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Perceived Transformational Leadership and Career Success Among Chinese University Teachers: The Mediating Role of Career Adaptability

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Abstract. Transformational leadership is a style of leadership that excels at aligning their vision and mission with their followers, motivating them to break away from their interests and dedicate themselves to the effectiveness of the organization, and being able to inspire their followers to realize their potential and strengths. In the field of education, the relationship between transformational leadership, career adaptability, and career success remains worthy of study in the academic arena. This study aimed to investigate the causal relationship between perceived transformational leadership on career success among higher education faculty in Gansu Province, China. The study employed a convenience sampling method to collect cross-sectional data from 605 faculty members across 12 universities in Gansu Province using standardized questionnaires. The data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and the PROCESS macro. The results revealed that transformational leadership not only demonstrated a significant positive predictive effect on teachers' career success, but more importantly, career adaptability played a crucial partial mediating role in this relationship. These findings provide novel empirical evidence for understanding the intrinsic mechanisms through which leadership influences faculty development. This research holds both significant theoretical value and practical implications. Theoretically, it constructs a "leadership-adaptability-career success" theoretical model, deepening our understanding of faculty career development mechanisms in higher education contexts. Practically, it offers concrete strategies for university administrators to enhance faculty career development, including actionable recommendations such as implementing transformational

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leadership training programs and establishing career adaptability cultivation systems.

Keywords: university teachers; perceived transformational leadership; career success; career adaptability; education management

1. Introduction

With the deepening of China's education reform, the contribution of universities to national economic growth and social progress is becoming increasingly important (Fu, 2023). Universities not only disseminate knowledge but also cultivate innovators (Wang et al., 2020). Teachers are responsible for human, intellectual, cultural, and character-building while training professionals in various fields (Chen, 2022). They represent the primary source of high-quality human resource development (Ingarianti & Pratiwi, 2024). Ingarianti et al. (2022) argued that a professional success orientation helps teachers improve their performance and competence, ultimately achieving their professional goals. Teachers with a subjective career success orientation may define success through self-satisfaction (e.g., perceiving success when students achieve high test scores or deriving satisfaction from their hard work and personal values). Nexhip et al. (2025) noted that teachers motivated by idealism demonstrate stronger intrinsic motivation and higher career success rates compared to those who enter the profession primarily for financial reasons, who typically exhibit lower job satisfaction and dedication. Therefore, teachers' professional success significantly contributes to national knowledge advancement and social progress. For university teachers, professional success can be attained not only through teaching activities but also via educational research. This dual achievement enhances both the teaching community's professional standards and the unique value of academic careers, while playing a pivotal role in cultivating high-level talent (Sharma & Kumra, 2022).

Additionally, professional success enhances teachers' job satisfaction and income potential (Lonika & Riasnugrahani, 2022). As career success increases, institutional recognition typically follows, often manifested through salary increments that contribute to greater job contentment and professional fulfillment (Ingarianti & Pratiwi, 2024). Regarding strategies to enhance professional success, integrating career construction theory into higher education management and examining faculty perceptions of transformational leadership represent effective approaches for improving both teaching quality and workforce development (Rad et al., 2022). While transformational leadership has been extensively studied and validated in business contexts (Nasir et al., 2022), research remains limited in higher education settings (Al-Husseini et al., 2021). This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success among university faculty, thereby contributing to the existing literature.

In school settings, the role of administrative leaders is critical (Brown et al., 2019). Effective leadership serves as the cornerstone for achieving positive outcomes (Villaver & Mugadza, 2024) and directly enhances education quality

(Andoko et al., 2024). Transformational leadership positively influences multiple aspects of teaching: teacher performance (Alzoraiki et al., 2023; Kou et al., 2024), commitment (Metaferia et al., 2023), psychological well-being (Lin et al., 2022), self-efficacy (Villaver & Mugadza, 2024), team efficacy (Sánchez-Rosas et al., 2023), innovation (Hidayat & Patras, 2024), and professional engagement (Polatcan et al., 2024). As an essential professional concept, transformational leadership should be understood and practiced by teachers to achieve career success (Saleem et al., 2022). Effective school leadership enhances teachers' professional success through smooth team management (Alzoraiki, 2023). Furthermore, career adaptability serves as a key resource for addressing career challenges and role transitions (Xue, 2022). Transformational leaders foster teacher potential by creating innovative, supportive, and motivating environments (Li et al., 2023), which promote career concern, curiosity, control, and confidence (Chang et al., 2023) for career development and success (Yen et al., 2023).

One contribution of this study is confirming career adaptability's mediating role between transformational leadership and teachers' career success, addressing an education research gap. The revealed "transformational leadership → career adaptability → career success" pathway improves understanding of teacher career development. Using career construction theory also offers new insights into university teachers' career success, especially for under-researched faculty groups. Another contribution is providing practical guidance for school leaders: transformational leadership strengthens teachers' career adaptability, supporting their professional growth. The findings highlight career adaptability's importance and help improve teacher training programs. These results advance educational management research while suggesting ways to enhance teacher quality and school management.

The following research questions and hypotheses are addressed to realize the objective of the study which aimed to determine the causal relationship between perceived transformational leadership on career success among higher education faculty in Gansu Province, China.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a positive relationship between perceived transformational leadership and university teachers' career success in China?

RQ2: Is there a positive relationship between perceived transformational leadership and university teachers' career adaptability in China?

RQ3: Is career adaptability directly associated with university teachers' career success in China?

RQ4: Does career adaptability mediate the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success among university teachers in Gansu Province, China?

Research Hypotheses

H1: University teachers perceived a positive and significant effect of transformational leadership on career success.

H2: University teachers perceived a positive and significant effect of transformational leadership on Career Adaptability.

H3: Career adaptability has a positive and significant impact on the career success of university teachers.

H4: Career adaptability mediates the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success among university teachers in Gansu Province, China.

Figure 1 shows how university teachers' perceived transformational leadership affects career success (H1) and career adaptability (H2). It also shows career adaptability's impact on career success (H3) and its mediating role between leadership and career success (H4).

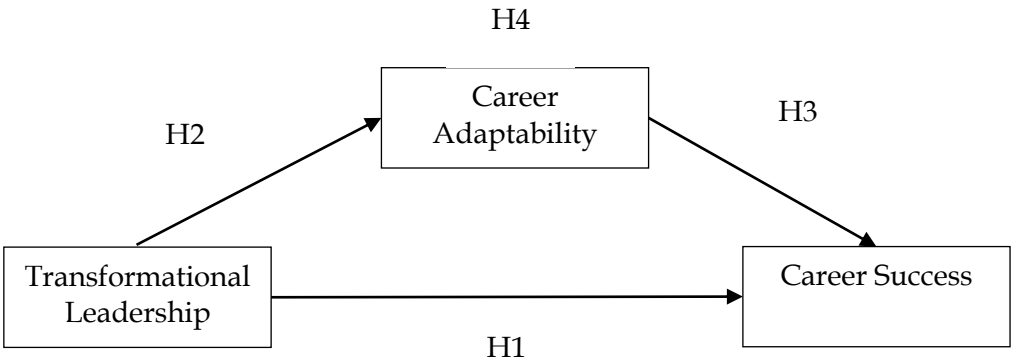

Figure 1: Research model

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational Leadership and Career Success

Transformational leadership is widely recognized as one of the most effective approaches to enhance employee career success, as it emphasizes intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation (Agrawal & Pradhan, 2023). Through inspirational motivation, transformational leaders enable followers to better appreciate their contributions and find greater meaning in their work (Al-Ghazali, 2020). These leaders provide constructive feedback to encourage employees to develop creative solutions (Agrawal & Pradhan, 2023), facilitate effective team interactions, and help achieve desired outcomes by aligning with team members' talents and addressing their innate needs (Crede et al., 2019). Their personalized approach focuses on developing others' abilities, providing mentorship, and attending to socio-emotional needs (Al-Ghazali, 2020). Specifically in education, transformational leaders support teachers in optimizing their instructional practices through recognition of

excellence and constructive feedback (Alzoraiki et al., 2023). As a crucial concept for educators, transformational leadership requires deep understanding and active practice, as it significantly influences teachers' career success (Saleem et al., 2022).

2.2 Transformational Leadership and Career Adaptability

Individuals require specific resources to adapt to career changes and address work-related challenges (Savickas, 2005). According to career construction theory, transformational leaders can simultaneously influence the physical work environment and enhance employees' psychological resources (Wildan et al., 2022). Career adaptability enables employees to develop a coherent career self-concept (Safavi & Bouzari, 2019), equipping them to navigate career transitions and resolve occupational difficulties (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Research by Lan and Chen (2020) demonstrates that transformational leadership serves as a precursor for career adaptability development (Delle & Searle, 2022). In educational contexts, transformational leadership fosters innovative, supportive, and engaging environments where teachers gain professional confidence, realize their potential, and attain higher levels of career fitness (Li et al., 2023). As Wildan et al. (2022) established, career adaptability among teachers can be cultivated through intentional interventions, with transformational leadership being a particularly effective catalyst. Empirical evidence confirms transformational leadership's significant impact on teachers' career adaptability.

2.3 Career Adaptability and Career Success

In today's rapidly evolving economy, emerging adults must cultivate psychosocial resources to navigate dynamic workplaces (Wildan et al., 2022). Career adaptability enhances workplace integration and predicts both objective and subjective career success (Zhang et al., 2020). Its four dimensions—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—are measurable and malleable competencies (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Yen et al., 2023), enabling individuals to secure optimal employment and well-being (Ebner & Paul, 2023). For teachers, career adaptability serves as a psychological asset to overcome challenges (Koç & Fidan, 2022), fostering professional agency and confidence (Chang et al., 2023). It correlates with career success independent of income stability (Purba, 2020) and moderates professional outcomes (Granziera et al., 2021).

2.4 The Mediating Role of Career Adaptability

Transformational leadership fosters an innovative, supportive, and engaging atmosphere for teachers. Within such environments, teachers gain professional assurance, motivation to realize their potential, and enhanced professional competence (Li et al., 2023). This atmosphere cultivates teachers' professional concern, curiosity, control, and confidence (Chang et al., 2023), which in turn promotes career-oriented behaviors essential for professional development and success (Yen et al., 2023). Lan and Chen (2020) demonstrate that transformational leaders effectively shape work environments while enriching teachers' psychological resources. Wildan et al. (2022) further indicate that transformational leadership enhances teachers' career adaptability, thereby moderating their career outcomes (Granziera et al., 2021). Consistent with these findings, Wen et al. (2023) established that Chinese teachers' career adaptability

correlates with career success through improved well-being - a pattern replicated internationally (Salahudin, 2021). Collectively, these studies confirm that career adaptability mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and teachers' career success (Al-Ghazali, 2020; Wildan et al., 2022).

2.5 Research Model

Career construct theory suggests that individuals who possess adaptive readiness can effectively activate adaptive resources and enhance adaptive responses, which positively impacts career adaptation outcomes. These individuals build their careers by employing self-actualizing adaptive strategies (Korkmaz, 2023; Savickas, 2005, 2013).

As a form of adaptive readiness, transformational leadership plays an exemplary role in motivating employees (Akhtar et al., 2020). Transformational leaders' inspirational motivation helps followers recognize the value of their contributions and derive greater meaning and purpose from their work (Al-Ghazali, 2020). They provide constructive feedback to encourage creative problem-solving (Agrawal & Pradhan, 2023; Le, 2020), foster team interaction, and achieve outcomes aligned with team members' talents and intrinsic needs (Crede et al., 2019). Their individualized consideration focuses on capability development, mentoring, and addressing socioemotional needs (Al-Ghazali, 2020). When subordinates experience satisfaction, productivity naturally increases (Manzoor & Jan, 2021).

Furthermore，in organizational contexts, human intervention research specifically identifies transformational leadership as supporting career adaptability (Lan & Chen, 2020). Transformational leaders identify necessary organizational changes and proactively implement them (Bass, 1985) while shaping the work environment (Bass & Avolio, 1990). By reorganizing the organizational environment, they motivate full employee engagement (Ng, 2017), exposing employees to novel workplace situations that trigger adaptive resources (Wang et al., 2017). Environmentally provided psychological characteristics constitute the key factor in activating career adaptability (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Career adjustment significantly correlates with various career resources - including adaptation resources, knowledge/skills, and motivational/environmental resources - each uniquely contributing to different success aspects (Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020). Successful career development emerges through continuous social environment adaptation to achieve optimal person-environment integration (Wildan et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative approach to assess the impact of transformational leadership on career success among university teachers in Gansu Province, China. Quantitative research methods, through standardized data collection and statistical analysis, can objectively and efficiently verify causal relationships between variables. The quantitative results based on large samples possess both replicability and comparability. Data were collected through convenience

sampling using questionnaires distributed via the online platform "Questionnaire Star." This method offers advantages such as cost efficiency, high reliability, and rapid data collection, enabling generalizations from a smaller sample to a broader population (Stratton, 2021). However, it also has certain limitations, such as potential systematic biases in statistical results (Etikan et al., 2016). Following Sudman's (1976) recommendation, a minimum of 500 valid responses was targeted. We conducted Harman's single-factor test to assess common method bias. The results showed that the primary factor accounted for 33.239% of the total variance, indicating no significant common method variance issue in the data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This study strictly adhered to Thai research ethics standards and obtained ethical approval from the Dhurakij Pundit University Institutional Review Board (Certificate No. DPU_BSH 0811/2567). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

3.2 Study Sample

This study examined university teachers in Gansu Province, categorized as an economically underdeveloped region in China, with an initial collection of 636 questionnaires. After excluding invalid responses, 605 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. The gender distribution indicated male teachers accounted for 53.88% (n=326) and female teachers 46.12% (n=279). In terms of age distribution, participants were categorized as follows: 18.35% (n=110) aged 20-30 years, 36.53% (n=221) aged 31-40 years, 41.49% (n=251) aged 41-50 years, and 3.80% (n=23) aged 51 years or older. Regarding educational background, the sample consisted of 38.33% (n=232) with bachelor's degrees or below, 47.77% (n=289) with master's degrees, and 13.88% (n=84) with doctoral degrees.

3.3 Data Collection and Instruments

The questionnaire was used to collect data through convenience sampling, and the main advantage of this method is that it can infer a larger group based on a smaller group, and it has the advantages of higher reliability, lower cost, and higher collection efficiency. The questionnaire production utility software, Questionnaire Star, was used to collect data through convenience sampling, and all surveys were distributed to public university teachers in Gansu Province, China, through online survey systems (e.g., QQ, email, WeChat, etc.); data collection lasted 17 days, from August 14 to 30, 2024, and respondents had to be teachers with a staff in the school. In total, 650 questionnaires were distributed to university teachers in Gansu Province. Of these. 636 were retrieved, and, after excluding invalid questionnaires, 605 valid questionnaires were retained, with a valid response rate of 93.076%.

4. Measurement

The transformational leadership scale developed by Li and Shi (2008) was used to assess teachers' perceptions of school leadership. The 26-item scale measures four key dimensions: morality (8 items), leadership charisma (6 items), vision motivation (6 items), and personalized care (6 items). Reliability analysis demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's α coefficients of 0.940 for morality, 0.927 for leadership charisma, 0.918 for vision motivation, and

0.903 for personalized care, yielding an overall α of 0.957. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated good model fit, with χ^2/df = 1.831, RMR = 0.038, SRMR = 0.023, RMSEA = 0.037, and GFI = 0.940, all meeting recommended thresholds for scale validation.

The present study adopted the Career Success Scale developed by Eby et al. (2003) in the context of borderless careers. This 11-item scale comprises three dimensions: intra-organizational competitiveness (3 items), extra-organizational competitiveness (3 items), and career satisfaction (5 items). Notably, the career satisfaction measure was adapted from Greenhaus et al. (1990). This instrument comprehensively assesses career success through both subjective and objective dimensions, aligning well with contemporary conceptualizations of career success and current theoretical trends. Reliability analysis demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.934 and dimension-level coefficients of 0.869, 0.853, and 0.905. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated strong model fit with χ^2/df = 1.510, RMR = 0.029, SRMR = 0.018, RMSEA = 0.029, GFI = 0.982, meeting standard validation criteria.

Additionally, this study adopted the Career Adaptability Abbreviated Scale (CAAS-SF) developed by Yu et al. (2020). The 12-item scale measures four dimensions: career concern (3 items), career control (3 items), career curiosity (3 items), and career confidence (3 items). Reliability analysis showed excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.953 and Cronbach's α coefficients of each dimension were 0.859, 0.870, 0.873, and 0.859, respectively. Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated good model fit， with χ^2/df = 2.073, RMR = 0.030, SRMR = 0.016, RMSEA = 0.042, GFI = 0.974, all meeting recommended thresholds for scale validation.

4.1 Data Analysis

We conducted data analysis using SPSS statistical software. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to examine the relationships and correlations among variables, thereby validating the measurement model. Subsequently, we employed Model 4 from the SPSS PROCESS macro to perform path analysis, assessing both the direct and indirect effects of the mediating variables.

5. Analysis

5.1 Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. The results indicate moderately high levels for transformational leadership (TL: M=3.422, SD=0.910), career adaptability (CA: M=3.443, SD=1.098), and career success (CC: M=3.446, SD=1.002). Significant positive correlations were observed between TL and CA (r=0.453, p<0.01), TL and CC (r=0.602, p<0.01), as well as between CA and CC (r=0.404, p<0.01).

Table 1: Mean, SD, and Correlation Matrix

Variable	M	SD	TL	CA	CC
1. Gender			0.852	0.237	0.604
2. Age			0.000***	0.031*	0.000***
3. Educational background			0.043*	0.000***	0.320
4. TL	3.422	0.910	0.660		
5.CA	3.444	1.098	0.453**	0.683	
6. CC	3.446	1.002	0.602**	0.404**	0.665

Note: N=605; ***p<0.001, **p<0.01; TL=transformational leadership; CA=career adaptability; CC=career success
Source: Created by authors

5.2 Hypothesis Testing

In this study, age and education level were included as background control variables. The results demonstrate distinct demographic patterns where age significantly differentiates career success and adaptability but shows no variation in perceived transformational leadership, whereas educational attainment significantly influences both leadership perception and career adaptability yet exhibits no discernible impact on ultimate career success.

This study used the SPSS PROCESS plug-in model4 from Hayes et al. (2011) to analyze the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success, the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career adaptability, the relationship between career adaptability and career success, and the mediating role of career adaptability among university teachers in Gansu Province.

The results are shown in Table 2. There is a significant positive effect of perceived transformational leadership on career success among university teachers (β=.600, *p*<.001), indicating that the higher the level of perceived transformational leadership, the higher the level of career success among university teachers, thus, validating H1. As shown in Table 2, there is a significant positive effect of perceived transformational leadership on career adaptability (β=.543, *p*<.001) among university teachers, indicating that the more severe the transformational leadership, the higher the level of career adaptability, thus, validating H2. In addition, there is a significant positive effect of university teachers' career adaptability on career success (β=.502, *p*<.001), indicating that the higher the level of career adaptability, the higher the level of career success of the university teachers. Thus, confirming H3.

In Model 1, there is a significant positive effect of Perceived Transformational Leadership on Career Success among university teachers (B=.600, p<.001). In Model 2, university teachers' perceived transformational leadership had a significant positive effect on career adaptability (B=.543, p<.001), indicating that career adaptability varies with the level of transformational leadership. Adding career adaptability as a mediating variable in Model 3 showed that university

teachers' perceived transformational leadership (B=.502, $p<.001$), and career adaptability (B=.176, $p<.001$) still had a significant effect on career success, but the B-values of perceived transformational leadership, and career adaptability on career success in Model 3 were smaller than the B-values of perceived transformational leadership, and career adaptability on career success B-value in Model 1. Therefore, combining the regression analyses of Models 1, 2, and 3, it is clear that, controlling for the effects of age and educational attainment, career adaptability plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success among university teachers, thus validating H4.

Table 2: Analysis of mediation model of career adaptability

variant	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	CC			CA			CC		
	B	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*B*	*SE*	*t*
20-30 years old	.307	.092	3.348***	-.315	.113	-2.783***	.362	.090	4.020***
31-40 years	.485	.091	5.315***	-.327	.113	-2.903***	.542	.090	6.043***
41-50 years	1.243	.180	7.902***	-.050	.222	-2.223	1.252	.176	7.115***
Undergraduate and below	.049	.068	.717	.243	.085	2.879***	.006	.067	.094
bachelor's degree	.076	.101	.756	.665	.124	5.357***	-.041	.101	-.407
TL	.600	.036	16.755***	.543	.044	12.334***	.502	.039	12.848***
CA							.176	.032	5.435***
Adj.R^2	.420			.263			.447		
F-value	71.897***			35.600***			68.787***		

Note: ***p<0.001; TL=transformational leadership; CA=career adaptability; CC=career success; B=unstandardized coefficient, SE=standard error; Age and education are dummy variables: 20-30 years old, 31-40 years old, and 41-50 years old for the experimental group, and the reference group 51 years old and above; bachelor's degree and below, master's degree is the experimental group, and PhD. is the reference group; Source: Created by authors

This study further examined the mediating effect of career adaptability using the bootstrap method of validating mediators. The bootstrap sample size was set at 2000 and the confidence level was set at 95% as recommended by Diciccio and Romano (1988). Results showed a direct effect value of (.509, p<.001, 95% CI [.433, .586]); an indirect effect value of (.097, p<.001, 95% CI [.052, .145]); and a total effect value of (.606, p<.001, 95% CI [.536, .676]), with mediated effects accounting for 16% of the total effect of 16%, and re-validating career adaptability as a partial mediator between transformational leadership and career success, confirming H4, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Intermediary effect bootstrap test form

pathway relationship	estimated value	95% confidence interval	
		limit	lower limit
Direct Effect: Transformational Leadership→ Career Success	.509***	0.433	0.586
Indirect Effects: Transformational Leadership→ Career Adaptability→ Career Success	.097***	0.052	0.145
The Total Effect: Transformational Leadership→ Career Success	.606***	0.536	0.676

Note: ***p<0.001

6. Discussion

This study confirms that university teachers in Gansu Province, China generally perceive transformational leadership as significantly enhancing career success (supporting Hypothesis H1), a finding that aligns with Tannady's (2023) cross-cultural research conclusions. Specifically, principals' transformational leadership promotes teacher development through three key dimensions: first, it directly enhances teachers' professional competence, classroom teaching quality, and career identity (Manzoor & Jan, 2021); second, it establishes effective teacher-leader collaboration mechanisms (Hafsari, 2020) to create a supportive teaching environment; third, it develops a dual incentive system incorporating performance recognition (Saleem et al., 2022) and strategic goal alignment (Kou et al., 2024). This study focuses on the importance of transformational leadership in driving career success, adding new content and perspective to the literature in the field of leadership and career development (Al-Ghazali, 2020). Of particular significance is the discovery of concrete behavioral expressions of transformational leadership and their operational mechanisms in the distinctive institutional setting of Chinese higher education (Saleem et al., 2022).

This study further confirms that university teachers in Gansu Province, China generally perceive transformational leadership as having a significantly positive impact on career adaptability (supporting Hypothesis H2). This finding not only aligns with Lan and Chen's (2020) perspective on the relationship between leadership and career adaptability, but also empirically validates core propositions of career construction theory (Wildan et al., 2022). The research demonstrates that transformational leadership effectively enhances teachers' capacity to adapt to workplace changes (Delle & Searle, 2022) through dual pathways: providing psychological resources (e.g., professional identity) and improving physical work environments (e.g., professional development support) (Lan & Chen, 2020). Notably, specific dimensions of leadership behaviors - including personal growth guidance (Al-Ghazali, 2020), clear career expectations, and developmental support - exert differential effects on teachers' career adaptability. These findings deepen our understanding of contextual factors in the career adaptation process within educational settings.

This study confirms that career adaptability significantly enhances career success among university teachers in Gansu Province (supporting Hypothesis H3), a finding that not only aligns with the research conclusions of Haenggli and Hirschi (2020) but also extends the core propositions of career construction theory (Guan et al., 2015; Savickas, 2013) through empirical evidence from China's higher education context. The research demonstrates that highly adaptable teachers effectively overcome professional obstacles (Koç et al., 2022) by cultivating career concern, curiosity, control, and confidence (Chang et al., 2023). These teachers exhibit distinctive behavioral characteristics including quicker psychological adjustment, accurate self-assessment, and proactive advice-seeking behaviors (Chughtai et al., 2023), while demonstrating superior performance in environmental adaptation, role transitions, and work engagement (Chong & Leong, 2017).

This study confirms the mediating role of career adaptability between perceived transformational leadership and career success among university teachers in Gansu Province (supporting Hypothesis H4), a finding that not only corroborates Wildan et al.'s (2022) research but also, through integrating career construction theory (Li et al., 2023), reveals the dual-path mechanism ("environment shaping-resource provision") by which transformational leadership enhances career adaptability (Wang et al., 2019). The results demonstrate that transformational leadership directly influences teachers' career adaptation processes by fostering innovative and supportive school climates (Granziera et al., 2021), while career adaptability subsequently promotes career success through enhanced subjective well-being (Wen et al., 2023) - a mechanism showing cross-cultural robustness (Salahudin, 2021). Furthermore, by verifying the mediating relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success via career adaptability, these findings deepen the comprehension of the "leadership-adaptability-career outcome" mechanism in educational organizations and provide cross-cultural evidence for career development theories.

This study has several limitations. First, it omitted contextual variables like school type (public/private) which may affect results, which can be investigated in the future. Second, relying solely on quantitative methods limits exploration of underlying mechanisms, and in the future mixed methods are recommended for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships studied. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions, which limits the ability to infer causality and a longitudinal study is recommended to examine the long-term effects of transformational leadership on teacher career success. Finally, using only Gansu Province universities may reduce generalizability, Future research could extend to universities in economically developed coastal provinces. Despite these limitations, the findings retain strong validity. The hypotheses build on established Career Construction Theory and existing evidence. Methodologically, standardized tools and rigorous analysis controlled for potential biases. The identified mediating role of career adaptability both aligns with current educational administration research and offers practical insights into faculty career development.

This study expands the research data on the field of transformational leadership in educational settings and this study focuses on the importance of transformational leadership in driving career success, adding new content and perspective to the literature in the field of leadership and career development (Al-Ghazali, 2020). In previous research, it was found that leaders enhance teachers' career success by stimulating intrinsic motivation and the high-level needs of the teacher population, and shaping the shared vision of the organization; the present study not only validates the applicability of this relationship in the college and university teacher population but more importantly discovers the specific manifestations of transformational leadership and the mechanisms of its influence in the specific context of Chinese universities and colleges (Saleem et al., 2022). In addition, this study confirmed the relationship of career adaptability in the relationship between perceived transformational leadership and career success among university teachers, extending Career Construction Theory. This study opens up a new perspective on leadership, and at the same time it adds to the practical knowledge of fostering career adaptability in organizational settings, shedding new light on the theoretical and practical applications in related fields (Lan & Chen, 2020).

6.1 Practical Implications

This study offers specific guidance for university human resource management regarding leadership selection. Institutions should prioritize candidates demonstrating transformational leadership traits (Kou et al., 2024), particularly those with strong moral values who can enhance teacher professionalism, boost morale, and stimulate motivation, creativity, and potential (Hafsari, 2020). For current leaders, targeted training programs should be implemented to cultivate and strengthen transformational leadership competencies.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the influence of transformational leadership on the career development of university teachers in Gansu Province, China, with a particular focus on the mediating role of career adaptability. The findings demonstrate that transformational leadership significantly enhances teachers' career success through both direct and indirect pathways. Specifically, when institutional leaders demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors—including motivating inspiration, stimulating innovation, and supporting professional development—they create work environments that simultaneously improve teaching quality and enhance teachers' psychological well-being. The study identifies career adaptability as playing a crucial mediating role in this relationship: transformational leadership enhances teachers' capacity to adapt to changing professional environments, thereby facilitating their career success.

The core contribution of this research lies in revealing the multifaceted benefits of cultivating transformational leadership in higher education institutions: it not only directly improves teachers' career achievements but also helps them better navigate professional challenges through enhanced adaptability. Based on these findings, we recommend that university administrators prioritize developing

transformational leadership qualities among department chairs and deans while implementing specialized training programs to enhance faculty members' career adaptability skills. For education policymakers, the results suggest that establishing long-term mechanisms for leadership development could serve as an effective approach to improving faculty development and institutional effectiveness in higher education.

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