

Ethical leadership and pro-social behavior in the hospitality industry: Does social norms matter?

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Abstract: Ethical leadership (EL) plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational culture and influencing employees' behaviors, especially in service-oriented sectors like hospitality, where interpersonal interactions are fundamental. This study investigates the mediating role of social norms (SN) in the relationship between EL and pro-social behavior (PSB) within Saudi Arabian hospitality enterprises. This research posits that SN serve as a critical conduit through which EL affects PSB among employees. A quantitative approach using self-administered questionnaire, gathering data from Saudi Arabian hotel employees to measure perceptions of EL, SN, and PSB. Structural equation modeling using Smart-PLS was used to analyze the data and test the proposed mediation model. The findings indicate that EL significantly enhances PSB and SN. Furthermore, SN partially mediate the relationship between EL and PSB. These results underscore the importance of fostering a culture of EL to promote PSBs in the hospitality industry, thereby enhancing overall service quality and employee satisfaction. Several theoretical and practical implications have been discussed for hospitality managers and researchers.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, Hospitality, Pro-social behavior, Social norms theory, Social norms.

1. Introduction

Nowadays successful business practices, especially in the hospitality sector, depend heavily on EL as social responsibility and organizational integrity become more important than ever (Ayad & Hasanein, 2024; Srivastava & Madan, 2023). Ethical leaders exemplify commendable behaviors and cultivate a climate that encourages pro-social conduct among employees, thereby impacting their interactions and decision-making processes (Jeong et al., 2022; Khattak et al., 2022). PSBactions aimed at benefiting others significantly enhances guest experiences, improves team chemistry, and fosters a positive workplace culture (Srivastava & Madan, 2023). EL refers to a style of leadership characterized by a strong commitment to ethical principles, integrity, and fairness, where leaders prioritize moral values and serve as role models for their followers (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). This type of leadership fosters a culture of trust and transparency, encouraging employees to engage in behaviors that align with organizational values (Ahmed & Khan, 2024).

Concerning PSB encompasses actions that are intended to benefit others, including acts of kindness, cooperation, and altruism, and is crucial for fostering positive interpersonal relationships within organizations (Dey et al., 2022). These behaviors not only enhance individual and team dynamics but also contribute to overall organizational success (Jeong et al., 2022). Social norms, on the other hand, are the unwritten rules and expectations that govern behavior within a group or society (Khattak et al., 2022). They shape how individuals perceive acceptable conduct, often influencing their actions and decision-making processes (Ayad & Hasanein, 2024). SN can reinforce the values promoted by EL and encourage PSBs among employees, creating a cohesive and supportive work environment (Khan et al., 2022). However, the path from EL to PSB is not always direct. It is often mediated by SN shared expectations and rules that guide behavior within a group (Rastgar & Hasani, 2023). SN act as a vital link, translating the values espoused by ethical leaders into tangible actions among employees. When

employees perceive that PSBs are valued and expected within their organization, they are more likely to engage in such actions, thereby contributing to a cohesive and supportive work environment.

This research aims to explore the mediating role of SN in the relationship between EL and PSB in the hospitality industry. Drawing on the framework of Social Norms Theory (SNT), this study seeks to uncover how ethical leaders can effectively cultivate PSBs through the establishment of positive SN. Understanding these dynamics is essential for organizations striving to enhance employee engagement, improve service quality, and create a more collaborative atmosphere in the hospitality sector. Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights that will empower leaders to not only promote ethical practices but also to nurture a culture of altruism that benefits employees, customers, and the broader community.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Study

2.1. Ethical Leadership and Pro-Social Behavior

Numerous studies (e.g., Jeong et al., 2022; Khattak et al., 2022; Dey et al., 2022; Srivastava & Madan, 2023; Ahmed & Khan, 2023; Srivastava & Madan, 2023; Ahmed & Khan, 2024; Khattak & Irshad, 2024) have established a significant link between EL and PSB within organizations. Ethical leaders, who prioritize moral principles and integrity, set a positive example for their employees, thereby encouraging them to engage in PSBs such as helping others, cooperating, and demonstrating empathy. For instance, a study by Dey et al. (2022) found that EL positively influences followers' attitudes and behaviors, including their willingness to engage in pro-social acts. Furthermore, research by Ahmed and Khan (2023) indicated that ethical leaders promote a culture of trust and mutual respect, which fosters an environment where employees feel empowered to act altruistically. Furthermore, Saha et al. (2020) highlighted that EL not only enhances employee morale but also strengthens their sense of social responsibility, leading to increased PSB. Concerning the hospitality context, a study by Srivastava and Madan (2023) found that ethical leaders positively impact employees' willingness to engage in PSBs, such as helping colleagues and providing exceptional customer service, by fostering a supportive and trust-based work environment. Similarly, Ahmed and Khan, (2024) highlighted that EL enhances team cohesion and collaboration, as employees who perceive their leaders as ethical are more likely to adopt PSBs that contribute to a positive organizational culture. Based upon these discussions, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H₁: EL has a direct and positive effect on PSB

2.2. Ethical Leadership and Social Norms

To-date studies (e.g., Lagowska et al., 2024; Van Kleef, 2024; Kristinsson et al., 2024; Shiundu, 2024; Valentine et al., 2024; Zaghmout et al., 2024; Theriou et al., 2024; Nazarian et al., 2024; Farooq & Khan, 2024) have explored the pivotal role of EL has a significant influence on the establishment and reinforcement of SN within organizations. Studies have shown that ethical leaders play a critical role in shaping the moral climate of their organizations by modeling ethical behavior and setting clear expectations for acceptable conduct among employees. For instance, a study by Kristinsson et al. (2024) found that ethical leaders significantly impact followers' perceptions of ethical norms, which in turn influences their own ethical behaviors. Another research conducted by Shiundu (2024) demonstrated that EL not only enhances employees' commitment to organizational values but also encourages the internalization of pro-social norms. By fostering an environment where ethical behavior is valued and expected, ethical leaders create a framework that shapes SN, promoting a culture of accountability and mutual support among employees. This alignment between leadership behavior and SN ultimately leads to enhanced organizational performance and employee satisfaction, highlighting the pivotal role of EL in cultivating a positive organizational culture (Martin et al., 2022; Dey et al., 2022). In terms of hospitality enterprises, recent studies (i.e., Valentine et al., 2024; Zaghmout et al., 2024; Theriou et al., 2024; Nazarian et al., 2024) claimed that EL has a profound impact on shaping SN that guide employee behavior and interactions. A study by Theriou et al. (2024) found that EL in hospitality settings fosters a culture of integrity and accountability, which in turn encourages employees to adopt PSBs aligned with organizational values. Similarly, research conducted by Nazarian et al. (2024) highlighted that EL

cultivates SN emphasizing teamwork and collaboration, enhancing service quality and employee morale. Consequently, it is suggested that:

H₂: EL has a Direct and Positive Effect on SN

2.3. Social Norms and Pro-Social Behavior

Several Research (e.g., Graf et al., 2023; Trajano et al., 2023; Asyari et al., 2024; Burningham et al., 2024; Huang & Fang, 2024; Mintz & Fu, 2024; Lu et al., 2024) have consistently demonstrated that SN play a significant role in influencing PSB across various contexts. A recent study by Asyari et al. (2024) found that individuals are more likely to engage in helping behaviors when they perceive such actions as normative within their social group. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Lu et al. (2024) revealed that the presence of positive SN increases the likelihood of PSB, suggesting that when individuals believe their peers value helping others, they are more inclined to act altruistically. Moreover, the descriptive norms depending on what employees typically can significantly shape behavior; when employees witness others engaging in pro-social acts, they are often motivated to emulate those behaviors themselves (Trajano et al., 2023). This influence is further amplified in organizational settings, where ethical leaders can establish and reinforce SN that promote cooperation and altruism among employees (Graf et al., 2023). Another recent study by Huang & Fang (2024) revealed that SN serve as a critical mechanism through which PSBs are cultivated and sustained within groups and organizations, highlighting their importance in fostering a culture of support and collaboration. Regarding hospitality enterprisers, some recent studies (i.e., Mundt et al., 2024; Boo et al., 2024; Nsirim, 2024; Fakfare et al., 2024) have claimed the influence of SN on employees PSB. A study by Nsirim (2024) found that when hotel employees perceive a strong SN of helpfulness within their organization, they are more likely to engage in PSBs, such as assisting colleagues and providing exceptional service to guests. Likewise, research by Fakfare et al. (2024) confirmed that SN significantly influence the willingness of hospitality employees to engage in altruistic behaviors, such as volunteering for additional shifts or supporting co-workers during busy periods. However, this research is considered an early attempt to measure SN as a mediator in the hospitality industry focused on exploring how perceived expectations influence employee behavior and interactions with guests. For instance, researchers began assessing the impact of SN on PSBs among hotel staff, highlighting that strong normative beliefs around helpfulness and teamwork significantly affected service quality and employee collaboration. These initial studies laid the groundwork for understanding the role of SN in the relationship between EL and PSB as well as enhancing overall guest experiences. These discussions can be articulated into the following hypotheses:

H₃: SN has a direct and positive effect on PSB

H₄: SN mediates the relationship between EL and PSB

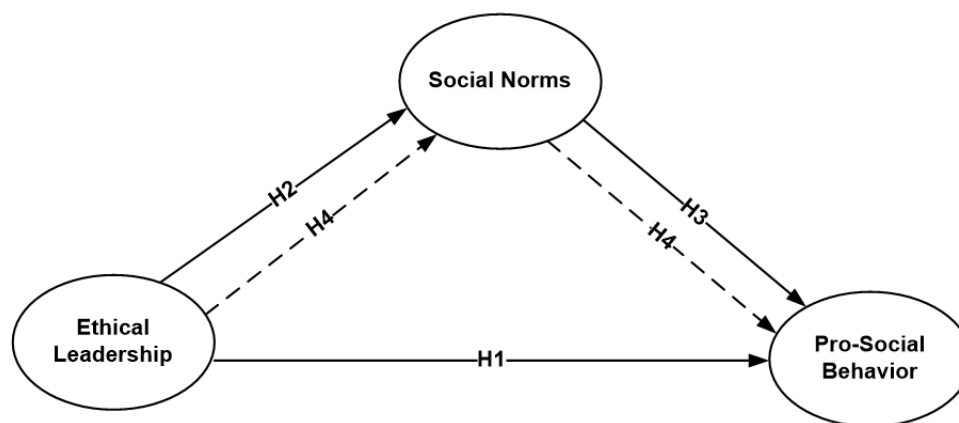


Figure 1.
Theoretical framework of the study.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The Study Constructs

The literature studies served as the basis for the scale that was used in the current research to examine the variables. The ethical leadership was measured by five items scale, was adopted by Kalshoven et al. (2011), items of scale include the leader's concern for followers, the concept of sharing responsibility during problems, fulfillment of promises by leader, the clarification of the rules, and the shared authority with subordinates. Regarding social norms, it was measured by the scale adopted by Ajzen (1991), which contains 4 items, related to the believe of helping others in need, willing to engage in positive community behaviors, people in my social circle follow prosocial norms; and feeling pressured by my peers to act in ways that benefit others. As for Pro-Social Behavior, it was measure by 4 items scale, adopted by Eisenberg & Miller (1987), items of scale include: I frequently help others without expecting anything in return; I feel good when I assist someone in need; When I see someone struggling, I take action to offer support; and I go out of my way to do things that benefit others.

3.2. Research Population and Sampling

Hotel employees in Saudi Arabia are the target population for the study. Based on Veal's recommendations and the lack of government statistics about the accurate number of hotel employees, sample of this study will be calculated based on a population of 20,000 people (Veal, 2006). Stephen Sampson's formula was used to determine the suitable sample size (Ayad, 2022). Yielding 372 replies.

3.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis Techniques

The self-administered questionnaires were used in the study's quantitative methodology to gather primary data. it was distributed during April, May and June 2024 at five-star and four-star hotels in major cities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 450 employees received it. In the end, 399 completed surveys (response rate of 88.7%) were received and subjected to statistical analysis. The questionnaire is structured into four sections to address the study's objectives. The first section gathers demographic data, while the subsequent three sections focus on the main three variables of the study: The ethical leadership "EL", Social Norms "SN", and Pro-Social Behavior "PSB". Respondents to the questionnaire evaluated items for all the study variables using Likert scale (5-points scale). The analysis of descriptive data and the exploration of the demographic features of the sample were carried out utilizing Excel-sheet V.2010 and SPSS version 24. Additionally, PLS-SEM version-4 was devoted to test the research hypotheses and an investigation of the correlations between all variables.

4. Study Results

4.1. Measurement Model

Convergent validity was assessed to verify the construct reliability and validity of the model. The findings indicated that the reliability of all items exceeded 0.7, thereby meeting the threshold proposed by Hair et al. (2017). Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) for all study variables exceeded 0.7, in line with the criteria established by Bryman and Cramer (2011) and the threshold proposed by Hair et al. (2017). Furthermore, the "AVE" values for the study variables were above 0.5, consistent with the recommendations, which proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). These results affirm that the model is both valid and reliable. Further details can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.
The results of convergent validity.

Construct	Item	Loading	AVE	CR
Ethical leadership "EL" (Kalshoven et al., 2011)	EL-1	0.808	0.564	0.821
	EL-2	0.767		
	EL-3	0.808		
	EL-4	0.815		
	EL-5	0.837		
Social norms "SN" (Ajzen, 1991)	SN-1	0.837	0.643	0.893
	SN-2	0.756		
	SN-3	0.843		
	SN-4	0.767		
Pro-social behavior "PSB" (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987)	PSB-1	0.889	0.697	0.909
	PSB-2	0.815		
	PSB-3	0.755		
	PSB-4	0.874		

4.1.1. Discriminant Validity "DV"

In order to bolster confidence in the proposed model results and conclusions, Tables (2,3) as well as Figure 2 explored that every model variable is different from every other one, proving the discriminant validity of Kock's model (2020). This was achieved using the cross-loadings method and the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 2.
The criterion of Fornell-Larcker.

Variables	EL	SN	PSB
EL	0.751		
SN	0.670	0.802	
PSB	0.557	0.754	0.835

Note: * The bolded values represent the square root of the AVE.

All the above mentioned results, shown in Table-2 indicate that each variable accounts for the variance of its own components more efficiently than other factors in the proposed model, consistent with the recommendations of Fornell & Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2017). This finding confirms the model's DV.

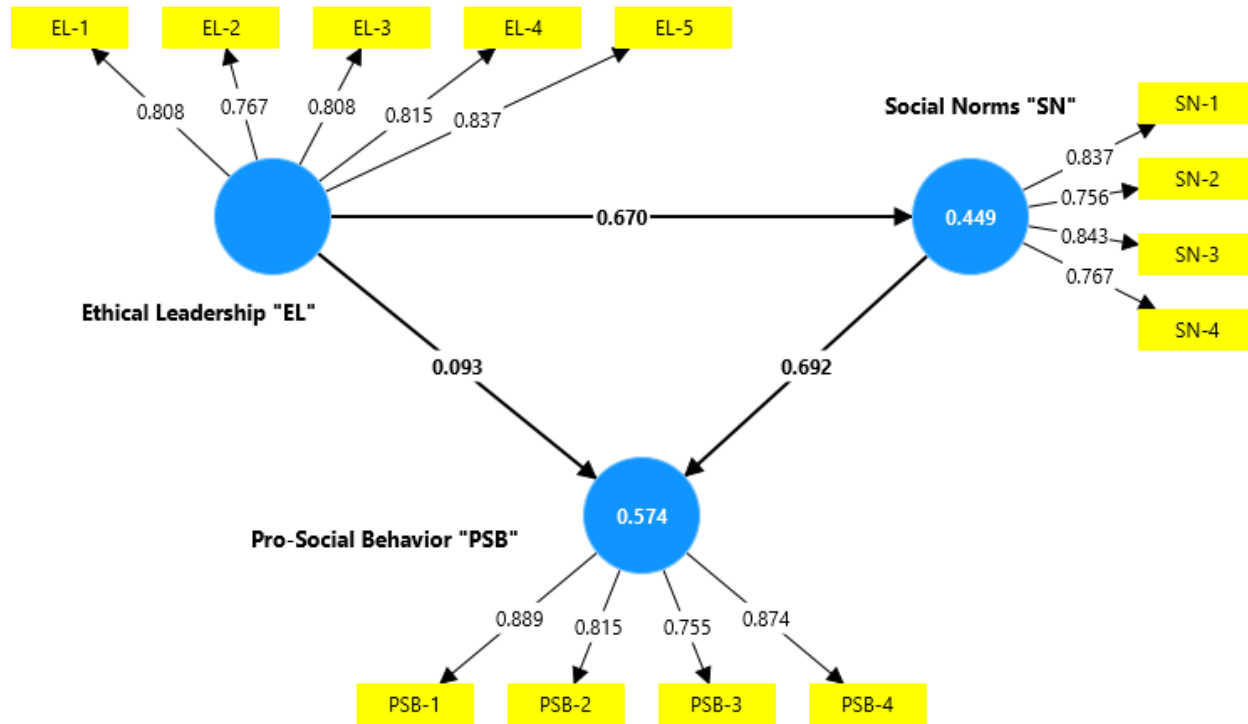


Figure 2.
Assessment of the measurement model.

4.2. Measuring Structural Model

4.2.1. Determination Coefficient

Determination coefficient (R^2) as presented in table number 3 explore the forecasting ability of the proposed model by examining the proportion of variance in the "DV" explained by the "IV". Table number 3 presents that the "IV" significantly influence the "DV", "SN" and "PSB," with high R^2 values, surpassing the minimum level of Chin (1998).

Table 3.
 R^2 Values.

Variable	R^2	Level
SN	0.449	High
PSB	0.574	High

4.2.2. Effect Size

The relative contributions of the "IV" to the "DV" in the proposed model were assessed using f^2 . The above mentioned results presented in table number 4 demonstrate that the IV "EL" has varying degrees of impact on the DVs "SN" and "PSB," ranging from small to large. Of particular note, the effect size of "SB" on "PSB" was substantial, meeting the criteria outlined by Cohen (1988).

Table 4.
Effect size (f^2).

Variables	PSB	SN
EL	0.161 (Medium)	0.815 (Large)
SN	0.618 (Large)	

4.2.3. Model Fit Assessment

To verify that the proposed study model meets the criteria for a global comprehensive fit measure, a goodness of fit (GOF) test was performed at the levels of measurement, structural, and overall model performance, as demonstrated and suggested by Chin (2010):

$$GoF = \sqrt{R^2 \times AVE}$$

$$GoF = 0.570$$

It is possible to infer that GOF of proposed model is sufficiently enough to be deemed adequately standing for a global PLS model, based on the recommended point of reference proposed by Wetzels and Odekerken (2009) and goodness of fit test result.

4.3. Assessment of Hypotheses "Significance of Path Coefficients"

In order to assess the alignment of the proposed theoretical model with the primary data, as shown in Table 5 the significance of the path coefficients was evaluated. The following is a summary of the results for each hypothesis test.

Table 5.
Path coefficients for hypothesized relationships.

Hypothesis	Relation	S. beta	S.E	T	P	Findings
H1* EL -> SN	Direct	0.670	0.037	17.880	0.000**	Accepted
H2* EL -> PSB	Direct	0.293	0.057	5.140	0.000**	Accepted
H3* SN -> PSB	Direct	0.692	0.042	16.570	0.000**	Accepted
H4* EL -> SN -> PSB	In-direct	0.464	0.025	18.533	0.000**	Accepted

Note: **Significant at P. Value ≤ .005.

The SEM results (Tables 4 & 5) and the three proposed hypotheses Figure 1. "EL" positively and significantly influences "SN" (Effect size = 0.815; Std. Beta = 0.670) and "PSB" (Effect size = 0.161; Std. Beta = 0.293). Also, "SN" has a direct impact on "PSB" that is both positive and significant (Effect-size = 0.618; Std. Beta = 0.692), therefore, all of the direct impacts hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 were shown to be true and received support. As for the indirect relationship between the study variables, "PSB" shows a partial mediating impact on the relationship between "EL" and "SN" (Std. Beta = 0.464 and P-value = .000). As the mediating relationship was significant, the hypothesis H4 was accepted.

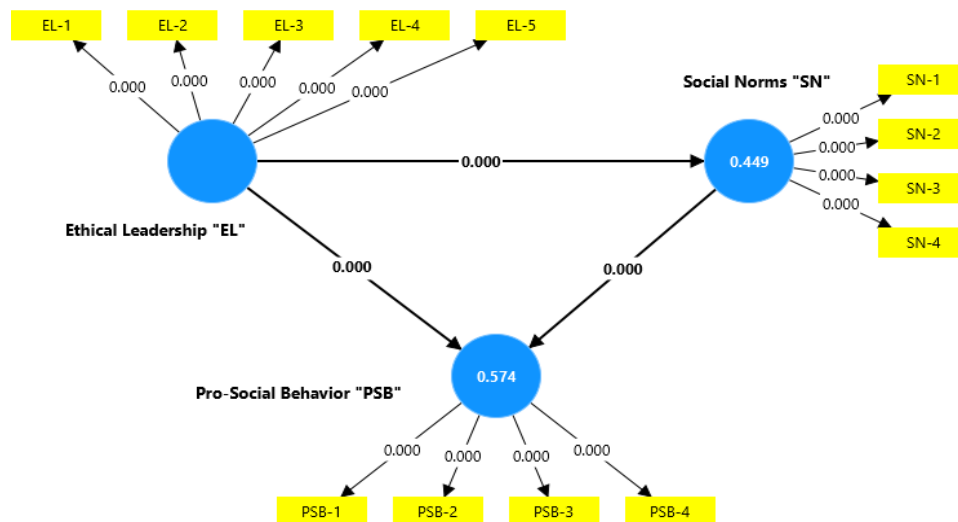


Figure 3.
Significance of Path coefficients.

5. Discussion and Implications

Using the Social Norms Theory (SNT), this study aims to explore the mediating role of SN in the relationship between EL and PSB in the hospitality industry. Furthermore, the research seeks to uncover how ethical leaders can effectively cultivate PSBs through the establishment of positive SN. The findings showed that Ethical Leadership (EL) has a positive and significant effect on Social Norms "SN" among hotel employees in Saudi Arabia, aligning with the findings of Saha et al. (2020), who also found that ethical leadership fosters a positive workplace climate conducive to prosocial norms. Furthermore, Ethical Leadership (EL) also demonstrates a positive and significant effect on Pro-Social Behavior (PSB), consistent with Rastgar & Hasani (2023), who highlighted the role of EL in encouraging employees' voluntary behaviors. Moreover, Social Norms "SN" positively and significantly affect Pro-Social Behavior (PSB) among hotel employees, aligning the findings of Mintz & Fu (2024), who suggested that norms significantly shape prosocial actions.

The findings also highlight the mediating role of Social Norms (SN) in the relationships between Ethical Leadership (EL) and Pro-Social Behavior (PSB). This aligns with previous research by Graf et al. (2023), which demonstrated how norms mediate leadership's influence on behavior. The research yields several findings that have significant theoretical and practical implications for the hotel industry. It contributes to addressing gaps in the literature concerning the mediating role of Social Norms (SN) in the relationships between Ethical Leadership (EL) and Pro-Social Behavior (PSB). Furthermore, this implies that SN can alter the effects of EL on PSB. These findings prompt hotel executives and decision-makers not only to promote ethical practices but also to nurture a culture of altruism that benefits employees, customers, and the broader community.

The findings of this study offer significant theoretical and practical implications for the Saudi Arabian hospitality industry. Theoretically, they deepen our understanding of Social Norms Theory (SNT) by revealing the critical mediating role of social norms in the relationship between Ethical Leadership (EL) and Pro-Social Behavior (PSB), contributing to leadership and organizational behavior literature. This study highlights how ethical leadership not only fosters positive workplace environments but also aligns employees' behavior with prosocial norms, which can drive collective well-being. Practically, the results underscore the need for hotel executives to prioritize ethical leadership development and cultivate strong social norms that encourage altruism and prosocial behaviors. By doing so, organizations can boost employee morale, enhance customer satisfaction, and improve overall operational effectiveness, creating a competitive advantage in the hospitality sector.

6. Conclusion

This paper aims to investigate the mediating role of SN in the relationship between EL and PSB in the hospitality industry, and the direct role of EL and SN on PSB. Data were gathered from 399 hotel employees. Data analysis of Descriptive and demographic statistics of the respondents were analysed using SPSS-24. Additionally, PLS-SEM V.4 was employed to explore influence between variables (direct and indirect) as well as examine the proposed model. Meanwhile, The SEM results proved that EL has a positive and significant impact on SN and PSB, in addition, SN has a positive and significant impact on PSB. Moreover, the SEM results showed the mediating role of SN on the relationships between EL and PSB, which offer comprehensive advice to hotel executives and decision-makers on how much these dynamics is essential for organizations striving to enhance employee engagement, improve service quality, and create a more collaborative atmosphere in the hospitality sector.

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