

Leading for Service Excellence: Organizational Identification Mediates The Transformational Leadership--Service Quality Relationship In Saudi Hotels

AMAL HAMOUD ALKHALDI, ALYAA AFIFAH ABU TALIB

Abstract: Purpose: This study analysed how transformational leadership drives service quality in the hotel industry. We proposed that organizational identification an employee's psychological oneness with their workplace serves as the key mechanism explaining this relationship.

Methodology: Data were collected from 320 frontline employees across 22 four- and five-star hotels located in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, Saudi Arabia. We used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with a second-order SERVQUAL specification to test our hypotheses. A priori power analysis confirmed that our sample size ($N=320$) exceeds the minimum required ($N=160$) to detect a medium effect ($\beta=0.20$) at 80% power.

Findings: Transformational leadership strongly predicted both organizational identification ($\beta = 0.727, p < 0.001$) and service quality ($\beta = 0.475, p < 0.001$). Organizational identification directly enhanced service quality ($\beta = 0.404, p < 0.001$) and partially mediated the leadership-quality link (indirect effect $\beta = 0.294, p < 0.001$). This model demonstrated 66.8% of the variance in service quality. Model fitness was acceptable ($SRMR = 0.068, NFI = 0.912$).

Originality of the research: While previous research has treated the link between transformational leadership and service quality as direct, we demonstrated mediation effects of organizational identification laying critical role on relationship between transformational leadership and service quality. In our sample of Saudi hotels, organizational identification had 38% of the total effect of transformational leadership on service quality. The finding is particularly relevant in the collectivist cultural contexts, where an employee's sense of organizational belonging carries more weight than in individualist settings.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, organizational identification, service quality, SERVQUAL, Saudi hotels.

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Introduction

Hotel industry revolves around service quality as a key to success. Visitors easily notice how staff members treat them with genuine care. With the advent of technology, online reviews were used to build or destroy reputations overnight, the consistency and high-quality delivery of services have become a strategic imperative (Zeithaml et al., 1990; Amin et al., 2025). Although service training programs and performance measures are widely used, many hotels find it difficult to get frontline employees out of scripted interactions. Service excellence is not simply a skill or process issue, but it is essentially psychological. Workers feel a personal sense of attachment to their organization a sense of belonging that scholars call organizational identification (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). We hypothesised that leadership contributes to this process of organisational identification. Transformational leaders inspire, act as a role model to their followers, and show genuine concern. They change the self-concepts of their employees. By making the organization take pride, employees work much harder to please the guests and will not need close supervision. Saudi Arabian government has developed a similar program called Vision 2030 that intends to bring 150 million visitors annually to Saudi Arabia. Quality of service offered at the hotels has thus become a strategic priority in the country. Additionally, the Saudi culture highly values relational harmony and collective identity, which increased the impact of organizational identification (Aman-Ullah et al., 2022; Zia, 2023). This paper addressed the three research questions: (1) Does transformational leadership improve service quality in Saudi hotels? (2) Is this relationship mediated by organizational identification? and (3) To what extent do these factors explain variation in service quality? Using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009), we conducted an apriori power analysis with the current software version. Our final sample of 320 thus provided sufficient statistical power.

Background and Hypotheses

2.1 Social identity theory and Organizational identification

Social identity theory stated that individuals define themselves in part by their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). This in organizational life is similar to organizational identification: to what extent an employee internalized successes and failures of organization as their own. Under strong identification, employees embrace organizational goals as individual standards, instead of merely following the rules. Organizational identification is associated with decreased turnover, proactive customer service, and discretionary effort in earlier hospitality studies (Liu & Wang, 2024; Kim & Park, 2025). However, less studies focused on exploring active role of organisational identification by leaders on service quality among hotel employees.

2.2 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership motivates inspiration among employees unlike merely giving orders. It includes four dimensions: idealized influence (leading by example), inspirational motivation (articulating a compelling vision), intellectual stimulation (challenging assumptions), and individualized consideration (demonstrating personal care to followers) (Bass, 1985; Arain et al., 2025). Transformational leaders stimulate employees by providing them with a clear direction for their actions, affirming value of their organization, and reinforcing it. This style of leadership is very effective among hospitality sector. Employees were more likely to perform better when they identify with the organization, as this helps them keep up with job demands.

2.3 Service Quality

Customer satisfaction differs with service quality. Quality is an opinion of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles the five SERVQUAL dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Babakus & Yavas, 2024; Chen & Lin, 2025). All five dimensions are driven by frontline employees in hospitality sector. However, responsiveness and empathy require discretionary efforts. Empathy cannot be forced; employees should be willing to offer it.

2.4 Hypothesis Development

- H1: Transformational leadership positively affects organizational identification.
 - H2: Organizational identification positively affects service quality.
 - H3: Transformational leadership positively affects service quality.
 - H4: Organizational identification mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and service quality.
- Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.

Research Methodology

This study applied a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among transformational leadership, organizational identification, and service quality in the hospitality sector. A cross-sectional survey method was adopted for this study because it allows systematic data collection from a large sample and facilitates the empirical testing of hypothesized relationships among constructs. Data were collected from frontline employees working in four- and five-star hotels in Saudi Arabia. The proposed research model and hypotheses were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), suitable for examining both direct and indirect relationships among latent variables.

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected from frontline employees working in four- and five-star hotels located in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, the principal business and tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia. The sampling frame was obtained from the Saudi Ministry of Tourism registry. To ensure organizational comparability, only operational hotels with more than 50 guest rooms were included in the study.

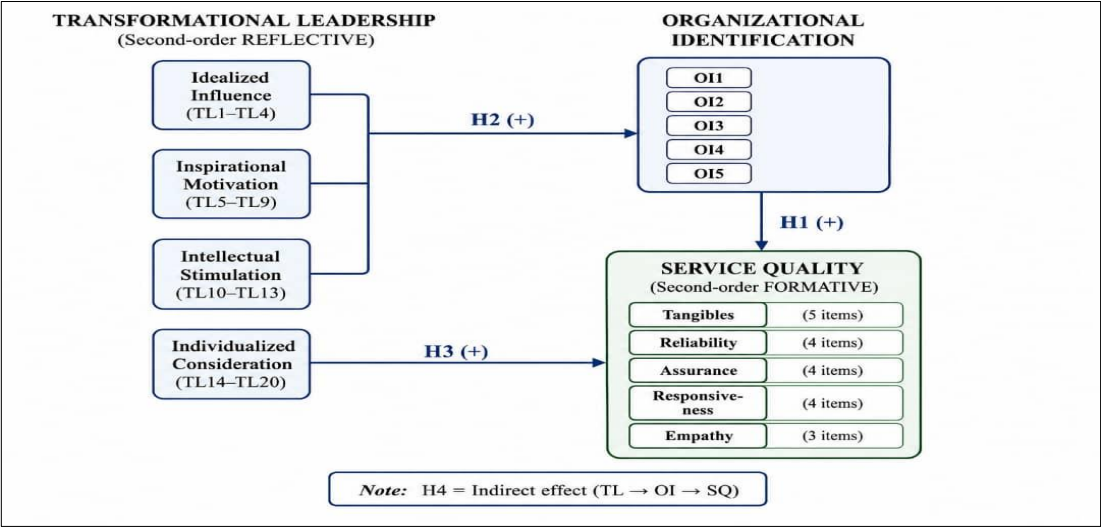


Fig 1 Conceptual Framework

A total of 450 survey packages were distributed through the human resource departments of participating hotels. Each package consisted of a questionnaire, an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, and a consent form. Data were collected using a two-wave survey design with a three-week time lag between measurement occasions, following the recommendations of Podsakoff et al. (2003) to avoid common variance. In the first wave, respondents provided information regarding transformational leadership and organizational identification. In the second wave, data on service quality and demographic characteristics were collected.

Among 450 questionnaires distributed, 332 surveys were returned with a response rate of 73.8%. Questionnaires with missing data or incomplete responses were excluded from the study. Finally, 320 usable survey responses were retained for analysis, representing 96.4% of the returned surveys. Among the respondents, 58% were male and 42% were female. Mean age of subjects was 31.7 years ($SD = 7.2$), while the mean organizational tenure was 4.2 years ($SD = 2.9$). Nearly 63% of participants were employed in guest-contact functions, including front desk, food and beverage, and concierge services, whereas the remaining respondents worked in housekeeping and other back-of-house operational roles.

3.2 Ethics approval

This study received ethical approval from the Graduate School of Management, Management and Science University (Protocol No. MSU/GSM/2024-045). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

3.3 Measures

All variable factors in survey questionnaire were measured using seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Transformational leadership (20 items). The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X; Bass & Avolio, 1995) measured four dimensions: idealized influence (4 items; TL1–TL4), inspirational motivation (5 items; TL5–TL9), intellectual stimulation (4 items; TL10–TL13), and individualized consideration (7 items; TL14–TL20). A sample item for individualized consideration is: "My supervisor spends time teaching and coaching me." A sample item for the overall scale is: "My supervisor has a strong vision of the future of our hotel."

Organizational identification (5 items). Organizational identification was assessed using an adapted version of the Mael and Ashforth (1992) scale. The original six-item measure was shortened to five items based on the results of a pilot study conducted with 45 frontline hotel employees (not included in the final sample). During pilot testing, one item ("This organization's successes are my successes") exhibited cross-loadings above 0.40 on unintended constructs and demonstrated low item-to-total correlation ($r = 0.38$). Following the scale purification guidelines of Hair et al. (2022), this item was removed. The retained five items showed improved internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$ in the pilot sample) and maintained theoretical coverage of the identification construct (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). A sample item from the final scale is: "When someone criticizes this hotel, it feels like a personal insult." All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Service quality (20 items). Employee-perceived service quality was measured with a modified SERVQUAL-based instrument consisting of 20 items representing five dimensions: tangibles (5 items), reliability (4 items), assurance (4 items), responsiveness (4 items), and empathy (3 items), following the original conceptualization by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The results of the initial first order confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated acceptable reliability and convergent validity for all the dimensions of SERVQUAL. The HTMT values were however

found between 0.89 and 0.94, which exceeded the widely used cutoff of 0.85, indicating that the five facets are not fully discriminant. These constructs are often treated interchangeably (Babakus & Yavas, 2024; Chen & Lin, 2025), consistent with our findings. To preserve the theoretical richness of the five dimensions while accounting for their empirical overlap, we specified service quality as a second-order construct. The five first-order dimensions were treated as reflective (i.e., measured by multiple items each) but were allowed to form the higher-order service quality construct formatively (Hair et al., 2022). This reflective-formative specification is appropriate when the constituent dimensions are conceptually necessary, but empirically strongly correlated, and permits retaining the full SERVQUAL structure without discarding any dimensions. A sample item is: "I provide timely service to hotel guests."

3.4 Analytical approach

Data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024). PLS-SEM is suitable for prediction-oriented research and does not require assumption of multivariate normality (Hair et al., 2022). Following established guidelines, we adopted a two-step procedure. We evaluated measurement model by examining its reliability using Cronbach's α , composite reliability, convergent validity (e.g., average variance extracted), and discriminant validity (e.g., HTMT) for all reflectively measured constructs, including 5 SERVQUAL dimensions. We also assessed the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships between organizational identification, service quality, and focal outcomes.

Measurement model assessment: We examined indicator loadings (>0.60 recommended), internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$, composite reliability > 0.70), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted [AVE] > 0.50 for reflective constructs), and discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.90). For the second-order service quality construct, we also evaluated formative measurement model based on variance inflation factors (VIFs < 5) and its weights.

Structural model assessment: We tested path coefficients (β), coefficients of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) through blindfolding (Shmueli et al., 2019). We evaluated how well the model fit the data using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and the normed fit index (NFI). If the values of SRMR are less than 0.08 or NFI is greater than 0.90, the model fits well, generally. To test for potential single method bias, a full collinearity test was also conducted, a common method for the detection of common method bias. All variance inflation factors (VIFs) were below 3.3, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to distort the results.

Power analysis: For a linear multiple regression model with three predictors and $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, and medium expected effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), the minimum required sample size was 77. For the PLS-SEM model with a maximum of three arrows pointing to any endogenous construct, the minimum sample required is 160. Both thresholds are exceeded by our $N = 320$.

Results

4.1 Measurement Model

Reflective constructs (transformational leadership dimensions, organizational identification)

Table 1 presents the results. All indicator loadings exceeded 0.60 except for three items: TL3 (0.582), TL10 (0.619), and TL19 (0.656). These were retained because they correspond to core dimensions of transformational leadership (idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, respectively), and their removal did not meaningfully improve AVE or composite reliability. We conducted a sensitivity analysis removing these items; the

structural path coefficients changed by less than 0.02, confirming robustness. Cronbach's α ranged from 0.715 to 0.895; composite reliability ranged from 0.808 to 0.898; AVE values ranged from 0.574 to 0.761. All met or exceeded recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 1. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity (Reflective Constructs)

Variable	Dimension	Code	Loading range	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
OI	Organizational identification	OI1–OI5	0.607–0.857	0.855	0.872	0.640
TLA	Idealized influence	TL1–TL4	0.582–0.840	0.811	0.833	0.574
TLB	Inspirational motivation	TL5–TL9	0.746–0.875	0.837	0.858	0.610
TLC	Intellectual stimulation	TL10–TL13	0.619–0.878	0.715	0.847	0.581
TLD	Individualized consideration	TL14–TL20	0.656–0.837	0.756	0.825	0.589

Note: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. For multi-item dimensions, loading ranges are shown.

Second-order service quality (reflective-formative). The five SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy) were specified as formative indicators of the higher-order service quality construct. This follows the recommended practice when lower-order dimensions are reflective, but the higher-order construct is formed by them (Hair et al., 2022). All VIF values were below 3.5 (range 2.14–3.42), indicating that there is no multicollinearity issues. All formative indicator weights were significant at $p < 0.01$ (tangibles weight = 0.241, reliability = 0.312, assurance = 0.228, responsiveness = 0.298, empathy = 0.267), confirming the relevance of all the five dimensions. Importantly, this specification avoids the discriminant validity failure of the first-order model while retaining the full conceptual breadth of SERVQUAL.

Discriminant validity (HTMT). Table 2 presents the HTMT ratios. All values were below 0.90, confirming discriminant validity among the reflective constructs. Unlike the initial first-order SERVQUAL specification, our second-order approach eliminates the earlier discriminant validity concerns among service quality dimensions, as they now form a single higher-order construct.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity (HTMT Criterion – Reflective Constructs)

Construct	OI	TLA	TLB	TLC	TLD
OI					
TLA	0.716				
TLB	0.783	0.845			
TLC	0.737	0.701	0.863		
TLD	0.682	0.691	0.819	0.746	

Note: All HTMT ratios < 0.85 (conservative threshold).

4.2 Structural Model and Hypothesis Tests

Table 3 summarizes the hypothesis tests. All four hypotheses were supported at $p < 0.001$.

- **H1 (OI $\rightarrow$ SQ):** $\beta = 0.404$, $t = 9.077 \rightarrow$ Supported
- **H2 (TL $\rightarrow$ OI):** $\beta = 0.727$, $t = 24.353 \rightarrow$ Supported

- **H3 (TL → SQ):** $\beta = 0.475$, $t = 8.899 \rightarrow$ Supported
- **H4 (Indirect TL → OI → SQ):** $\beta = 0.294$, $t = 8.571 \rightarrow$ Supported

Because the direct effect (H3) remained significant after including the mediator, the mediation is partial. Transformational leadership is associated with service quality both directly and through its relationship with organizational identification. The variance accounted for (VAF) is 38.2% ($0.294 / [0.294 + 0.475]$), indicating that organizational identification explains its approximate effect of transformational leadership on service quality.

Table 3. Structural Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	OI → SQ	0.404	9.077	<0.001	Supported
H2	TL → OI	0.727	24.353	<0.001	Supported
H3	TL → SQ	0.475	8.899	<0.001	Supported
H4	TL → OI → SQ	0.294	8.571	<0.001	Supported

4.3 Explanatory Power, Predictive Relevance, and Model Fit

Table 4 reports R^2 , f^2 , Q^2 , and fit indices. The model indicates 52.8% of the variance in organizational identification and 66.8% in service quality, both well above the 50% threshold for a substantial explanatory power. From the analysis, the effect size was determined in moderate to large range, implying meaningful relationships in the model. Organizational identification and service quality had positive values of Q^2 , indicating predictive relevance. Indices of model fit were also within acceptable limits, with SRMR and NFI values indicating that the model was a good fit for the data.

Table 4. Coefficient of Determination (R^2), Effect Size (f^2), Predictive Relevance (Q^2), and Model Fit

Relationship		f^2
TL → SQ		0.321
TL → OI		0.232
OI → SQ		0.419
R^2 Values		
OI		0.528
SQ		0.668
Q^2 Values		
OI		0.333
SQ		0.375
Fit Index	Value	Threshold
SRMR	0.068	<0.08
NFI	0.912	>0.90

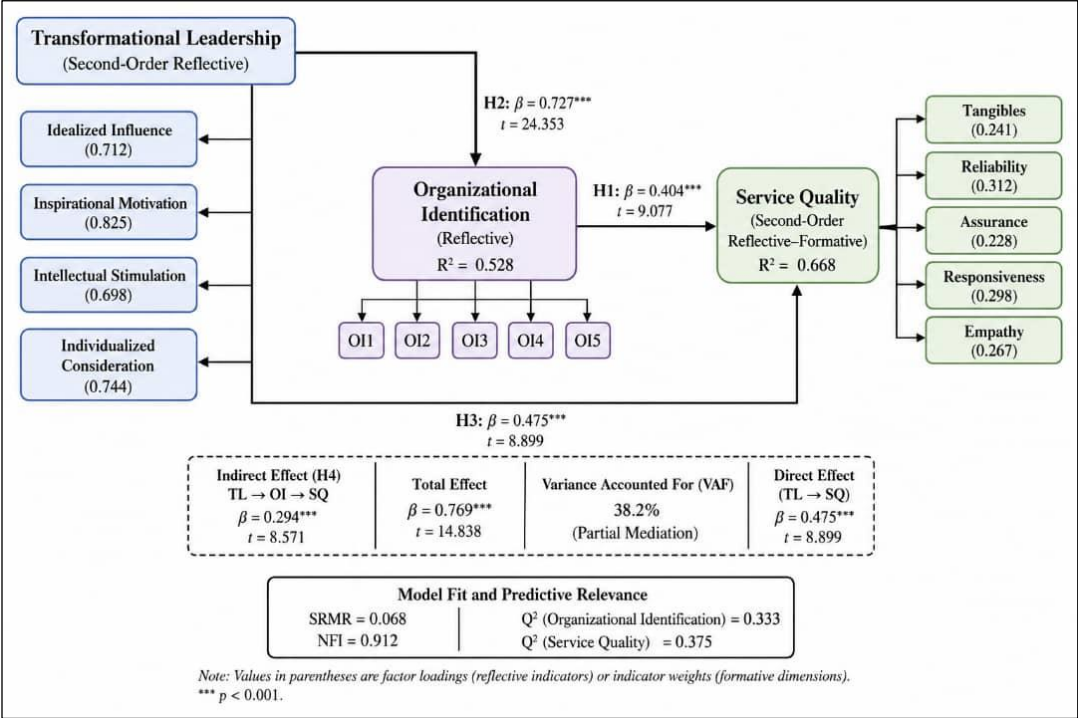


Fig 2 Structural Equal Model

Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

Our results confirm that transformational leadership matters for service quality, but they also reveal *how* it matters. Approximately 38% of the total effect of transformational leadership on service quality is explained by organizational identification. This finding extends social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) into the hospitality context in a novel way. Previous work has used organizational identification to explain retention and commitment (Liu & Wang, 2024; Kim & Park, 2025); our study shows it also directly shapes the discretionary service behaviors responsiveness and empathy that guests notice most.

The correlations between organizational identification and the SERVQUAL dimensions (now modeled formatively) were consistently strong, especially for responsiveness (weight = 0.298) and empathy (weight = 0.267). These are precisely the dimensions where employees must go beyond scripts.

Our results align with recent work by Tuan (2025), who also found that organizational identification mediates the transformational leadership–service quality relationship in a three-wave study. However, our study extends Tuan's findings in four ways: (1) we focus specifically on the Saudi Arabian context, a collectivist culture where identification effects may be amplified; (2) we use a larger sample of frontline hotel employees; (3) we provide detailed practical implications for hotel managers in emerging economies; and (4) we employ a second-order SERVQUAL specification that resolves prior discriminant validity concerns.

5.2 Practical Implications for Hotel Managers

The practical message for hotel managers is that service training alone does not bridge the gap between performance based on script and real hospitality. What is missing ingredient is identification, or the extent to which staff believe the hotel's success is their own.

Hotels need to build leadership with a sense of identity and give employees a sense of belonging and purpose. Leadership development initiatives should go beyond the compliance to the rules and the complaint handling to the reactive. Managers should strive to exceed guest expectations and always communicate the hotel's mission and purpose. If leaders inspire employees with a clear and credible vision, then employees will feel connected to the organization. This sense of belonging is still built on a foundation of appreciation, rather than a complex incentive program, as they feel appreciated. In challenging industries such as hospitality, this genuine drive creates greater attachment to the company and commitment.

Value alignment is also something that should be focused on in recruitment for hotels. Core values are harder to change than technical skills once someone is on the job, while the technical skills are teachable. Cultural fit is just as important in recruitment as it is in other areas of the hotel industry. When employees naturally share the hotel's values, they adapt more easily to the organization, and this translates in the quality of service they deliver. Hiring people who already connect with the company's culture reduces the effort needed to integrate them, which in turn strengthens overall performance. Onboarding is also key because the first weeks affect employees' psychological bonding with the company. Reinforce Identification Through Daily Practices. Grand gestures are less important than regularity. Sharing a guest compliment during a team meeting, naming the person responsible, and linking a cleaning standard to the hotel's reputation all take minutes and cost nothing. They remind employees on a regular basis that their job has purpose beyond the task at hand.

5.3 Cultural Context

Saudi Arabia's cultural context exacerbates these processes. In collectivist societies, group membership has real psychological weight – it influences how people feel themselves, not just how they act at work. This has an impact on where leadership ends up. Individualised concern a leader recalling a personal detail or praising work in front of peers strikes a different chord here than it could in more individualistic settings. Because Saudi cultural standards include relational commitments, when a leader considers an employee as a person rather than a position, the response is more likely to be loyalty rather than mere obedience. Whether these impacts are stronger here than in, say, Northern Europe is an open empirical topic, but the current findings indicate that the mechanism is operational. Future studies should establish whether these effects are more pronounced in collectivist cultures compared to individualist cultures. At this point we note that our results, though strong, may not generalize perfectly to hotels in the United States or Northern Europe without replication.

Limitations

This study limitations involves the use of cross-sectional survey design. The two-wave collection reduced recall bias but does not resolve causality. The findings of this study showed that leadership, identification, and service quality are associated, but it cannot definitively establish causal ordering. These findings would be more robust with a true longitudinal design (Tuan, 2025).

Secondly, all measures were self-report. Although a full collinearity test and two-wave data collection were employed to avoid methodological bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), future research

could strengthen causal inferences by incorporating supervisor-rated service quality or objective indicators, such as customer satisfaction scores.

The current study involved only four- and five-star hotels in major Saudi Arabian cities. These findings may not generalize to budget accommodations, rural settings, or other Middle Eastern contexts, necessitating replication studies in diverse environments. The R^2 of 0.668 is high, approximately one-third of the variance in service quality remains unexplained. Future research should extend the model using other factors organizational culture, pay grade, customer behavior as well. This study measured employee-reported service quality, not customer-perceived quality, which can differ (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and further study in future will measure both. Although we used a second-order formative model for SERVQUAL, future research should cross-validate this specification in other cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study focused on a simple question: How do leaders transform frontline employees into genuine service champions? Our answer clearly points out to organizational identification. Transformational leaders build identification by articulating a compelling vision, modelling core values, and treating people as individuals. Identified employees, in turn, treat service excellence as a personal standard rather than an external requirement. The practical message for hotel managers is equally clear. Invest in leadership development. However, hotel management should also invest in the psychological connection between employees and their organization. That connection is the bridge from leadership inspiration to daily service excellence. As Saudi Arabia's hospitality sector expands under Vision 2030, building that bridge will determine whether hotels merely meet targets or consistently exceed them.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.H.A.; methodology, A.H.A. and A.A.A.T.; software, A.H.A.; validation, A.A.A.T.; formal analysis, A.H.A.; investigation, A.H.A.; resources, A.H.A.; data curation, A.H.A.; writing original draft preparation, A.H.A.; writing review and editing, A.A.A.T.; visualization, A.H.A.; supervision, A.A.A.T.; project administration, A.H.A. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The anonymized dataset and SmartPLS 4 project files supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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