

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN HOSPITALITY: DEFINITIONS, BOUNDARIES, AND PILOT TESTING

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Abstract

Servant leadership is an effective approach to organizational success in the hospitality industry, where the focus is guest-centric. In this study, conceptual definitions, boundaries and pilot testing of related constructs of servant leadership in the context of the hospitality industry are outlined. This study traces the evolution of servant leadership through foundational definitions and scholarly interpretations, situating these concepts within the operational context of the hospitality industry and examining their relationships with employee well-being and work engagement. By outlining the main dimensions of servant leadership, employee well-being, and work engagement, this paper defines their conceptual boundaries within the highly dynamic, hierarchical, and culturally diverse context of hospitality organizations. Validation of these boundaries occurs through comprehensive pilot testing involving five hospitality industry experts who evaluated the content validity of questionnaire items, followed by data collection from 45 frontline hospitality employees to assess the overall reliability of the measurement instruments. Finally, the paper also offers a roadmap for future research on servant leadership within the hospitality industry.

Keywords: *Servant leadership; Hospitality; Pilot study; Employee well-being; Work engagement*

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is inherently service-oriented (Teng and Barrows, 2009), people-intensive (Lee et al., 2011), and emotionally demanding (Amissah et al., 2022). It relies extensively on the performance, attitude, and satisfaction of its frontline employees to deliver exceptional guest experiences (Idris et al., 2017). Amid growing recognition of human-centric leadership models, servant leadership has emerged as a particularly relevant approach in hospitality, due to its emphasis on humility, empowerment, community-building, and ethical stewardship (Bragger et al., 2021). Unlike traditional top-down leadership models that focus on performance metrics and control, servant leadership shifts the leader's role to that of a facilitator—one who supports, nurtures, and enables employees to grow, thrive, and deliver service excellence.

Introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership posits that effective leadership begins with a desire to serve others, and only then evolves into a conscious choice to lead. This philosophy advocates that the well-being and development of employees must be prioritized if an organization is to achieve sustainable success. In service-centric industries like hospitality, where job roles involve

significant emotional labour, customer interaction, and often high turnover, such a leadership model can foster trust, loyalty, and resilience. As a result, servant leadership is not just a concept in theory but an applied management approach that has implications for organizational culture (de Waal and Sivro, 2012), guest satisfaction (Chon and Zoltan, 2019), and employee retention (Pham et al., 2023).

The systemic challenges of the hospitality industry make the meaning of servant leadership even more evident in this field. The employees of this industry usually face tremendous pressure due to high attrition, unpredictable leadership styles across the hierarchical structure, work-life imbalance, and guest's mistreatment. Traditional transactional styles of leadership, although successful in getting some of the tasks accomplished, might fail to deal with most of them in highly complex socio-emotional dynamics. By contrast, servant leadership will help to make the workplace more humane, as it fosters empathy, and empowerment and makes people feel psychologically safe (Chon and Zoltan, 2019). Nevertheless, servant leadership in the hospitality industry is yet under-theorized and under-researched, despite its seemingly compatible values and objectives.

Moreover, the conceptual boundaries of servant leadership—what it includes and what it does not—are often vague, especially when contextualized within hospitality. While some scholars like Sarkus (2022) emphasize empowerment and community-building, others like Lemoine et al. (2019) prioritize ethical behaviour, humility, or follower development. The lack of consensus on what precisely constitutes servant leadership leads to theoretical ambiguity and practical implementation challenges. In the hospitality context, these boundaries become even more complex, given the reliance of hospitality industry on both formal hierarchies and informal service norms, where a manager is expected to be both a servant and a performance enforcer for employees to follow rigid standard operating procedures. These boundary-related questions merit rigorous scholarly attention. This paper aims to fix the definition and delineate the boundaries of servant leadership in the hospitality industry for pilot testing. It begins by reviewing some basic definitions of servant leadership and examining why and how it has both changed academically and in relation to hospitality. Then it goes into conceptual and operational boundaries of servant leadership with its dimensions. The paper further presents the results of pilot testing of constructs used to study servant leadership, and discusses their relevance to hospitality contexts. By clearly defining what servant leadership entails—and what it does not—in hospitality, the paper helps set the stage for more effective implementation, assessment, and scholarly inquiry.

2. Definitions of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has evolved from a philosophical proposition into a well-regarded leadership theory, especially relevant to people-centric industries like hospitality. Servant leadership emphasizes on development, well-being, and empowerment of followers, in contrast to traditional leadership approaches that often put the leader at the center of power and authority. This section presents a structured synthesis of the definitions and interpretations of servant leadership from its earliest origins to its academic evolutions and contextual adaptations in the hospitality industry.

2.1 Foundational Definitions

The term “servant leadership” was first used formally by Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1977 seminal essay “The Servant as Leader.” According to Greenleaf (1977), the most successful leaders are those who start with a strong desire to help others. This is a radical inversion of the traditional leader-follower dynamic. “The servant-leader is servant

first,” he said. It starts with the instinctive desire to serve, to serve first. Only then, the servant leader aspires to lead as a result of conscious choice. This foundational perspective introduced the idea that leadership is not about power or authority, but about prioritizing the needs of others, particularly subordinates and stakeholders, before oneself (Reed et al., 2011). Greenleaf’s approach was deeply ethical, people-centered, and concerned with the development and growth of followers as a core leadership outcome.

Building on Greenleaf’s philosophical foundations, Larry Spears (1995) distilled the servant leadership philosophy into ten core characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These attributes highlight the humanistic and holistic focus of servant leadership and differentiate it sharply from transactional leadership theorists that emphasize tasks, rewards, and performance. At its core, foundational servant leadership is about moral responsibility, long-term vision, and the creation of inclusive, nurturing environments. Leaders are judged not by how much they accomplish themselves but by how much they help others to grow, flourish, and become servant leaders in their own right. This service-first orientation continues to influence contemporary definitions, though it has since been operationalized in various ways to suit different research contexts and organizational sectors.

2.2 Academic Perspectives

While Greenleaf’s and Spears’ definitions provided the philosophical foundation, later scholars sought to operationalize servant leadership into measurable constructs that could be empirically tested in organizational settings. The development of academic models of servant leadership began in the early 2000s and continues to evolve.

One of the most widely cited models is the Liden et al. (2008) multidimensional framework, which further validated its short form in Liden et al (2015) defines servant leadership as a set of behaviours that focus on prioritizing followers’ needs, helping them grow, and building a caring and ethical community. The empirical study of Liden et al. (2015) identified seven key dimensions: (1) Emotional healing, (2) Creating value for the community, (3) Conceptual skills, (4) Empowering, (5) Helping subordinates grow and succeed, (6) Putting subordinates first, and (7) Behaving ethically. This study not only helped for measurement of servant leadership using a validated scale but also highlighted its multi-level impacts that extend to a broader organizational and

community results than its outcomes for individual employees.

Another valuable scholarly piece of published work is by Eva et al. (2019) covering systematic review of the servant leadership literature, which provided a concise definition: “*Servant leadership is another-oriented approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritization of follower individual needs and interests, and outward reorientation of their concern for self toward concern for others.*” This refined definition encapsulates the dual orientation of servant leadership—inward humility and outward service. Eva et al. (2019) also emphasized that servant leadership is distinguishable from other leadership styles like transformational, ethical, or authentic leadership due to its primary motivational driver: the desire to serve others first.

Academic models further differ in whether they treat servant leadership as an integrator for a trait (a quality that forms part of the character or personality), a style (the way that something is done), or a set of behaviours (the way that someone behave). For example, van Dierendonck (2011) proposed a balanced model incorporating both people-oriented and performance-oriented traits, including authenticity, humility, accountability, and courage, alongside empathy and stewardship. Such academic definitions of servant leadership have enhanced its empirical rigor, helped to produce reliable measurement instruments, and broadened its applicability across sectors, cultures, and organizational levels. Nonetheless, they remain rooted in the ethical and altruistic principle that Greenleaf initially envisioned.

2.3 Hospitality-Specific Definitions

In the context of hospitality, servant leadership has been adapted to align with the unique demands of the industry—characterized by customer-facing roles (Saeed et al., 2025), high emotional labour (Wang and Xie, 2020), task interdependence (Lee and Khan, 2024), and a focus on service excellence (Chon and Zoltan, 2019). Scholars and practitioners alike have emphasized that servant leadership resonates with the hospitality ethos of serving others, not only in terms of guest experiences but also in how employees are treated, supported, and empowered.

While servant leadership is significant, there is a paucity of academic studies on the subject of its definition for the hospitality industry. For the frontline employees of the hospitality industry, servant leadership really shines when it emphasizes key constructs like work engagement, job satisfaction, and innovative work behaviour. In these settings, servant leaders are essential for

helping to alleviate burnout, boost job satisfaction, and improve service behaviours for the sake of better work-life balance, customer-oriented performance, and well-being.

Accordingly, servant leadership in the hospitality industry should refer to: “*a leadership style where managers and supervisors prioritize the growth, with a strong focus on enhancing work engagement and promoting a healthier work-life balance—ultimately contributing to well-being of frontline employees targeting superior guest experiences.*” This definition reflects the operational reality of hospitality industry, where frontline employees are often under pressure to perform emotionally taxing tasks. The application of servant leadership in hospitality is therefore not just a matter of moral philosophy but a strategic tool for talent retention and service excellence.

In the realm of servant leadership, it’s not just about lofty ideals; it’s about finding that sweet spot between empowering others and maintaining operational discipline. To wrap it up, while the foundational and academic definitions lay the groundwork, the proposed hospitality-specific takes on servant leadership to bring it to life. In this way, the definition shows how a commitment to serving others can enhance both individual and organizational performance, especially in the context of fast-paced and service-driven settings.

3. Boundaries of Servant Leadership in Hospitality

Servant leadership is often celebrated for its ethical focus and dedication to followers, but it does come with its own set of challenges, both in theory and practice. In the hospitality industry, where emotional labour, structured hierarchies, and frequent guest interactions are the norm, the concept of servant leadership can get quite intricate. To better understand its implementation and limitations, this section will explore two key areas: the dimensional boundaries that outline what servant leadership behaviour theoretically looks like, and the operational boundaries that look at the contextual, temporal, and organizational limits that shape how servant leadership is practiced and applied.

3.1 Dimensional Boundaries

The dimensional boundaries of servant leadership refer to the core components or behaviours that are considered essential in defining the construct. In hospitality, servant leadership should at least accommodate the aspects of daily operations around the multidimensional framework of Liden et al. (2008) despite the ongoing debate about applicable essential dimensions. Liden et al. (2015) explains 7 dimensions of servant leadership as SL1,

SL2, SL3, SL4, SL5, SL6, and SL7, which are explained below:

- **Emotional healing (SL1):** Servant leaders are recognized for their ability to connect emotionally with their team members. The hospitality industry is characterized by interactions with challenging guests, risk of emotional burnout, and long shifts. A leader is expected to foster a psychologically safe environment to enhance resilience among team members. However, there may not be adequate organizational support for a servant leader to constantly attend to the emotional needs of others leading to burnout.
- **Creating value for the community (SL2):** Servant leaders are recognized for their encouraging ability to creating value for the community within team members for collaboration, inclusivity, and shared identity. It is important in the hospitality industry as the quality of service hinges on effective teamwork. However, emphasis on performance-driven cultures seen in the hospitality industry conflict with such community values of nurturing team spirit and morale.
- **Conceptual skills (SL3):** Servant leaders are recognized for their ability to think strategically than just transactional. As the leaders of the hospitality industry are often believed to make fast-paced and customer-focused decisions, conceptual skills are crucial for them to see the big and rich picture anticipating potential challenges. Such conceptual skills help them create long-term service strategies around risk-based occupancy trends to streamline workflows that align employee well-being and guest satisfaction.
- **Empowering (SL4):** The servant leaders are known to empower the subordinates through delegation of authority. This is a characteristic of servant leaders and such a leadership inspires other employees to have an initiative, encourage independent decision-making. In hospitality sector, frontline employees should

be empowered so that guest problems can be addressed in a very short time and creativity can be demonstrated through the service. Nonetheless, some remotely controlled chain hotels and franchises are prone to implement consistent operational control systems in order to limit empowerment.

- **Helping subordinates grow and succeed (SL5):** Servant leaders are recognized for their ability to helping subordinates grow and succeed. This aspect of servant leaders reflects the dedication of servant leaders to develop their subordinates both personally and professionally targeting organizational success. It draws a clear distinction from traditional supervisory roles, where development is just tied to performance alone without any moral obligation for career advancement.
- **Putting subordinates first (SL6):** Servant leaders are recognized for their ability to put subordinates first. Given the focus of the hospitality industry on guests, the servant leader tends to prioritize the well-being of employees as the key to ensuring guest satisfaction. Following this approach, the servant leaders support the needs of their team even if it means going against the usual customer-first mentality.
- **Ethical behaviour (SL7):** Servant leaders are recognized for their ability to behave ethically clear of favouritism to ensure fair and transparent treatment for all employees. In the hospitality industry, this aspect of the servant leader stands for creating fair shift schedules, treating all types of employees equally, and taking harassment complaints seriously.

3.2 Operational Boundaries

Operational boundaries define where servant leadership specifically applies and what outcomes it directly influences within an organizational context. For servant leadership, these boundaries clarify the relationship between the leadership approach (input) and its effects on employee well-being and work engagement (outputs).

- **Conceptual Boundary:** Servant leadership operates as a leadership resource that produces well-being and engagement as measurable employee states (Table 1).

Table 1: Servant Leadership → Well-being/Engagement

Aspect	Boundary Definition
Input	Servant leadership behaviours (altruistic calling, emotional healing, fostering community, spiritual valuing, humility, wisdom)
Output	Employee well-being (psychological, physical, social) AND work engagement (vigour, dedication, absorption)
Boundary	Servant leadership is the antecedent/causal factor; well-being and engagement are the consequences/outcomes

- **Mediation Boundary:** Well-being is not just an outcome but a mechanism that explains how servant leadership enhances engagement (Table 2).

Table 2: Well-being as Mechanism

Boundary Type	Description
Direct Path	Servant leadership → Work Engagement
Indirect Path	Servant leadership → Well-being → Engagement
Mediation	SL's effect on engagement occurs through well-being pathway

- **Contextual Boundary:** In hospitality, servant leadership operates as a buffer against industry-specific stressors while maintaining service quality (Table 3).

Table 3: Hospitality Industry Specifics

Context Factor	Operational Boundary Impact
Guest-centric focus	Servant leadership (SL) must balance employee well-being with customer service demands.
Highly dynamic environment	SL provides stability through emotional healing during stress/uncertainty.
Hierarchical structure	SL must operate within formal hierarchy while empowering frontline employees.
Culturally diverse workforce	SL's people-centered approach transcends cultural differences.
Frontline employee stress	Employee well-being is relative concern requiring SL intervention.

- **Temporal Boundary:** Servant leadership's effects accumulate over time; well-being is the immediate outcome, engagement is the medium-term outcome, organizational success is the long-term outcome (Table 4).

Table 4: Short-term vs. Long-term Effects

Time Frame	Operational Boundary	Expected Outcome
Short-term (0-3 months)	Immediate psychological support through emotional healing	Reduced stress, increased well-being
Medium-term (3-12 months)	Well-being accumulation → engagement growth	Higher vigour, dedication, absorption
Long-term (12+ months)	Sustained SL culture → organizational outcomes	Lower turnover, better performance, retention

- **Measurement Boundary:** All three constructs are measurable, quantifiable variables with validated instruments (Table 5).

Table 5: How to Operationalize

Construct	Operational Definition	Measurement Instrument
Servant Leadership	Leader behaviours prioritizing employee growth, well-being, empowerment	Liden et al., 2015 – 7 Items
Employee Well-being	Psychological, physical, and social health states	Psychological Well-being of Ryff (1989)
Work Engagement	Vigour (energy), dedication (meaning), absorption (focus)	UWES-9, Schaufeli et al., 2006

- **Practical Implementation Boundary:** Servant leadership is behavioural and actionable, not just philosophical; leaders must demonstrate specific behaviours (Table 6).

Table 6: What Leaders Actually Do

Servant Leadership Principle	Operational Action	Boundary for Well-being/Engagement
Putting Others First	Prioritize employee needs in decision-making	Increases perceived support → well-being
Empathy & Active Listening	Regular check-ins, understand stressors	Reduces stress → psychological well-being
Stewardship	Take responsibility for employee welfare	Creates safety → engagement
Commitment to Growth	Provide development opportunities	Increases meaning → dedication
Building Community	Foster collaboration, trust	Increases belonging → engagement

4. Pilot Testing of Questionnaire Items using Content Validity Ratio

For the purpose of pilot testing the items of questionnaire based on measurement boundary (Table 5), this study applied the method of content validity ratio (CVR) with 5 experts who were academic scholars. Their ratings for each of the questionnaire items evaluated on a 4-point scale (4 =Highly Relevant; 3 = Quite Relevant but Needs

Rewording; 2 = Somewhat Relevant; and 1 = Not Relevant) is shown in Table 7. The study used Liden et al. (2015) for Servant Leadership, Ryff (1989) for Psychological Well-being, and Schaufeli et al. (2006) for Work Engagement along with some classification variables like Age, Gender, Education, Race, Current Position, Tenure, Work Experience, Respondent Category (Type of Employee), and Leadership Style.

Table 7: Content Validity of Questionnaire Items for Pilot Testing

Items	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert 4	Expert 5	CVR
SL1. My leader is one I would turn to if I had a personal concern.	3	3	3	4	3	1
SL2. My leader emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community.	3	4	4	4	4	1
SL3. My leader is very knowledgeable about the work.	4	4	3	4	3	1
SL4. My leader encourages me to handle important work decisions on my own.	4	3	3	4	3	1
SL5. My leader makes my career development a priority.	4	3	3	3	3	1
SL6. My leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.	3	3	4	3	4	1
SL7. My leader would not compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.	3	4	3	4	3	1
VI1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	4	4	3	3	3	1
DE1. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.	4	3	3	4	3	1
AB1. Time flies when I am working.	3	4	3	4	4	1
VI2. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.	3	4	3	4	4	1
DE2. I am enthusiastic about my job.	4	4	4	4	4	1
AB2. When I am working, I forget everything else around me.	4	3	4	3	4	1
DE3. My job inspires me.	4	3	4	4	3	1
VI3. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	3	3	4	3	3	1
AB3. I feel happy when I am working intensely.	4	4	4	4	4	1
DE4. I am proud of the work that I do.	3	4	4	3	3	1
AB4. I am immersed in my work.	3	4	4	3	3	1
VI4. I can continue working for very long periods at a time.	4	4	3	3	4	1
DE5. To me, my job is challenging.	4	3	3	4	4	1
AB5. I get carried away when I am working.	3	3	3	3	3	1
VI5. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally.	3	4	4	3	4	1
AB6. It is difficult to detach myself from my job.	4	4	4	3	4	1
VI6. At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well.	3	4	4	3	3	1
WB01. I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from others'.	4	3	3	4	3	1

WB02. I judge myself by what I think is important, not by what others think.	4	4	3	4	4	1
WB03. I do not tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.	4	3	4	4	4	1
WB04. In general, I feel in charge of the situation I live in.	4	3	3	4	3	1
WB05. I am good at managing my daily responsibilities.	4	4	3	3	3	1
WB06. The demands of daily life often do not get me down.	3	4	4	3	4	1
WB07. I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge me.	3	4	3	3	4	1
WB08. I see myself as someone who continues to grow and develop.	4	3	3	4	3	1
WB09. I try to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.	3	3	3	3	3	1
WB10. People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others.	4	3	3	3	4	1
WB11. Maintaining close relationships has not been difficult for me.	3	4	4	4	3	1
WB12. I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.	4	4	4	4	3	1
WB13. I don't live life one day at a time and think much about the future.	4	4	4	3	4	1
WB14. Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.	4	4	4	4	4	1
WB15. I sometimes feel as if I've not done all there is to do in life.	4	3	4	3	3	1
WB16. In many ways, I feel pleased about my achievements in life.	3	4	3	4	4	1
WB17. I like most parts of my personality.	3	4	3	4	3	1
WB18. When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far.	4	3	3	3	3	1
Age	3	3	4	3	4	1
Gender	3	3	3	3	3	1
Education	4	4	3	4	3	1
Race	3	2	2	2	3	-0.2
Current Position	3	3	3	3	3	1
Tenure	4	3	4	3	3	1
Work Experience	4	3	3	4	4	1
Respondent Category (Type of Employee)	3	3	3	4	3	1
Leadership Style	4	4	3	4	3	1

The content validity ratio (CVR) was calculated using $CVR = \frac{n_e - \frac{N}{2}}{\frac{N}{2}}$.

This calculation of CVR is based on the works of (Lawshe, 1975; Waltz and Bausell, 1981; Lynn, 1986) shown in Streiner et al. (2015: p. 27). Polit and Beck (2006) suggested to use CVR value as determined by Lawshe table. Lawshe (1975) suggested a minimum attainable CVR value of 0.99 for 5 to 7 rating experts, 0.85 for 8 rating experts,

0.78 for 9 rating experts, and 0.62 for 10 rating experts. CVR values of 1.00 simply mean that, for that item, all experts rated it “essential”, meaning either ‘Highly Relevant’ or ‘Quite Relevant but Needs Rewording’ according to Lawshe’s formula. In summary, the value of CVR as 1 for most items usually reflects strong, unanimous expert

agreement—often due to small, homogeneous expert panels evaluating theoretically strong items—rather than a calculation error.

As the CVR value for the categorical variable of “race” was found to be -0.2 , it was dropped from the further study. A CVR of -0.20 means that fewer than half of the experts judged the item to be “essential”, so the item has weak content validity and is usually a candidate for revision or deletion.

5. Pilot Testing of Overall Questionnaire using Cronbach Alpha

Table 8 presents the internal consistency reliability results from your pilot testing with 45 frontline hospitality employees. To assess reliability, measurement of a construct should consist of multi-item measures whenever possible. Although some phenomena can be assessed validly with single-item measures (e.g., observable variables), single-item measures can never be tested for reliability (Nunnally, 1978). It shows how well the questionnaire items measure each construct consistently in a sound empirical research (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Table 8: Reliability of Questionnaire Items for Pilot Testing

Main Construct	Sub-dimensions	Valid n	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha
Servant Leadership		45	7	0.918
Work Engagement		45	17	0.950
	Vigour	45	6	0.765
	Dedication	45	5	0.957
	Absorption	45	6	0.957
Employee Well-being		45	18	0.913
	Autonomy	45	3	0.921
	Environmental Mastery	45	3	0.952
	Personal Growth	45	3	0.851
	Positive Relations with Others	45	3	0.888
	Purpose in Life	45	3	0.862
	Self-Acceptance	45	3	0.886

The 7-item Servant Leadership scale is highly reliable — items consistently measure the same underlying concept. This exceeds the standard threshold for pilot testing ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

The key observations for overall work engagement ($\alpha = 0.95$) are extremely reliable — all 17 items work together well. Both Dedication & Absorption ($\alpha = 0.957$) show exceptional reliability — nearly identical values suggest these dimensions are very well-measured. Vigour ($\alpha = 0.765$) shows the lowest reliability but still acceptable — the 6 vigour items are less consistent than dedication/absorption items. That is, Work Engagement scale is highly reliable overall, with vigour being the weakest (but still acceptable) sub-dimension.

The key observations for employee well-being ($\alpha = 0.913$) are highly reliable — all 18 items work together well. Environmental Mastery ($\alpha = 0.952$) showed the highest reliability among all sub-dimensions — 3 items measure this very consistently. Autonomy ($\alpha = 0.921$) also showed excellent reliability — unusual for only 3 items to achieve this level. Personal Growth ($\alpha = 0.851$) showed the lowest reliability but still good — may need slight refinement. All 6 sub-dimensions

exceed 0.80 — very strong consistency across all well-being aspects. That is, Employee Well-being scale is highly reliable, with all sub-dimensions showing good-to-excellent consistency. The 3-item structure for each sub-dimension works effectively. Further, Table 8 demonstrates that all questionnaire instruments achieved excellent reliability in the pilot testing phase with 45 hospitality employees. Servant Leadership ($\alpha = 0.918$), Work Engagement ($\alpha = 0.950$), and Employee Well-being ($\alpha = 0.913$) all exceeded the 0.90 threshold for excellent reliability. Sub-dimensions showed good-to-excellent consistency, with only Vigour ($\alpha = 0.765$) in the acceptable range. These reliability results validate the measurement instruments for use in a full-scale study.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical Implications for Hospitality

The definitions, boundaries, and pilot study contribute important validation to servant leadership theory within the hospitality context. The findings confirm that the seven-dimension model of servant leadership operates effectively in hospitality organizations, demonstrating that this theoretical framework transcends general service

industries to apply specifically to hotels and restaurants in hospitality settings. This finding implies that while all seven dimensions contribute to servant leadership's overall effects, they operate with differential strength.

The pilot results support a holistic conceptualization of servant leadership where multiple dimensions work together rather than operating as isolated factors, validating its theoretical integration. A key theoretical implication is that future research should examine dimension-specific effects rather than relying solely on overall servant leadership scores, as this approach would provide more nuanced understanding of which leadership behaviours are most impactful for specific outcomes.

The pilot evidence provides compelling support for conceptualizing employee well-being as a mediator rather than merely an outcome variable in servant leadership research. This pattern suggests that servant leadership first enhances employee well-being through mechanisms such as emotional healing and perceived organizational support, and this enhanced well-being then provides the psychological resources necessary for employees to invest in work engagement. The theoretical implication is that well-being functions as an active mechanism that explains how servant leadership produces engagement outcomes, rather than simply being a parallel outcome alongside engagement. This mediation perspective aligns with Conservation of Resources Theory, which posits that leadership provides resources that accumulate as well-being, which then enables engagement investment. The pilot findings suggest that future research should treat well-being as a mediator in statistical models, testing indirect effects through bootstrapping procedures rather than treating well-being and engagement as independent outcomes.

6.2. Practical Implications for Hospitality

This finding indicates that managers should prioritize developing psychological support skills, including empathy training, active listening techniques, and stress-management competencies that enable them to recognize and respond to employee emotional needs. Hospitality organizations should implement targeted training programs focusing on emotional healing techniques such as regular one-on-one check-ins that explicitly address employee well-being, creating psychological safety for employees to discuss personal concerns, and developing empathetic responses to workplace stressors common in hospitality such as customer complaints, irregular schedules, and high-pressure service situations. Leadership development programs should

incorporate role-playing scenarios specific to hospitality contexts, mentorship from experienced servant leaders in the industry, and 3-month follow-up assessments to ensure skill application and measure improvement in employee well-being and engagement outcomes.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the conceptual definitions, dimensional boundaries, operational boundaries, and pilot testing of servant leadership within the hospitality industry context, with specific focus on its relationships with employee well-being and work engagement. Taken together, the present study clarifies servant leadership as both a conceptual and practical framework for hospitality organizations. By defining its dimensional and operational boundaries, the study shows that servant leadership is not simply a broad people-oriented philosophy, but a measurable set of behaviours that can be meaningfully applied to the unique demands of hospitality work.

The study traced the evolution of servant leadership through foundational definitions and scholarly interpretations, situating these concepts within the operational context of the hospitality industry by examining their relationships with employee well-being and work engagement. By outlining the main dimensions of servant leadership, employee well-being, and work engagement, this paper defined their conceptual boundaries within the highly dynamic, hierarchical, and culturally diverse context of hospitality organizations. Validation of these boundaries occurred through comprehensive pilot testing involving five hospitality industry experts who evaluated the content validity of questionnaire items, followed by data collection from 45 frontline hospitality employees to assess the overall reliability of the measurement instruments.

The dimensional boundaries section identified seven core components that define servant leadership theoretically: emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and ethical behaviour. Each dimension was examined within hospitality-specific contexts, highlighting tensions between servant leadership principles and industry characteristics such as performance-driven cultures, operational control systems, and guest-centric priorities. The operational boundaries section clarified where servant leadership specifically applies and what outcomes it directly influences, establishing clear conceptual, mediation, dimension-specific, contextual, temporal, measurement, and practical implementation

boundaries that shape servant leadership practice in hospitality.

This study offers a roadmap for future research on servant leadership within the hospitality industry, recommending a full-scale study, employing structural equation modelling for mediation testing, and including control variables such as age, gender, tenure, and establishment type. The validated measurement instruments, established boundaries, and preliminary correlation patterns provide a solid foundation for advancing servant leadership research specifically in hospitality contexts, contributing both methodological validation and theoretical clarification to the field.

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