

Transformational Leadership and Turnover Intention in the Digital Era: Sequential Mediation of LMX and Affective organizational Commitment.

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Abstract

In a context of accelerated digital transformation, African organizations face major challenges in retaining talent. While transformational leadership (TL) is recognized for its positive effects on employee performance and engagement, the mechanisms by which it influences turnover intentions remain largely unexplored in digital and culturally specific environments. This research aims to fill this gap by proposing a sequential mediation model linking transformational leadership (TL), leader-member exchange (LMX) quality, affective organizational commitment (EA), and turnover intention (IL). By drawing on self-determination theory, social exchange theory, and LMX theory, the study offers an integrated reading of the motivational and relational dynamics specific to Tunisian organizations undergoing digitalization.

Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 147 Tunisian employees and then analyzed using Hayes' (2018) macro PROCESS model 6 in SPSS. The results reveal partial mediation, mainly driven by affective commitment, while the quality of the leader-member relationship does not have a significant direct mediating effect. The sequential path via LMX and EA is marginally significant.

These results enrich the literature on human resource management and offer concrete avenues for strengthening talent retention in changing organizations. Managerial and theoretical implications are discussed, as well as future research prospects.

Keywords: transformational leadership – LMX – affective organizational commitment – turnover intention– digital transformation.

Résumé

Dans un environnement de transformation digitale accélérée, les organisations africaines sont confrontées à des défis majeurs en matière de fidélisation des talents. Bien que, le leadership transformationnel (LT) est reconnu pour ses effets positifs sur la performance et l'engagement des collaborateurs, les mécanismes par lesquels il influence l'intention de quitter restent encore peu explorés dans les environnements digitales et culturellement spécifiques. Cette recherche vise à réduire le fossé en proposant un modèle de médiation séquentielle articulant le leadership transformationnel, la qualité de la relation leader-membre (LMX), l'engagement organisationnel affectif et l'intention de quitter. En mobilisant les apports de la théorie de l'autodétermination, de l'échange social et du LMX, l'étude offre une lecture intégrée des dynamiques motivationnelles et relationnelles liée aux organisations tunisiennes en phase de digitalisation.

En suivant une approche quantitative, les données ont été recueillies auprès de 147 employés tunisiens, analysées, par la suite, à l'aide du modèle 6 du macro PROCESS de Hayes (2018) sous SPSS. Les résultats révèlent une médiation partielle, principalement portée par l'engagement affectif, tandis que la qualité de la relation leader-membre n'exerce pas d'effet médiateur direct significatif. Le chemin séquentiel via LMX et engagement affectif est marginalement significatif.

Ces résultats embellissent la littérature sur le management des ressources humaines et proposent des pistes concrètes pour renforcer la rétention des talents dans les organisations en pleine mutation. Des implications managériales et théoriques sont discutées, ainsi que des perspectives de recherche futures.

Mots clés : leadership transformationnel – LMX – engagement organisationnel affectif – intention de quitter – transformation digitale.

Introduction

Organizational change is now a strategic necessity for companies facing increasing technological, regulatory, and competitive pressures (Ibragimov & Kadagidze, 2025). Among the drivers of this change, digitalization is profoundly transforming professional practices, far beyond traditional IT functions (Goswami et al., 2023). However, despite its potential, digital transformation remains difficult to integrate: more than 60% of projects fail, often due to poorly defined objectives, resistance to change, or poor human adaptation to new technologies (Ibragimov & Kadagidze, 2025). In this context, the human factor appears to be a decisive lever for success, particularly in African environments where organizational changes are rapid and managerial practices are undergoing a complete overhaul.

The subject of this research focuses on the psychological and relational mechanisms that influence talent retention in organizations undergoing digitalization. While digitalization promotes innovation, it also weakens emotional and hierarchical ties within organizations. Recent studies show that digital interactions can weaken relationship quality and a sense of belonging (Yang et al., 2024; Li & Wang, 2025). These upheavals make talent retention particularly strategic for African organizations. However, research on turnover intention has long focused on structural factors such as job satisfaction or organizational conditions (Gara et al., 2021), neglecting the relational and emotional dynamics specific to digitalized contexts. In this framework, two elements appear to be essential to the success of change: transformational leadership and affective organizational commitment of employees (Yue, 2019).

Transformational leadership (TL) is recognized as a psychological and relational lever for retention (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio & Bass, 2004), with positive effects on employee engagement, trust, and performance (Jiatong et al., 2022; Cao & Le, 2024). However, in digital environments, the results remain mixed: simple mediation by the quality of the leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship is not always sufficient to explain retention behaviors (Herman et al., 2013). The literature has amply demonstrated that transformational leadership promotes the quality of LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Wang et al., 2021), which can positively influence organizational commitment (Donkor, 2021; Tao, 2025). However, in digitalized contexts, this mediation appears limited in fully capturing the dynamics at play. These specific environments require a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying the effects of leadership. Furthermore, few studies have explored these mechanisms in non-Western

contexts, particularly African or Arab contexts, where relational norms, hierarchical expectations, and forms of affective commitment differ significantly (Bouderbala et al., 2020).

The objective of this study is to examine the extent to which transformational leadership acts as a lever for retention, through two key mediators: the quality of the leader–member exchange (LMX) and affective organizational commitment. In response to the limitations of existing models, this research proposes a sequential mediation model linking transformational leadership, LMX, affective organizational commitment, and intention to leave. This model aims to better understand the psychological and relational mechanisms through which leadership influences talent retention in a digitalized context. Such understanding is essential to help organizations strengthen their human performance in an ever-changing technological environment.

Beyond simply identifying gaps, this study takes a problematizing stance: why are transformational leader behaviors not always sufficient to curb departure intentions in digitalized environments? What intermediate mechanisms transform these behaviors into lasting organizational attachment? And how do Tunisian cultural specificities influence the quality of exchanges and talent retention? These questions are part of a hypothetical-deductive approach, using a quantitative method to empirically test a contextualized sequential mediation model capable of revealing the mechanisms underlying talent retention in a digital context.

Data was collected from 147 Tunisian employees from organizations undergoing digitalization, using a structured questionnaire. The analysis was conducted using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro in SPSS, allowing for a rigorous assessment of sequential mediation effects. This approach offers an integrated reading of the retention process, going beyond fragmented analyses focused on leadership, relational quality, or commitment.

The theoretical framework draws on three major perspectives: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), social exchange theory (Blau, 1968), and leader–member exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Together, they offer an integrated reading of motivational and relational dynamics in Arab-African organizational contexts, where cultural norms strongly influence hierarchical interactions and forms of commitment. By contextualizing the effects of transformational leadership in Tunisian culture, this research contributes to enriching studies in human resource management, taking into account regional specificities that are often overlooked in Western models.

This research makes several theoretical and empirical contributions. First, it offers a sequential interpretation of retention mechanisms in a digitalized context, articulating the effects of transformational leadership (TL), relational quality (LMX), and affective organizational commitment (AOC). Second, it updates the role of LMX in digital environments, showing that the leader-member relationship remains a key vector of organizational attachment, even in virtualized contexts. It also repositions affective commitment as a strategic mediator, capable of transforming leader behavior into lasting loyalty. Furthermore, it integrates the combined contributions of self-determination theory and social exchange theory, offering a nuanced interpretation of motivational and relational dynamics. Finally, it contextualizes the results in light of Tunisian cultural specificities, thus contributing to a better understanding of retention mechanisms in changing Arab-African environments.

With this in mind, the central research question is formulated as follows: **To what extent do the quality of the leader-member relationship and affective organizational commitment mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention among Tunisian employees in a digitalized context?**

The article is structured in five sections: (1) a literature review establishing the conceptual foundations and hypotheses; (2) a methodology detailing the survey protocol and analysis tools; (3) a presentation of the empirical results; (4) a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications; and finally, (5) a conclusion opening up prospects for future research.

1. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

1.1. Transformational leadership and turnover intention: an interpretation based on social exchange theory

In this study, the concept of turnover intention (TI) is assimilated to that of intention to quit, defined as an employee's conscious desire to leave their current position to join another organization in the near future (Rošková et al., 2024). This process is based on a subjective assessment of working conditions, interpersonal relationships, and career prospects.

Numerous studies show that job abandonment is frequently linked to factors such as job satisfaction, organizational justice, commitment to the organization, job insecurity, lack of growth opportunities, poor communication, and low emotional intelligence (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Gara et al., 2021; Boussedra, 2025).

Recently, several studies have highlighted the crucial role of transformational leadership (TL) in reducing employee turnover, notably Cranick (2022); Rošková et al. (2024); Opolot et al. (2025). Transformational leadership, widely recognized in the literature, is defined as the leader's ability to mobilize the skills and resources of their subordinates in the service of collective goals, by inspiring respect, trust, and self-improvement (Wandji et al., 2022; Rošková et al., 2024; Opolot et al., 2025). This style is based on four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1992; Avolio & Bass, 2004). Table 1 below explains each of these dimensions:

Table 1: The dimensions of transformational leadership according to Bass & Avolio (1992)

Idealized influence (charisma)	Individualized consideration	Intellectual stimulation	Inspirational motivation
This manifests itself when the leader acts as a role model, inspiring admiration, respect, and strong emotional identification on the part of employees. This dimension generates a climate of trust and commitment around shared values.	It involves personalized support for team members through encouragement, coaching, delegation, advice, and constructive feedback. The leader recognizes the specific needs of each individual and promotes their personal and professional development.	It aims to encourage creativity and innovation by encouraging employees to question their beliefs, explore new ideas, and solve problems independently. The leader values critical thinking and organizational learning.	It consists of formulating a vision and communicating it with clarity and enthusiasm, using symbols, images, and exemplary behavior. This dimension reinforces the meaning of work and the alignment of individual efforts with collective goals.

Adapted source: Rošková et al. (2024)

To understand the dynamics between transformational leadership and turnover intention, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) offers a particularly relevant explanatory framework. This theory

posits that professional relationships are based on expectations of reciprocal exchange, where the support, recognition, and opportunities offered by the leader generate a sense of moral obligation in employees, encouraging them to stay (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Rošková et al., 2024). Transformational leadership, through its inspiring and supportive behaviors, establishes a positive social dynamic based on trust, fairness, mutual respect, open communication, and a strong organizational culture (Wandji et al., 2022; Malokani et al., 2023; Rošková et al., 2024; Opolot et al., 2025). This is not simply an effect based on structural or motivational incentives, but a relational process based on perceived reciprocity, strengthening organizational attachment and reducing the turnover intention (Ghadi et al., 2013).

Numerous studies confirm this direct and negative link, showing that transformational leadership is an effective lever for reducing turnover intentions by fostering an inspiring and rewarding work environment (Cranick, 2022; Haq et al., 2022; Malokani et al., 2023; Opolot et al., 2025; Umachia & de Guzman, 2025). Recent research (Gagnon, 2023), among Quebec nurses highlights a significant direct effect of transformational leadership by senior managers on reducing the turnover intention, confirming the findings of Bass and Riggio (2006) on the role of leadership in trust, commitment, and retention.

Other studies in various contexts reinforce this relationship, highlighting the impact of transformational leadership on reducing turnover intentions by promoting affective commitment, job satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation (Jiatong et al., 2022; Rošková et al., 2024; Umachia & de Guzman, 2025). In addition, it creates positive conditions that foster a sense of belonging and staff stability (Feranita et al., 2020; Sabella et al., 2021). However, in certain specific contexts, the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention may be attenuated or even insignificant. For example, in conflict zones (Promchart & Potipiroon, 2020) or in contexts of traumatic stress (Park & Pierce, 2020), the need for security and stability takes precedence over the effects of leadership style. Similarly, in high-pressure hospital environments (Manoppo, 2020) or during health crises (Yücel, 2021), external constraints and organizational stress can neutralize the direct impact of leadership on retention.

This divergence in studies and results highlights the importance of examining these mechanisms in various organizational environments, while recognizing that transformational leadership remains a major lever for mobilizing positive social exchanges to promote engagement, loyalty, and retention (Donkor, 2021; Diko & Saxena, 2023; Rošková et al., 2024).

Consequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Transformational leadership has a direct, negative, and significant effect on employees' turnover intention.

1.2. The mediation of LMX in the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention: an interpretation based on Leader–Member Exchange theory

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, initially conceptualized under the Vertical Dyad Linkage model (Graen & Cashman, 1975), proposes that leaders develop dyadic relationships of varying quality with each of their subordinates. These relationships are built through tangible and intangible social exchanges based on trust, mutual respect, and support (Wang et al., 2022; Kim & Han, 2022) and directly influence organizational attitudes such as commitment, satisfaction, and turnover intention (Wang et al., 2022).

Transformational leadership acts as a powerful lever for fostering high-quality LMX relationships (Nandedkar & Brown, 2018). Through behaviors such as individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, leaders transform their relationships with their employees into rich and engaging exchanges (Wang et al., 2022). This quality relationship encourages employees to develop a stronger emotional attachment to the organization and reduces their turnover intention (Jiatong et al., 2022; Gagnon, 2023).

In this logic, LMX acts as a mediating mechanism between transformational leadership and turnover intention. By promoting high-quality relational exchanges, transformational leaders strengthen the sense of belonging and perceived recognition, which reduces the turnover intention (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Donkor et al., 2021). LMX thus reflects the leader's ability to create a relational climate conducive to talent retention.

Recent research confirms the relevance of the LMX model in digitalized environments, which are characterized by uncertainty, rapid change, and the dematerialization of interactions. For example, Ahmed et al. (2024) show that LMX, combined with digital leadership, acts as a relational amplifier, stimulating engagement and innovative behaviors. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) emphasize that quality relationships between leaders and members strengthen the digital performance of employees in SMEs through engaging HR practices. Finally, Widiati et al. (2025) highlight the important role of LMX in talent retention in a digital context.

Furthermore, Dulebohn et al. (2012) point out the dyadic nature of LMX and its differentiated impact within teams, which sheds light on the variability of leadership effects on retention. In complex, often multicultural organizational environments, the quality of LMX promotes proactive behaviors and role adjustment (Wong et al., 2022), which can indirectly strengthen emotional attachment and reduce the turnover intention. Tao's (2025) work also confirms the centrality of LMX in the link between transformational leadership and reduced turnover intentions.

Based on these findings, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: LMX mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention.

1.3. The mediation of affective organizational commitment (AOC) in the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention: an interpretation based on self-determination theory

AOC refers to the deep emotional attachment that an employee feels toward their organization, reflecting an identification with institutional values and a sincere desire to contribute to its success (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Among the components of organizational commitment, it is the most robust predictor of loyalty behavior, surpassing commitment based on continuity or obligation (Meyer et al., 2002). This emotional bond is not built in a vacuum: it is strongly influenced by the quality of leadership. Transformational leadership acts as a powerful lever for emotional commitment (Pulido-Martos et al., 2024).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) offers a relevant explanatory framework. This theory posits that the satisfaction of fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and affiliation, all stimulated by transformational leadership, nurtures intrinsic motivation and affective commitment to work (Chua & Ayoko, 2021). By meeting these needs, the transformational leader generates psychological satisfaction that translates into voluntary organizational attachment (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) complements this reading by suggesting that transformational leadership induces behaviors of affective reciprocity. Perceived support, autonomy, and recognition generate a sense of moral obligation and loyalty to the organization.

This affective capital translates into a significant decrease in the turnover intention (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Eisenberger et al., 2020).

Recent work confirms that affective commitment to the leader is an essential psychological bridge to organizational commitment, contributing significantly to reducing the turnover intention, particularly in unstable or uncertain contexts. For example, Ndao and Fall (2024) show that transformational leadership promotes the satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs, which stimulates autonomous motivation and strengthens organizational commitment in African public organizations. Complementarily, Catalano et al. (2024) reveal that, in educational institutions, this leadership style improves the performance of leaders by consolidating the emotional relationship with employees, thereby strengthening their long-term commitment. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2021) emphasize that the quality of the emotional bond between leader and employee is an indirect but robust predictor of retention, surpassing material incentives, particularly in multicultural environments.

A systematic review conducted by Lee et al. (2024) confirms that, in various sectoral contexts, transformational leadership remains a stable determinant of affective commitment, which systematically translates into a lower turnover intention.

Finally, in digitalized environments, recent research (Gui et al., 2024; Cao & Le, 2024) demonstrates that transformational leadership acts as a strategic lever to stimulate innovation, strengthen the capacity for change, and promote organizational commitment, particularly when the culture of innovation or trust in the leader is high—which contributes to a significant reduction in turnover.

Consequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: AOC mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention.

1.4. Sequential mediation of LMX and organizational affective commitment: towards an integrated relational model

As highlighted in the previous sections, numerous studies emphasize the fundamental role of transformational leadership in building high-quality dyadic relationships between leaders and subordinates, as conceptualized by Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. This leadership

style, based on individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation (Bass & Avolio, 1994), fosters a climate of mutual trust and enriched socio-emotional exchange, which are catalysts for a sense of belonging and organizational justice (Saint-Michel & Wielhorski, 2011).

The quality of LMX acts as an amplifier of the effects of transformational leadership on organizational attitudes, particularly affective commitment and turnover intention (Wang et al., 2021; Donkor et al., 2021; Tao, 2025). Indeed, high-quality LMX is characterized by personalized support, individual recognition, and involvement in decision-making, elements that reinforce employees' autonomous motivation according to self-determination theory (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Thus, transformational leadership and AOC can each play a mediating role in the relationship between leadership style and turnover intention, by mobilizing powerful relational and motivational mechanisms (Stepanek & Paul, 2023; Choi et al., 2020).

Transformational leadership plays a central role in reducing the turnover intention by catalyzing a high-quality relationship between leader and subordinate through sequential mediation of LMX and AOC. Through its key dimensions, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, this leadership style creates a climate of trust, mutual respect, and rich socio-emotional exchanges (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Saint-Michel & Wielhorski, 2011; Avolio & Bass, 2004).

High-quality LMX is characterized by personalized support, individualized recognition, and active employee involvement in decision-making processes, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and their perception of organizational justice (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goede et al., 2022). These elements are essential catalysts for affective commitment, which acts as a powerful motivational lever in talent retention (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ndao & Fall, 2024).

Several empirical studies confirm the strength of the link between LMX and AOC (Saint-Michel & Wielhorski, 2011; Gara et al., 2021; AIT BAHADOU et al., 2022; Nanglo et al., 2024; Ibragimov, & Kadagidze, 2025). Thus, transformational leadership and AOC can each play a mediating role in the relationship between leadership style and turnover intention, by

mobilizing powerful relational and motivational mechanisms (Choi et al., 2020; Stepanek & Paul, 2023).

Relational dynamics (LMX-AOC) are particularly effective in digitalized and complex environments, where the quality of interpersonal interactions becomes a strategic factor in organizational performance and stability (Ibragimov & Kadagidze, 2025; Mahbub & Maugh-Funderburk, 2025).

Thus, the reduction in turnover intention is not the result of a single factor, but rather a series of interrelated mechanisms—ranging from leadership style to relational quality (LMX) to AOC—which together promote autonomous motivation, loyalty, and retention.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: LMX and AOC sequentially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention.

To summarize, the hypotheses of this research are directly derived from the theoretical models used, notably those of Bass & Avolio (1994) for transformational leadership, Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) for LMX, and Meyer & Allen (1991) for AOC. Each variable was operationalized using validated scales, as detailed in the following section (methodology). The table below (table2) presents the structure of the sequential mediation model tested in this research.

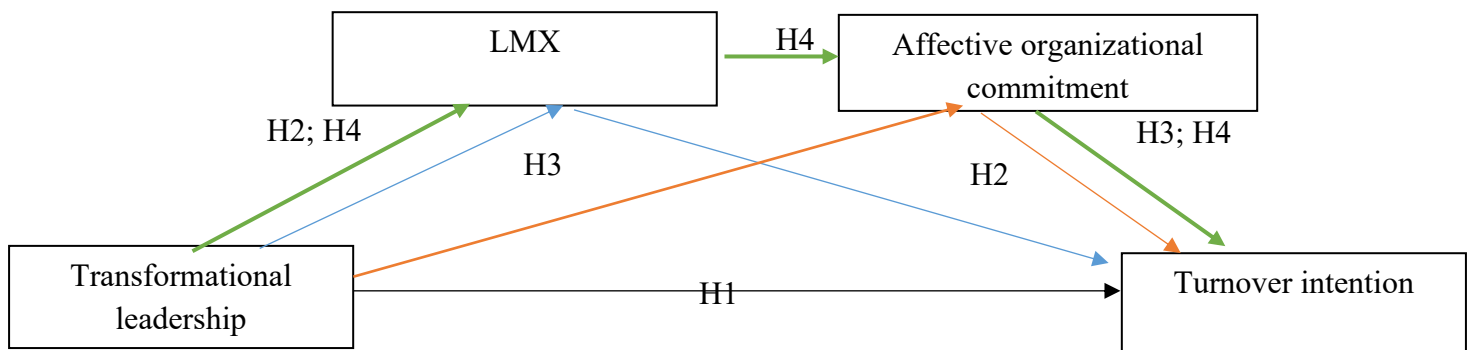
Table2: the structure of the sequential mediation model

Independent variable	Mediator 1 (LMX)	Mediator 2 (affective commitment)	Dependent variable
Transformational leadership	Quality of leader–member relationship	Affectif organizational commitment	Turnover intention

Source: author

The following figure (Figure 1) presents our conceptual research model.

Figure 1: conceptual model



Source: author

2. Methodology

This research adopts a hypothetical-deductive epistemological approach, aiming to empirically test a theoretical model based on presumed causal relationships between variables. It employs a positivist approach, focusing on the objective measurement of organizational perceptions and behaviors using a standardized questionnaire.

Between February and June 2025, an online survey was conducted among professionals working in Tunisian organizations engaged in a digitalization process. Participants were selected through LinkedIn and personal networks. Data collection was anonymous and confidential. Out of the 154 completed questionnaires, 147 were selected for final analysis after excluding incomplete or inconsistent responses.

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, 40.2% of respondents were men and 50.8% were women, with an average age of 28.01 (SD = 5.20). Most participants held a bachelor's degree (bac+3), representing 62.6% of the sample.

The sample, which was selected using a convenience sampling method, includes employees from various Tunisian private companies operating in the information technology, financial services, and manufacturing sectors. These organizations have begun or are continuing a digital transition, integrating digital tools into their internal processes and external interactions.

2.1. Measurement scales

The variables used in this model—transformational leadership, leader-member exchange (LMX) quality, AOC, and intention to leave—are derived from theoretical models validated in organizational literature. Transformational leadership is defined according to the dimensions proposed by Bass & Avolio (1994), LMX according to Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995), affective commitment according to Meyer & Allen (1991), and intention to leave according to Mobley et al. (1979).

The variables were measured using five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly agree”), to capture the intensity of respondents' perceptions.

The items used were adapted from validated questionnaires as detailed below.

Transformational leadership (TL): this concept was assessed using the Global Transformational Leadership Scale (GTL) developed by Carless, Wearing, and Mann (2000). This short scale, which has been validated and widely used in organizational contexts, measures the transformational behaviors perceived in leaders. It covers dimensions such as inspirational vision, individualized consideration, recognition, intellectual stimulation, and exemplary behavior. An example of an item is: *“My supervisor communicates a clear and inspiring vision of the future.”*

Leader-member exchange (LMX): the quality of the exchange between the leader and the member (Leader-Member Exchange) was measured using items inspired by the model developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). This scale assesses the perception of support, trust, and reciprocity in the hierarchical relationship. An example of an item is: *“My supervisor uses his or her influence to help me solve problems related to my work.”*

Affective organizational commitment (AOC): affective commitment to the organization was measured using the scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1991), consisting of five items. This measure reflects the degree of emotional attachment and identification of employees with their organization. An example item is: *“I feel that the problems of this company are my own.”*

Turnover Intention (TI): this concept was assessed using the three-item scale proposed by Colarelli (1984). This measure captures the frequency of thoughts of leaving and intentions to

seek new employment. Examples of items include: “*I frequently think about leaving my job*” and “*I plan to look for a new job in the next twelve months.*”

Control variables: in accordance with the methodological recommendations of Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), four sociodemographic variables were initially considered as control variables: gender, age, tenure, and level of education. These variables are frequently associated with affective organizational commitment and turnover intention.

Following the selection principles proposed by Becker (2005), only variables with a relevant theoretical or empirical link to the model variables were retained. Pearson's correlation analysis (see Table 2) revealed that:

- Gender, although not significantly correlated with the main variables ($p > .05$), was retained for theoretical reasons related to the perception of leadership.
- Tuner was retained because of its moderate correlations with transformational leadership ($r = .144, p = .083$) and affective commitment ($r = .146, p = .079$), suggesting a potential influence on relational dynamics.
- Educational level was excluded, as its correlations with the model variables were weak to moderate (r between .013 and .084), with no direct theoretical basis.
- Age was removed to prevent the risk of multicollinearity, as it was strongly correlated with seniority ($r = .549, p < .001$) and educational attainment ($r = .430, p < .001$).

This selection aims to strengthen the robustness of the model by avoiding statistical redundancies and respecting the principles of analytical parsimony.

Finely, table 3 below details measurement scales

Variable	Definition	Theoretical source	Scale used	Number of items
Transformational leadership	Perceived behaviors of the leader such as inspirational vision, individual consideration, recognition, intellectual stimulation, and exemplary behavior.	Bass & Avolio (1994) ; Carless et al. (2000)	Global Transformational Leadership Scale (GTL)	7
Quality of LMX relationship	Perception of support, trust, and reciprocity in the hierarchical relationship between leader and employee.	Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995)	LMX-7	7
Affective organizational commitment	Emotional attachment and identification of the employee with their organization.	Meyer & Allen (1991)	Affective Commitment Scale	5
Turnover Intention	Frequency of thoughts of leaving and intention to seek new employment.	Mobley et al. (1979) ; Colarelli (1984)	Turnover Intention Scale	3

Source: author

3. Results

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics, correlations between the main variables in the study, and internal reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α). Turnover intention (TI) is significantly and negatively correlated with affective organizational commitment (AOC) ($r = -.511$, $p < .01$) and moderately correlated with the quality of the leader-member exchange (LMX) ($r = -.239$, $p < .01$). AOC is positively associated with LMX ($r = .639$, $p < .01$) and transformational leadership (TL) ($r = .581$, $p < .01$), while LMX also shows a strong positive correlation with TL ($r = .667$,

$p < .01$). These preliminary results support the hypothesis that relational and affective dynamics—particularly the quality of leader-member exchanges and transformational leadership—are key levers for reducing turnover intention. This trend is particularly relevant in digitalized organizational contexts that value people-centered leadership and employee engagement.

To test the hypothetical model, we used the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2018) in SPSS version 21. Hayes' PROCESS macro (2018) was chosen for its ability to model sequential mediation effects with variable control, providing robust estimates of indirect effects using the bootstrap method. This choice allows for a detailed understanding of the mechanisms underlying retention, going beyond traditional correlational approaches.

Model 6 was selected, corresponding to sequential mediation. Transformational leadership (TL) was introduced as an independent variable, the quality of the leader-member relationship (LMX) and affective organizational commitment (AOC) as mediators, and turnover intention (TI) as a dependent variable.

The significance of direct and indirect effects was assessed using the bootstrap method with percentile bias correction, based on 5,000 samples. An effect is considered statistically significant when the 95% confidence interval (CI) does not contain the value zero.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. TI	(0.80)					
2. LMX	-.239**	(0.92)				
3. AOC	-.511**	.639**	(0.74)			
4. LT	-.145	.667**	.581**	(0.77)		
5. Gender ^a	-.142	.032	-.082	-.130		
6. Tenure ^b	.025	.065	.146	.144	-.155	

Notes: $n = 147$. The diagonals show Cronbach's alpha for each construct. ** $p < .01$.

^a1=female, 0=male. ^b1 ≤ 2 years, 2=2–5 years, 3=5–10 years, 4 = 10-20, years, 5=≥ 20 years.

Cronbach's α reliabilities are shown in parentheses in bold italic. ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5 Direct effects of transformational leadership (TL) on mediating variables and turnover intention (TI)

Predictive variable	LMX (M1)	AOC (M2)	IT (Y)	<i>p</i>
R²	.445	.452	.297	—
LT (X)	.594 (.055)	.236 (.070)	-.188 (.088)	< .001 / .001 / .034
LMX (M1)	—	.431 (.079)	-.044 (.104)	< .001 / .671
AOC (M2)	—	—	-.701 (.100)	< .001

Note: Non-standardized coefficients are followed by their standard error in parentheses. P-values are indicated in the order of the models: LMX, AOC, IT.

Table 5 shows that the results of the sequential mediation model indicate that transformational leadership (TL) has a significant direct effect on the quality of the leader-member relationship (LMX) ($\beta = .594$, $p < .001$), affective organizational commitment (AOC) ($\beta = .236$, $p = .001$), and turnover intention (IL) ($\beta = -.188$, $p = .034$). Furthermore, LMX strongly influences OEC ($\beta = .431$, $p < .001$), but has no significant direct effect on TI ($\beta = -.044$, $p = .671$), suggesting complete mediation by affective commitment. Finally, AOC has a very strong direct effect on TI ($\beta = -.701$, $p < .001$), confirming its central role in talent retention. These results support the hypothesis that transformational leadership influences turnover intention mainly through relational (LMX) and affective (AOC) dynamics, thus reinforcing the importance of people-centered management in digitalized organizational contexts.

Table 6 Indirect effects of transformational leadership (TL) on turnover intention (TI) via LMX and AOC

Mediation path Point estimate (SE)	Mediation path Point estimate (SE)	IC 95 % [LLCI ; ULCI]
LT → LMX → TI	-0.026 (.069)	[-0.170 ; 0.111]
LT → AOC → TI	0.165 (.108)	[0.051 ; 0.488]
LT → LMX → AOC → IT	0.179 (.060)	[-0.004 ; 0.257]
Total indirect effect	0.318 (.102)	[0.160 ; 0.567]

The results in **Table 6** reveal that transformational leadership (TL) has a significant indirect effect on turnover intention (TI) ($\beta = 0.318$, $SE = .102$, 95% CI [0.160; 0.567]). This result confirms that the impact of transformational leadership on talent retention operates mainly through mediating mechanisms. More specifically, the indirect effect via affective organizational commitment (AOC) is significant ($\beta = 0.165$, $SE = .108$, 95% CI [0.051; 0.488]), highlighting the central role of affective commitment in reducing the turnover intention. On the other hand, the path $LT \rightarrow LMX \rightarrow IT$ is not significant ($\beta = -0.026$, $SE = .069$, 95% CI [-0.170; 0.111]), suggesting that the quality of the leader-member relationship does not directly affect the turnover intention. The sequential path $LT \rightarrow LMX \rightarrow AOC \rightarrow IT$ has a marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.179$, $SE = .060$, 95% CI [-0.004; 0.257]), indicating that LMX contributes to strengthening AOC, which in turn influences IT. These results confirm that affective commitment is the main mediating lever and that transformational leadership indirectly affects retention through affective dynamics reinforced by relationship quality.

Table 7 summarizes our main results

Table 7 main results

Hypotheses		Results
H1	Transformational leadership has a direct, negative, and significant effect on employees' turnover intention.	Confirmed
H2	LMX mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention.	Rejected
H3	AOC mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention.	Confirmed
H4	LMX and AOC sequentially mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and turnover intention	Partially confirmed

4. Discussion and implications

4.1. Discussion

The main objective of this study is to examine the direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership on turnover intention in a digitalized organizational context. Although this relationship has been widely documented, few studies have explored the psychological and relational mechanisms underlying this influence, particularly in environments marked by digitalization. While the direct effect of transformational leadership on retention has been demonstrated, the mediating role of variables such as the quality of LMX and AOC remains understudied in this type of context. Furthermore, the majority of research has focused on traditional sectors, such as healthcare, neglecting the specificities of digitalized organizations, where relational and motivational dynamics may differ significantly.

The results confirm that transformational leadership (TL) has a direct, significant negative effect on turnover intention (TI) ($\beta = -0.188$; $p = .034$), thus **validating hypothesis H1**. This result is consistent with several previous studies that have shown that transformational leaders, through their ability to mobilize, inspire, and recognize their employees, contribute to significantly reducing intentions to leave (Cranick, 2022; Malokani et al., 2023; Gagnon, 2023; Opolot et al., 2025; Umachia & de Guzman, 2025).

This direct link can be explained by the key behaviors of transformational leadership. First, individualized consideration, which responds to the specific needs of employees and promotes their personal development. Second, intellectual stimulation, which values autonomy and creativity. And inspirational motivation, which gives meaning to work and aligns individual efforts with a collective vision. These dimensions create a positive organizational climate based on trust, recognition, and alignment of values, which strengthens employees' emotional attachment to the organization and reduces their propensity to consider leaving.

This result is particularly relevant in a digitalized context, where relational benchmarks are often weakened by distance, the virtualization of interactions, and the speed of change. Transformational leadership then acts as an emotional and motivational stabilizer, capable of restoring connection, meaning, and coherence in complex environments (Ibragimov & Kadagidze, 2025; Mahbub & Maugh-Funderburk, 2025).

However, this finding should be qualified in light of certain studies that have not observed a significant direct effect between LTr and INTQ (Promchart & Potipiroon, 2020; Park & Pierce, 2020; Manoppo, 2020; Yücel, 2021; Rošková et al., 2024). These discrepancies can be explained by specific organizational contexts. Thus, although the direct effect is validated in our study, it paves the way for a more detailed exploration of the relational and motivational mechanisms underlying this relationship, particularly in digitalized environments.

As for **hypothesis 2** The results obtained reveal that TL has a strong and significant influence on LMX ($\beta = 0.594$; $p < .001$), confirming that transformational behaviors promote the construction of high-quality dyadic relationships. However, LMX does not have a significant direct effect on TI ($\beta = -0.044$; $p = .671$), and the indirect effect via LMX alone is not significant ($\beta = -0.026$; 95% CI $[-0.170; 0.111]$), leading to the **rejection of hypothesis H2** on simple mediation.

This result calls for a nuanced interpretation of the conclusions of previous studies that have highlighted the mediating role of LMX in the relationship between LT and TI (Donkor, 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Jiatong et al., 2022; Tao, 2025). This result can be explained by the fact that, in a digitalized context, the quality of the dyadic relationship alone is not sufficient to significantly influence turnover intentions. It also echoes the conclusions of Herman et al. (2013), who, although they confirmed the effect of LT on LMX, showed that the latter is not a significant mediator of the link between LT and turnover intention.

Digital environments, characterized by the dematerialization of interactions, rapid change, and sometimes relational isolation, can weaken the explanatory power of LMX on retention behaviors (Stepanek & Paul, 2022; Mahbub & Maugh-Funderburk, 2025).

This finding is consistent with the work of Dulebohn et al. (2012), who emphasize that the impact of LMX on organizational attitudes varies according to context, hierarchical level, and organizational culture. In digitalized organizations, employees may place greater importance on factors such as consistency between the leader's words and actions, the satisfaction of psychological needs, or the perception of organizational justice, which LMX alone does not fully capture.

Thus, although LT significantly improves the quality of LMX, this dyadic relationship is not a sufficient mechanism to explain retention. This justifies the exploration of combined or sequential mediations, notably integrating affective commitment as an intermediate variable, which is likely to translate the effects of LMX into lasting organizational attachment (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Cranick, 2022).

In the Tunisian context, characterized by low hierarchical distance and high emotional expressiveness (Bouderbala et al., 2020), transformational leadership finds fertile ground for developing close relationships. However, this culture that values horizontal individualism can also lead employees to seek more autonomous forms of engagement focused on the meaning of work, which could explain why LMX alone is not enough to reduce turnover intention. The dyadic relationship, although important, must be translated into emotional attachment to the organization in order to produce lasting effects on retention.

Regarding the **third hypothesis**, the results of our study confirm that emotional commitment plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between transformational leadership (TL) and intention to quit (ITQ). TL positively influences affective commitment ($\beta = 0.478$; $p < .001$), which has a significant negative effect on TI ($\beta = -0.231$; $p = .012$). The indirect effect via affective commitment is significant (95% CI not containing zero), thus **validating hypothesis H3**.

This result is in line with the work of Meyer & Allen (1991) and Deci & Ryan (2000), who postulate that affective commitment is based on the satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and affiliation—and is a powerful lever for retention.

Transformational leadership, through its dimensions of individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, creates an environment conducive to the satisfaction of these needs, thereby strengthening employees' emotional attachment to the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2020).

These results are consistent with those of Herman et al., 2013, who showed that AOC plays a catalytic role in this relationship. Ndao and Fall (2024), Gui et al. (2024) and Cao & Le (2024) show that in a digitalized context that weakens relational benchmarks, affective commitment is a lever for loyalty. Affectively committed employees remain more inclined to stay with the organization, despite technological constraints, because their motivation is based on recognition, the meaning of their work, and the quality of interactions.

This result also confirms the findings of Cranick (2022) and Umachia & de Guzman (2025), which show that affective commitment acts as a bulwark against turnover by consolidating organizational loyalty and reducing TI. It highlights the importance of developing transformational leadership practices that promote affective commitment, particularly in digitalized environments where traditional retention levers (physical proximity, direct control) are less effective.

In short, AOC is a central motivational mechanism in the relationship between LT and TI, translating the effects of leadership into loyalty behaviors. This result fully justifies its integration into contemporary explanatory models of talent retention. This catalytic role of AOC can be explained by the transformational leader's ability to transcend individual interests and foster strong organizational identification (Avolio, 1999; Shamir et al., 1993). AOC thus becomes the main vector through which transformational behaviors translate into retention intentions, particularly in environments where dyadic interactions are weakened by digitalization (Stepanek & Paul, 2022; Mahbub & Maugh-Funderburk, 2025).

In the Tunisian context, where interpersonal relationships are valued and emotional expectations are high, AOC appears to be a central vector of loyalty. Low masculinity and high uncertainty avoidance (Bouderbala et al., 2020) favor adherence to leaders who are able to create a climate of psychological safety and recognition. Thus, transformational leadership, by responding to these cultural expectations, strengthens employees' attachment to their organization, even in digitalized environments.

Hypothesis H4, which posits a sequential mediation of the link TL and TI via the quality of the dyadic relationship (LMX) and AOC, **is partially confirmed**. The observed indirect effect ($b = 0.179$; 95% CI $[-0.004; 0.257]$) is marginally significant, suggesting a consistent but contextually dependent relational and motivational dynamic.

This result supports the work of Tao (2025), which shows that the joint integration of LMX and AOC neutralizes the direct effect of LT on TI, thus revealing the pivotal role of mediators in retention. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) identify this sequence as one of the best indirect predictors of retention in digitalized environments, where relational benchmarks are often weakened.

Theoretically, this sequential mediation illustrates a logic of progressive anchoring: transformational leadership initiates a quality relationship (LMX), based on individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio, 1994), which nurtures affective commitment, a catalyst for autonomous motivation and organizational loyalty (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Saint-Michel & Wielhorski, 2011). This process is part of self-determination theory, where fundamental psychological needs (autonomy, competence, affiliation) are activated by relational managerial practices.

However, the statistical marginality of the indirect effect calls for caution. It suggests that this chain may be modulated by contextual variables, such as the level of digitalization, organizational culture, or team stability. A longitudinal approach would allow us to test the robustness of this mediation over time, while exploring alternative mediations (e.g., organizational trust, perceived justice) could enrich our understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

Finally, these results reinforce the idea that reducing the TI does not depend on a single factor, but on a series of interrelated levers—leadership, relational quality, affective commitment—which together promote talent retention in contexts of digital transformation (Ibragimov & Kadagidze, 2025).

4.2. Theoretical contribution

This research offers a significant advance in understanding the relational and motivational mechanisms underlying talent retention in a digital context, by sequentially articulating TL, the quality of the dyadic relationship (LMX), AOC, and TI.

The main contributions of this research revolve around five strategic axes, which allow for a renewed understanding of retention mechanisms in a digital context:

❖ **A novel sequential interpretation of the retention process**

While existing literature has extensively documented the effects of transformational leadership on organizational commitment, this study innovates by proposing a sequential mediation model in which LMX and AOC act as intermediate levers between leadership style TI. Unlike independent approaches, this study reveals a dynamic chain between the variables, illustrating a logic of progressive anchoring of loyalty.

❖ **Updating the LMX framework in digital environments**

Few studies have explored the role of LMX in digital environments. This research, based on Ibragimov & Kadagidze (2025), shows that its explanatory power remains, provided it is activated by appropriate leadership.

❖ **Repositioning affective commitment as a strategic mediator**

AOC is generally studied as a dependent variable or an indicator of organizational attachment. This research repositions it as a strategic mediator, capable of transmitting the effects of leadership to retention behaviors.

❖ **Integrating self-determination theory into the field of leadership**

By drawing on self-determination theory, this study shows that transformational leadership, relayed by high-quality LMX, activates the needs for autonomy, competence, and affiliation, reinforcing autonomous motivation.

❖ **Contribution to the field of change management**

Finally, this research falls within the field of change management, showing that transformational leadership, when combined with high-quality relational practices, is a lever for sustainable commitment to organizational transformations. At the same time, and in response to recent calls (Mahbub & Maugh-Funderburk 2025; Ibragimov & Kadagidze, 2025), this study offers an integrative reading of leadership, LMX, and AOC, highlighting an intertwined dynamic that is sensitive to the digital context.

4.3. Managerial implications

The results of this study highlight several strategic levers for action for organizations engaged in digital transformation processes and facing challenges in retaining talent and ensuring the emotional stability of their teams. First, it is important to develop relational transformational leadership by training leaders in individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation in order to create a climate of trust, recognition, and meaning conducive to sustainable engagement. Second, strengthening the quality of dyadic exchanges (LMX) appears to amplify the effects of leadership through authentic interactions, increased involvement in decision-making, and personalized support, helping to reduce isolation and consolidate a sense of belonging. Furthermore, mobilizing emotional engagement as a lever for loyalty involves valuing individual contributions, creating spaces for emotional exchange, even at a distance, and integrating rituals of recognition, which are particularly effective in unstable or digitalized environments. Finally, adapting HR practices to hybrid environments must go beyond material incentives to incorporate relational quality indicators, design contextualized transformational leadership programs, and promote an inclusive and emotionally engaging organizational culture.

By contextualizing these implications within the Tunisian organizational framework, this study highlights the importance of relational norms, hierarchical expectations, and emotional dynamics in talent retention. It emphasizes that managerial practices must be adapted to Arab-African cultural specificities, which are often underrepresented in Western models. Promoting transformational leadership that is sensitive to the local context can thus strengthen engagement and retention in digitalized and hybrid environments.

5. Conclusion, limitations, and future directions

This study has shed light on the relational and motivational mechanisms through which transformational leadership influences turnover intention, particularly in digital environments. By sequentially linking the quality of the leader–member exchange (LMX) and affective organizational commitment, it proposes an original explanatory model that goes beyond traditional linear approaches. The results confirm that while transformational leadership has a direct effect on retention, its impact is significantly enhanced when it is reinforced by high-quality relational dynamics and deep emotional commitment.

However, certain limitations must be highlighted. The first important theoretical limitation of this study lies in the choice to consider only the organizational dimension of affective commitment. However, in the context of a model using the quality of the leader-member relationship (LMX) as a mediator, it would have been more consistent to also include affective commitment to the supervisor. According to the Target Similarity Framework (Lavelle et al., 2007), reciprocal obligations arising from social exchanges are directed toward the target perceived as the actual source of support. Thus, to better understand the mediating mechanisms at work, future research would benefit from incorporating emotional commitment to the supervisor as a complementary mediating variable (Vandenberghe & Bentein, 2009), allowing for a more refined modeling of relational dynamics in digitalized organizational environments.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for the establishment of causality, and the generalization of the results may be limited by the specific (digital) organizational context. In addition, the marginally significant effect of sequential mediation invites consideration of moderating variables such as organizational culture, level of digitalization, or type of complementary leadership.

To further explore these results, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach, integrate multilevel models, or explore alternative mediations (e.g., organizational justice, perceived trust). The study thus paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of retention levers in organizations undergoing transformation.

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