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An Empirical Test of the Influence of Rural Leadership on the Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs from the Perspective of Leadership Identification

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Abstract: The participation of villagers in rural public affairs is vital for the sustainable development of rural communities and the improvement of villagers' quality of life. Various factors, including individual characteristics, village environment, social forces, and national policies, influence villagers' willingness to participate. However, empirical research on the determinants of villagers' participation in public affairs often overlooks the role of grassroots leadership. To address this gap, this study proposes a theoretical model examining the relationship between transformational leadership and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. Using a sample of 438 villagers from Jiangsu Province in eastern China, structural equation modeling and regression are employed to analyze the data. The findings indicate that moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care directly impact villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs or indirectly influence it through leadership identification, which acts as a mediator. Furthermore, shared vision enhances the positive relationship between leadership identification and villagers' awareness of public affairs participation. These findings provide valuable insights for village cadres seeking to promote active participation in public affairs among villagers. Specifically, gaining recognition through virtuous conduct, capabilities, and strong cadre–villager relationships serves as a foundation for influencing villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, while shared vision plays a strategic role in mobilizing villagers based on their identification with leaders.

Keywords: transformational leadership; public affairs participation; leadership identification



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1. Introduction

With the progress of reform and opening up, China's financial strength has grown significantly, allowing for the implementation of various strategies aimed at benefiting rural areas, developing agriculture, and improving the livelihoods of farmers. In 2006, China abolished the agricultural tax, marking the end of a two-thousand-year-old system and relieving the production and living burdens of farmers. Subsequently, national initiatives such as beautiful rural construction and rural revitalization were introduced, channeling substantial financial resources into the countryside and enhancing the development of basic public facilities to meet the modern needs of rural residents. As a result, significant improvements have been made in the provision of infrastructure such as water, electricity, roads, and networks across rural China. According to the third national agricultural census, conducted in 2016, over 90% of villages nationwide had access to such infrastructure, and more than a quarter of villages had e-commerce distribution sites [1].

However, challenges remain in the realm of rural public affairs, including issues related to human settlements, sanitation, and farmland water conservancy in rural areas [2]. For instance, studies have shown that many rural areas struggle to collect minimal fees

for public sanitation and tap water [3], highlighting the need for active participation by farmers in the governance of rural public affairs. State financial support alone is insufficient to address these civic issues that directly impact rural production and livelihoods [4]. Thus, farmers' active engagement in the governance process is crucial [3]. Scholars have extensively discussed the causes and consequences of this issue. Existing research has predominantly focused on macro-level factors such as social structure and institutions [5,6], rural economic conditions [7], rural culture [8], or rural social capital at the meso-level, such as trust and frequency of interaction among village people [9], or individual villagers' capital at the micro level, such as age, personal participation ability and personal rationality, etc. [10,11]. Few studies, however, have empirically explored the role of grassroots leadership in influencing villagers' participation behavior or willingness to engage in public affairs. Given the practical challenges faced by rural China, this study aims to fill this research gap and examine the impact of rural leadership on villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs.

In response to the challenges in rural governance in China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized the role of leadership by advocating for the Party's leadership in all aspects of society. This was highlighted in the 19th Party Congress and reiterated in the 19th Generation Report, which called for the cultivation of a team of rural workers who have a deep understanding of agriculture, love the countryside, and care for farmers. Academic research has also emphasized the importance of leadership in effectively coordinating community efforts [12]. Leadership is seen as the ability to influence a group towards achieving common goals [13], and it plays a crucial role in mobilizing the enthusiasm and initiative of organizational members, particularly in situations where formal institutional structures are lacking [14]. Successful community collaboration and the realization of a shared vision rely on the guidance and motivation provided by effective leaders. In other words, getting things done in a community requires good leaders to guide residents to work together and to bring the vision of the future to life [15–17]. Therefore, leadership assumes a critical role in promoting collaboration, enhancing public performance, and facilitating organizational change. As traditional binding forces weaken and legal governance is still developing in Chinese rural society, the exercise of grassroots leadership becomes vital in stimulating villagers' engagement in public affairs.

Transformational leadership has emerged as a prominent leadership theory, emphasizing the importance of going beyond transactional exchanges and focusing on developing personal responsibility and interest among team members. This leadership style aims to stimulate intellectual potential, utilize non-monetary incentives, and motivate subordinates through moral, ethical, persuasive, and motivational means [18]. It seeks to inspire a sense of shared vision and common goals, emphasizing human emotions, values, ethics, norms, and long-term objectives [19]. This leadership style has received significant attention and recognition in both private corporate [20–22] and public leadership research [23–25], with meta-analyses confirming its positive effects [26]. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of transformational leadership on villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs in rural China, shedding light on the mechanisms involved.

Social identity theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the impact of leadership behaviors on followers, with followers' identification with the leader being recognized as a significant mediating variable through which various leadership styles influence followers' cognition, attitudes, and behaviors [27,28]. Some scholars have even integrated leadership theory and social identity theory, forming a self-concept-based leadership theory [29], which highlights the role of leadership identification as an intermediary process through which leadership styles affect individuals' attitudes and behavioral responses [30]. Building upon this, the current study aims to incorporate the concept of leadership identification as a mediating variable to investigate how transformational leadership indirectly influences villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, shedding light on the underlying mechanism between transformational leadership and villagers' engagement in public affairs.

Based on the analysis conducted above, this study aims to explore the following research propositions: (1) What is the relationship between the four dimensions of transformational leadership and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs? (2) What is the underlying mechanism that explains how the four dimensions of transformational leadership influence villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs? (3) What is the role of leadership identification in mediating the relationship between transformational leadership and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs? By delving into these questions, this research aims to unlock the potential of grassroots cadres' leadership in addressing the issue of villagers' passive participation in public affairs within the context of China's rural development. It also aims to provide insights into resolving the challenges of collective action in rural areas and offer viable strategies to alleviate the crisis in rural public governance. Ultimately, the findings of this study can serve as a valuable reference for cultivating effective rural leadership.

2. Hypothetical Analysis

2.1. Transformational Leadership and Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs

Transformational leadership, originally conceptualized by Burns describes a leadership style that goes beyond mere social and material exchanges and focuses on inspiring and motivating followers towards achieving common goals. Building on this concept, Bass (1990) further developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which measures transformational leadership through four dimensions: idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation [31]. Since its inception, the MLQ has been widely used by scholars to study transformational leadership.

In the Chinese context, Li Chaoping (2006) recognized the cultural differences and developed a Chinese version of the transformational leadership questionnaire. Through an inductive approach, expert discussions, and questionnaire analysis, Li identified a unique dimension in Chinese transformational leadership, namely morale modeling. Additionally, Li found that personalized care in the Chinese context extends beyond work-related concerns to include care for the personal lives of subordinates, encompassing a broader scope than originally proposed by Bass. Based on these findings, Li Chaoping (2006) suggested that Chinese transformational leadership consists of four factors: moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, and shared vision [32]. In light of these insights, this study draws upon Li Chaoping's (2006) research to establish the theoretical foundation of leadership and adopts the framework of transformational leadership as the basis for examining the leadership factors influencing villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs.

Villagers' participation in public affairs refers to their voluntary engagement in collective activities and community affairs, wherein they actively contribute to the development of the community and share both responsibilities and achievements [33]. This type of participation can be considered a form of organizational citizenship behavior. Previous research has demonstrated a positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational citizenship behavior [34–38]. However, most of these studies have examined the overall effect of transformational leadership without differentiating the impacts of its individual dimensions on willingness to participate in public affairs. Some scholars have deconstructed transformational leadership into different dimensions, such as team-centered transformational leadership and individual-centered transformational leadership [39], or highlighted the unique role of shared vision in influencing organizational identity rather than leadership identity [20], or only pointed out that there are differences in the effect size and significance of the four dimensions of transformational leadership [40,41]. However, these studies have not specifically considered the sequence of effects of different dimensions.

2.2. Moral Modeling, Leadership Charm, Personalized Care and Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs

Moral modeling plays a crucial role. The ancient saying “To govern with virtue is like the North Star, living in its place while all the stars are working on it” highlights the importance of virtue in leadership. In modern society, leaders are expected to possess moral qualities. The Communist Party of China emphasizes the selection of leaders based on both virtue and talent, with virtue being prioritized [42]. Leaders should lead by example and demonstrate virtuous behavior, influencing the attitudes and behaviors of their subordinates [43]. Research has shown that organizations led by virtuous leaders exhibit higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior and altruistic actions among their members [44–47], as well as follow and imitate behaviors towards leaders [48]. In the context of village organizations, virtuous leadership refers to village cadres, led by the village secretary, demonstrating qualities such as integrity, honesty, fairness, and altruism when dealing with village affairs. Through their own exemplary behavior, village cadres serve as role models for the villagers, positively influencing their active participation in public affairs. This influence can be attributed to social learning theory, as individuals learn by observing and internalizing the behaviors and norms of others [49]. Village cadres, being closely connected to the interests of the villagers, impact their behavior through interaction and serve as a source of identification and emulation. By witnessing the dedication, selflessness, and altruism of the village cadres, the villagers develop a sense of identification and are motivated to participate in public affairs that contribute to the collective interest.

Leadership charm is another important aspect. In addition to virtue, talent is a crucial criterion for selecting leaders. In the rural context, village cadres play a significant role in disseminating information about national policies, agricultural techniques, and contributing to the overall economic development of the village [50]. Village cadres with the ability to envision, access resources, and effectively communicate and coordinate are instrumental to the village’s progress. On a more micro level, the level of a leader’s ability to get things done directly affects the personal interests of the villagers. From the point of view of public affairs related to the economic development of villages. Charismatic village leaders actively seek external support and resources, aiming to improve the living standards of the villagers and promote sustainable village development. This not only satisfies the aspirations of the villagers for a better life but also provides them with opportunities to participate in and make decisions about village affairs. Additionally, leaders with charisma play a crucial role in overcoming obstacles and taking responsibility when faced with resistance [51]. Village cadres with leadership charm serve as catalysts for the improvement of village infrastructure, rural economic advancement, and overall countryside development, leading the way towards a modern lifestyle for the villagers [52]. From the perspective of the daily village affairs related to the development of rural society. Village cadres with strong coordination skills are crucial in managing daily village affairs that contribute to the development of rural society. Due to the diverse needs and interests of villagers, conflicts can arise between individuals or groups, as well as between villagers and the village committees. These conflicts are often complex and uncertain, making it challenging to standardize collective village activities [53]. In the face of such complexities, village cadres with effective coordination skills can address conflicts and problems through communication and negotiation, thereby minimizing the negative impact and spread of negative emotions among villagers.

As a result, when village cadres exercise leadership centered on the economic and social development of the village, villagers benefit and the development of harmonious social relationships is facilitated. Drawing on social exchange theory, satisfactory social relationships are characterized by mutual benefit [54]. Villagers are willing to actively engage and support village cadres due to the mutual benefits derived from their active participation, which strengthens their interest in the village’s development and fosters their alignment with village leaders.

Personalized care is another crucial aspect of rural leadership. In addition to virtue and talent, leaders must prioritize the cadre–mass relationship. Personalized care plays a significant role in this regard. The ancient sayings “If you give me a peach, you will be rewarded with a plum” align with the principles of contemporary social exchange theory. In organizational settings, members often reciprocate a leader’s care and assistance by supporting and following their guidance and advice [55], i.e., care, respect and other spiritual incentives will mobilize people’s intrinsic motivation to work [56].

In rural social organizations, social exchange theory suggests that when village cadres, as representatives of the two village committees, organize village public affairs that require villagers to contribute their labor and resources within their capacity, villagers often feel grateful and reciprocate the village cadres’ caring behavior with their own support. Furthermore, in rural China, where traditional social bonds and acquaintances are diminishing, a sense of alienation and detachment between villagers and village cadres has emerged [57]. Personalized care can help bridge this gap and foster the establishment of “personal relationships” between leaders and subordinates, thereby enhancing the quality of leader–member exchanges and promoting harmony [58,59]. Consequently, personalized care from village cadres can mitigate power differentials between villagers and village cadres, fostering the development of harmonious cadre–community relations. In such a harmonious relationship, villagers view village cadres as “one of their own” and are more inclined to follow their guidance and fulfill their corresponding obligations, including active participation in public affairs that contribute to the collective goals of the village. Based on these, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care positively affect villagers’ willingness to participate in public affairs.*

2.3. The Mediating Role of Leadership Identification

Identification can be observed at different levels, namely the individual, relationship, and collective levels. Each level encompasses distinct focuses and motivations. At the individual level, identification refers to an individual’s identification with their leader. At the relationship level, it involves the identification with the relationship between individuals. Finally, at the collective level, identification pertains to the identification with the organization as a whole [60]. Therefore, leadership identification is the identification of an individual to its leader. Becker (1992) defined supervisor identification as when subordinates admire certain attributes of the supervisor, such as attitude, behavior, personality or attainment, and are proud to work with the supervisor, thus fostering a sense of identification [61]. Some scholars simply believe that leadership identification refers to the degree to which subordinates recognize the leader [62]. In this study, leadership identification is defined as the recognition of villagers regarding the abilities, virtues, and the relationship between villagers and village cadres.

According to the implicit leadership theory, individuals in an organization tend to identify with a leader based on the perceived similarity or difference between the leader’s explicit behavior and their own internalized ideal leadership concept [63]. The stronger the perceived similarity or the smaller the difference, the greater the identification with the leader. Alternatively, drawing from the social identity theory, individuals’ identification with a leader is often driven by the extent to which their self-motivations, such as self-esteem, sense of security, belongingness, and sense of existence, are fulfilled [64]. Numerous studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership is effective in garnering the identification of organizational members towards their leaders [65–67]. Therefore, in the context of rural China, this paper posits that the moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care exhibited by grassroots cadres can fulfill the villagers’ expectations of an ideal leader and satisfy their self-motivations, consequently fostering identification with village cadres.

On the other hand, according to the implicit leadership theory, individuals actively construct cognitive schema based on long-term memory and factual information that encompass the characteristics of leaders. When these schema closely align with the actual leader, subordinates tend to have more positive evaluations of the leader and agree with their behaviors [68]. Research on implicit leadership theory in the Chinese context has identified four dimensions of the psychological structure of implicit leaders: individual morality, goal effectiveness, interpersonal competence, and knowledge, skills and psychological qualities [69]. Individual morality emphasizes the moral character of the leader, encompassing qualities such as integrity, honesty, unselfishness, consistency in behavior, and leading by example. Goal effectiveness highlights the leader's ability to achieve work-related goals, including present attributes such as decisiveness, competence, and effective decision making, as well as future-oriented qualities like continuous learning, foresight, and ideological openness. Interpersonal competence focuses on the leader's social relationships, emphasizing qualities such as maturity, caution, openness, social adeptness, and persuasiveness [69]. These three dimensions align with the dimensions of transformational leadership: moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care. Empirical studies have shown that leaders who exhibit moral modeling [70,71], leadership charm [72] and personalized care [51] are able to fulfill the expectations of organizational members and gain their identification, thus fostering positive leader–member exchange relationships. In traditional village communities, village cadres primarily focused on tasks such as food collection and family planning, often managing village affairs through authoritative control, which led to villagers perceiving village cadres as being against their own interests. However, as society developed, the importance of harmonious cadre–villager relations under Party leadership was emphasized, leading to a shift from mandatory management behaviors to cooperative leadership behaviors. Characteristics such as moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care can fulfill villagers' conceptualization of ideal village cadres. Therefore, according to the implicit leadership theory, it can be inferred that moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care can elicit villagers' identification by satisfying their expectations of leadership qualities related to morality, competence, and interpersonal relationships, respectively.

Furthermore, according to social identity theory, individuals form their self-concept by selecting group members based on motives such as improving self-esteem, seeking security, fostering a sense of belonging, and finding meaning in their existence. The satisfaction of these motives directly influences their identification with an individual [64]. Firstly, virtuous leaders are known for their fair and impartial handling of affairs, consistently aligning their actions with their words [73]. Consistency in word and deed provides a clear role model and enhances the sense of security among organizational members [74]. This alleviates dissatisfaction and increases trust in the leader's character and competence [75], thereby satisfying the need for security and positively influencing the degree to which organizational members recognize and identify with the leader [76,77]. In the context of villagers' participation in public affairs, such as village environmental improvement and water conservation, virtuous village cadres can mitigate the perceived risks associated with the labor or financial costs that villagers must bear. As a result, villagers' trust in village cadres and their sense of security in participating in public affairs increase, leading to a stronger identification with the moral character of the cadres.

Secondly, the talent of village cadres plays a crucial role in their charisma when it comes to rural governance. The positive work attitude and excellent abilities of village cadres directly impact their status and image in the minds of villagers, instilling confidence in their ability to accomplish tasks [78]. Moreover, village cadres with high levels of competence contribute to the development of the rural economy, standardize daily management, and breathe vitality into the village. This fosters a sense of love and belonging among villagers, further enhancing their identification with the village cadres.

Thirdly, interpersonal relationships have a significant influence on individual perceptions and attitudes [79]. Individuals often form their perceptions of others based on

observations made during interpersonal communication [80]. In non-equitable hierarchical relationships, close and informal interpersonal communication, in addition to formal communication channels, serves as a reflection of the strength of the leader–member social relationship [81]. Emotionally oriented, long-term relationships help foster mutual trust and respect between members and leaders [82]. Trust and respect in turn influence organizational members' perceptions and attitudes, making them more susceptible to the influence of leaders. Through personalized care, such as visiting households and engaging in communication, village cadres can facilitate social interactions between themselves and villagers, satisfying villagers' need for self-esteem and improving their perceptions and evaluations of the cadres. This, in turn, promotes villagers' identification with their relationship with the village cadres. In summary, according to social identity theory, moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care can enhance villagers' sense of security, belonging, and self-esteem, respectively, leading to their recognition of the leader's moral character, abilities, and cadre-member relationship. Consequently, moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care have positive effects on villagers' identification with the leaders.

Once leadership identification is established, organizational members experience a sense of pride and satisfaction in their role as followers, leading them to align their behavior and values with those of the leader [83] or to directly agree with and follow the leader's advice [84]. In the context of village organizations, when villagers identify with village cadres, it signifies their pride and contentment with the presence of these cadres in their village. Consequently, they become more inclined to adopt the behaviors and values exhibited by the cadres and willingly follow their guidance. Specifically, leadership identification fosters a sense of similarity between followers and leaders [85]. This means that villagers view the goals and interests of the village cadres as their own, motivating them to exert additional efforts in pursuit of shared interests [86]. As a result, villagers actively participate in public affairs to align with and support the village leaders, ultimately contributing to the achievement of collective goals. Additionally, leadership identification entails a psychological attachment between followers and the leader [87,88], and a high level of leadership identification reflects followers' desire to establish personal relationships with the leader [89]. Community public affairs serve as a crucial link connecting village cadres and villagers [90], reinforcing the interpersonal bond between them. Therefore, villagers exhibit a greater willingness to participate in public affairs organized by the two village committees in order to maintain positive interpersonal interactions with the village leaders.

Moreover, high levels of leadership identification lead villagers to perceive the village leader as a member of their own community, fostering understanding, loyalty, cooperation, and altruistic attitudes and behaviors towards their own community members [91]. Consequently, when villagers view village cadres as part of their own community, they are more inclined to trust the messages and behaviors exhibited by the cadres, thereby demonstrating greater willingness to support and engage in the tasks conveyed by the cadres. This positive relationship between leadership identification and participation is evident in the active involvement of villagers in collective public affairs, which often entails labor or financial contributions organized by the two village committees. Conversely, in cases of low leadership identification, where villagers do not recognize or perceive the village cadres as "insiders" or members of their own community, the instructions and specific requests from the village cadres are typically perceived as mechanical and fail to generate positive changes in the villagers' psychological perceptions. Consequently, villagers exhibit reluctance to participate in village public affairs, leading to collective action problems and a detriment to the public interests of the village. Thus, leadership identification plays a crucial role in shaping villagers' willingness to engage in public affairs.

In summary, village cadres who embody moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care are better positioned to meet the villagers' expectations of an ideal leader, addressing both their intrinsic motivations. As a result, they are more likely to garner

identification from the villagers across moral, competence, and relationship dimensions. Moreover, when villagers identify with the village cadres, they develop an emotional attachment to them, leading to an alignment of their behaviors and values with those of the cadres. This emotional attachment fosters positive interpersonal relationships and motivates villagers to follow the guidance and advice of the village cadres, thereby facilitating their active participation in various public affairs organized by the village council. Thus, leadership identification serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, and the villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs.

In summary, village cadres who embody moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care are better positioned to meet the villagers' expectations of an ideal leader, addressing both their intrinsic motivations. As a result, they are more likely to garner identification from the villagers across moral, competence, and relationship dimensions. Moreover, when villagers identify with the village cadres, they develop an emotional attachment to them, leading to an alignment of their behaviors and values with those of the cadres. This emotional attachment fosters positive interpersonal relationships and motivates villagers to follow the guidance and advice of the village cadres, thereby facilitating their active participation in various public affairs organized by the village council. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Leadership identification serves as a mediating role between moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, i.e., moral modeling, leadership charm and personalized care indirectly affect villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs through the mediation process of leadership identification.*

2.4. Moderating Effect of Shared Vision

A vision represents a shared and desired future scenario that a group of individuals aim to create together [92]. In the context of a village, a village vision refers to a concise plan that outlines the development mission, core values, and envisioned future state of the village. It is a collective aspiration for the future development of the village that is mutually agreed upon by village cadres and villagers. Importantly, this vision stems from their internal desires and motivations rather than external factors. It is essential to recognize that due to variations in geographical location, economic conditions, and village sentiments, the vision for each village at different stages of development cannot be derived solely by examining the external environment. Instead, it must be generated from within the village, based on their unique needs and aspirations. However, the current rural development planning in China predominantly relies on top-down state projects and decision making by village cadres, with limited participation of villagers in discussions [93]. As a result, villagers often find themselves as mere "spectators" in rural governance, lacking active involvement in public affairs that directly impact their livelihoods. This passive role has perpetuated a mindset of "waiting, relying, and wanting" among villagers, hindering their proactive engagement. Therefore, in this context, to realize the aspirations for a modern life for villagers and promote the sustainable development of the village, village committees require the active cooperation of villagers. When organizing public affairs that necessitate the investment of villagers' labor, time, and resources, strategic mobilization through the stimulation of the village vision becomes crucial. By doing so, it becomes possible to ignite the villagers' enthusiasm, initiative, and even creativity, thereby fostering their active participation and contribution. Previous studies have often combined the variable of shared vision with moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care, examining their combined effect as transformational leadership.

As discussed earlier, moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care play a crucial role in establishing leadership identification, which forms the foundation for village cadres to influence villagers' civic behavior [53]. It is important to note that even with a compelling vision for village development and the emphasis on the importance of

villagers' participation in governance, if village cadres lack trust, competence, and positive cadre-mass relations, villagers may perceive their actions as hypocritical or insincere or 'being an armchair strategist' [94], leading to their reluctance to invest their time, energy, or resources in public affairs. Thus, in rural societies, the prerequisite for motivating villagers to engage in village governance and participate in public affairs lies in village cadres earning the trust and recognition of villagers through moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that villagers may agree with the village cadres' vision, but it does not necessarily mean that they will automatically comply with their directives. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, villagers may have a psychological dependency on village cadres, perceiving village governance as solely the responsibility of the cadres themselves, and thus lacking the awareness and motivation to actively participate in public affairs [93]. Secondly, villagers may exhibit characteristics of being rational individuals [10], and may be hesitant to engage in public affairs that require their time, energy, and resources due to various personal reasons, such as childcare responsibilities, engaging in other jobs, or perceiving no personal need for involvement. Human nature tends to prioritize self-interest over the interests of others, and thus, a vision that directly aligns with individuals' own interests can have a strong motivating effect, instilling a sense of unity among members and inspiring collective action [95]. In the context of village organizations, where the villagers' initiative and motivation may be lacking, village cadres need to strategically mobilize the villagers by appealing to their own interests and the prospects of collective village development, shared vision serves as a crucial strategy for this mobilization. Through the integration of various resources and the empowerment received from the state, village cadres create a vision that aligns with the village's development and the interests of the villagers. At the same time, by employing motivational language, the cadres stimulate the villagers' intrinsic motivation to actively participate in public affairs. In doing so, they effectively bring together the dispersed farmers, fostering collective action and achieving successful reorganization [53].

To summarize, village cadres must not only gain the identification of villagers through their virtue, ability, and cadre-mass relationship but also inspire them through a compelling vision of the future and the meaningfulness of their own participation. Based on these observations, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Shared vision plays a crucial role in strengthening the influence of leadership identification on villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, i.e., the positive effect of leadership identification on villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs is enhanced under high shared vision conditions and weakened under low shared vision conditions.*

The hypothetical model is shown in Figure 1.

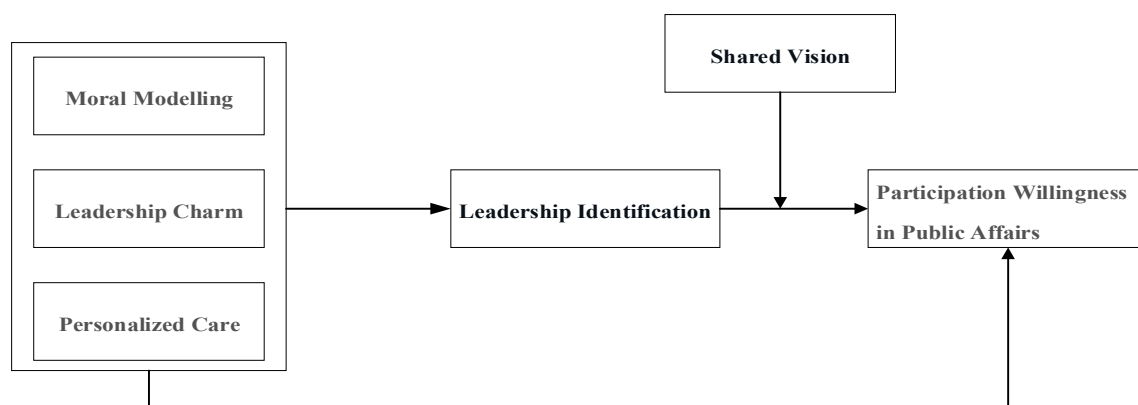


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Processes

The research data were collected through the administration of questionnaires using the Qualtrics platform and distributed to long-term residents of 15 village communities in Jiangsu province via the WeChat platform. The survey was conducted online, and a total of 668 questionnaires were collected. After eliminating 230 incomplete questionnaires, 438 valid responses remained. Among these 438 respondents, 239 (54.57%) were male and 199 (45.43%) were female. Regarding age distribution, there were 76 individuals aged 18–25 (17.35%), 150 individuals aged 26–35 (34.25%), 85 individuals aged 36–45 (19.41%), 79 individuals aged 46–55 (18.04%), and 48 individuals above 50 (10.96%). In terms of education level, 41 respondents had completed primary school (9.36%), 125 had completed junior high school (28.54%), 160 had completed senior high school or junior college (36.53%), 100 held undergraduate degrees (22.83%), and 12 had graduate degrees (2.74%). Regarding political status, 160 respondents were party members (36.53%), and 278 were ordinary individuals (63.47%) (refer to Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Sociological–demographic characteristics of participants ($n = 438$).

Demographic Information	Category	Number of People	Proportion
Gender	Male	239	54.57%
	Female	199	45.43%
Age	18–25 years old	76	17.35%
	26–35 years	150	34.25%
	36–45 years	85	19.41%
	46–55 years	79	18.04%
	56 years and over	48	10.96%
	Primary School	41	9.36%
Education level	Junior high school	125	28.54%
	Senior high school or junior college	160	36.53%
	Undergraduate Degree	100	22.83%
	Graduate degrees	12	2.74%
Political status	Party member	160	36.53%
	Ordinary people	278	63.47%

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Transformational Leadership

The scale used to measure transformational leadership was adapted from Li Chaoping (2005) [43]. The scale consists of four dimensions: moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, and shared vision.

- Moral Modeling (MM) includes four items, such as “The village cadres do duties with honesty and integrity, and do not seek personal gain”. The Cronbach’ α coefficient for this scale is 0.926.
- Leadership Charm (LC) includes five items, such as “The village cadres have excellent professional ability”. The Cronbach’ α coefficient for this scale is 0.942.
- Personalized Care (PC) includes four items, such as “Village cadres often visit and communicate with villagers”. The Cronbach’ α coefficient for this scale is 0.951.
- Shared Vision (SV) includes three items, such as “Village cadres can publicize the village’s long-term prospects and short-term goals”. The Cronbach’ α coefficient for this scale is 0.896.

3.2.2. Leadership Identification (LI)

The Leadership Identification scale was revised from Shamir et.al.(1998) [96] and consists of four items, such as “I am glad he or she is the cadre of our village”. The Cronbach’s α coefficient for this scale is 0.914.

3.2.3. Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs (WP)

The Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs scale was compiled and revised from Li Rongbin (2021) [9] and includes three items, such as “I am willing to pay for public affairs in the village”. The Cronbach’ α coefficient of this scale is 0.859.

3.2.4. Control Variables

Control variables in the study include gender, age, education level, and political status. Gender is coded as 1 for male and 2 for female. Age is an integer. Education level is coded as 1 for primary school or below, 2 for junior high school, 3 for senior high school or junior college, 4 for bachelor’s degree, and 5 for master’s degree or above. Political status is coded as 1 for party member and 2 for ordinary people.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. A Confirmatory Analysis of Discrimination Validity

The data analyzed are all from the same data source when studying moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, shared vision, leadership identification and villagers’ willingness to participate in public affairs. Therefore, to ensure the distinctiveness of the research variables representing different constructs, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS 25.0. The method employed in Haemi Kim et al.(2021) [97] and Liu M(2021) [98] was adopted for this study.

First, the CFA was performed to assess the discriminant validity of the variables. The standard values of IFI, TLI and CFI are recommended to be no less than 0.90. The standard values of RMSEA are recommended to be no more than 0.08 [99,100]. The results indicated that the six-factor model ($\chi^2/\text{Df} = 3.437$, FI = 0.941, NFI = 0.930, CFI = 0.941, RMSEA = 0.075) demonstrated superior fit compared to the other models tested (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Model fitting index.

Models	χ^2/DF	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Six-factor model	3.437	0.941	0.930	0.941	0.075
Four-factor model	17.209	0.591	0.536	0.589	0.193
three-factor model	20.094	0.511	0.454	0.510	0.209
Two-factor model 1	24.982	0.380	0.314	0.379	0.234
Two-factor model 2	22.558	0.443	0.383	0.442	0.230
One-factor model	26.901	0.328	0.259	0.326	0.243
Value standard	<5	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.08

Note: Factor composition: Six-factor model comprises moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, shared vision, leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs. Four-factor model comprises moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care measure one factor, while shared vision, leadership identification, and willingness to participate in public affairs measure one factor, respectively. Three-factor model comprises moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, and shared vision measure one factor, and leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs measure one factor, respectively. Two-factor model 1 comprises moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, shared vision, and leadership identification measure one factor, and the willingness to participate in public affairs measures one factor; Two-factor model 2 comprises moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care and shared vision are measured as one factor, while leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs are measured as one factor. One-factor model comprises all the observed variables are measured as one factor.

Second, aggregation validity was tested using factor loadings, combined reliability (CR), and average variance extraction (AVE). The factor loadings of the measurement items for each of the six dimensions in this study ranged from 0.60 to 0.95, all surpassing the threshold of 0.6, indicating satisfactory loadings. Additionally, the CR values for all variables exceeded 0.8, meeting the standard of 0.6 or above. The AVE values for all variables were higher than 0.6, which also satisfied the criterion of 0.5 or above (refer to Table 3).

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis of variables.

Dimensions	Measurement Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Moral Modeling (MM)	MM1	0.935	0.924	0.754
	MM2	0.767		
	MM3	0.807		
	MM4	0.949		
leadership charm (LC)	LC1	0.773	0.944	0.770
	LC2	0.896		
	LC3	0.913		
	LC4	0.923		
	LC5	0.875		
Personalized Care (PC)	PC1	0.852	0.952	0.833
	PC2	0.940		
	PC3	0.933		
	PC4	0.924		
Leadership (LI)	LI1	0.798	0.916	0.731
	LI2	0.857		
	LI3	0.890		
	LI4	0.872		
Willingness to participate in public affairs (WP)	WP1	0.816	0.863	0.678
	WP2	0.887		
	WP3	0.763		
Shared Vision (SV)	SV1	0.875	0.896	0.742
	SV2	0.874		
	SV3	0.834		

Based on the results of these two tests, it can be concluded that the six variables used in this study exhibit good discriminant validity and aggregation validity, indicating that they represent distinct constructs. Consequently, the data analysis can proceed.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficient

Table 4 presents the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and correlation coefficients of all variables. The results indicate the following: moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care exhibit positive correlations with leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. Furthermore, there is a significant positive correlation between leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. These preliminary analysis findings provide initial support for the hypotheses H1 and H2 proposed in this study, establishing a foundation for further analysis.

Table 4. Mean, standard deviation and correlation analysis of research variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.45	0.50									
2. Age	37.89	12.85	−0.07								
3. Education level	4.02	1.00	−0.04	−0.59 **							
4. Political status	2.27	0.96	0.102 *	−0.02	−0.24 **						
5.MM	3.58	0.98	−0.02	−0.03	−0.01	−0.04					
6.LC	3.62	1.03	0.04	0.01	0.07	−0.01	0.32 **				
7.PC	3.47	1.07	0.05	0.00	0.01	−0.02	0.18 **	0.30 **			
8.LI	3.54	0.93	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.07	0.34 **	0.26 **	0.24 **		
9.WP	4.14	0.75	0.01	−0.05	0.15 **	−0.17 **	0.34 **	0.41 **	0.28 **	0.33 **	
10.SV	3.34	0.99	−0.04	−0.07	0.02	−0.12 *	0.18 **	0.31 **	0.21 **	0.07	0.29 **

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Analysis of the Main Effect of Moral Modeling, Leadership Charm, Personalized Care and Mediating Effect of Leadership Identification

To determine the mediating role of leadership identification, the author of this paper followed the analysis steps discussed by Baron and Kenny (1999) [101] and other scholars, which are widely used in research [98]. Based on the fitting results of previous models, three target models were selected: the first model (partial-mediation model), the second model (full-mediation model), and the third model (direct-effect model). The first model, also known as the partial-mediation model, includes two paths: moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care → willingness to participate in public affairs (MM, LC, PC → WP), and moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care → leadership identification → willingness to participate in public affairs (MM, LC, PC → LI → WP). The second model, the full-mediation model, includes a single path: moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care → leadership identification → willingness to participate in public affairs (MM, LC, PC → LI → WP). The third model, the direct-effect model, includes two paths: moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care → willingness to participate in public affairs (MM, LC, PC → WP) and leadership identification → willingness to participate in public affairs (LI → WP). Upon examination, it was found that the first model, the partial-mediation model, demonstrated the best fit ($\chi^2/DF = 3.910$, TLI = 0.930, CFI = 0.941, RMSEA = 0.082) (refer to Table 5). Thus, it can be concluded that leadership identification plays a partial mediating role, providing support for H2.

Table 5. Comparison of hypothetical models.

Structural Equation Model	χ^2/DF	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
The first model (partial-mediation model) MM, LC, PC → WP and MM, LC, PC → LI → WP	3.910	0.930	0.941	0.082
Second model (complete intermediary model) MM, LC, PC → LI → WP	4.331	0.920	0.932	0.087
The third model (direct-effect model) is MM, LC, PC → WP and LI → WP	4.366	0.919	0.931	0.088

Note: Drawn by the author of this paper.

To further confirm the mediating role of leadership identification, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted, following the approach used by previous research [28,102]. The results are presented in Table 6. Moral modeling ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), leadership charm ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and personalized care ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$) positively predicted villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, providing support for H1. Moral modeling ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$), leadership charm ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$) and personalized care ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) positively predicted leadership identification. Additionally, leadership identification positively predicted villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs

($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$). The direct effects of moral modeling ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.05$), leadership charm ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.05$) and personalized care ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$) on villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs remained significant, but the magnitude of the correlation was reduced. This finding suggests that leadership identification partially mediates the relationship, providing support for H2.

Table 6. Hierarchical regression analysis of variables.

Variables	WP			LI	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Control variable					
Gender	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.00	−0.01
Age	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.05	0.05
Education Level	0.13 *	0.11 *	0.10	0.04	0.04
Political Status	−0.14 **	−0.13 **	−0.14	0.08	0.09 *
Independent variable					
Moral Modeling		0.22 ***	0.16 ***		0.28 ***
leadership charm		0.29 ***	0.27 ***		0.13 **
Personalized Care		0.15 ***	0.13 **		0.15**
Mediator variable					
Leadership Identification			0.19 ***		
R ²	0.04	0.27	0.30	0.006	0.18
Variance Ratio	4.65 **	22.88 ***	23.04***	0.64	12.99 ***

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4.4. Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Shared Vision

To examine the moderating effect of shared vision on the relationship between leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. This approach has been employed in previous studies such as Wang, K. et al., (2020) [102] and Zhang, Y. (2017) [64]. The following steps were followed: to address multicollinearity issues, leadership identification and shared vision were centered, interaction terms were created, and then a hierarchical regression analysis was performed. Table 7 presents the results for Model 3, where the variance inflation factor (VIF) values are below 8, indicating no collinearity. The standardized regression coefficient $\beta = 0.09, p = 0.028 < 0.05$ for the interaction between leadership identification and shared vision on willingness to participate in public affairs, indicating that shared vision significantly moderates the relationship between leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs.

Table 7. Moderating-effect analysis.

Variables	Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	VIF	β	VIF	β	VIF
Control variables						
Gender	0.03	1.02	0.04	1.02	0.05	1.02
Age	0.03	1.61	0.05	1.63	0.05	1.63
Education Level	0.13 *	1.70	0.14 *	1.71	0.14 *	1.72
Political Status	−0.14 *	1.11	−0.13 *	1.14	−0.13 **	1.14

Table 7. Cont.

Variables	Willingness to Participate in Public Affairs					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	VIF	β	VIF	β	VIF
Mediator variable						
Leadership Identification			0.32	1.01	0.32 ***	1.01
Moderator variable						
Shared Vision			0.25	1.03	0.27 ***	1.05
Interactive item						
LI * SV					0.09 *	1.03
R2	0.04		0.22		0.23	
Variance Ratio	4.65 **		20.47 ***		18.39 ***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

To visually represent the moderating effect, a line chart was created (seen in Figure 2). It shows that when shared vision is low, leadership identification has a significant positive impact on willingness to participate in public affairs ($\beta_L = 0.177$, $p < 0.001$), but the impact is lower compared to when shared vision is high ($\beta_H = 0.320$, $p < 0.001$). This finding demonstrates that shared vision plays a significant positive moderating role in the relationship between leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs, supporting H3.

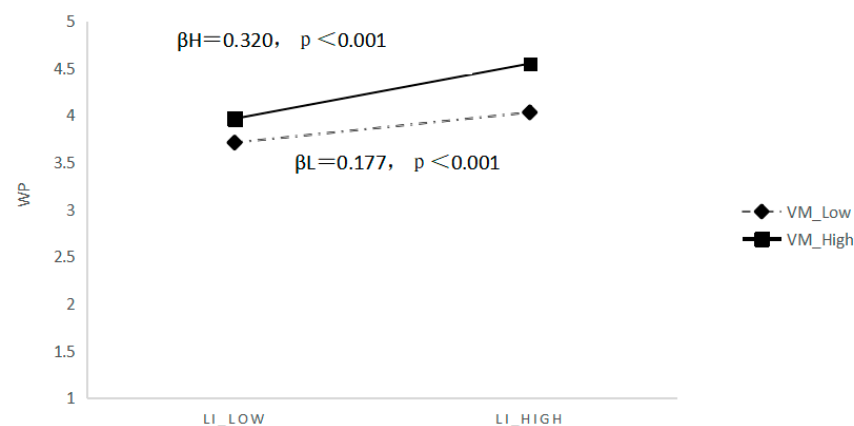


Figure 2. The moderating role of shared vision between leadership identification and willingness to participate in public affairs.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1. Conclusions

Firstly, the descriptive statistics reveal several noteworthy findings. Firstly, the average score for villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs is approximately 4.14, suggesting a high level of willingness among villagers to engage in public affairs in their respective villages. This finding differs from the research conducted by Shu Quanfeng (2018) [53], which may be attributed to the difference in research scope and research variable. It is important to note that this study focuses specifically on rural areas in Jiangsu, which are known for their relatively developed economy, rather than encompassing the entire country. Additionally, among the four dimensions of transformational leadership, the shared vision dimension receives the lowest score, indicating that the study participants perceive a lack of attention and implementation of shared vision by village cadres. This finding underscores the predominant top-down approach to village public affairs management,

where village cadres are empowered by the state, and a bottom-up collaborative model has yet to be established.

The empirical analysis conducted in this study deconstructed and examined the components of transformational leadership, namely moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care. A comprehensive model was then constructed and tested, incorporating variables such as leadership identification, willingness to participate in public affairs, and shared vision. The findings of this study confirm that moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care positively predict villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. Moreover, leadership identification partially mediates the relationship between moral modeling, leadership charm, personalized care, and willingness to participate in public affairs. The relationship between leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs is further moderated by shared vision, indicating that a stronger shared vision of village cadres strengthens the positive relationship between leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. This finding aligns with the results of Shu Quanfeng (2018) [53]. Among the three variables influencing leadership identification, moral modeling emerges as the strongest factor, possibly due to its ability to garner genuine identification from villagers through virtuous service. Additionally, leadership charm is identified as the strongest direct factor influencing villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, as village cadres with leadership charm can generate more economic benefits and create opportunities for villagers to engage in public affairs, thereby directly impacting their willingness to participate.

5.2. Research Significance and Enlightenment

This study makes theoretical contributions in two main aspects. Firstly, it mainly utilizes social identity theory to uncover the internal mechanism between transformational leadership and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs through the lens of leadership identification. This enriches the understanding and explanation of the effectiveness of transformational leadership and expands the research on antecedents of villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. By emphasizing the mediating role of leadership identification, this study highlights how the leadership style directly influences villagers' willingness through their identification with village cadres. The three variables of moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care have a direct impact on leadership identification, as village cadres possessing these qualities can serve the public with virtue, demonstrate their competence, and foster a harmonious cadre–mass relationship. Through these dimensions, village cadres can garner villagers' identification based on morality, ability, and cadre–mass relationship.

Secondly, the study recognizes that villagers' identification of village cadres is a crucial factor influencing their willingness to participate in public affairs, which is further influenced by the village cadres' ability to promote shared vision. The findings indicate that village cadres, once they have gained villagers' identification, can strengthen shared vision to stimulate their willingness to participate in public affairs. Shared vision acts as a positive mediator in the relationship between leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. This means that as the level of shared vision of village cadres increases, the positive relationship between leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs becomes stronger.

From a practical standpoint, this study offers insights to grassroots organizations on how to effectively stimulate villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, guide village cadres in their management practices, and promote collective action among villagers. The research underscores the direct influence of moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care on leadership identification and villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. Therefore, village cadres should strive to cultivate villagers' sense of identification by demonstrating morality, competence, and fostering a positive cadre–mass relationship. This will, in turn, promote villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs,

facilitate collective action, foster a harmonious and cooperative rural environment, and further enhance effective rural governance.

Additionally, moral modeling, leadership charm, and personalized care directly and significantly promote villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs. From the perspective of the national government, careful selection and training of village cadres, particularly village secretaries, should prioritize individuals who possess both moral character and competence, as well as emphasize the importance of the cadre–mass relationship. Only those who embody morality, competence, and value the cadre–mass relationship can win villagers' identification, promote their willingness to participate in public affairs, and contribute to effective village governance and sustainable development. Furthermore, the role of shared vision should be recognized as it relates to the villagers' understanding of the village's future development blueprint. A shared vision acts as an adhesive, enhancer, and catalyst, influencing every member of the organization and fostering a sense of unity that harnesses individual strengths into a collective force. Therefore, village cadres need to maintain timely communication with villagers, provide them with relevant information, listen to their opinions, and jointly create a shared vision for the village's development. The higher-level government should also prioritize the development of village cadres' ability to promote shared vision, simplify administration, decentralize power, and grant grass-roots cadres decision-making autonomy. Additionally, village cadres themselves should acknowledge their own limitations, have the courage to accept suggestions and criticisms from villagers, establish effective feedback mechanisms, and reward those who provide constructive opinions.

6. Limitations and Future Direction

While this study has cited the relevant literature both domestically and internationally, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. Firstly, the data collection method primarily relied on WeChat, which may have resulted in a narrower scope of research subjects, limited to villagers who commonly use mobile phones. This could introduce potential bias and restrict the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the research data collected are cross-sectional, and the dynamic interaction between village cadres and villagers is subject to constant change. The villagers' sense of identification with village cadres may also have a delayed effect. Therefore, compared to panel data that includes time series, cross-sectional data may have limited explanatory power.

To enhance the reliability of future conclusions, the author suggests several improvements. Firstly, longitudinal analysis could be employed to explore the dynamic influence of leadership on villagers' sense of identification and willingness to participate. Secondly, as leadership identification only plays a partial mediating role, future research could explore other mediating variables based on alternative theories and identify additional boundary conditions, such as villagers' intrinsic motivation for public service and their rational psychological evaluations. Thirdly, most studies on the factors influencing leadership styles and willingness to participate in public affairs primarily rely on single empirical research methods. The integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods is a potential future research direction. Therefore, qualitative research can be utilized to identify important factors affecting villagers' willingness to participate in public affairs, followed by empirical research to further examine each dimension of transformational leadership and its influencing mechanism on villagers' willingness to participate. These efforts will continuously enrich the theory and understanding of transformational leadership and provide more reliable guidance for theoretical research.

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