



Research on the Impact of Leadership Styles in Organizational Development on College Students' Positive Psychological Experiences from the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory

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How to cite this paper: Shi, J. (2025) Research on the Impact of Leadership Styles in Organizational Development on College Students' Positive Psychological Experiences from the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory. *Open Access Library Journal*, 12: e14550. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1114550>

Received: November 5, 2025

Accepted: November 15, 2025

Published: November 18, 2025

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Abstract

With the acceleration of the popularization process of higher education, university organizational development is confronted with new challenges, such as the diversification of students' needs and the complexity of management. Against this backdrop, leadership styles, as a key variable in the organizational environment, exert a profound influence on college students' psychological experiences and behavioral manifestations. Based on Self-Determination Theory, this study explores the impact of different leadership styles in organizational development on college students' positive psychological experiences. By analyzing the characteristics of transformational, supportive, transactional, and passive leadership styles, and combining case analysis, it theoretically reveals the mechanisms through which each leadership style affects college students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings indicate that transformational and supportive leadership styles significantly enhance college students' positive psychological experiences, while transactional and passive leadership styles exert inhibitory effects. The study proposes strategies such as optimizing leadership styles and constructing a supportive organizational environment, providing theoretical foundations and practical guidance for university organizational development and the promotion of college students' mental health.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Organizational Development, Leadership Styles, College Students, Positive Psychological Experiences, Self-Determination Theory

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

As higher education transitions from an “elite” to a “mass” model, university organizational development faces multiple challenges. On one hand, the contradiction between the expanding student population and limited resources has become increasingly prominent. For instance, UNESCO [1] reported that the global gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education reached 38% in 2018, with some regions even exceeding 80%. This situation makes it difficult for the traditional “managerial” approach to meet the diverse needs of individuals [2]. On the other hand, the waves of globalization and digitalization have raised higher demands for college students’ core competencies, such as critical thinking, innovation ability, and psychological resilience, necessitating a shift for universities from “knowledge transmission” to “holistic education” [3]. Against this backdrop, leadership styles within the organizational environment, as a key variable influencing student behavior and psychology, urgently require systematic exploration of their underlying mechanisms.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a crucial perspective for understanding this issue. The theory, originally proposed by Deci and Ryan [4], emphasizes that an individual’s psychological growth relies on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When individuals perceive their actions as self-determined (autonomy), believe they possess the ability to complete tasks (competence), and feel accepted and respected within a group (relatedness), they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation and positive emotions, thereby enhancing creativity, resilience to setbacks, and organizational identification [5]. Empirical studies have consistently supported these claims across various contexts, including educational settings. For example, Niemiec and Ryan [6] found that when students’ basic psychological needs were satisfied in school, they exhibited higher levels of engagement, well-being, and academic performance.

As a typical organizational system, universities’ leadership styles (e.g., transformational, supportive, transactional) indirectly influence students’ psychological need satisfaction by shaping the organizational climate. For instance, a mentor’s heuristic guidance may enhance students’ willingness for autonomous exploration, while an authoritative management style may trigger self-doubt and career burnout [7]. However, existing research has predominantly focused on workplace settings, with limited attention to university organizations. A systematic review by Gagné and Deci [8] noted that while SDT has been widely applied in organiza-

tional behavior studies, its application in higher education remains underdeveloped, particularly in exploring the dynamic relationship between leadership styles and college students' psychological experiences. Moreover, few studies have revealed the mediating role of psychological needs in this process, leaving a critical gap in the literature.

The significance of this study lies in two aspects: theoretically, it constructs an analytical framework of "leadership style—psychological needs—positive experiences" based on SDT, enriching the research perspectives in university organizational behavior studies; practically, it provides empirical evidence for universities to optimize management strategies and enhance educational quality, aiding in the cultivation of compound talents adaptable to future societal demands [9].

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

The deepening of higher education reform and the diversification of college students' psychological needs have made the influence mechanism of leadership styles a core issue in organizational development. Against this backdrop, clarifying the action pathways and boundary conditions of different leadership styles holds urgency for optimizing university management practices. This study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the main features of different leadership styles in universities?
- 2) What impacts do various leadership styles have on students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs?
- 3) What are the effects of leadership styles, through psychological needs, on students' resilience, innovation motivation, and organizational identification?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Core Framework of Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan in the 1980s, focuses on the development and maintenance mechanisms of individuals' intrinsic motivation. It emphasizes that the intrinsic motivation for individuals' behaviors stems from the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [10].

Autonomy refers to an individual's sense of free choice and control over their own behaviors. That is, individuals can decide the direction and manner of their actions based on their own will and values, rather than being subject to external coercion or excessive control. When individuals experience a high degree of autonomy, they perceive their behaviors as self-determined and are thus more likely to actively engage in activities [11]. For example, in the learning process of students, if they can autonomously choose learning content and methods, they often develop a stronger interest and higher enthusiasm for learning.

Competence refers to an individual's confidence in their own abilities and the sense of achievement gained during the process of completing tasks. When individuals believe they have the ability to accomplish a certain task and actually achieve

success in doing so, they experience a sense of competence. This sense of competence further enhances an individual's self-confidence and self-efficacy, prompting them to be more willing to take on more challenging tasks [12]. For instance, a student who continuously solves difficult problems and achieves excellent results in mathematics learning will feel their ability to master and apply mathematical knowledge, thereby generating stronger motivation for mathematics learning.

Relatedness refers to the emotional connection of an individual being accepted, respected, and cared for within a group. Humans are social beings and have a desire to establish connections with others and integrate into groups. When individuals feel warmth, support, and a sense of belonging in a group, they are more willing to make efforts for the group and can obtain emotional satisfaction within the group [13]. For example, in a class, if students feel cared for and accepted by teachers and classmates, they will love the class more and actively participate in class activities.

When these three basic psychological needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to experience positive emotions, creativity, and sustained motivation, thereby promoting their psychological growth and all-round development. Conversely, if these needs are not met, individuals may develop negative psychological states, such as anxiety, burnout, and depression, which have adverse effects on their physical and mental health and behavioral performance [14]. However, although existing research has extensively validated the application of self-determination theory in different fields, there is still a lack of in-depth and systematic research on the specific action mechanisms of the three needs in different cultural backgrounds and organizational types, as well as their interactive relationships. In addition, further exploration is needed on how to more effectively promote the satisfaction of individuals' three basic needs to achieve the best motivation-stimulating and psychological development effects.

2.2. Research on the Relationship between Leadership Styles and Psychological Experiences

2.2.1. Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership drives organizational change by inspiring and motivating employees to pursue excellence. Bass [15] proposed that transformational leadership has four key characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Research shows that transformational leadership can significantly enhance employees' intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment by granting subordinates autonomy and providing personalized support [16]. For example, in university research teams, a mentor's transformational leadership style (such as encouraging independent exploration and recognizing innovative achievements) can enhance students' enthusiasm for scientific research and their ability to withstand setbacks. Wang and Howell [17] found that when mentors adopt a transformational leadership approach, students are more willing to actively participate in research projects, actively explore new research methods and ideas, and show stronger per-

severance and problem-solving abilities when facing scientific research difficulties.

However, some research also points out that the effectiveness of transformational leadership may be influenced by factors such as organizational culture and employees' personality traits. For example, in a highly centralized organizational culture, transformational leadership may find it difficult to fully exert its motivational effects because organizational systems and cultures may limit employees' autonomy and innovation [18]. In addition, employees with different personality traits may respond differently to transformational leadership. Some employees may be more adaptable to the motivational methods of transformational leadership, while others may be less sensitive to them.

2.2.2. Supportive Leadership Style

Supportive leadership focuses on caring for employees' needs and providing emotional support. Eisenberger *et al.* [19] argued that supportive leadership can promote employees' mental health by reducing work stress and enhancing a sense of belonging. In a university environment, the supportive behaviors of university counselors (such as listening to students' confusions and coordinating resources to solve problems) can alleviate students' anxiety and improve their academic satisfaction [9].

For example, a study on college students found that when counselors can timely pay attention to students' psychological states and provide emotional support and practical help, students are more able to maintain a positive attitude when facing academic pressure and life difficulties and show higher satisfaction with their studies and campus life [20].

However, supportive leadership also has certain limitations. Excessive support may lead employees to develop a dependent mentality towards leaders, reducing their own autonomy and problem-solving abilities. In addition, if supportive leaders fail to provide appropriate support according to employees' actual needs and instead offer help blindly, it may cause employees' aversion and have a negative impact on their psychological experiences [21].

2.2.3. Transactional Leadership Style

Transactional leadership is task-completion and performance-reward oriented, emphasizing rules and efficiency. Bass and Avolio [22] pointed out that transactional leadership mainly motivates employees to complete tasks by setting clear goals and reward mechanisms.

In the long run, excessive reliance on external rewards may weaken intrinsic motivation. For example, in university student organizations, a leadership style that evaluates members' contributions solely based on quantitative indicators (such as the number of activity participations) may lead students to overlook the value of the tasks themselves and reduce their willingness to invest. Deci *et al.* [23] showed that when individuals engage in an activity mainly to obtain external rewards, once the external rewards disappear, their motivation to engage in the activity will significantly decline.

Moreover, transactional leadership may focus too much on the achievement of short-term goals and neglect employees' long-term development and the overall interests of the organization. In a complex and changing environment, the rigid rules and single reward mechanism of transactional leadership may not be able to meet the needs of organizational development, leading to a decline in the organization's innovation ability and adaptability [24].

2.2.4. Negative Leadership Style

Negative leadership includes behaviors such as abuse, neglect, and abuse of power, which have significant negative impacts on psychological experiences. Tepper [25] pointed out that a leader's abusive behavior can damage employees' self-esteem, cause negative emotions such as anxiety and depression, and reduce job satisfaction and performance.

For example, the authoritarian management style of some mentors in universities may trigger students' self-doubt and job burnout, and even lead to a tendency towards depression. A survey of university students found that students who are frequently criticized severely and ignored by their mentors show lower enthusiasm and a sense of achievement in their studies and are more prone to psychological problems [26].

However, most current research on negative leadership styles focuses on describing their negative impacts, and there is a lack of in-depth research and practical guidance on how to effectively prevent and respond to negative leadership behaviors and how to help employees affected by negative leadership restore their mental health.

2.3. Shortcomings of Existing Research

Existing research mostly focuses on workplace scenarios and lacks in-depth analysis of the dynamic relationship between leadership styles and college students' psychological experiences in university organizations. Workplaces and university organizations have significant differences in goals, structures, and cultures, and the conclusions drawn from workplace research cannot be directly and simply applied to university environments. For example, the goals of employees in the workplace are mainly economic benefits and career development, while the goals of university students are more related to academic achievements, personal growth, and social needs [27].

In addition, most research has not been based on the systematic framework of self-determination theory, making it difficult to reveal the mediating role of psychological needs. Self-determination theory provides an important theoretical perspective for understanding how leadership styles affect college students' psychological experiences, but currently, few studies have incorporated leadership styles, the three psychological needs in self-determination theory, and college students' positive psychological experiences into a unified research framework for in-depth exploration [28]. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically study the influence mechanisms of different leadership styles in university organizations on

college students' positive psychological experiences based on self-determination theory, providing more targeted theoretical bases and practical guidance for the development of university organizations and the promotion of college students' mental health.

3. Existing Issues: Problems with Adaptability, Mediation, and Strategies

3.1. Scarcity of Research on the Fit between Leadership Styles and College Students' Psychological Needs

University organizations feature a variety of leadership styles. However, there is extremely limited research on the fit between different leadership styles and college students' three major psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Although transformational leadership has been proven to enhance students' intrinsic motivation, there are differences in the extent to which it satisfies students' autonomy needs across different disciplines and grade levels [29]. For instance, science and engineering students may have a greater need for transformational leadership to stimulate their innovative autonomy, while liberal arts students may place more importance on the emotional support provided by leaders. However, the specific manifestations and influencing factors of these differences lack in-depth analysis.

Supportive leadership plays a significant role in providing emotional support to enhance students' sense of relatedness. Yet, there has been no systematic research on how to accurately grasp students' relatedness needs at different stages, as well as the impact of the degree and manner of support on students' sense of competence. For example, freshmen may need more support from leaders in adapting to university life, while senior students may be more concerned with leaders' guidance in career planning [30].

Transactional leadership, which is performance-oriented, has a certain role in meeting students' competence needs. However, an excessive emphasis on external rewards may undermine autonomy. The manifestations of this contradiction among students with different personality traits and corresponding coping strategies have not been fully explored. For example, for students with strong self-drive, external rewards may have limited effects, while for those with weak self-drive, an over-reliance on external rewards may suppress their intrinsic motivation.

This lack of research makes it difficult for university administrators to select and adjust appropriate leadership styles according to students' specific psychological needs, thereby affecting leadership effectiveness and student development.

3.2. Insufficient Depth in Research on the Mediating Mechanism of Psychological Needs

Although self-determination theory emphasizes the crucial role of the three psychological needs in individual behavior and psychological experiences [31], the mediating mechanism of psychological needs in the relationship between univer-

sity leadership styles and college students' positive psychological experiences has not been fully clarified. Existing research mostly remains at the surface level of association and has not delved into the specific paths and magnitudes of the influence of different leadership styles on positive psychological experiences through affecting autonomy, competence, and relatedness [32].

For example, there is a lack of detailed research on the specific behaviors through which transformational leadership enhances students' autonomy and how autonomy further influences creativity and resilience in positive psychological experiences. Similarly, the impact of supportive leadership on students' sense of relatedness and the specific transformation process of relatedness in enhancing academic satisfaction and positive psychological states are also unclear.

This lack of in-depth research makes it difficult for universities to precisely apply leadership styles to effectively enhance students' positive psychological experiences by satisfying their psychological needs, thereby affecting students' learning outcomes and all-round development.

3.3. Absence of Optimization Strategies for Leadership Styles Based on the Characteristics of University Organizations

As a special educational organization, universities have unique goals, structures, and cultures. However, there is a lack of optimization strategies for leadership styles formulated based on the characteristics of university organizations. Existing research on leadership styles mostly draws on findings from the workplace field and fails to fully consider the characteristics of universities, such as their focus on talent cultivation, the diversity of students' needs, and the close teacher-student relationships [33].

When optimizing leadership styles, no differentiated strategies have been proposed for different departments within universities (such as teaching departments, administrative departments, and student affairs departments) and different educational scenarios (such as classroom teaching, research guidance, and club activities). For example, it is unclear which leadership style can better meet students' psychological needs and enhance learning outcomes in classroom teaching, and how to adjust leadership styles to promote students' active participation and all-round development in student club activities.

This lack of targeted strategies makes it difficult for universities to optimize leadership styles and build a supportive organizational environment, thus hindering the full play of the positive role of leadership styles in promoting student development.

4. Improvement Paths: Construction of Adaptability, Mechanisms, and Strategies

4.1. Strengthening Research on the Fit between Leadership Styles and Students' Psychological Needs

Universities should conduct research on the fit between leadership styles for different student groups. Through questionnaires, interviews, and other methods, they should gain an in-depth understanding of the psychological needs character-

istics of students from different disciplines, grade levels, and genders [33]. For example, for science and engineering students, research should be conducted on the effective ways in which transformational leadership can stimulate their innovative autonomy; for liberal arts students, discussions should be held on how supportive leadership can better meet their emotional relatedness needs.

At the same time, a dynamic assessment mechanism should be established to regularly track changes in students' psychological needs and adjust leadership styles in a timely manner. University administrators can flexibly apply multiple leadership styles in different scenarios based on research results, such as adopting transformational leadership in research project guidance to stimulate students' independent exploration and using supportive leadership in student life guidance to enhance students' sense of relatedness [34].

4.2. Delving into the Mediating Mechanism of Psychological Needs

Experimental research, case studies, and other methods should be used to deeply analyze the specific mechanisms through which different leadership styles influence positive psychological experiences via psychological needs. Design experiments to compare changes in students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness under different leadership styles, as well as how these changes trigger differences in positive psychological experiences [35].

For example, set up a comparative experiment between transformational leadership and transactional leadership to observe the improvements in students' autonomy and competence under these two leadership styles and how these improvements affect students' innovative motivation and resilience. Through case studies, conduct a detailed analysis of the mediating process of psychological needs in successful and failed leadership cases, summarize experience and lessons, and provide practical references for university administrators.

4.3. Formulating Optimization Strategies for Leadership Styles in Line with the Characteristics of University Organizations

Based on the goals, structures, and cultural characteristics of university organizations, differentiated optimization strategies for leadership styles should be formulated. In teaching departments, teachers should be encouraged to adopt a combination of transformational and supportive leadership styles. While imparting knowledge, they should pay attention to students' individual development, stimulate students' interest in independent learning, and enhance their sense of competence and relatedness [36].

In administrative departments, a combination of transactional and supportive leadership styles can be adopted. Clearly define work tasks and goals while providing necessary support and resources for employees to improve work efficiency and employee satisfaction. In student affairs departments, leadership styles are flexibly adjusted according to different student activity scenarios. For example, adopt democratic leadership in club activities to encourage students to actively participate in

decision-making and enhance their autonomy and organizational identification [37].

By formulating targeted strategies, a supportive organizational environment adapted to university development can be constructed, and the positive role of leadership styles in promoting students' all-round development can be fully played.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Major Findings

Based on self-determination theory, this study explored the impact of different leadership styles in organizational development on college students' positive psychological experiences. The study found that transformational and supportive leadership styles can significantly enhance college students' positive psychological experiences. By satisfying students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they stimulate students' intrinsic motivation, creativity, and resilience. In contrast, transactional and negative leadership styles have inhibitory effects. Transactional leadership's over-reliance on external rewards may weaken students' autonomy, and negative leadership can damage students' self-esteem and trigger negative emotions. At the same time, there are deficiencies in existing research in terms of the fit between leadership styles and college students' psychological needs, the mediating mechanism of psychological needs, and optimization strategies for leadership styles based on the characteristics of university organizations.

5.2. Implications for Education and Teaching

This study has important implications for university education and teaching. University administrators should attach importance to the impact of leadership styles on students' psychological experiences and flexibly select and adjust leadership styles according to students' psychological needs characteristics. In the teaching process, teachers should focus on cultivating students' autonomy, adopt heuristic teaching methods, and encourage students to explore independently; pay attention to students' sense of competence, provide appropriate challenges and feedback to help students improve their abilities; and create a good class and campus atmosphere to enhance students' sense of relatedness. Universities should strengthen leadership style training to improve the leadership abilities of administrators and teachers and build a supportive organizational environment to promote students' all-round development.

5.3. Research Limitations and Future Research Prospects

This study has certain limitations. The research is mainly based on theoretical analysis and literature review and lacks empirical data support. Future research should use questionnaires, experimental research, and other methods to collect data and verify the research conclusions. The classification of different leadership styles in this study is relatively simple. Future research can further refine leadership style types and delve into their impact on students' psychological experiences.

In addition, this study does not consider the influence of cultural factors on leadership styles and college students' psychological experiences. Future research can conduct cross-cultural studies to compare the differences in the effects of leadership styles in different cultural backgrounds and provide more universal theoretical bases and practical guidance for university education management.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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