-R model, and the research model is shared in Figure 1:

H2. *Servant leadership positively impacts workplace buoyancy.*

H3. *Workplace buoyancy reduces emotional exhaustion.*

H4. *Workplace buoyancy plays a mediation role in the effect of servant leadership on emotional exhaustion.*

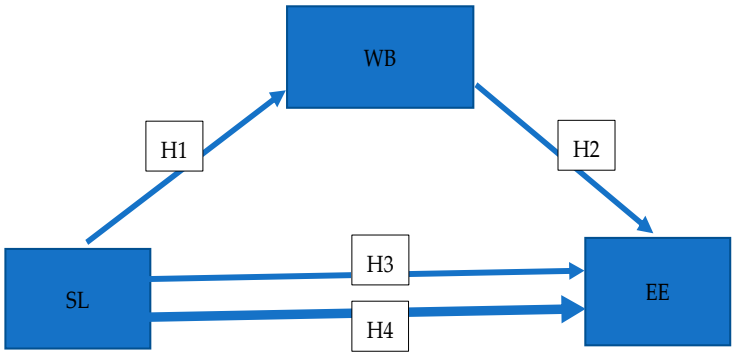

Figure 1. Research Model (SL—Servant Leadership, WB—Workplace Buoyancy, and EE—Emotional Exhaustion). Source: Prepared by the Authors.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Collection and Sample

In an era characterized by a slew of global crises—from health pandemics and disasters to ongoing conflict and escalating impacts of climate change—there is an urgent need to rethink our approach to public health, disaster management, and sustainability. In this context, the study aims to examine the relationship between servant leadership, workplace buoyancy, and emotional exhaustion to reduce the emotional exhaustion that DRWs experience at a high rate due to increased job demands in the name of sustainable disaster management and public health. The 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake, which has recently created repercussions on a global scale and caused great destruction in Turkey, stands out as a sad experience that offers comprehensive experiences in the name of sustainable disaster management and public health. Within the scope of officially shared information (www.en.afad.gov.tr, accessed on 13 March 2024), the 7.7-magnitude earthquake centered in Pazarcık, Kahramanmaraş province on 6 February 2023 had wide-reaching effects in the provinces of Kahramanmaraş, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Osmaniye, Hatay, Kilis, Malatya, and Elazığ. There were 7184 aftershocks, resulting in 42,310 deaths. It was reported that 448,018 citizens were evacuated in the region. In accordance with the study's primary purpose, DRWs who took an active role in the field in the 2023 Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquake constitute the study population.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, and approval was obtained from the Kocaeli University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (The decision number is 2023/05 and is dated 27 April 2023). In accordance with the study's primary purpose, the employees who were reached by the convenience sampling method from the DRWs who participated during the 2023 Kahramanmaraş/Turkey earthquake and who have been on duty for at least one year constitute the study's sample. The study participants were selected from individuals who responded immediately to the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake and participated in rescue efforts. All participants had been active in earthquake response and employed at the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Data were collected online via Google Forms in May, with the consent of the participants and without disrupting their duties. After obtaining the participants' consent to participate, surveys were distributed. To reflect the actual situation in the field, information about the consent form stated that the answers would not be shared with third parties and that participation was entirely voluntary. Out of 560 surveys distributed, 340 were returned. Four surveys were discarded due to incomplete or incorrect data, leaving 336 valid survey responses for the study. The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency's official website (www.afad.gov.tr, accessed on 6 February 2024) reports 6044 employees. 1709 holds the position of search and rescue technician as a DRW. The required sample size for this population, determined by the sampling calculation method, is 333 [90]. The study, with the participation of 336 DRWs, is considered to have a sufficient sample size in this context.

In the study, 69% of the participants were men and 70% were married. The age group of 36–45 years represented 33% of the participants, and 79% were university graduates. In terms of tenure, 8.5% had worked for 1–5 years, 25.5% for 6–10 years, 38% for 11–15 years, and 28% for 16–20 years or more.

3.2. Measurement Tools

The study utilized scales that tested the validity and reliability of three different variables, as found in the literature. Details about the measurement tools are as follows:

Servant Leadership Scale: Researchers evaluated how DRWs perceived the servant leadership of their managers using a seven-item servant leadership scale adapted to Turkish [91,92]. Participants rated the statements on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating their level of agreement (1—Strongly Disagree–5—Totally Agree). The scale included expressions such as "I feel energetic at my job", "I am enthusiastic and passionate about my job", and "My manager can tell if something is wrong".

Workplace buoyancy: A commonly used scale in literature was employed to assess the workplace buoyancy levels of DRWs [80]. This scale includes four statements, which participants rated on a scale from 1 to 5 to indicate their level of agreement (1—Strongly Disagree, 5—Totally Agree). Statements included expressions such as "I think I am good at dealing with work pressure" and "I do not let poor performance or results at work affect my self-confidence".

Emotional exhaustion: Researchers evaluated how DRWs experienced emotional exhaustion using a nine-item emotional exhaustion burnout scale adapted to Turkish [93,94]. Participants indicated their level of agreement by rating the statements on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 signifies 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 means 'Totally Agree'. The scale included statements like "I feel dissatisfied with my job" and "I feel frustrated with my job".

4. Results

The measurement and structural models were evaluated using Smart PLS 4, a reliable tool for analyzing the variation in exogenous variables. PLS (Partial Least Squares) is a robust analytical method used to assess models' explanatory power and predictive fit.

4.1. Measurement Model Analysis

It is suggested that scale items with a loading value below 0.7 [95] be identified. Items with loading values below 0.40 were directly deleted. For those with loading values between 0.40–0.70, their Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values were checked to determine if they fell within an acceptable range. The internal consistency analysis was completed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values to measure convergent validity. The suggested framework in the literature is adhered to, and construct reliability is analyzed using Cronbach's alpha and CR [96]. As Table 1 illustrates, the values of Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) surpassed the threshold of 0.7, indicating a high level of internal consistency reliabilities [97].

Furthermore, to ensure each construct's convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated. An examination of Table 1 shows values exceeding the threshold values of 0.7 and 0.5; as established in the literature, the average variance extracted (AVE) values demonstrated convergent validity by exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.5 [98].

Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis. Discriminant validity was well established (Tables 2 and 3), as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) square root for each latent variable was more significant than the correlation values between the latent constructs [99]. In addition, the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation values was under 0.085 [100].

Table 1. Measurement Model Analysis Results.

	Factor Loadings	Mean	Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha \geq 0.70$	CR $\alpha \geq 0.70$	AVE $\alpha \geq 0.50$	VIF
SL1	0.756	2.870	0.921	0.948	0.673	2.172
SL2	0.782					2.590
SL3	0.801					2.313
SL4	0.895					3.620
SL5	0.890					3.510
SL6	0.790					2.053
SL7	0.818					2.301
EE1	0.813	2.875	0.934	0.943	0.658	2.769
EE2	0.849					3.375
EE3	0.883					4.135
EE4	0.715					2.587
EE5	0.900					4.840
EE6	0.852					3.123
EE7	0.705					1.884
EE8	0.695					2.461
EE9	0.858					3.902
WB1	0.869	3.427	0.850	0.870	0.689	2.107
WB2	0.854					2.411
WB3	0.822					1.948
WB4	0.772					1.759

SL—Servant Leadership, WB—Workplace Buoyancy, and EE—Emotional Exhaustion. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

Table 2. Fornell–Larcker criterion and correlation matrix.

Variables	EE	SL	WB
EE	0.811		
SL	−0.391	0.820	
WB	−0.471	0.192	0.830

SL—Servant Leadership, WB—Workplace Buoyancy, and EE—Emotional Exhaustion. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

Table 3. Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Variables	EE	SL	WB
EE			
SL	0.375		
WB	0.519	0.194	

SL—Servant Leadership, WB—Workplace Buoyancy, and EE—Emotional Exhaustion. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

This study utilized a statistical approach to assess the impact of common method bias. It is emphasized that VIF > 5 indicates multicollinearity [101]. The examination of variance inflation factor (VIF) values revealed that the presence of common method bias was not a significant concern. The VIF values, ranging from 1.759 to 4.840, were below the threshold of 5, indicating the absence of substantial common method bias.

4.2. Structural Model Analysis-Hypothesis Testing

A bootstrapping analysis was conducted to evaluate the observed relations in the structural model. Random subsamples were generated from the original dataset and used to estimate a PLS path model. The process was repeated multiple times to ensure robustness. The results obtained from the bootstrapping analysis, including t-values, *p*-values, and confidence intervals, are presented in a table and graph for hypothesis examination.

Within the scope of the hypothesis test results, it was determined that there was a significant negative relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion (β = −0.311; t = 7.074; *p* = 0.001). These findings supported H1. Furthermore, there is a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and workplace buoyancy (β = 0.192; t = 3.330; *p* = 0.001), supporting H2. Also, there is a negative relationship between workplace buoyancy and emotional exhaustion (β = −0.412; t =9.554; *p* = 0.001), supporting H3. Thus, hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

The authors also investigated the mediating role of workplace buoyancy in the association between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. The results indicate partial mediation (Table 4), as the indirect effect of servant leadership on emotional exhaustion through workplace buoyancy is significant (β = −0.059; t = 2.133; *p* = 0.033). Therefore, hypothesis H4 is also supported. Figure 2 visually represents these relationships.

Table 4. Mediation Analysis Results.

Total Effects (SL→EE)			Direct Effect (SL→EE)			Indirect Effect (SL→WB→EE)			97.5% CI	
Coefficient	**T-Value**	***p*-Value**	**Coefficient**	**T-Value**	***p*-Value**	**Coefficient**	**T-Value**	***p*-Value**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
−0.390	8.709	0.001	−0.311	7.074	0.001	−0.079	3.165	0.002	−0.132	−0.034

SL—Servant Leadership, WB—Workplace Buoyancy, and EE—Emotional Exhaustion. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

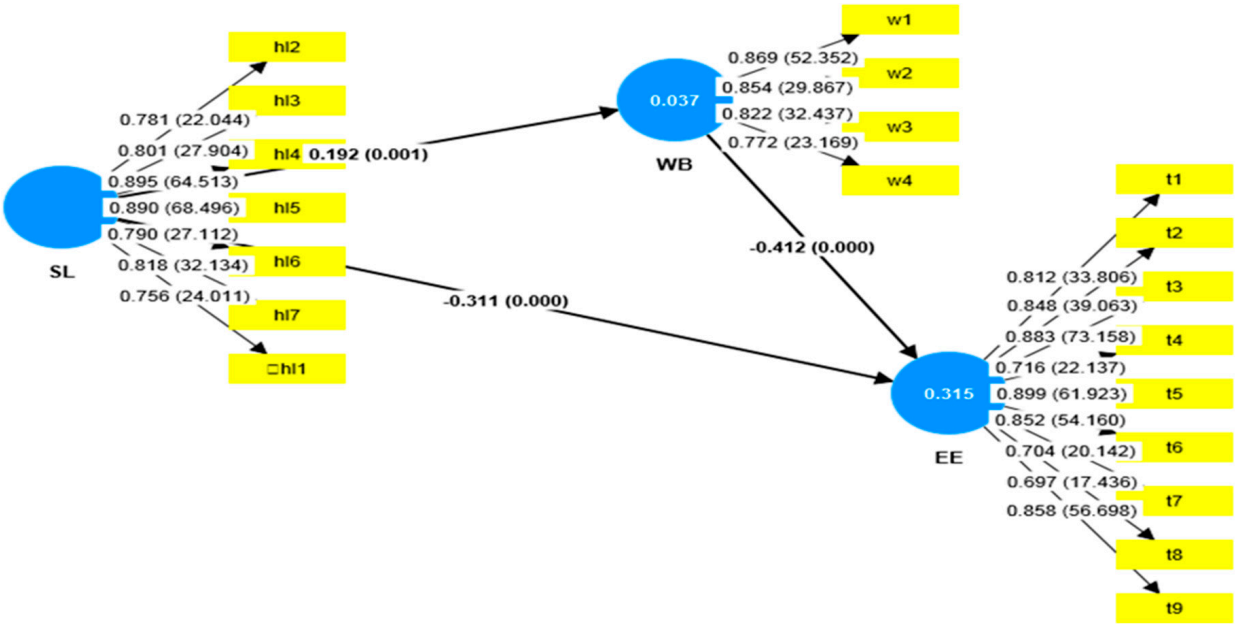

Figure 2. Structural equation model. Source: Prepared by the Authors.

5. Discussion

The study explored the relationships between DRW's perceptions of servant leadership, emotional exhaustion, and workplace buoyancy. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used, and path analysis was employed to test the conceptual model. The study

yielded significant results that could enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of DRWs, thus contributing to a healthier work experience and sustainable crisis and disaster management.

The study's first significant finding is the empirical demonstration of an adverse effect of SL on emotional exhaustion. DRWs combat job demands, such as long working hours, insomnia, stress, and distress from victims' family experiences. They also face life-threatening situations during work and replenish the depleted resources within the framework of JD-R theory. The study illustrates that servant leadership's psychological and instrumental resources can alleviate emotional exhaustion. This study's findings align with previous research. Similarly, recent studies focusing on employees in the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and on frontline healthcare workers found that servant leadership mitigated employees' emotional exhaustion and potential negative impacts [23,24]. Despite locating studies examining this effect in service and health sectors, no research was reached relating to high-pressure, high-risk occupations like firefighters or disaster relief workers. This study thus broadens the literature and offers an original contribution. The study also found a positive effect between servant leadership and workplace buoyancy (WB). WB is a significant resource for employees to manage work-related stress. Since not everyone can effectively handle these stressors [65], servant leadership plays a vital role in enhancing this resource. In the study, this interaction was demonstrated empirically. It has been determined that SL experiences affect the increase in the WB of DRWs. WB not only can combat stressors that develop in the workplace but also plays an essential role in helping employees achieve organizational goals and directing all the resources and time necessary for these goals, that is, in increasing important workplace behaviors such as work engagement, job satisfaction, and performance [84,85]. In roles where the outcome directly impacts human lives, such as in Disaster Relief Workers (DRWs), enhancing individual resources (Workplace buoyancy) and understanding the influence of servant leadership is crucial. The findings of this study align with the limited research available in this field. A study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that autonomy-supportive leadership positively impacts teachers' workplace resources and skills, while autonomy-thwarting leadership has a negative effect [25]. This suggests that leadership style significantly influences how employees manage work-related stress. Specifically, the positive influence of autonomy-supportive leadership implies that a supportive leadership approach enhances employee competence.

Additionally, leaders who demonstrate support and encourage participatory decision-making contribute to the growth of employees' resources [102]. The study suggests that servant leadership, characterized by support, employee orientation, and a focus on development, contributes to increasing Workplace Buoyancy. This approach impacts the growth of employees' individual resources and competencies within the framework of JD-R theory. Servant leadership offers both instrumental and psychological resources required by DRWs. A sincere and close approach enables the development of personal resources, namely workplace buoyancy, through a focus on employee development [26,27,86,87]. Though a literature review reveals limited studies on workplace buoyancy, none have been found that empirically analyze the relationship between workplace buoyancy and servant leadership in terms of accessible resources. This study not only broadens the findings of previous research on stress management capabilities like workplace buoyancy, which significantly influences numerous adverse outcomes in the workplace, but it also uniquely contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between variables within the interaction mechanism of servant leadership and workplace buoyancy.

The study's main purpose includes analyzing the mediating effect of WB. The findings reveal that WB mediates between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. This suggests that the stress and emotional exhaustion experienced by DRWs in high-demand job environments can be alleviated through WB. This is developed from the positive climate created by the supportive, employee-oriented approach of servant leadership. Currently, it appears that both SL and WB are concepts that require emphasis. In fact, emotional exhaustion can lead to employees resigning, underperforming, experiencing job

dissatisfaction, depression, health issues, and ultimately quitting their jobs [12,59,62]. As some researchers suggest, emotional exhaustion, which is seen at a high rate, especially in people working in jobs that involve close contact with people [103], is seen even more as the years of service of DRW employees increase [15]. While reducing and preventing emotional exhaustion has a positive impact on many adverse organizational outcomes, it also has a broad effect on a healthy working environment and the psychological health of individuals. At this point, the result of the study points to an essential issue for decision-makers: focusing on the positive interaction between servant leadership and WB and preventing employees from experiencing emotional exhaustion. The literature emphasizes that, in a study conducted on teachers, WB plays a mediating role in the effect of Autonomy-Supportive Leadership on emotional exhaustion despite the challenges created by pandemic working conditions [25]. This study's findings align with existing literature, once again empirically demonstrating that WB, coupled with the support of SL's employee-focused and supportive approach, reduces emotional exhaustion. This expands on the conclusions of previous limited studies.

The study has important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes significantly to the literature by examining the relationship between leadership style and employee psychological health. Despite the importance of human resources' psychological health, there appears to be limited research on the impact of servant leadership on emotional exhaustion. This condition often leads to negative workplace attitudes and detracts from employee quality of life. It is emphasized in the literature that essential steps must be taken to understand the mechanism of the relationship between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion. There are calls for studies in different sectors, employee groups, and contexts, especially regarding the interaction mechanism between servant leadership and emotional exhaustion [33,34,36]. At this point, the study expands the literature by considering the interaction mechanism and the concept of workplace buoyancy as a mediating variable in the context of DRW employees and public services, where emotional labor is intensely experienced. Additionally, the study contributes empirically to the development of servant leadership theory and highlights how servant leadership is a vital workplace resource within the scope of J-DR theory. Secondly, the theoretical contributions of the study include its emphasis on the concept of WB. According to the literature, there is a need to increase the number of studies that examine the impact of the developing WB concept on employees, particularly with regard to its impact on employee well-being as an individual resource. It is also noted that studies conducted in individualistic societies often have limited generalizability and contribution to the development of the concept. Therefore, there are calls to increase the number of studies in relatively more collectivist societies compared to Western societies in order to achieve more generalizable results [35].

At this point in the study, the effect of the developing WB concept on emotional exhaustion in relation to employee well-being was examined on a sample that is relatively more collectivist than Western societies. The study responds to the calls in the literature and contributes to the development of the WB concept by empirically revealing its effect as a personal resource on emotional exhaustion. This guidance may be particularly useful for studies conducted in societies that are relatively more collectivist than Western countries.

Regarding sustainable public health and disaster management, it is crucial for DRWs to demonstrate adequate performance and have good well-being, as their work directly touches human life. At this point, the practical implication of the study is the emphasis of DRWs on two essential resources, servant leadership (workplace resource) and WB (personal resource), to increase employees' well-being. First, it raises awareness about the high emotional exhaustion levels of DRW employees and the impact of two essential resources, SL and WB, in meeting high job demands. It also introduces a sustainable disaster management practice to reduce this. The fact that the empirical results of the study were conducted on DRWs who took part in the 2023 Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquake, which made a significant impact on a large scale, clearly states that policymakers and

managers at various levels should pay attention to SL and WB in terms of the leadership understanding they display and the competencies that need to be developed or possessed by their employees.

6. Conclusions

Today's work environments have become more stressful due to high job demands. Employees often experience significant emotional exhaustion when they fail to manage their resources effectively in such environments. This issue has become particularly critical and widespread in professions that require direct contact with people whose performance directly affects individuals. Among these, disaster response/relief workers (DRWs) are often among the most emotionally exhausted. This can be attributed to the demanding nature of their work, including factors like job sensitivity, insomnia, emotional pressure, long working hours, and the constant risk to their lives. At this point, reducing emotional exhaustion can help Disaster Response/Relief Workers (DRWs) enhance their psychological and physical well-being, leading to increased productivity, work engagement, and dealing with crises and challenging public health issues. Due to its dual impact, this preventative measure is crucial for organizations and society. Based on this, this study was conducted on Disaster Response/Relief Workers (DRWs) who participated in the 2023 Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquake. The aim was to explore the effects of SL and WB in reducing DRWs' emotional exhaustion. The study revealed that SL significantly reduced emotional exhaustion, with WB playing a mediating role. Therefore, it is suggested that the negative impact of emotional exhaustion can be mitigated by enhancing managers' servant leadership skills and improving employees' WB. Policymakers and senior managers should pay attention to these two concepts for sustainable public health and disaster management.

Recognizing the two essential resources, SL and WB is crucial in helping DRWs combat stress and emotional exhaustion during crisis/disaster interventions. DRWs often operate in busy environments with high job demands. Taking measures to provide these resources can make a significant difference. The first step in this process should be a needs analysis conducted by the institution's human resources departments. They should assess current leadership practices in the organization, determining whether they are authoritarian or supportive and if they favor a servant-leader, employee-oriented approach. Based on these results, areas for improvement should be identified. Upper- and middle-level managers must receive training on awareness and good management practices. This is to help them adopt the employee-oriented, supportive attitudes and the empowerment and development-oriented leadership traits that characterize servant leadership. During training, practical guidance should be provided on how managers should react in various situations and which issues they should prioritize in leader-member interactions. In this process, top management support is vital in fostering an employee-oriented organizational culture and increasing the number of servant leaders. Top management should demonstrate and promote a leadership style that prioritizes employee support over results. The task outcome correlates directly with human lives in the disaster relief process. If DRWs consistently feel supported rather than pressured, this can enhance their growth, constructive risk-taking capacity, and workplace buoyancy. This, in turn, can boost their overall performance. In addition to leadership training, effective communication training should be provided to bridge the gap between leaders and DRWs. This helps to convey that DRWs are not alone in their high job demands pressures. With the backing of their leaders and organizations, they can overcome various challenging scenarios. This approach, where leaders serve their employees, can mitigate the employees' emotional exhaustion. Additionally, once training and awareness about servant leadership are established throughout the organization, a performance evaluation system for managers and employees should be developed. When creating performance assessments for managers or supervisors, considering the various characteristics of servant leadership could be beneficial [34,104]. With this system, by establishing a positive environment provided by servant leadership in the organizational climate in a sustainable way, DRWs can be prevented from

experiencing emotional exhaustion while increasing their WB, which is the ability to cope with difficulties.

The well-being of employees in roles that directly impact human life, like those at DRW, significantly affects organizational performance and public health. At this juncture, policymakers and top managers need to understand the impact of servant leadership within the organizational climate. Emphasis should be placed on WB, which includes their capacity to handle stress and difficulties. Reducing emotional exhaustion by implementing appropriate measures contributes to managerial effectiveness and sustainability in addressing social issues.

Limited time and resources imposed some limitations on this study. The primary limitation is that the study was cross-sectional, focusing on DRWs involved in the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake. Future studies should consider using larger samples and adopting a longitudinal approach for more comprehensive results. This study discussed emotional exhaustion as a significant negative workplace experience and proposed SL and WB as resources to alleviate it. Since a few studies only examined the effect of individuals' characteristics on emotional exhaustion [105,106], it might be beneficial for future studies to include personality traits in their research models. At this point, a profession such as DRW, whose performance directly concerns human life, can offer an alternative to the issues that should be considered in recruiting civil servants. In addition, the study examines the mechanism of the relationship between the servant leadership approach, WB, and emotional exhaustion for the first time in the literature study conducted among accessible sources. At this point, obtaining more comprehensive results by repeating the current model and comparing it with the results of recent studies will expand the literature.

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