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Impacto del contagio emocional en la comunicación organizacional de empleados en ONG hacia el desarrollo sostenible

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Resumen. El estudio proporciona evidencia sobre el papel del contagio emocional (un mecanismo sociopsicológico por el cual los estados mentales se transmiten a otras personas) para motivar al personal de organizaciones sociales sin fines de lucro con recursos financieros limitados. El objetivo de la investigación fue identificar los mecanismos a través de los cuales el contagio emocional en las comunicaciones de gestión afecta la motivación de los empleados en organizaciones sociales sin fines de lucro en el contexto del logro de los principios de desarrollo sostenible. El estudio adoptó un diseño de métodos mixtos. Se aplicaron métodos cuantitativos validados para evaluar el contagio emocional, la motivación intrínseca, el ajuste de valores y los estilos de liderazgo entre 267 empleados de 18 organizaciones sin fines de lucro. Posteriormente, se realizaron 15 entrevistas en profundidad con gerentes y seis grupos focales con empleados para comprender mejor los resultados. El análisis estadístico se realizó con métodos no paramétricos: correlación de Spearman, pruebas de Mann-Whitney y Kruskal-Wallis, y análisis de mediación y moderación con bootstrapping. Los datos cualitativos se sometieron a análisis temático. Se concluyó que el contagio emocional es un mecanismo eficaz para motivar al personal de organizaciones sociales

sin fines de lucro, actuando a través de la adecuación a valores y potenciado por el liderazgo transformacional. Los resultados proporcionan directrices prácticas para el desarrollo de estrategias de RR. HH. para el sector sin fines de lucro, en particular para organizaciones centradas en el trabajo social (p. ej., que incluyen trabajo voluntario). Estas estrategias pueden contribuir al logro de los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible al aumentar la motivación de los empleados y la calidad de los servicios sociales.

Palabras clave: comunicación, psicología, liderazgo, voluntariado, motivación intrínseca, organización sin fines de lucro, trabajo social.

Impact of emotional contagion on organizational communication among employees in NGOs working toward sustainable development

Abstract. The study provides important empirical evidence of the role of emotional contagion (a socio-psychological mechanism by which mental states are transmitted to other people) to motivate the staff of social non-profit organizations with limited financial resources. The research goal was to identify the mechanisms through which emotional contagion in management communications affects the motivation of employees at social non-profits in the context of achieving sustainable development principles. The study adopted a mixed-methods design. Validated quantitative methods were applied to assess emotional contagion, intrinsic motivation, value fit, and leadership styles among 267 employees from 18 non-profits. Following this, 15 in-depth interviews with managers and six focus groups with employees were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the results. Statistical analysis was conducted with nonparametric methods: Spearman's correlation, the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests, and mediation and moderation analysis with bootstrapping. The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Emotional contagion was concluded to be an effective mechanism for motivating the staff of social non-profit organizations, acting through value fit and enhanced by transformational leadership. The results provide practical guidelines for the development of HR strategies for the nonprofit sector, particularly for organizations focused on social work (e.g., involving volunteer work). These strategies can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals by increasing employee motivation and the quality of social services.

Key words: communication, psychology, leadership, volunteers, intrinsic motivation, non-profit organization, social work.

INTRODUCTION

Today, social nonprofit organizations operate with a constant shortage of financial resources, which makes traditional approaches to employee motivation ineffective or inaccessible. Unlike commercial entities, nonprofits cannot rely on financial incentives to maintain high employee engagement (Gaponenko & Burtseva, 2024). This creates a need for alternative motivational mechanisms that draw upon intrinsic motives and emotional factors (Fattakhov & Khachatryan, 2024; Kryucheva & Tolstoukhova, 2024).

Emotional contagion theory (Hatfield et al., 1994) suggests that emotional states can be transmitted from one person to another through mimicry, convergence, and the subsequent emotional contagion. In the organizational context, this phenomenon gains special importance, as the emotional states of managers and colleagues can significantly affect employees' motivation and performance (Aziyev et al., 2024; Suiunalieva et al., 2024).

Research on personnel motivation in nonprofit organizations highlights the dominant role of intrinsic motivation based on the significance of work, the alignment of personal and organizational values, and the person's ability to contribute to the social mission (Renard & Snelgar, 2018; Ullah & Bishop, 2020). However, the mechanisms through which emotional contagion can enhance or inhibit intrinsic motivation remain understudied.

The emotional mechanisms of motivation in social nonprofits are particularly relevant in the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), where the performance of the nonprofit sector plays a pivotal role in addressing global social challenges (Petrova, 2024). Highly motivated social workers provide better social services (Letova, 2023a, 2023b), directly contributing to the achievements of such goals as reducing inequality, providing quality education (Gadzaova et al., 2023; Zhuzeyev et al., 2024), and strengthening social justice. However, empirical data on the specific mechanisms behind the effects of emotional contagion on intrinsic motivation remain fragmentary (Word & Carpenter, 2013; Kharkovskaya et al., 2023; Muchtadin & Sundry, 2023).

The research question posed in the study was as follows: How does emotional contagion in management communications affect the intrinsic motivation of employees at social non-profit organizations, and what factors mediate this influence?

Research hypotheses:

H1: Emotional contagion is positively associated with the intrinsic motivation of employees at nonprofit organizations.

H2: The relationship between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation is mediated by employee-organization value fit.

H3: Leadership style moderates the relationship between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation.

This article is structured as follows: the first section provides an overview of the theory of emotional contagion and motivation in the nonprofit sector; next, the adopted mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative components is described; and finally, the results of empirical analysis are presented, and the conclusions and practical recommendations are formulated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of emotional contagion

The concept of emotional contagion relies on the understanding of emotions as social phenomena capable of spreading among people automatically and unconsciously (Smolin & Palchikova, 2024). Hatfield et al. (1994) define emotional contagion as a tendency to automatically imitate

and synchronize with other people's facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements, which then leads to emotional convergence.

In the organizational context, emotional contagion functions through three main mechanisms: automatic mimicry, emotional convergence, and the symbolic processing of emotional information. Barsade (2002) demonstrated that both positive and negative emotional contagion affect both individual and team productivity, but positive emotional contagion promotes cooperation and reduces conflict.

Recent studies have shed more light on emotional contagion in the digital environment (Shichkin et al., 2024). Li et al. found that emotionally charged content posted by nonprofits on social media greatly increases public engagement, demonstrating the possibility of emotional contagion spreading through mediated communication channels (Kochesokov, 2022; Li et al. 2022).

Intrinsic motivation in the non-profit sector

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) highlights intrinsic motivation as the most stable form of motivation that relies on the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of nonprofit organizations, intrinsic motivation becomes particularly important, since there is little room for external incentives (Donika et al., 2024).

Empirical studies of recent years confirm the central role of intrinsic motivation in maintaining the engagement of nonprofit employees (Zentsova, 2024). Ullah and Bishop (2020) demonstrated that passion, empathy, and mission fit act as key intrinsic motivators that contribute to surpassing the set goals. Renard & Snelgar (2017) found intrinsic rewards to mediate the relationship between job characteristics and employee engagement.

Studies also reveal that intrinsic motivation promotes positive organizational behavior, including altruism, commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (Muchtadin & Sundry, 2023; Krainova et al., 2024).

Relationship between emotional contagion and motivation

The theoretical models of social motivations indicate that emotional contagion can impact motivation by creating shared emotional experiences and reinforcing social ties (Afanasyev et al., 2017; Vassilchenko, 2024). Grant and Shandell's (2022) model suggests that emotional contagion promotes perseverance and cooperation, creating a favorable environment for the development of intrinsic motivation.

Social non-profit organizations are constantly facing the essential task of attracting and retaining volunteers, who make up a significant portion of human resources in the non-profit sector. Volunteers can be attracted by both formal rewards (e.g., benefits, certificates, and training opportunities) and emotional incentives associated with feeling the importance of the work and belonging to a community of like-minded people (Markheim & Lukyanova, 2023).

Studying the relationship between volunteers' emotional labor and their engagement, Miao et al. (2024) found that the strategies of profound emotional impact mediate the relationship between intrinsic motivation and the positive results of volunteering. This study suggests that emotion management can serve as a mechanism to transform intrinsic motivation into specific behavioral outcomes.

Silva et al. (2024) introduced the concept of emotional salary — a system of non-monetary rewards, including the recognition of achievements, a favorable working atmosphere, professional growth opportunities, and a sense of belonging to a significant activity, which boost motivation through affective mechanisms. In a correlation study, emotional salary demonstrated a positive effect on job satisfaction and performance, giving rise to positive affective processes (Gasanov, 2024).

Role of leadership in emotional contagion

Leaders play a critical role in initiating and directing emotional contagion in an organization (Akhmetshin et al., 2025). Goleman et al. (2002) argue that the emotional state of the leader has a disproportionate effect on emotional climate in the organization because of their power and visibility.

Wang (2021) found that engaged leadership and organizational support affect organizational commitment in the nonprofit sector through stakeholder management mechanisms, which emphasizes the importance of leadership behavior in creating a motivating work environment.

Gaps in research and rationale for the study

Our analysis of the existing body of research points to several significant gaps. First, there is a lack of empirical research focused directly on the relationship between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation in the context of nonprofit organizations. Most studies examine these constructs in isolation, giving no insight into their interactions.

Second, there is not enough research on the mediating mechanisms by which emotional contagion can influence motivation. Existing theoretical models suggest the involvement of value fit and social identification, but there is little empirical evidence to support these assumptions.

Third, the lack of validated tools for measuring emotional contagion in the organizational context of the non-profit sector hinders quantitative research in this area.

Our study aims to address these gaps by examining the association between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation in a mixed-methods study, both to quantify these associations and investigate their underlying mechanisms qualitatively.

METHODS

Study design

The study used a sequential mixed-methods design, where the quantitative phase was followed by the qualitative phase to ensure a deeper understanding of the statistical patterns identified. This approach combines the statistical rigor of quantitative analysis with the contextual depth of qualitative research.

Sample

The sample comprised 267 employees from 18 nonprofit organizations in the fields of social services, education, healthcare, and environmental protection. The organizations were selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of being officially recognized as an NGO, having at least 10 full-time employees, and operating for at least 3 years.

The key characteristics of the sample were as follows: average age — 34.2 years (SD = 8.7), 68% women, average work experience in the current organization — 2.8 years (SD = 2.1). In terms of job levels, 45% of the participants were ordinary employees, 35% were mid-level specialists, and 20% were department heads.

In the course of the study, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with the heads of organizations and six focus groups with employees (6–8 people each, 42 participants in total).

Emotional contagion was measured with a variation of the Emotional Contagion Scale adapted to the organizational context based on the work of Barsade et al. (2018) on emotional contagion in organizational life (Barsade et al., 2018). The scale contained 15 items assessing the tendency to automatically reproduce the emotional states of colleagues and managers ($\alpha = .89$).

Intrinsic motivation was assessed with the Intrinsic Work Motivation Scale (Renard & Snelgar, 2018), validated on nonprofit employees. The scale includes 18 items targeting interest in the tasks, the sense of competence, and self-determination ($\alpha = .92$).

Value fit was assessed using the Person-Organization Fit Scale (Cable & DeRue, 2002) adapted to the non-profit sector, which included nine items ($\alpha = .85$).

Leadership styles were determined using an abridged version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

All questionnaires used a 5-point Likert scale from “completely disagree” to “completely agree.”

Data collection and analysis procedure

Quantitative data were collected through an online survey. The response rate was 78% (267 out of the 342 invitees). Interviews with managers lasted 45-60 minutes, and focus groups took 90-120 minutes. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent.

Statistical analysis used non-parametric methods: Spearman's correlation coefficient to assess links between variables, the Mann-Whitney U-test to compare groups, and mediation analysis with non-parametric bootstrapping (Hayes, 2017), which included 5,000 iterations of random sample extraction with return from the initial data to assess the distribution of indirect effects and construct 95% confidence intervals. The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis with independent coding by two researchers. The study was approved by the university's ethics committee.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the main variables under study are presented in Table 1. The Shapiro-Wilk test showed deviations from the normal distribution in most variables, suggesting the need for nonparametric methods.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables.

Variable	Mdn	IQR	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional contagion	3.40	0.93	—			
2. Intrinsic motivation	3.78	1.06	.64***	—		
3. Value fit	3.67	1.22	.52***	.69***	—	
4. Transformational leadership	3.33	1.33	.48***	.56***	.61***	—

Note. N = 267. Mdn = Median; IQR = Interquartile range. Spearman's rank correlation. ***p < .001.

Spearman's correlation analysis shows significant positive associations between all variables studied. The strongest correlation is the one between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation, which confirms the first hypothesis of the study.

The analysis of differences by demographic characteristics reveals significant differences in the level of emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation between different positions (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Differences in key variables by demographic characteristics.

Characteristic	Group	n	Emotional contagion Mdn (IQR)	Intrinsic motivation Mdn (IQR)	U/H	p
Gender	Women	181	3.53 (0.87)	3.89 (0.94)	2947.5	.021
	Men	86	3.20 (1.07)	3.61 (1.22)		
Work experience	Under 2 years	142	3.27 (1.00)	3.67 (1.11)	3821.0	.006
	Over 2 years	125	3.60 (0.80)	3.89 (0.94)		
Position	Non-management employees	120	3.33 (0.93)	3.72 (1.06)	15.42†	.001
	Specialists	94	3.44 (0.87)	3.78 (0.89)		
	Managers	53	3.67 (0.93)	4.00 (1.00)		

Note. U = Mann-Whitney U test; †H = Kruskal-Wallis test; Mdn = Median; IQR = Interquartile range.

Women show significantly higher levels of emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation compared to men. Employees with more than 2 years of experience scored higher on both variables. Considering job levels, executives have the highest levels of both emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation.

The second hypothesis was tested through mediation analysis, the results of which are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Analysis of the mediating role of value fit.

Path	B	SE	z	p	95% CI (bootstrap)
a (EC → VF)	0.65	0.07	9.28***	< .001	[0.51, 0.79]
b (VF → IM)	0.42	0.05	8.41***	< .001	[0.32, 0.52]
c' (EC → IM)	0.40	0.06	6.67***	< .001	[0.28, 0.52]
c (general effect EC → IM)	0.67	0.06	11.23***	< .001	[0.55, 0.79]
Indirect effect (a×b)	0.27	0.04	—	—	[0.19, 0.36]

Note. EC = Emotional contagion; VF = Value fit; IM = Intrinsic motivation. ***p < .001.

The results reveal a significant indirect effect of value fit on the relationship between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation. This result supports the second hypothesis that value fit mediates the relationship between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation.

The third hypothesis was tested by means of moderation analysis with bootstrapping. The results are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4. The moderating role of transformational leadership.

Predictor	B	SE (bootstrap)	z	p	95% CI
Emotional contagion	0.45	0.07	6.43***	< .001	[0.31, 0.59]
Transformational leadership	0.24	0.05	4.80***	< .001	[0.14, 0.34]
EC × TL	0.18	0.06	3.00**	.003	[0.06, 0.30]

Note. Pseudo- R^2 = .48. EC = Emotional contagion; TL = Transformational leadership. ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

A significant interaction effect was found between emotional contagion and transformational leadership ($B = 0.18$, $p = .003$). The analysis of simple effects shows that the association between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation is stronger with a high level of transformational leadership as compared to a low level.

Qualitative analysis results

The thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups highlights three key mechanisms by which emotional contagion affects motivation (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Key themes in the qualitative analysis.

Theme	Frequency of mentions	Key sub-themes
Emotional modeling of leadership	87% of participants	Transfer of enthusiasm, demonstration of commitment to the mission, emotional support
Creating shared emotional experiences	74% of participants	Team rituals, celebrating successes together, overcoming challenges collectively
Strengthening value fit	69% of participants	Emotional connection with the mission, shared values, sense of belonging

The participants note that the emotions of leaders “infect” the entire team: “*When our director is passionate about some new project, it encourages us all*” (Head of department, female, age 35). Shared emotional experiences, on the other hand, promote team spirit: “*As we experience both joys and difficulties together, we become more united*” (Specialist, male, age 28).

DISCUSSION

Our results support all three research hypotheses and give important empirical evidence of the role of emotional contagion in the motivation of nonprofit employees. The strong positive relationship observed between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation ($r_s = .64$, $p < .001$) is consistent with theoretical assumptions that emotional mechanisms play a crucial role in maintaining motivation when financial incentives are limited.

Qualitative analysis identified three main mechanisms behind the influence of emotional contagion on motivation: the emotional modeling of leadership, creating shared emotional experiences, and increasing value fit. These results expand the understanding of emotional contagion theory (Hatfield et al., 1994) as applied to the organizational context. The most notable is the mechanism of emotional modeling of leadership, which was mentioned by 87% of the study participants. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of Wang (2021) that engaged leadership is a critical factor in building organizational commitment in the nonprofit sector.

The emphasis on the role of creating shared emotional experiences through team rituals and celebrating successes together supports Grant and Shandell's (2022) theory that emotional contagion fosters perseverance and collaboration. In social nonprofit organizations, where the mission plays a central role, such collective emotional experiences become particularly valuable for maintaining staff motivation in the long run.

The confirmation of the second hypothesis that value fit mediates the relationship between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation (indirect effect $B = 0.27$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.36]) has important theoretical and practical implications. Agreeing with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this result demonstrates that value fit serves as a link between emotional processes and motivational outcomes in the context of social nonprofits (Begishev et al., 2024).

In a study on medical workers in Indonesia, Muchtadin & Sundry (2023) demonstrated that intrinsic motivation has strong positive effects on work engagement and organizational citizenship behavior, which testifies to the universal nature of the mechanisms identified in our study. The findings suggest that emotional contagion may amplify these effects through a values-fit mechanism (Denisova et al., 2023; Shebzukhova et al., 2023).

The effect of interaction between emotional contagion and transformational leadership ($B = 0.18$, $p = .003$) emphasizes the importance of leadership style in activating the emotional mechanisms of motivation. With a high level of transformational leadership, the connection between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation is much stronger. This is consistent with the findings of Goleman et al. (2002) on the disproportionate effect of the emotional state of the leader on the organizational climate.

Transformational leaders in social nonprofits act as emotional catalysts that amplify the transmission of positive emotional states and create the conditions for more effective motivational contagion. This factor is particularly notable in the context of "emotional salary" (Silva et al., 2024), because transformational leadership promotes a more favorable working atmosphere and fosters a sense of belonging to a significant activity.

The established differences in the level of emotional contagion between men and women, as well as between employees at different job levels, call for a differentiated approach to motivation management. The higher rates of emotional contagion in women are consistent with existing

research on gender differences in emotional susceptibility. Finally, the fact that managers have the highest levels of both emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation confirms their key role in creating an emotionally charged work environment (Yang, 2025).

Our results are particularly significant in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015; Sergeeva et al., 2023). Highly motivated social workers are a crucial factor in providing quality social services and achieving goals such as curbing inequality and providing quality education (Shichkin et al., 2024). Emotional contagion as a motivation mechanism can contribute to a sustainable organizational culture focused on long-term social impact.

CONCLUSIONS

The strong positive correlation between emotional contagion and intrinsic motivation mediated by value fit and reinforced by transformational leadership demonstrates the complex nature of motivational processes in the nonprofit sector. The three main mechanisms of influence, i.e., the emotional modeling of leadership, creating shared emotional experiences, and strengthening value fit, provide practical points of reference for effective personnel management strategies that contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals by means of improving the quality of social services.

The limitations of this study have to do with the features of the studied social non-profit organizations, which can hinder the extrapolation of the obtained findings onto other non-profit entities and commercial organizations with pronounced social missions. The employed self-report tools could have brought in systematic biases due to social desirability, especially when assessing emotional processes. The cross-sectional design of the quantitative portion of the study did not allow us to establish causal relationships between the studied variables. Finally, the cultural characteristics of study participants could affect the manifestation of emotional contagion and the perception of motivational factors.

Further research should focus on the digital channels of emotional contagion in remote and hybrid forms of work, as well as intercultural differences in the manifestation of emotional motivation mechanisms. The development and validation of specialized emotional contagion measurement tools for the nonprofit sector can facilitate the creation of diagnostic tools to assess emotional climate in organizations and the effectiveness of motivational strategies.

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