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Servant leadership and employee innovative behavior: Understanding the influence of inequality reduction within high-power distance cultures

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of servant leadership in a high-power culture to minimize organizational inequalities and enhance employee innovative behaviors. A cross-sectional survey was used to collect quantitative data from employees working in Jordanian hotel organizations in a high-power cultural context. Simple random sampling helped target and collect data from participants. The findings established a relationship between servant leaders and innovative employee behavior and how servant leadership reduces inequalities, consequently fostering innovative behaviors. A high-power culture also affects the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior. This study confirms that servant leaders can reduce hierarchical structures, contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10–10.2), and foster employee innovation in Jordan's hotel industry. Hotel managers should emphasize active listening, employee development programs, and leadership training aligned with cultural norms to enhance employee performance. This study underscores the significance of servant leadership in fostering innovation and reducing inequalities in high-power cultures. Servant leaders can bridge hierarchical gaps and enhance employee engagement by promoting active listening, employee development, and inclusive leadership. Additionally, diversity training, transparent promotion criteria, and innovation-driven policies contribute to a more equitable and dynamic work environment.

Contribution/Originality: This study fills a gap by exploring servant leadership (SL) in Jordan's high-power hospitality sector, where its role in reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and fostering innovation remains underexplored. It uniquely examines power distance as a moderator highlighting how hierarchical structures influence SL's impact on employee innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Innovation has become a key factor for organizations seeking high competitiveness and sustainability (Hermundsdottir & Aspelund, 2021). The hospitality sector is known for its vibrant nature and preference. The sector faces a pressing need for continuous innovation to meet the diverse needs of guests and adapt to shifting

market demands (Truong, Dang-Pham, McClelland, & Nkhoma, 2020). Understanding the factors that influence employee innovative behaviors (EIB) becomes imperative for organizational success within this context.

Developing abilities and skills focused on the future is crucial for long-term development and sustainability as nations look to the future (Zainuddin, Ahmad, Abdul Latif, Mohamed Yusof, & Sulaiman, 2023). It is crucial to prepare young, aspirational leaders to advance the economies of different countries in public and private sectors by preparing them to handle the reputational issues caused by workforce reduction (Chew, 2023).

The cultural dimension of power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of a society expect and accept the unequal distribution of power (Hofstede-insights, 2023). Jordan, a country characterized by its high-power distance, hierarchical structures, and deference to authority is deeply ingrained within the societal fabric, influencing various aspects of organizational behavior and leadership dynamics (Hofstede-insights, 2023).

The importance of studying the traits of servant leaders needed to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10) cannot be overstated. SDG 10-10.2 aims to "reduce inequality within and among countries, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all" (UN, 2015). Achieving this goal requires leaders who possess empathy, inclusivity, and commitment to social justice (Alshaketheep et al., 2024).

Several past studies have focused either on developed economies or on industries other than hospitality, creating a knowledge gap in how SL functions within high-power distance cultures like Jordan. Servant leadership (SL) has been recognized as a critical approach in fostering innovation and inclusiveness. Little attention has been given to the hospitality sector which is characterized by relentless innovation in understanding how SL, reduction in inequality, and employee innovation are related. Besides, the moderating role of power distance between SL and EIB remains under-explored, especially in hierarchical cultures where organizational structures may impede innovation. This study addresses these gaps by empirically investigating how SL decreases inequalities as addressed by SDG 10 and its effect on fostering innovation in the Jordanian hospitality industry.

According to the behavioural theory, leaders are made, not born. There is increasing awareness of SL's contribution to promoting inclusive communities and reducing inequality (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Servant leaders prioritize the needs of their followers and work towards the betterment of the community, thereby creating an environment conducive to achieving SDG 10. Organizations worldwide are increasingly investing in training programs aimed at developing servant leaders. These programs focus on cultivating empathy, humility, and a service-oriented mindset among aspiring leaders and equipping them with the skills necessary to address complex societal challenges.

Previous research has focused on the effect of power distance on EIB and performance, an understanding of the role of (SL) in minimizing the hierarchal level is still lacking (Luo, 2023). This study investigates the critical role of leadership in reducing organizational inequalities and fostering EIB. It focuses on the moderating effect of high-power distance on the relationship between SL and employees' innovative behavior. SL, characterized by humility, empathy, and a service-oriented approach may counteract the hierarchical tendencies in high-power distance cultures. This, in turn, can influence the extent to which employees feel empowered to innovate and contribute novel ideas to their organizations. This study addressed the following research questions to achieve this purpose:

(1) How does servant leadership minimize hierarchical structures (thereby contributing to SDG 10) and improve innovative employee behavior in high-power distance cultures?

(2) What is the impact of high-power distance on the relationship between servant leadership and inequality reduction?

(3) How does the reduction of inequalities relate to employee innovative behavior?

This paper critically reviews the literature on SL style, EIB, and high-power distance culture to inspect the study questions. The paper then describes the methods used to collect and analyze the quantitative research data ending with a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

1.1. Theoretical Model and Hypothesis Development

SL is a widely explored leadership style that creates an environment that fosters innovation in modern organizations. Robert Greenleaf is largely attributed to leadership founded on moral principles, in which leaders' sole responsibility is to empower followers (Ren & Shen, 2024). This leadership style emphasizes the need for leaders to create an organizational culture in which employees feel acknowledged and appreciated for their efforts (Greenleaf, 1991). Servant leaders should focus on serving others as well as sharing power in decision-making, including upholding a sense of community (Greenleaf, 1991). Based on this concept, Buchen (1998) developed a model of SL in the context of higher education based on the following five key tenets: identity, reciprocity, empowering, commitment, and future orientation. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) created an SL model that entails five variables: vision, credibility, influence, trust, and service. This model maintains that servant leaders should borrow from transformational leadership and that leaders and followers should continually empower one another.

Canavesi and Minelli (2022) found that servant leaders can empower employees through different moderating and mediating approaches. These leaders influence all aspects of an organization, including employees, teams, and organizational behavior (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Similarly, Hai and Van (2021) established that SL focuses on the well-being of employees, including sharing power in decision- making. Therefore, SL can help reduce the power distance between leaders and employees and contribute to innovation.

Servant leaders positively influence employee creativity and innovation. Servant leaders exhibit several aspects of positive leadership, including transformational, situational, and interpersonal (Wirawan, Jufri, & Saman, 2020). Hence, this style of leadership can foster positive outcomes at personal and societal levels. Servant leaders may efficiently foster creativity and enhance resilience by prioritizing service beyond self-interest (Batool, Mohammad, & Awang, 2021). Leaders must create value and establish a foundation for sustainable growth for organizations to excel and attain sustainability. Hence, servant leaders are an important organizational resource that helps prioritize goals and empower employees (Eliot, 2020). According to Tripathi, Tripathi, and Priyadarshi (2023) servant leaders focus on building a capable and innovative workforce by nurturing a culture of stewardship and encouraging followers to think creatively. Therefore, there is a direct correlation between SL and EIB. Therefore, this study develops a framework that considers how SL mediates high-power distance cultures to reduce inequalities and foster employee innovative behavior as illustrated in Figure 1.
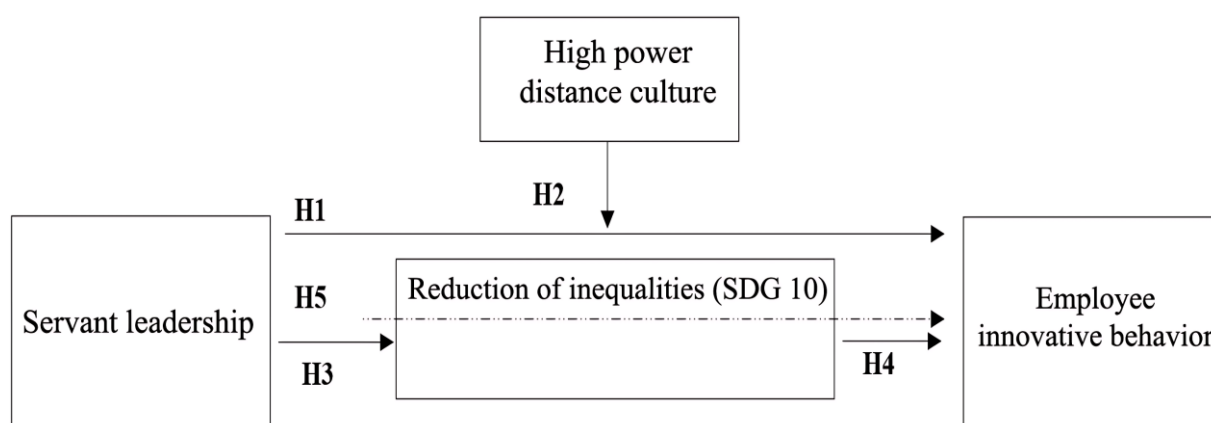

Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

H₁: There is a positive relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior.

SL reduces the power distance between leaders and employees which contributes positively to innovation. However, high-power distance structures may create real challenges for leaders as these hierarchical settings often hinder open communication and reduce employees' willingness to engage in creative processes. High-power

distance structures might negatively affect the relationship between leaders and employees, including workers' morale to be creative (Cai, Wang, & Cheng, 2024). This highlights the need to examine how leadership styles, particularly SL can mitigate such cultural and structural barriers.

Moreover, increased organizational support and improved job autonomy contribute to better resilience and self-efficacy, which are positively correlated with creativity and innovation (Cai et al., 2024; Harasis, Helalat, Alhelalat, & Aqrabawi, 2024). Despite this, existing studies have primarily focused on general leadership practices, leaving a gap in understanding how SL drives these outcomes in hierarchical cultures. Evidence also reveals that leaders who respect employees foster trust and build high-quality interpersonal and trusting relationships with employees, which can positively influence organizational performance (Ren & Shen, 2024). For instance, leaders who interact with employees and make them feel acknowledged and appreciated in the service industry can create positive employee behavior that increases productivity (Ren & Shen, 2024). Servant leaders can also enhance employees' intrinsic motivation to trigger innovative behavior in the service sector (Su, Lyu, Chen, & Zhang, 2020). Thus, employees who identify their leaders are more likely to be creative and productive.

H₂: High- power distance negatively affects the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Power distance can affect idea sharing to foster innovation. Innovation occurs when leaders allocate sufficient resources, persuade employees to embrace new ways of thinking, and integrate creative ideas into their daily routines (Helalat, Sharari, Qawasmeh, Bani-Mustafa, & Alkhazali, 2023; Luo, Wang, & Tong, 2020). However, these practices are less effective due to the hierarchical mindset that discourages open dialogue and participation from lower-level employees in high-power distance cultures. High- power can hinder how leaders and employees communicate and share ideas due to status differences. High-power structures tend to create psychological barriers between leaders and employees as well as among employees, making it challenging for individuals to engage in meaningful interactions (Luo et al., 2020). These barriers not only reduce trust but also inhibit the flow of knowledge and creativity, which are critical for innovation. In high-power distance, employees cannot relate to their managers because of their lack of intrinsic motivation (Areiqat, Alheet, & Hamdan, 2024; Su et al., 2020). Thus, a high-power culture tends to limit conversations between leaders and managers, thereby contributing to a reduction in innovative idea generation. Addressing this challenge requires leadership styles, such as SL that actively works to bridge hierarchical gaps and foster an environment where employees feel empowered to contribute innovative ideas.

H₃: Servant leadership has a positive effect on the reduction of inequalities.

Servant leaders create a supportive workplace environment that enhances employee autonomy and reduces inequality. SL is a people-focused approach whereby those in positions of power pay attention to the needs of employees, including empathizing with followers (Coun, De Ruiter, & Peters, 2023). Earlier studies establish the benefits of SL in fostering inclusivity while they often fail to explore its long-term implications for reducing systemic workplace inequalities, particularly in hierarchical or high-power distance cultures. Similarly, servant leaders are friendly and focus on meeting the needs of employees, which ultimately enhances the growth and development of their followers (Jiang & Wei, 2024). Employee development emphasizes SL as a strategy for reducing disparities in career advancement, particularly in environments where opportunities are often unequally distributed. These leaders perceive themselves as community builders who provide opportunities for employees to thrive (Coun et al., 2023). Servant leaders use their emotional intelligence and sense of stability to create trust which is vital in sustaining workplace relationships. However, the extent to which this trust-building can address deeply ingrained workplace inequalities remains underexplored, especially in culturally diverse or hierarchical settings because these leaders reduce workplace-related inequalities; they trigger positive emotional responses that contribute to job autonomy, better social contracts, career opportunities, flexibility, and improved job satisfaction (Coun et al., 2023). It has also been argued that servant leaders can help prevent counterproductive employee behaviors, which may encompass intentional actions that harm organizational productivity (Roh, Kim, & Hong,

2023). Servant leaders not only promote fairness but also create an environment where employees feel secure and supported, further reducing perceived inequalities by addressing these behaviors.

In essence, counterproductive behaviors negatively affect an organization's values and efficiency with long-term adverse implications for individual and team productivity and well-being (Roh et al., 2023). Therefore, servant leaders can positively influence employees' job-related attitudes, such as job satisfaction, job engagement, and turnover intentions, including organizational behaviors, such as innovation, knowledge sharing, and citizenship (Jiang & Wei, 2024). There is limited understanding of how SL addresses structural or institutional inequalities in the workplace, an area that warrants further exploration despite these documented benefits.

Furthermore, social exchange theory is important for understanding how servant leaders end workplace inequalities and create a positive working environment. The social exchange theory illustrates that human interactions can foster reciprocity (Roh et al., 2023). Servant leaders are respectful, engage with employees as equals, and focus on meeting the needs of followers. Workers can feel valued and motivated to exhibit positive attitudes (Roh et al., 2023). This theoretical perspective reinforces the notion that servant leadership's focus on mutual respect and reciprocity can address not just interpersonal inequalities but also systemic challenges in organizations. In general, servant leaders can end workplace inequalities by countering unproductive behaviors and engaging with employees.

H₄: There is a positive relationship between reduced organizational inequalities and employee innovative behavior.

Improved employee engagement can significantly contribute to innovative behavior. There is evidence that employee engagement helps promote autonomy and better interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Ghani, Hyder, Yoo, & Han, 2023). Much of the literature overlooks how such a decrease in organizational inequalities and employee innovation are related, especially in contexts characterized by high power distance and hierarchy. In other words, a decrease in organizational inequalities develops an environment in which employees are better able to identify themselves with their leaders. Such identification increases loyalty and develops an alignment of goals between employees and organizational objectives which is critical in fostering creativity and innovation in diverse workplace settings. Strong identification not only makes employees loyal but can also encourage workers to embrace the goals, values, and interests of their leaders and even transform their self-concept (Su et al., 2020). Employees can participate in decision-making by providing unique insights and promoting a collaborative culture of collaboration when inequalities are reduced (Ghani et al., 2023). Furthermore, increased organisational performance and creativity are two benefits of leaders promoting the employees' participation. Hence, the interaction between servant leaders and followers reduces organizational inequalities, positively contributing to EIB. This interaction has demonstrated how SL can facilitate cultural changes in the workplace by addressing systemic barriers and creating a platform where innovation is embraced inclusively. However, further empirical research is needed into the wider organizational implications of such dynamics within highly culturally diverse and hierarchical settings.

H₅: Servant leadership contributes to a reduction in organizational inequalities, which consequently mediates between servant leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Creating an environment that fosters fairness and amplifies employee voices can empower creativity. This indicates a positive relationship between fairness and both individual and team outcomes (Lee, Lyubovnikova, Tian, & Knight, 2020). Servant leaders create procedural fairness that contributes to their sense of safety. Procedural justice can also mediate employees' cooperative behavior and task performance (Lee et al., 2020). This mediation underscores the importance of SL in bridging gaps between hierarchical expectations and the autonomy required for innovative behavior.

Servant leaders develop behaviors such as employee voice, proactiveness, and creativity which might not be found in high-power cultures (Batool et al., 2021). Existing studies fail to explore how the focus of SL on fairness and inclusiveness translates into concrete organizational outcomes, such as employee innovative behavior, in highly

unequal environments. Organizational climate has a considerable impact on innovation (Ren & Shen, 2024; Sharari, Qawasmeh, Helalat, & Jahmani, 2024). When employees feel free and experience autonomy to participate in making decisions and taking measured risks, they tend to be more creative. Ren and Shen (2024) noted that servant leaders can create a highly creative climate by reducing disparities and encouraging employees to be creative. Indeed, reducing workplace inequalities by motivating and engaging workers is a sustainable development goal (Batool et al., 2021). Servant leaders address workplace inequalities directly by motivating and engaging workers, hence linking their practices to sustainable development goals such as SDG 10. Few studies have empirically examined this linkage in the context of employee innovative behavior. Thus, there is a gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold in diverse organizational settings. Leaders can reduce workplace inequalities by providing resources, encouraging interpersonal relationships, and maintaining well-being (Batool et al., 2021). As servant leaders are stewards and focus on empowering employees and building interpersonal relationships, they successfully reduce organizational inequalities. These leaders create an organization in which followers can openly voice their opinions, initiate investigations, and share creative ideas without fear of intimidation.

2. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative method was used to gather data from targeted employees working in the Jordanian hospitality sector to investigate the relationship between SL, employee innovation, and inequality reduction. The total number of employees in Jordanian five-star hotels is 23.000; most of them are located in Amman (JHA, 2024). These hospitality organizations are considered to be performing in one of the high-power distance environments (e.g., Southeast Asia, Middle East) which supported choosing Jordan as a suitable research context.

Data collection was conducted during July and August 2024; peak months for tourism in Jordan. These months were purposely selected as they represent a time of high workload for hotel employees, offering the best opportunity to observe their behavior and experiences under realistic and high-pressure conditions. Simple random sampling was employed to assure representation from different hotel types (e.g., top luxury, resorts, and mid-range) and hotel organizational levels (i.e., top management, middle management, and frontline employees). All these were targeted to ensure statistical significance.

A cross-sectional questionnaire was developed by employing valid scales to measure the research variables and constructs. SL was measured using a scale adopted by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). High-power distance was measured using the scale adopted by Hofstede (2011). Employee innovation was measured using Howell, Shea, and Higgins's (2005) innovative behavior scale. Perceived inequality was measured using a relevant organizational justice scale developed by Kuhn (2019) with a focus on distributive and procedural fairness in the hospitality context (Table 6). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure all items in the study ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 (strongly agree). Appendix A presents all questionnaire items.

The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and distributed to respondents through WhatsApp through the human resource departments within hotels. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. Of the 800 distributed questionnaires, 396 were returned, and five questionnaires were discarded due to repetitive answers. Outlier detection methods were applied to ensure data quality and reliability. As an outlier result check, 391 questionnaires were used for analysis. This sample size was considered adequate based on power analysis to achieve statistical significance and ensure reliable results. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to investigate the direct impact of SL on EIB and perceived inequality. The bootstrapping technique was used to perform the mediating test for perceived inequality between SL and EIB. Furthermore, a moderation analysis test was run for interaction effects to determine whether the relationships differed across different hotel types or job levels. These analytical techniques were chosen for their robustness in testing direct, mediating, and moderating effects within complex models.

2.1. Ethical Approval

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. As authors, we are fully aware of the ethical considerations and have ensured the integrity of our research. The Ethical Committee of the Business School, Al-Ahliyya Amman University, Jordan approved this study on 30 May 2024 (Ref. No. SR-F17-14-001-Eng, Rev. a) ensuring compliance with ethical standards for conducting research.

A written consent letter accompanied the questionnaire, explicitly stating that participation was voluntary. Participants could exit the survey at any time. The letter emphasized that responses would be used solely for research purposes, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The study did not target a single institution for distributing the questionnaire. Instead, participants were selected using simple random sampling techniques and approached through a structured process. Employees of five-star hotels were identified as the target respondents with the names of the hotels and participants kept anonymous. The questionnaire did not request participants to disclose their workplace, personal names, managers' names, or the hotel chain's name. The study focused solely on obtaining employees' responses to explore the impact of servant leadership on employee innovative behavior.

The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and distributed to target respondents through WhatsApp through human resources and department heads of the targeted hotels in alignment with the policies of each establishment. The consent letter was integrated into the Google Form to ensure informed participation. Respondents could not access the questions unless they clicked a button confirming, "I have read the information provided and agree to participate in this research study." Upon clicking, "I wish to proceed," participants were directed to the survey questions. Additionally, an option to decline consent was provided, reinforcing the voluntary nature of participation. The consent letter communicated that participation was solely for academic research purposes and would not affect participants in any way. It assured them that their responses were entirely secure and protected.

The questionnaire link was accessible only to the corresponding author and secured with a password. All data were stored securely in the corresponding author's cloud account with a commitment to delete the data after the recommended retention period. Managers were excluded from accessing participation details or individual responses, ensuring participants' privacy and protecting their rights throughout the study.

2.2. Empirical Framework

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using Structural Equation Modeling (Smart-PLS, SEM) was used to examine the main hypotheses of the study research model. SEM is chosen over more straightforward methods, such as regression, because of its robustness and capability to manage complex models of different research. This allows for correlations among variables assisting in understanding cause-and-effect relationships. The analysis requires the relationship between the observed items and overall latent variables to be more significant with a loading factor of at edge 0.2 or less. When the factor loading above 0.5 indicates high-reliability results, the moderate is between 0.3 and 0.5 while below 0.3 is poor.

2.3. Sample

The current study focused on the employees of various hotels in Jordan, Amman which are classified as five-star hotels. The study looks at those who work in several operational departments, such as human resources, room division, food and beverage, and finance etc. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Study demographic characteristics.

Age		Frequency	Percent
	18-24	53	13.6
	24-29	194	49.6
	30-34	92	23.5
	35-40	10	2.6
	40+	42	10.7
	Total	391	100.0
Gender			
	Male	346	88.5
	Female	45	11.5
	Total	391	100.0
Marital status			
	Married	229	58.6
	Single	162	41.4
	Total	391	100.0
Work experience by year			
	Less than two	36	9.2
	3-6	108	27.6
	7-10	77	19.7
	11-13	94	24.0
	+ 13	76	19.4
	Total	391	100.0
Education			
	1	112	28.6
	2	102	26.1
	3	143	36.6
	4	31	7.9
	5	3	0.8
Total		391	

2.4. Model Evaluation

Hair Jr, Howard, and Nitzl (2020) suggest a suitable methodology for assessing and evaluating the main features of a reflective measurement model.
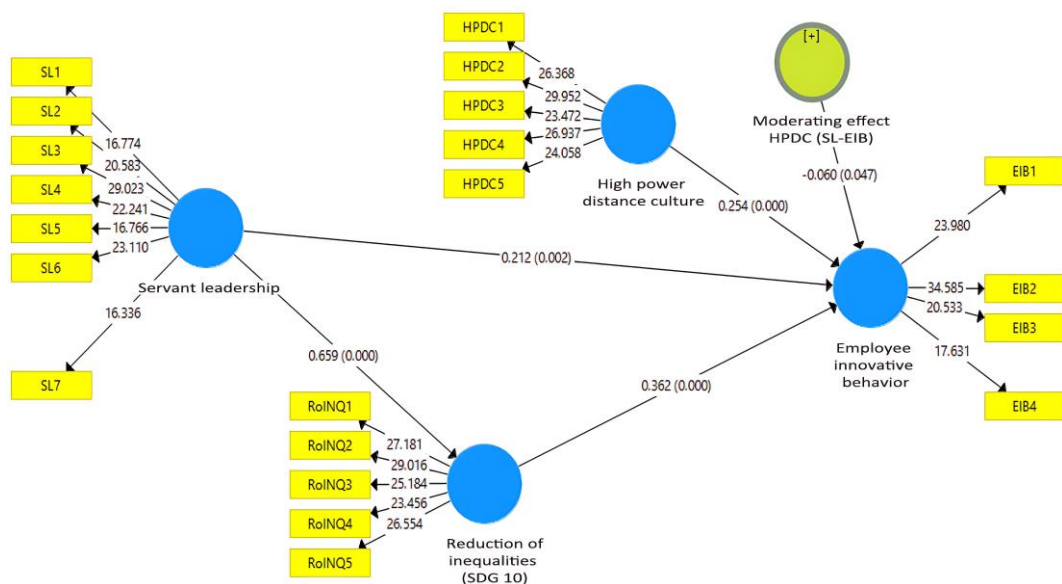

Figure 2. Structural model.

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This method entails estimating research factor loadings and assessing model reliability through the value of Cronbach's alpha and the estimation of composite reliability. Furthermore, average variance extracted (AVE) values were used to define the convergent validity of the model measurements (Hair Jr et al., 2020). Table 2 presents the results. The research model created in this study is illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 2. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and convergent validity.

Scales	Items loading	Cronbach's alpha	rho _A	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Employee innovative behavior	0.788	0.808	0.813	0.874	0.635
	0.844				
	0.798				
	0.755				
High power distance culture	0.795	0.858	0.859	0.898	0.638
	0.813				
	0.757				
	0.813				
	0.813				
Reduction of inequalities (SDG 10)	0.825	0.869	0.871	0.905	0.656
	0.817				
	0.804				
	0.803				
	0.801				
Servant leadership	0.728	0.875	0.877	0.903	0.572
	0.791				
	0.80				
	0.74				
	0.755				
	0.76				
	0.72				

All first-order construct results were loadings higher than 0.6 with both values of Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.70 and composite reliability is higher than 0.60. Additionally, all constructs' average variance extracted (AVE) values were higher than the threshold of 0.5. This indicates that convergent validity is correct and well-explained with no issue for all variables.

The researchers utilized the Farnell–Larker criterion for the discriminant validity assessment. The values are presented in Table 3 where the first-order construct's AVE square roots in the correlations with all other variables in the research model. There is proof of discriminant validity that the square root value of AVE was greater than the value of its corresponding correlation for all variables.

Table 3. Discriminant validity establishment based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Scales	Employee innovative behavior	High power distance culture	Reduction of inequalities (SDG 10)	Servant leadership
Employee innovative behavior	0.797			
High power distance culture	0.676	0.799		
Reduction of inequalities (SDG 10)	0.67	0.562	0.81	
Servant leadership	0.665	0.659	0.659	0.757

2.5. Effect Sizes

In partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modeling (SEM), the difference in R^2 when a particular exogenous construct is removed from the research model serves as a test of the construct's effect on the model's

predictive accuracy. This is known as the effect size (f²) test and is calculated automatically for all exogenous constructs in the research model. Furthermore, the relative impact of any exogenous construct on the predictive relevance of the research model or q² effect size can also be determined manually as suggested by Hair, Hollingsworth, Randolph, and Chong (2017). Accordingly, effect sizes were categorized as small (0.02), medium (0.15), and large (0.35) (Cohen, 1988).

The results of this study which investigate inequality reduction in EIB through f² effect sizes indicate that the relationships between SL style and inequality reduction in EIB are relatively small (f² = 0.079 and f² = 0.039, respectively). Employing the method suggested by Hair Jr et al. (2020) q² effect sizes were calculated for the exogenous constructs in the model. The results showed that the effect sizes of SL style on inequality reduction (q² = 0.044) and EIB (q² = 0.039) were small. The effect size of inequality reduction on EIB was moderately strong (q² = 0.194) while the effect size of inequality reduction on EIB was small to moderate (q² = 0.105).

2.6. Hypotheses Testing Result

Table 4 illustrates the empirical evidence representative of the dynamics of SL and employees with the moderating influence of power distance and mediating inequality reduction. This study investigates direct and indirect effect relationships.

The moderating influence of High-Power Distance Culture (HPDC) on the relationship between SL and EIB is negative (-0.060) which is statistically significant at the level of 0.05 as indicated by a t-statistic of 1.99 while the results show a p-value of 0.047. This indicates that HPDC weakens the positive effect of SL on EIB. The reduction in inequalities (SDG 10) has a significant and positive impact on EIB with a strong path coefficient of 0.362. The high level of the t-statistic (7.319) and the result of a p-value of 0.000 confirm the statistical significance of this influence.

SL has a significant positive effect on EIB with a path coefficient of 0.212. The impact is statistically significant with a t-statistic of 3.094 and a p-value of 0.002 which indicates a strong relationship. SL had a strong and positive influence on reduction of inequalities (RoI) (SDG 10) with a path coefficient impact of 0.659. The t-statistic effect was extremely high (14.249) and the p-value was 0.000 indicating a robust relationship.

Table 4. Direct effect testing.

Scales	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values
Moderating effect HPDC (SL-EIB) -> EIB	-0.06	-0.066	0.03	1.993	0.047
RoI (SDG 10) -> EIB	0.362	0.357	0.049	7.319	0
SL -> EIB	0.212	0.213	0.069	3.094	0.002
SL -> RoI (SDG 10)	0.659	0.66	0.046	14.249	0

Table 5 presents the indirect effect of SL on EIB through the reduction of inequalities (RoI) which is related to Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10) and is significantly positive with a path coefficient of 0.238. This outcome is statistically significant as indicated by the results of a t-statistic of 6.656 and a p-value of 0.000. This indicates that RoI related to SDG 10 mediates well the relationship between SL and EIB meaning that SL positively influences EIB by enhancing RoI in the context of SDG 10.

Table 5. Indirect effect.

Scales	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values
SL-> RoI (SDG 10) -> EIB	0.238	0.236	0.036	6.656	0

3. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate how SL influences inequality reduction and EIB, particularly within the framework of the SDG 10. The findings also provide insights into how power distance controls these relationships adding further insight into leadership and innovation dynamics. The results also supported these five hypotheses aligning with previous studies conducted in low- and high-power cultures. This study bridges a critical gap in the literature by exploring the importance of using SL behaviors in high-power distance cultures.

3.1. Correlation between Servant Leadership and Employee Innovative Behavior

These findings confirm a direct association between SL and EIB. The significance (p = 0.002) demonstrates the substantial positive impact of SL on employees' innovative practices. These findings support the conclusions of prior studies such as Iqbal, Latif, and Ahmad (2020); Li, Liu, Lin, Wei, and Xu (2021) and Su et al. (2020). These findings also reveal that a servant leader is bound to prioritize his employees and hence create an innovative workplace. Moreover, the findings have indicated that a servant leader provides a supportive environment that enhances employees' psychological safety and supports the finding of Iqbal et al. (2020) that leaders with SL traits can enhance employees' psychological resources, which motivate them to become innovative. Specifically, the high value of the t-statistic (3.094) and low p-value (0.002) established a significant and reliable link between SL and EIB. The overall effect size is fairly small (f2 = 0.079) suggesting other contextual factors such as employee demographics or organizational culture may affect innovative behavior. In other words, future studies also need to find additional variables that could moderate or mediate this relationship. The effect size (f2 = 0.079) indicates that factors other than SL may influence employees' innovation behavior. For instance, Li et al. (2021) found that employee's age may be a moderator in the influence of SL. Generally, SL is an important enhancer to facilitate innovative behavior among employees.

3.2. The Moderating Role of High-Power Distance Culture

The study established that high-power culture in the Jordanian hotel industry negatively mediates the relationship between SL and EIB. In high-power cultures, such as Jordan, hierarchical structures and figures in authority might reduce the effectiveness of SL as demonstrated by Alkhodary (2023). A high-power culture cannot create and foster a sense of community, promote support and inclusive work, share values, and provide equal opportunities for employees (Alkhodary, 2023). According to Espig, Mazzini, Zimmermann, and de Carvalho (2021), national culture can positively or negatively influence employees' innovation behaviors. A low power distance tends to lead to a high indulgence between leaders and employees (Espig et al., 2021). The t-statistic (1.993) and p-value (0.047) indicate that high-power distance culture indeed plays a vital role in influencing SL effectiveness. In other words, in high-power cultures, such as Jordan, empowering and egalitarian characteristics of servant leaders can be at odds with existing organizational culture norms, lessening the leader's ability to foster innovation (Espig et al., 2021). The present study reveals how SL interfaces with hierarchical cultural dictates to provide newer insights into various challenges and opportunities in that respect based on Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions. This finding underlines the significance of cultural context in promoting the effectiveness of leaders – what works in one culture might not be effective in another.

3.3. Servant Leadership, Reduced Inequalities, and Employee Innovative Behavior

The findings of this study support the third hypothesis by illustrating that leaders who exhibit SL characteristics are likely to minimize organizational inequalities and simultaneously encourage innovation. A p-value of 0.000 and coefficient of 0.659 demonstrate a strong relationship between SL behaviors and reduced inequalities. At the same time, the t-statistic of 14.249 confirms how SL behaviors improve fairness and employee voice within an organization. The results of this study support the findings of previous studies, such as Song, Tian, and Kwan (2022) and Zada et al. (2022) who reported that SL behaviors are likely to strengthen equality, fairness, and employees' wellness. Moreover, the results of this study confirm that SL behaviors can foster cohesiveness, which forms the foundation for better social justice and the realization of SDG 10. Ghani et al. (2023) found that organizations with fewer inequalities are likely to foster innovative behaviors among employees. AlMahdawi (2020) recommended that staff be motivated to reduce bias. Hence, servant leaders are more likely to promote innovative behaviors because they create an organizational climate where employees can identify with their leaders and feel safe sharing their opinions. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the mediating role of reduced inequalities in fostering employee innovative behavior, a mechanism that has received limited attention in previous research.

SL reduces organizational inequalities and mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee innovation. SL indirectly influences EIB through the mediating effect of reduced inequality. Servant leaders can foster innovation by inspiring employees and creating an environment that enables innovation to flourish through this mediating role. In other words, servant leaders strengthen EIB by promoting equality, which creates an environment in which employees feel motivated and empowered to innovate ideas (Lee et al., 2020). These findings also align with SDG10, emphasizing the societal significance of lessening inequalities to foster positive outcomes. This study provides actionable insights for organizations aiming to balance inclusivity with innovation in hierarchical cultures by aligning these findings with SDG 10.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have several implications for hotel managers, leaders, and human resource officials to improve employee performance. The first recommendation is that hotel managers should practice active listening and introduce employee development programs to reduce the gap between high- and middle-level managers and employees. For instance, managers can initiate feedback systems, such as periodic one-on-one meetings or anonymous employee surveys, which may allow managers to understand where employees may need help. Similarly, managers can reduce the levels gap by designing employee committees or task forces, including inputs on operational decisions, hence representing the employees' voice at all levels in organizational goal setting.

Secondly, Jordanian hotel managers should introduce diversity and equity training programs to create and sustain a culture of equality. The programs will comprise workshops on unconscious bias, cultural competence, and inclusive leadership practices specifically tailored to the hospitality industry. In addition, human resource managers have to make it a point that equal opportunities are stressed to bring down current inequities in hiring and promotion. Based on this, clear and transparent criteria for recruitment and promotion with periodic audits to test for equity in these processes will ensure that equal opportunity practices are fair and cadre-wide.

Thirdly, since Jordan has a high-power culture, the leadership training program should be designed to be in line with the existing culture and practice. The leadership development initiatives must be a balance between servant leadership principles and respect for the hierarchy which could be embedded through mentorship programs matching junior employees with senior leaders to promote upward communication without questioning the cultural norms. It means that being aware of the cultural features that allow inequalities is the first step to implementing successful organizational changes.

Finally, organizations can create innovation policies that encourage innovative behavior. Such policies may include introducing reward systems for employees who propose new ideas or solutions to foster a culture of innovation. They may also include providing dedicated time for brainstorming and collaboration to inspire creativity among employees at all levels. Policymakers can also focus on developing national-level guidelines for leadership training programs in the hospitality sector, ensuring alignment with broader cultural and organizational needs to foster innovation and inclusivity. All these policies can contribute to optimized innovative employee practices and behaviors in high-power cultures and raise the awareness of cultural sensitivity as a vital factor for the successful implementation of SL.

5. CONCLUSION

This study assessed whether SL can reduce hierarchical organizational structures, thus contributing to achieving SDG 10 and strengthening employee innovation in the Jordanian hotel industry. The study also sought to establish the impact of high-power distance between SL and inequality reduction and how reducing inequalities might contribute to innovative behaviors among hotel managers and employees in Jordan. The findings demonstrate that SL significantly reduces inequality and promotes EIB. These results emphasize the critical role of servant leaders in fostering inclusive work environments that align with global sustainability goals, particularly SDG 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries.

Leaders who prioritize employees' well-being and fairness can drive innovation within their organizations. Thus, servant leaders enable the employees to be innovative in solving problems and to generate new ideas, which should enhance the competitiveness and adaptability of the organization concerned by creating an equal organizational culture. Nevertheless, culture is important for the implementation of SL. Servant leaders may be resisted with norms and the authoritarian culture of the organization in a high-power culture like Jordan. Therefore, servant leaders should have varying approaches and insert country-related cultural obstacles. For example, balancing servant leadership attributes with culturally accepted hierarchical norms could be how leaders inspire employees while commanding respect for traditional organizational structures. SL helps to address organizational inequalities that might hinder employee empowerment, creating an environment in which employees contribute to innovation.

This study highlights that reducing workplace inequalities not only strengthens employee morale but also fosters the psychological safety necessary for innovation to thrive. Nevertheless, the impact of SL is context specific, and leaders should adjust their approaches to increase innovative outcomes. Future research could explore how SL interacts with other cultural dimensions, such as collectivism, to further enhance its application across diverse organizational settings. Hotel managers in Jordan should be sensitive to high-power cultures and combine SL principles with acceptable cultural norms. Additionally, organizations should invest in leadership development programs that emphasize the principles of SL while accounting for cultural nuances, ensuring the effectiveness of leadership practices in hierarchical settings.

6. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper integrates the following three theories: the servant leadership theory, social exchange theory, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. The study explained how leadership fosters the innovative behavior of employees and reduces inequalities in high-power distance cultures. The study expanded servant leadership theory by showing its relevance in the Jordanian hierarchical culture and showed the theory contributes to fostering innovation and equality in such a special culture. Furthermore, social exchange theory is important for understanding how servant leaders end workplace inequalities and create a positive working environment. The social exchange theory illustrates that human interactions can foster reciprocity.

This study also contributes to Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions by showing how high-power distance moderates the effect of SL and provides a path to understand how leadership practices can be adapted to cultural contexts. This integration gives far greater insight into the role of leadership in fostering innovation and reducing inequalities and provides a base for future research in a variety of cultural settings.

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APPENDIX A. Questionnaire.

Table 6. Study questionnaire.

Servant leadership	
1	My leader helps me to further develop myself and learn new skills
2	My leader encourages his/her staff to come up with new ideas.
3	My leader appears to enjoy his/her colleagues' success more than his/her own.
4	I am held accountable for my performance by my leader.
5	My leader shows an understandable attitude towards people who have offended him/her at work.
6	My leader learns from the criticism he/she gets from his/her superior.
7	My leader has a long-term vision.
Employee innovative behavior	
1	I try new ways of doing things at work
2	When something does not function well at work, I try to find new solution
3	I am interested in how things are done elsewhere in order to use acquired ideas in my work
4	I search for new ideas of other people in order to try to implement the best ones
High power distance	
1	The eldest male should be the head of the household.
2	Employees should not talk to their bosses about personal matters.
3	Power and wealth are evil.
4	It is important for managers to make all decisions.
5	It is important that bosses closely supervise their employees.
Reducing inequalities: SDG10	
1	My hotel provides fair wages and benefits to all employees regardless of their position.
2	My hotel offers equal opportunities for career advancement to all employees.
3	My hotel has policies in place to prevent gender-based harassment and discrimination.
4	My hotel offers equal training and development opportunities to all employees.
5	The hotel actively promotes diversity and inclusion among its workforce.

Source(s): The above questionnaire was developed by Authors based on the following resources (Hofstede, 2011; Howell et al., 2005; Kuhn, 2019; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).