

# The effect of servant leadership on organisational sustainability: the parallel mediation role of creativity and psychological resilience

Effect of  
servant  
leadership on  
OS

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Fatima Batool

*Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Malaysia*

Jihad Mohammad

*Qatar University, Doha, Qatar, and*

Siti Rahmah Awang

*Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Malaysia*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The main concern of this research is to examine the indirect effects servant leadership on organisational sustainability (OS) through creativity and psychological resilience in the hoteling sector in Malaysia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A survey method based on a questionnaire was employed to gather data from 441 employees working in the hotel industry in Malaysia. The partial least squares technique, SmartPLS3.3.7, was employed to examine the hypotheses.

**Findings** – The result of the study found support for effect of servant leadership on creativity and psychological resilience. In addition, the effect of creativity and psychological resilience on OS was supported. Moreover, the mediation role of creativity and psychological resilience between servant leadership and organisational suitability was also supported by data.

**Originality/value** – This is a pioneering study that has combined human capital elements (i.e. servant leadership, creativity and psychological resilience) to examine their impacts on OS. Besides, this work has established comparatively new relationships, i.e. the impact of servant leadership on OS through the mediating role of creativity and psychological resilience. In addition, this study has developed relatively new link between psychological resilience and OS. In addition, it has confirmed the validity and reliability of servant leadership and OS at first and second orders.

**Keywords** Servant leadership, Creativity, Psychological resilience, Organisational sustainability, Hotel industry

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The prosperity of the tourism and hospitality sector is dependent on the patronage of visitors (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021), and a substantial reduction in their number has occurred because of travel restrictions, closure of borders, cancellation of events, quarantine issues and fear of expansion due to COVID-19 (Gosling *et al.*, 2020). In addition, COVID-19 has adversely stricken the global economy; however, the service sector, particularly the hospitality industry, has been affected the worst (Khan *et al.*, 2021). This has plunged the hospitality sector into a steep social and economic decline and enhanced the perception of job insecurity amongst the workforce, resulting in psychosomatic issues (Khan *et al.*, 2021).

The Malaysian tourism and hospitality industry, one of the biggest and rapidly developing industries (Puah *et al.*, 2018), has also been severely impacted by COVID-19. In addition to a reported loss of RM3.3bn incurred by the Malaysian Hotels Association (MAH) up to June 2020, a total of 2,041 workers suffered termination of employment, 5,054 with pay



reduction and 9,773 with unpaid leave, out of a total industry workforce of 54,299 by 2020 (Foo *et al.*, 2020). Alongside, since the second Movement Control Order (MCO), an increased number of hotels have closed down or are planning to do so (MAH, 2021). HassanDarvish (2021) reports that this sector is expected to incur a loss of more than RM300m every 14 days of MCO. The pandemic has not only affected the hospitality and tourism sector but has also highlighted its lack of resilience and underscored its susceptibility worldwide, including Malaysia (Khan and Hashim, 2020). Currently, the global, including the Malaysian hospitality sector, is facing the challenge of making a recovery and regaining sustainability in the post-COVID-19 scenario.

Ong *et al.* (2015) define organisational sustainability (OS) as living and working by utilising a modus operandi, which meets and combines the prevailing ecological, economic and societal requirements with no compromise for the well-being of the future cohorts. OS positively affects business performance, elicits competitive advantage via involving the stakeholders, recuperates risk management and nurtures innovation in an organisation (Whelan and Fink, 2016). Regaining sustainability in the aftermath of COVID-19 demands perseverance, adaptability and the ability to think beyond the impossibilities. Particularly, psychologically resilient individuals with their capacity to bounce back from deleterious incidents and revive from negative emotional experiences may lead to OS (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). In addition, individuals who are appealed by complex tasks, patient with uncertainty, self-assured and more creative (Barron and Harrington, 1981) can contribute to their OS (Lozano, 2014; Mróz and Ocetkiewicz, 2021). Most importantly, the complex nature of sustainability demands exceptional leadership capabilities like servant leader (SL) (Kang and Zhang, 2020; Metcalf and Benn, 2013) that plays a paramount role in setting the organisation's vision and mission, ensuring sustainability and economic growth of both the organisation and its employees (Meraku, 2017).

SL entails all facets of leadership, including ethical and relational (Jones Christensen *et al.*, 2014; Wirawan *et al.*, 2020), as well as situational, transformational and personal facets (Coetzer *et al.*, 2017). This type of leadership warrants sustainable outcomes at the personal, organisational and societal levels (Coetzer *et al.*, 2017). It emphasises service over self-interest, ethical behaviour and an altruistic ideology (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Iqbal *et al.*, 2020). It focus on followers' needs that help the followers to strive and succeed which consequently activates their creativity (Yang *et al.*, 2017) and complements their resilience (Wiroko, 2021). Thus, it is asserted that in order for businesses to revive and regain sustainability, they ought to focus on the leadership style (e.g. SL) that creates value and sets the foundation of its sustainability (Coetzer *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly and guided by job demands–resources model (JD-R), this study argues that SL is a crucial resource that focusses upon prioritising and empowering the employees (Stone *et al.*, 2004), provides a ground for them to turn more resilient (Eliot, 2020) and creative (psychological status) (Liden *et al.*, 2015), which eventually contributes to sustainability of their workplace (outcome).

Previous studies on the phenomenon of OS have found that it can be affected by various factors, including talent management and sustainable behaviour (Mujtaba and Mubarik, 2021), organisational learning capacity and green intellectual capital (e.g. Omar *et al.*, 2019), green human resource practices, environmental and employee performance (Amjad *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on the association between SL and OS through the parallel mediation of creativity and psychological resilience (PR). Besides, researchers have recommended for more studies on the predictors of OS (e.g. Grewal and Sarafeim, 2020; Hahn *et al.*, 2017). In addition, it was suggested by researcher (see Liden *et al.*, 2015; Yang *et al.*, 2019a, b) to examine the intervening mechanisms between SL and various outcomes. Accordingly, the main objectives of this study are (1) to examine the effect of SL on creativity and PR, (2) to examine the impacts of creativity and PR on OS and (3) to test the mediating effects of creativity and PR between SL and OS in the hotel industry in the Malaysian context.

Malaysia is a collectivism-based society (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013), which also prevails in Malaysian organisations, where Malaysian managers possess high degrees of horizontal and vertical collectivism (Noordin and Hamali, 2009). In such a culture, leadership is a group phenomenon, and individuals exhibit substantial faithfulness with their job when they feel that the leader reciprocates their faithfulness and protects them (Hofstede, 1983). Besides, this culture prioritises the group's interest over individual interest and endeavour for their well-being (Kececi, 2017). These characteristics are in line with the traits of SL. Specifically, SL is a holistic approach based on teamwork, community service and followers' participation in decision-making while simultaneously augmenting the caring and quality of man organisations (Spears, 1996). These characteristics make SL an appropriate leadership style that may help hotel industry in a collectivist culture like in Malaysia to survive and sustain.

Based on previous discussion, this study is likely to contribute significantly to the leadership theories in developing context in different aspects. In particular, it combined organisational and human resources, such as SL, creativity and PR, and empirically examined their impact on OS. These resources being unique, inimitable and internal to the organisation can contribute to sustainability of the organisation, specifically, the hoteling sector. Moreover, this work has developed comparatively new relationships between SL and OS through the parallel mediation of creativity and PR. The rest of the article has been organised as follows: First, a theoretical framework has been developed and hypotheses have been framed. Next, the methodology adopted has been discussed, followed by the results, findings and discussions. Finally, a conclusion has been stated, and implications and limitations as well as directions for future research have been highlighted.

## Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

### *Job demands–resources model (JD-R)*

The JD-R (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) incorporates two fundamental psychosomatic processes, namely the stress process stimulated by unwarranted job demands, leading to negative consequences, and the process based on a motivational process prompted by job resources, leading to positive results (Schaufeli, 2017). Instances of job demand entail excessive physical work, time pressure, recipient contact, job insecurity, risks and hazards, whereas examples of job resources encompass supervisor support, feedback, rewards, participation, job security and job control (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001).

The JD-R model was extended by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) by including burnout as a mediator between job demands and health problems and work engagement as a mediator between job resources and turnover intent. Later, the model was extended further by incorporating personal resources (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009) and engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2017). Schaufeli (2017) considers JD-R as a simple and empirically validated model that particularises associations amongst job and individual traits, leadership, employees' welfare and outcomes. Based on this, this work asserts that SL is a crucial resource that can strengthen creativity and PR (psychological states) of the followers, which ultimately foster OS (outcome). SLs, being follower-focussed, empowering, inspiring, judicious and emotional healers, set an environment that nurtures creativity and employees' PR during normal times as well as in times of uncertainty.

*Organisational sustainability (OS)*. Elkington (1994) defines OS as being economically feasible, socially valuable and environmentally reliable with an emphasis on a win–win–win approach for the business, the natural balance and society. Besides, Neubaum and Zahra (2006) define OS as the capacity of a business to foster and encourage growth by effectively fulfilling the expectancies of various stakeholders. According to Sze'kely and Knirsch (2005), OS encompasses maintaining and widening economic advancement, shareholders' value,

reputation, customer associations and the quality of products and services. OS entails embracing and following ethics in conducting business, generating sustainable employment, generating value for the stakeholders and addressing the needs of the marginalised people. Pursuing [Elkington \(1994\)](#), this study defines OS as a second-order construct based on three dimensions that ensure a threefold objective of being *economically feasible, societally beneficial and ecologically reliable, emphasising a win-win-win approach for business, the environment and society*.

According to [UN Global Compact and Accenture \(2010, 2013\)](#), business executives report that attending to sustainability on the economic, societal and ecological fronts brings them both tangible advantages, such as lessened costs and risks of conducting business, and also intangible advantages such as enhanced brand repute, enhanced attraction to talent and enhanced competitiveness. They remain convinced that sustainability can transform their businesses and can be a new path to advancement and innovation ([UN Global Compact and Accenture, 2010, 2013](#)). Furthermore, in regard to the current distressing situation, [Khan and Hashim \(2020\)](#) stated that COVID-19 has seized the world, attacking the hospitality and tourism sector most ruthlessly. It is therefore vital to explore ways and means through which this sector can revive and regain its sustainability.

*Psychological resilience (PR)*. Positive psychology is an approach that has become an emerging and dominant area of psychological research ([Peterson, 2006](#)), focussing more on helping individuals to achieve excellence ([Cameron and Lavine, 2006](#)). It emphasises positive constructs such as resiliency rather than negative constructs such as pessimism ([Seligman, 2006](#)). Resilience, which has been defined as a dynamic process in which people demonstrate positive adaptation amidst the experiences of critical distress, is a central concern in positive psychology ([Luther and Cicchetti, 2000](#)). It has been described as a personality trait that curbs the negative impacts of stress and fosters adaptability ([Wagnild and Young, 1993](#)). [Rutter \(1987\)](#) defines PR as a process that safeguards people from psychosomatic risks with regard to adversity and characterises resilient people as owning self-esteem, conviction in their own self-efficacy, having a repertory of skills of problem-solving and gratifying interpersonal associations. Similarly, [Luthans \(2002, p. 702\)](#) defines resilience as “the positive psychological capacity, to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increase responsibility”. In this study, resilience is defined as a unidimensional construct that is a dynamic process in which individuals exhibit positive adaptation despite the experiences of critical distress at the workplace in order to be more sustainable ([Luther and Cicchetti, 2000](#)).

The COVID-19 has substantially altered our lives and necessitated an array of changes for organisations and their workforce to cope with the crisis ([Sahni, 2020](#)). Furthermore, it has posed massive challenges to various sectors, wherein previous crisis coping mechanisms are ineffective and can disrupt business continuity, since problems not only occur in numerous areas but also manifest themselves in unknown ways ([Bryce et al., 2020](#)). This, in turn, has generated stress and anxiety ([Sahni, 2020](#)) amongst businesses, including those in the hospitality sector. Such a situation ought to be handled urgently and in a way that benefits both the workforce and the hotel industry in resuming operations, recovering and re-sustaining themselves in the new normal. One such way is by strengthening resilience, which, according to [Rutter \(1999\)](#), is the phenomenon of surmounting stress or hardship.

*Creativity*. [Amabile \(1997\)](#) and [Wang and Netemeyer \(2004\)](#) defined creativity as the generation of novel ideas in any sphere of human activity, be it science, arts, education, business or daily life. Similarly, [Woodman et al. \(1993\)](#) defined creativity as the generation of the invaluable and practical novel products, services, ideations, procedures and processes that can provide panaceas for problems via individuals working together in a complex societal set-up. This study has followed [Amabile \(1997\)](#) and defined creativity as a unidimensional construct, which is the act of generating novel and apposite ideas in an organisation for its sustainability.

The dynamic nature of sustainability implies that the means of obtaining sustainability ought to be flexible and receptive to generate the required sustainable outcomes (Lim, 2016). In this respect, creativity, the source of novel ideas, is focussed on generating opportunities that change the prevailing suggestions and propose new panaceas for greater sustainability in the hospitality and tourism sector (Lim, 2016).

With regard to the pandemic, unemployment primarily attacked service-based jobs, while the workforce at retails, restaurants and hotels were amongst the first to lose their jobs (Tappe and Luhby, 2020). However, the previous studies have shown that being engrossed in creativity-related actions can be an adaptive response to an altering scenario (Kapoor and Kaufman, 2020). Contextually, creativity possesses the potentiality to lead sustainability in ways that generate novel and invaluable sustainable consequences (Lim, 2016). During downturns, as in the current scenario, businesses in the hotel industry depend on creative and innovative services and on sustaining healthy relationships with customers (Hon and Lui, 2016). Moreover, during a period of uncertainty (e.g. COVID-19), it is creativity that can help businesses, including hotels, to respond positively by producing novel products and services to help them reattain sustainability. For creativity is considered an imperative source of prosperity in dynamic business scenarios that addresses unanticipated challenges and pre-emptively develops new capacities (Zhou and Hoever, 2014).

*Servant leadership (SL)*. SL is defined as (1) “other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one, prioritising follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorientation of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organisation and the larger community” (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Liden et al. (2008) state that SL emphasises the attitude of personal uprightness and service amongst the workforce, customers and communities. Furthermore, the study proposes SL as a multidimensional construct, which, at the personal level, makes an exceptional contribution that transcends transformational and leader member exchange (LMX) leaderships in elaborating organisational outcomes, including community citizenship comportment (Liden et al., 2008). Additionally, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) propose five dimensions of SL: (1) altruistic calling, which depicts a leader’s deep-seated desire to make a positive change in people’s life; (2) emotional healing, which illustrates the commitment to and the skill of a leader in nurturing spiritual revival from crisis; (3) wisdom, which refers to an amalgamation of cognisance of surroundings and prediction of the consequences; (4) persuasive mapping, which indicates the degree to which a leader uses sound logic and mental archetypes to grasp greater possibilities; (5) organisational stewardship, which depicts that leaders make organisations contribute to society. Following Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), this study defines SL as a multidimensional construct based on the five dimensions of altruistic calling, emotional healing, persuasive mapping, wisdom and organisational stewardship, in order to attain sustainability at the individual and organisational levels.

Dogra (2020) reports that the entire business world is encountering critical challenges and that the aviation, hospitality and tourism sectors, in particular, are experiencing a substantial drop in revenue, bankruptcies and job losses. In such a scenario, SL can serve as a support system for the organisation and can morally, emotionally and psychosomatically uplift the organisational members and the community, as it (Coetzer et al., 2017) represents a more significant approach to leadership aimed at ensuring sustainability at the personal, organisational and societal levels.

*Relationship between SL, creativity and OS*. SL begins with a natural desire to serve (Greenleaf, 1998), lead and augment the growth of the followers and the organisation and help build the community (Spears, 2010). SL might support and encourage the followers by focussing on their needs, empowering them and nurturing their potentiality to the maximum (Yang et al., 2019a, b). Past research illustrated a correlation between SL and creative behaviour (e.g. Neubert et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2019a, b). Besides, by permitting employees to

take responsibility for their works and fostering their talents (Bobbio *et al.*, 2012), SL can refine the workforce by imparting information and encouraging independent problem-solving (Liden *et al.*, 2008) creativity. Although some studies (e.g. Neubert *et al.*, 2008; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014) found a positive association between SL and employee creativity, others (e.g. Newman *et al.*, 2017) found an insignificant relationship between these two constructs. Hence, further research is needed to confirm this relationship in a new research context, i.e. the hotel industry in Malaysia. Accordingly, this study assumes a positive correlation between SL and employees' creativity. Based on this assumption, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H1. SL has a positive effect on creativity.*

Creativity may be one of the most compelling and pragmatic means of overcoming ignorance and reattaining knowledge by producing and establishing novel mental archetypes for sustainability (Lozano, 2014). Moreover, creativity is at the core of attaining goals of reinventing business archetypes by generating novel products and services and utilising applied mechanisms that recognise societal and ecological sustainability (Mitchell and Walinga, 2017). Although there have been conceptual studies on the association between creativity and OS (e.g. Lozano, 2014), there is a dearth of empirical studies on this relationship, especially in the hotel industry. In addition, Mohamed *et al.* (2019) suggested the need for research on both the antecedents and the consequences of creativity. Therefore, this research proposes a positive association between creativity and OS. Guided by this proposition, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H2. Creativity has a positive effect on OS.*

Based on the previous discussion, this study argued that SL can increase followers' creativity, ultimately enhancing OS. This argument outlines the mediation role of creativity between SL and OS. This postulation is in line with the JD-R model, which posits that job resource (SL) and individual/organisational outcomes are connected through cognitive and emotional factors (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). In addition, scholars (see Liden *et al.*, 2014; Bou Reslan *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2017) stressed exploring the mediating mechanisms in relation to servant leadership and workplace outcome at the individual and organisational levels. Therefore, this study argues that SL is a vital resource that enhances employees' creativity (cognitive status), leading to enhanced organisation's sustainability (outcome). Based this argument, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H3. Creativity mediates the association between SL and OS.*

*Relationship between SL, PR and OS.* Organisational behaviour studies revealed that leadership is a crucial factor in generating positive attitude and behaviour at the workplace (Liden *et al.*, 2014; Mohammad *et al.*, 2015; Seligman *et al.*, 2005). Thus, scholars call for more attention concerning the relationship between positive forms of leadership, such as servant leadership, and positive employee characteristics, such as PR (Newman *et al.*, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2019a, b). SL addresses the psychosomatic needs of the workforce (Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014) and, through it, their welfare. The scholar have argued that resilience can be developed in individuals through the influence of servant leadership (Eliot, 2020; Masten, 2001). It can stimulate followers' feelings of happiness (Bono *et al.*, 2007), enhancing their positive psychology (Liden *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2017) and bring out their full potential (Liden *et al.*, 2015). Past studies revealed empirical evidence of the effect of SL on the individual outcome at the workplace, such as job attitudes (Chan and Mak, 2014), organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Hsiao *et al.*, 2015) and performance (Liden *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, less attention was given to the effect of SL on employees' PR. Accordingly, this study proposes that SL can exert a positive effect on employee PR. Based on this proposition, the following hypothesis is developed:

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#### H4. SL has a positive effect on PR.

Although resilience has been applied to the workplace at a different level of analysis, it is still under-researched in organisational behaviour studies (King *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, a scant of research has examined the factors that may enhance resilience at the workplace and its subsequent influence on individual and organisational outcomes (King *et al.*, 2017). According to Chadwick and Raver (2020), the longitudinal advantages of PR bear wide-ranging advantages for the organisational members and the survival of the organisations. Moreover, this relationship between resilience and sustainability is attached to the notion of resilience that is the capability of comprehending disruptions and employing a consolidative method of surmounting difficulties with collective interests (Vizcaíno *et al.*, 2020). Alongside, Denckla *et al.* (2020) recommended examining the outcomes of PR as one of the essential areas of further research. Employees' PR is a crucial factor in turning threats into opportunities and increasing their ability to adapt to positive change. Meanwhile, this self-resilience capacity changes over time and is enhanced by protective factors in the individual and the environment (Stewart *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, past research demonstrated an association between employees' positive psychological status and workplace outcome (see; Logahan and Rahman, 2015; Paul *et al.*, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a lack of research on the effect of PR and OS. Therefore, this study presumes a positive relationship between PR and OS. Based on this presumption, the following hypothesis is developed:

#### H5. PR has a positive impact on OS.

Grounded in the previous discussion, this work assumes that SL can enhance the PR of the workforce, which can strengthen OS. This argument is in line with the JD-R model. Specifically, SL (resource) can stimulate employees' positive psychology (PR) that in due course contributes to the sustainability of the organisation (outcome). In addition, Chiniara and Bentein (2016) argued that psychological mechanisms might act as essential mediators in the relationship between leadership and individual/organisational outcomes. Moreover, Liden *et al.* (2014) and Yang *et al.* (2017) emphasised the importance of testing the mediating mechanisms in relation to servant leadership and workplace outcome. Therefore, this study assumes that PR can mediate the relationship between SL and OS. Based on this assumption, the following hypothesis is developed.

#### H6. PR mediates the relationship between SL and OS.

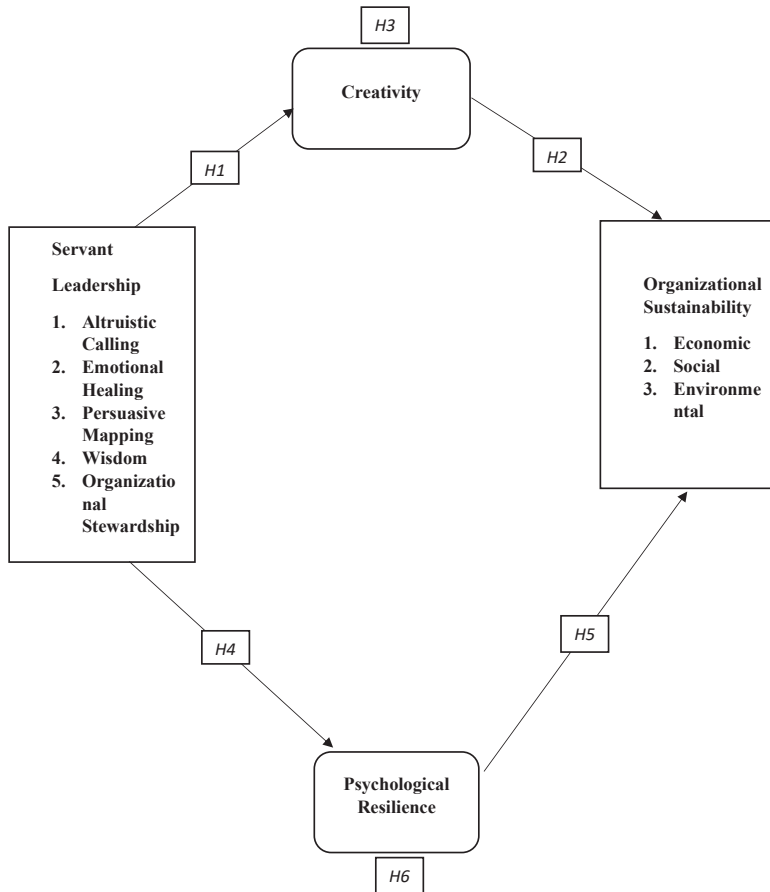
The theoretical model of the research hypotheses is presented in Figure 1.

## Methodology

### *Data collection and sampling*

This is a cross-sectional study, in which data were collected at one point of time from hotels of various ranks, from economy to luxury, including four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia. As many as 495 questionnaires were disseminated, mostly through Google Links, to both English and Bahasa (Malaysia) versions, while some hotels were approached through personal visits. Data collection took around five months, and 472 questionnaires were gathered. The next stage involved cleaning data, which is an essential part of the process as the occurrence of erroneous or inconsistent data can considerably affect the outcomes of the analysis (Hellerstein, 2008). During these processes, incomplete responses and missing values were deleted, bringing the total number of responses down to 441. Particularly, out of 31 discarded questionnaires, 15 were straight-line responses, 11 did not respond to the construct of OS and five had no response concerning SL (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

As the main concern of this study is to generalise the result to theory, the non-probability judgemental sampling technique was used to gather data from the right respondents in terms



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual framework

of giving information (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). The smallest sample size essential to ascertain an  $R^2$  of more than 10%, with a statistical significance level of 5%, a power of 95% and an effect size of 15%, was 130 (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

*Measurement*

The instrument was evaluated to confirm the content and face validity (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). After a thorough review of the literature, five lecturers of a reputable public university from the domains of organisational behaviour and leadership were contacted for content validity. Next, the questionnaire was face-validated for the items' clarity, readability and comprehensibility (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). This involved circulating the instrument to 10 MBA and PhD students and interviewing them for 3–5 min. Based on their feedback minor changes were made to the questionnaire.

The constructs of the study were quantified using a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree, to obtain the views of the respondents pertaining to each item. SL was measured using a 23-item developed and tested by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006). Creativity was quantified using a seven-item instrument established and evaluated by Wang and Netemeyer (2004). PR was measured using the brief resilience scale



formed and tested by Smith *et al.* (2008). Finally, OS was evaluated using the scale developed and empirically assessed by Alipour *et al.* (2019).

### *Respondents' profile*

As shown in Table 1, 46.3% of respondents were male, while 53.7% were female. Furthermore, 42.6% were Malay, 22.2% were Chinese, 22.0 Indian, while other ethnicities made up 13.2%. Most of the respondents aged 32–37 (35.1%). The highest percentage of respondents from middle management was from the front office department (9.1%), and most of the respondents (23.8%) were from the front office staff.

Demographic variables	<i>N</i> = 441	Percentage (%age)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	204	46.3
Female	237	53.7
<i>Age</i>		
20–25 years	117	26.5
26–31 years	94	21.3
32–37 years	155	35.1
38–43 years	51	11.6
44–49 years	18	4.08
50 and above	6	1.36
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Malay	188	42.6
Malay Chinese	98	22.2
Malay Indian	97	22
Others	58	13.2
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	202	45.8
Married	193	43.8
Divorced	42	9.5
Widow/widower	4	0.9
<i>Education background</i>		
Diploma	36	8.2
Bachelor degree	156	35.4
Master degree	213	48.3
Other	36	8.16
<i>Department (mid-mgt.)</i>		
Front office	40	9.1
F&B	37	8.4
Rooms division	28	6.3
Marketing	31	7.0
Public relations	35	7.9
Human resource	13	2.9
Other	2	0.45
<i>Department (Staff)</i>		
Front office	105	23.8
F&B	77	17.5
Rooms division	69	15.6
Other	4	0.9

**Table 1.**  
Demographic details

*Measurement model*

To confirm the absence of common method variance (CMV), partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to ascertain whether all the inner variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 3.3 at the factor level (Kock, 2015). The result of the PLS algorithm revealed that all the values were below a cut-off value of 3.3, thereby indicating the absence of CMV. Furthermore, Harman's unifactor test, executed using principal component analysis without rotation, demonstrated that all the generated factors explained less than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), and thus, CMV was not an issue in this study.

An OLS regression-based method, PLS-SEM, which is concerned with the prediction of hypotheses that maximise the explained variation in the outcome variables (Hair *et al.*, 2017), was employed. In addition, this is an exploratory study that aimed to examine new relationships between SL and OS through the mediation role of creativity and PR, justifying the use of PLS (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, PLS-SEM has been suggested for complex models that has many constructs and relationships (Richter *et al.*, 2016). Most importantly, PLS can handle reflective as well as formative measurement models and simultaneously assess the measurement and structural mode (Hair *et al.*, 2017), thereby justifying the use of PLS-SEM. The two-stage approach, advised by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), was followed to assess the measurement model at the first stage and the structural model at the second stage.

*Evaluation of reflective measurement model*

The reflectively measurement model at first order was assessed in terms of its reliability and validity (Quoquab *et al.*, 2020). The reliability of the model was assessed on the basis of indicator reliability, composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha (Quoquab and Mohammad 2020). As shown in Table 2, the factor loadings for all constructs exceeded the threshold value of 0.7, the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs surpassed the cut-off value of 0.7, which confirmed the reliability of all constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Next, convergent validity was examined on the basis of average variance extracted (AVE), which represents the shared variance between a construct and its own item (Henseler, 2017). As Table 2 shows, all constructs possessed AVE values greater than 0.5, confirming the convergent validity of all the constructs (Henseler *et al.*, 2016).

Next, discriminant validity was assessed through the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). HTMT, which represents the ratio of between constructs to within constructs correlation, should be less than 0.85 Henseler *et al.*, (2015). To adjust for HTMT 0.90 values, two items, SL2 and SL16, were deleted. Moreover, as recommended by Hair *et al.* (2017), bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 subsamples was performed to ascertain whether the lower and upper bounds of the confidence interval held a value of 1. There being no such inclusion, as shown in Table 3, thus discriminant validity was adequately established (see Figure 2).

*Evaluation of formative measurement model (second order)*

Assessment of formative second order was based on convergent validity, collinearity through VIF and their significance and relevance level (Hair *et al.*, 2017). This study followed the disjoint two-stage approach (Becker *et al.*, 2012). To run this approach, the latent variable scores of the first-order components were utilised to measure the second-order constructs at the second stage (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019). Next, the convergent validity of the higher order constructs was measured through redundancy analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2017), whereby at the second order, SL and OS were correlated with their single global indicators. The path coefficients were 0.746 and 0.839 for SL and OS, respectively, indicating that convergent validity was established. Next, collinearity was evaluated through VIF. The analysis

Construct	Items	Loadings	CB $\alpha$	rho_A	CR	AVE
ALC	SL1	0.868	0.865	0.87	0.917	0.787
	SL3	0.912				
	SL4	0.88				
EMH	SL5	0.883	0.886	0.891	0.921	0.746
	SL6	0.827				
	SL7	0.913				
WISDOM	SL8	0.828	0.855	0.86	0.896	0.634
	SL9	0.721				
	SL10	0.756				
	SL11	0.851				
	SL12	0.805				
PM	SL13	0.842	0.9	0.909	0.931	0.771
	SL14	0.916				
	SL15	0.851				
ORG.S	SL17	0.831	0.779	0.828	0.85	0.541
	SL18	0.91				
	SL19	0.821				
	SL20	0.854				
	SL21	0.849				
CR	SL22	0.511	0.93	0.931	0.943	0.704
	SL23	0.565				
	CR1	0.886				
	CR2	0.838				
	CR3	0.795				
PR	CR4	0.854	0.872	0.874	0.904	0.61
	CR5	0.853				
	CR6	0.808				
	CR7	0.834				
	PR1	0.793				
SOC.S	PR2_R	0.804	0.907	0.908	0.928	0.683
	PR3	0.799				
	PR4_R	0.787				
	PR5	0.725				
	PR6_R	0.776				
ENV.S	OS1	0.793	0.906	0.918	0.925	0.608
	OS2	0.852				
	OS3	0.836				
	OS4	0.838				
	OS5	0.798				
ECO.S	OS6	0.841	0.879	0.881	0.912	0.674
	OS7	0.795				
	OS8	0.838				
	OS9	0.788				
	OS10	0.758				
	OS11	0.78				
	OS12	0.828				
	OS13	0.837				
	OS14	0.587				
	OS15	0.798				
	OS16	0.83				
	OS17	0.827				
	OS18	0.806				
	OS19	0.845				

Effect of  
servant  
leadership on  
OS

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**Note(s):** ALC= altruistic calling, EMH = emotional healing, PM = persuasive mapping, ORG.S = organisational stewardship, CR = creativity, SOC.S= social sustainability, ENV.S = environmental sustainability, ECO.S = economic sustainability

**Table 2.**  
Assessment of  
measurement model



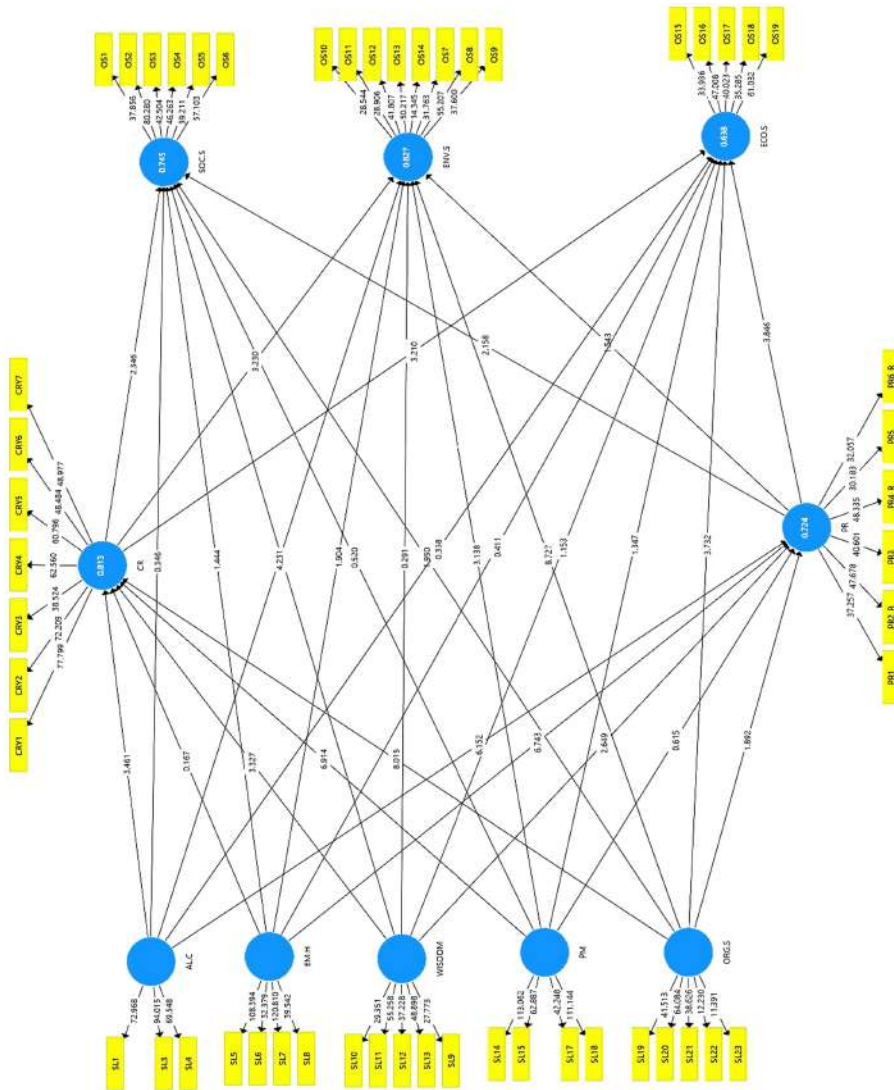


Figure 2. Reflective measurement model

indicated that all the values were less than the cut-off value of 5, implying the absence of a collinearity issue. Third, following the standard procedures of PLS-SEM, the significance and relevance of outer weights were assessed through bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 subsamples to produce *t*-values and *p*-values (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Both relative contribution and absolute contribution revealed that all the indicators were statistically significant, with *p*-values lower than 1% (see Table 4). Table 4 displays outer weights, outer loadings and the respective *t*-statistics and *p*-values of the indicators.

*Structural model assessment (direct relationships)*

The structural model was analysed in regard to path coefficients, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The bootstrapping method, with a re-sampling of 5,000, was executed to assess the significance of the path coefficient (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Table 5 demonstrates that SL was strongly related to creativity ( $\beta = 0.892$ ,  $t = 65.799$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and PR ( $\beta = 0.838$ ,  $t = 39.175$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), providing support for H1 and H4. Additionally, creativity displays a statistically significant relationship with OS ( $\beta = 0.608$ ,  $t = 16.145$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming H2. In addition, PR exerts a strong positive effect on OS ( $\beta = 0.342$ ,  $t = 8.134$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and, hence, H5 is supported.

Next, the model explanatory power was evaluated on the basis of the coefficient of determination values ( $R^2$ ).  $R^2$  represents the combined contribution of all exogenous variables in explaining variance in the endogenous variable. According to Cohen (1988), the  $R^2$  values 0.26, 0.13 and 0.03 reflect substantial, moderate and weak, respectively. On the basis of the PLS algorithm analysis results, shown in Table 5, SL explained a substantial amount of variance in creativity (79.6%) and PR (70.3%). In addition, both creativity and PR explained a huge amount of variance in OS (78.6%). These numbers demonstrate a substantial explanatory power of the model. The predictive power ( $Q^2$ ) of the structural model was then evaluated via the blindfolding procedure. As a rule of thumb suggested by Hair *et al.* (2017),  $Q^2$  values greater than 0 indicate the model has predictive power. As demonstrated in Table 5,

Construct	Indicators	VIF	Weights	<i>T</i> stat	Loadings	<i>T</i> stat
SL	ALC → SL	3.721	0.264	7.451	0.909	76.188
	EM.H → SL	4.371	0.251	3.715	0.92	69.667
	WISDOM → SL	3.6	0.202	4.282	0.893	60.307
	PM → SL	4.676	0.191	4.195	0.915	71.298
	ORG.S → SL	2.677	0.204	5.971	0.846	45.106
OS	SOC.S → OS	4.473	0.268	4.126	0.928	60.597
	ENV.S → OS	4.322	0.639	9.125	0.982	144.051
	ECOS → OS	3.736	0.139	2.445	0.885	51.469

**Table 4.** Assessment of formative measurement model

**Note(s):** ALC= altruistic calling, EM.H = emotional healing, PM = persuasive mapping, ORG.S = organizational stewardship, SOC.S = social sustainability, ENV.S = environmental sustainability, ECOS = economic sustainability

Hypotheses	Associations	Factor loadings	S.E.	<i>t</i> values	$R^2$	$Q^2$	Decision
H1	SL → CR	0.892	0.014	65.799	0.796	0.548	Supported
H2	SL → PR	0.838	0.021	39.175	0.703	0.412	Supported
H4	CR → OS	0.608	0.038	16.145	0.786	0.675	Supported
H5	PR → OS	0.342	0.042	8.134			Supported

**Table 5.** Structural model-direct associations

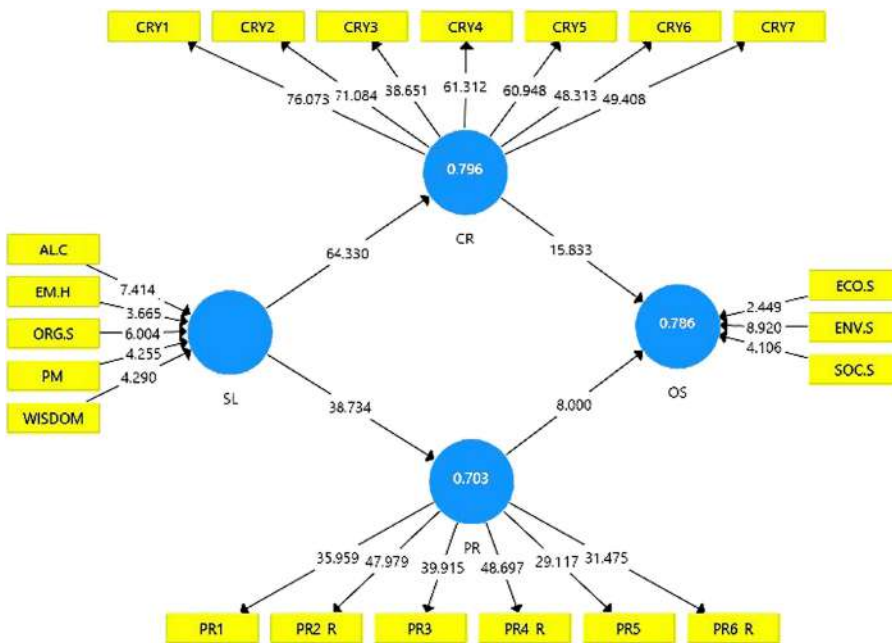
$Q^2$  values of all endogenous constructs were greater than 0, confirming the predictive relevance of the model.

*Assessment of mediating effect*

In order to evaluate the intervening impacts of creativity and PR and the associations between SL and OS, Preacher and Hayes’s (2004) method was applied. A bootstrapping procedure, with 5,000 bootstrap samples, was used to derive path coefficient values, standard errors, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals,  $t$ -statistics and  $p$ -values (Hair et al., 2017). The bootstrapping analysis showed that the indirect effect of  $\beta_1 = 0.542$  was significant with a  $t$ -value of 14.519,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI: [0.465–0.6144]. Further, the indirect effect of  $\beta_2 = 0.286$  was significant, with a  $t$ -value of 7.66,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI: [0.213–0.361]. These results showed evidence for the mediation effect of creativity and PR between SL and OS, respectively. Thus, H3 and H6 were supported (see Figure 3 and Table 6).

**Discussion**

The objectives of this study were to predict the effect of SL on creativity PR. It also examined the impacts of creativity and PR on OS. In addition, the study evaluated the mediation effect



**Figure 3.** Structural model

Hypotheses	Association	Indirect effect (a*b)	S.E.	t. stat	95% CI	Decision
H3	SL → CR → OS	$\beta_1 = 0.542$	0.037	14.519	0.465–0.614	Supported
H6	SL → PR → OS	$\beta_2 = 0.286$	0.031	7.66	0.213–0.361	Supported

**Table 6.** Mediation results

of creativity and PR between SL and OS. In order to attain these objectives, a conceptual framework was established based on the JD-R model, past research and logical arguments. SPSS for data cleaning and demographic information was utilised. PLS-SEM was employed for data analysis. The outcomes support all the hypotheses of this study.

The results of the analysis support the relationships between SL and creativity and between SL and PR, which is in line with the JD-R model. As per this model, SL is a powerful resource that values the variety of aptitudes and skills of the employees and makes the best use of them, opening up new avenues for creativity of the followers. Correspondingly, SL (resource) empathises, attends to the followers' problems, encourages them to work on their weak areas, nurtures them emotionally, thereby helping to make them more resilient. Besides, this result is in line with [Yang \*et al.\* \(2019a, b\)](#) and [Wilkinson \(2020\)](#) who found that SL has a powerful impact on employee attitude and behaviour. In the hotel industry, SL encourages, empowers and creates an open and congenial environment for the followers, boosting their self-confidence. In turn, they can develop a variety of solutions to problems and find novel ways of serving their customers, thereby creating impactful experiences for the guests.

Furthermore, through persuasive mapping, SL encourages the workforce to visualise the future of their workplace, and using wisdom SL can be cognisant of the environmental patterns at present. In addition, through their futuristic approach, they can better prepare their followers to deal with the emerging demands of the times ahead, allowing them to utilise their imagination and creativity. Similarly, SL nurtures spiritual and emotional revival of their followers through emotional healing, which are great sources of uplifting their resilience during and after crises. By working with a leader who, on the one hand, is strong-willed, courageous, persevering, knowledgeable and wise and, on the other hand, is empowering, encouraging, an active listener, a good adviser and someone they can trust, it is natural for the workforce to feel psychosomatically safe and at ease, thereby becoming stronger and more resilient.

The outcomes of this study revealed a strong positive relationship between creativity and OS and between PR and OS. This result is in agreement with the JD-R model. According to this model, both creativity and PR (cognitive and emotional status) are enhanced after receiving information from SL, which eventually boosts the organisation's sustainability (outcome). Furthermore, this result is consistent with past studies (see [d'Orville, 2019](#)) that found that creativity is a renewable resource and human aptitude that lies at the core of sustainability, deep-seated in economic, societal and ecological practices. In the hotel industry, to retain its sustainability, an organisation has to strive to achieve a robust financial, societal and ecological standing. To reattain sustainability in a highly dynamic scenario ruled by uncertainty, businesses, including those in the hotel industry, need to exercise originality and novelty in both knowledge and skills in using the existing resources and creating new ones. Organisational members with unique endowments are the source of novelty and creativity, making a further contribution to OS. In addition, coping mechanism, as a predisposition to resilience, helps individuals develop emotive and psychosomatic strength to withstand adverse conditions and bounce back from such conditions. Resilient organisational members who are determined, tolerant, perseverant, flexible and consistent help their organisation re-sustain itself in the aftermath of the current crisis.

The outcome of this study confirmed the mediating role of creativity and PR between SL and OS. The results are consistent with the JD-R model, which considers SL as a resource that helps in stimulating employees' creativity and resilience (psychological status), eventually, help the organisation to sustain (outcome). In the hotel industry, owing to uncertain conditions, creative individuals are capable of seeking new courses of action. They fundamentally require a set-up based on humility, forgiveness and authenticity, which allows them to experiment and make mistakes without being judged wrongly. An SL is one who can give rise to such a positive set-up, where the followers can openly share their ideas and



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thoughts and incorporate the trial and error methods in their work to come up with the best-suited means of attaining the objectives. All this leads to creativity in products and services, thereby ultimately moving to OS. Likewise, SL develops, transforms and supports the subordinates, works towards their welfare and helps them mature emotionally, intellectually and morally. With emotional and intellectual maturity, the followers are in an improved psychological state of tackling ambiguous situations effectively and become more resilient. At the same time, both creativity and PR contribute to the sustainability of the organisation.

### **Theoretical and managerial implications**

This study has both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research has developed new associations between SL and OS through the parallel mediations of creativity and PR. The study has found that both creativity and PR can transfer the effect of SL to OS. Furthermore, it has established a comparatively new association between PR and OS, and the result found that PR affects OS positively. Besides, it has empirically confirmed the positive effect of SL on creativity. These can be significant contributions to the theories of SL, creativity, PR and OS. In addition, combining these variables in a single framework has provided deeper insight into the antecedents of OS in terms of intangible human resources. More clearly, human resource is the primary source of creative ideations, products, services and systems. Their mental, emotional and spiritual endowments are the ultimate means of economic, environmental and societal sustainability. Besides, the fact remains that crises are part of every business. However, how effectively crises are tackled, how flexible and psychologically resilient organisational members are in addressing crises. This study has empirically proven that creativity and PR are two of the many intangible and unique human resources that ultimately contribute to an organisation's sustainability, while SL sets a fertile and long-lasting inspirational and behavioural foundation and provide opportunities for creativity and resilience to thrive through their employee-centric, participatory, emotionally intelligent, spiritually aware, insightful, wise, conceptualising, altruistic calling traits. In addition, this work has underscored the significance of the JD-R model in explicating the associations amongst the variables of this research, specifically in a non-West milieu. Thus, future studies can employ this model in developing culture. Furthermore, this study has successfully confirmed two higher-order reflective–formative constructs (SL and OS) with respect to their reliability and validity. At the first order, both SL and OS were measured reflectively, while at the higher-order, SL was quantified formatively using five dimensions and OS was measured formatively with three dimensions.

Practically, this study accentuates the vital roles of SL, creativity and PR in helping hotel industry in Malaysia gain and regain sustainability. Particularly, the presence of SLs leads to enhanced creative and resilient behaviour in the workplace that eventually contributes to its sustainability. To explain further, in the prevailing scenario ruled by ambiguity and agony, it is the SL's multi-dimensional traits, such as their genuine care for others, encouragement and acknowledgement of the followers' efforts and trustful relationship-building characteristics with various stakeholders that can push their hotel towards reattaining sustainability goals. Through their foresight, visionary capacities and power of conceptualisation, SLs can imagine beyond immediate possibilities. It is their entrusting nature that opens up new avenues for the followers' creative skills. Owing to its affable and emotionally and mentally inspiring work culture, SL allows subordinates to become resourceful, inventive, resilient and thrive. Consequently, such individuals can strive for sustainable business outcomes at the economic, societal and ecological levels and hence contribute to OS.

Furthermore, a sustainable organisation at the economic, social and environmental levels, can, in turn, contribute to sustainability practices at the national and global levels. Moreover, the hospitality industry is one of the effective industries in Malaysia, since Malaysia is an

attractive tourist destination. Thus, an economically, ecologically and socially sustainable hospitality sector will earn this country greater GDP, can earn stronger corporate image and goodwill, win the confidence and trust of the stakeholders at the local and national levels and eventually attract international recognition. Genuinely practising three dimensional-sustainability, i.e. economic, ecological and societal, brings effective and long-term success both for the hospitality industry and the country itself.

### Limitations and future research

Although this study has its significance in terms of establishing comparatively new relationships, empirically evaluating these relationships and putting forward some invaluable outputs, it is not free from certain limitations that can act as future recommendations. In particular, as a cross-sectional study that collected data at one point of time, it can raise concern about the cause and effect relationships. Future studies, therefore, may do well to adopt a longitudinal approach for a better explanation of causality. Additionally, the framework of this study was tested in the hotel industry in Malaysia, thereby limiting the generalisability of the result. Future research can replicate this study in different contexts and cultures for more generalisable outcomes.

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#### About the authors

Fatima Batool is a PhD research scholar at Azman Hashim Internal Business School, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur campus. Fatima Batool accomplished her MPhil degree in management science from SZABIST, Islamabad campus, Pakistan. Fatima has an overall experience of 15 years. She has written few articles for practitioners from the fields of leadership, management, organisational behaviour and HR. Fatima Batool is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [pan4ch3@gmail.com](mailto:pan4ch3@gmail.com)

Jihad Mohammad is An Assistant Professor at Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. He has received his DBA degree from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He has presented papers at various international and national conferences and published articles in peer-reviewed international journals such as, *Journal of Islamic Marketing*; *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *Personnel Review*, *Employee Relations The International Journal*, and *Asian Academy of Management Journal*.

Siti Rahmah Awang (Assoc. Prof) is an Associate Professor at Azman Hashim International Business School. She has had the experience of 27 years in academics. Before she turned into an academician, she was working as a Planning Assistant Manager at an international company. Siti Rahmah is a qualified mathematician and statistician who graduated from California State University, USA in Bachelor of Mathematics and Statistics. She continued her master's degree in statistics at University of Sheffield, UK and then, she pursued her PhD study in Applied Statistics (Psychometrics) at Universiti Teknologi MARA. Her expertise and her research works are more focussed on Multiple Intelligence and Fuzzy Modelling in which she has applied them in research and consultation on psychometrics, emotional intelligence, leadership and social science research. As an expert on the employability of people with epilepsy, multiple intelligences, and statistical computer packages, Dr Siti Rahmah Awang has authored a few books on multiple intelligence and has published widely in several peer-reviewed journals.

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