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Investigating The Impact of Humble Leadership on Employee Performance in Tour Operators. The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety

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Abstract

This study investigates the direct influence of humble leadership (HMBL) on employee performance (EMPF) in Saudi Arabia's tourism industry, alongside its indirect impact through psychological safety (PSYSF). A total of 399 employees' responses were gathered for analysis using Excel v.15-2013 and SPSS v.29-2022 to generate descriptive statistics. The analysis of variable relationships and research hypothesis testing used partial least squares structural equation modeling with version 4.1.0.9.2024 (PLS-SEM v.4.1.0.9.2024) as the analytical tool. HMBL generates positive effects on both EMPF and PSYSF within significant parameters. Furthermore, PSYSF mediates the relationship between HMBL and EMPF. Researchers established that organizational success requires leaders who prioritize open communication alongside empowered employees and recognition of their contributions which in turn create workspace environments free from psychological stress. A leadership approach based on humility brings out motivated employees who generate innovative solutions vital for a service industry focused on customers and market competitiveness. Organizations that integrate psychological safety as a mediating factor will address workplace anxieties and build team collaboration while driving ongoing improvements through their initiatives. The study provides leadership teams with concrete strategies to boost workforce performance which results in long-term competitive success throughout the tourism industry's changing environment.

Keywords: *Humble Leadership, Employee Performance, Psychological Safety, Saudi Arabia, Tour Operators.*

Introduction

The approach of prevailing employee performance (EMPF), in which employees obediently comply with organizational directives, has become inadequate due to the constantly shifting and volatile working environment (Elhadidy& Gao, 2024). EMPF has therefore been extensively researched and hailed as a means for organizations to gain insight and manage the changing nature of EMPF more effectively (Mohamed et al., 2024). According to Baard et al. (2014), EMPF is the way an employee's responds to the challenges of a new or dynamic setting and unforeseen guidelines. The significance of EMPF for promoting growth in their careers and fostering organizational creativity (Wang et al., 2024) According to Liu et al. (2024), academics alongside business experts and leaders are interested in finding ways to motivate people to perform. Leadership is one of the primary interpersonal situational elements, and it is one of many organizational factors that have been identified as significant drivers of EMPF (Soyalın, 2023). Previous studies have primarily examined how traditional leadership, such as visionary

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and transformational leadership, affects workers being able to modify their behaviors (Zheng & Ahmed, 2024). However, the popular approaches of leadership highlight strict upper- and lower-level management rather than employees' determination, unpredictability, and real work behavior and mindset, mainly through the leader's power and influence (Zhang et al., 2024). Consequently, it is insufficient to inspire and maintain EMPF.

Humble leadership (HMBL) received more interest from both academic researchers and practical leaders in different contexts (Luo et al., 2022; Rigolizzo et al., 2022; Elhadidy& Gao, 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). According to Luo et al. (2022), HMBL functions as a leadership approach that depends on actions by leaders who assess both themselves and their direct reports through comprehensive methods using open-mindedness to value employee talents and demonstrate a willingness to learn. ThroughoutHMBL, employee-centric method responds differently than standard top-down leadership (Mohamed et al., 2024). It lets us identify our weaknesses and supports employee development by listening to workers. Humble leaders put their employees first by considering their role in guiding the leadership procedure (Rigolizzo et al., 2022). As a result, employees experience more genuine motivation to change and be resilient. Furthermore, humble leaders may assist employees tofoster their performance.

Psychological safety (PSYSF) plays an essential role in all organizations yet matters most in tourism businesses (Natria et al., 2023; Qu et al., 2024; Fujii, 2025). Tourism employees who serve diverse customers in busy moments need fast thinking and problem-solving skills (Din et al., 2024). A safe emotional environment allows employees to manage unexpected problems such as customer issues and system failures without worryingabout getting into trouble. While tourism enterprisesaim to convey enhanced customer service due to better teamwork and stay ahead of risks through proactive measures (Saleem et al., 2024). Through allowing employees to discuss concerns and operational problems at work organizations solve issues early before they grow worse which benefits employee satisfaction and helps the tourism enterprises thrive (Elhadidy& Gao, 2024).

Building upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this research examines the influence of HMBL on EMPF within tour operator in Saudi Arabian travel agencies, addressing the mediating role of PSYSF. SDT claims that individuals are innately motivated to grow and develop, and that this intrinsic motivation is encouraged by supportive circumstances that satisfy core psychological needs i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness. HMBL, defined by self-awareness, openness to feedback, and an emphasis on empowering others, directly fulfils these demands. By fostering a psychologically safe workplace where employees feel comfortable taking risks and expressing opinions without fear of negative repercussions, humble leaders indirectly boost EMPF.

Literature Review& Hypotheses Development

Humble Leadership and Employee Performance

According to Luo et al. (2022), EMPF may be conceptually defined as consisting of three sorts of features: responsiveness, initiative, and tolerance. These characteristics indicate that employees' performance is a result of their inner will. Building on SDT, fostering rather than managing social settings boosts employees' drive and achievement (Zhang et al., 2024). Throughout empirical studies (Natria et al., 2023; Qu et al., 2024; Saleem et al., 2024; Fujii, 2025) on employee performance, positive leadership is a critical contextual aspect that fosters a

supportive atmosphere (e.g., feedback, safety, and tolerance). Research investigations that have been concentrated on foreseeing EMPF have pointed out serval leadership styles e.g., transformational leadership (Qu et al., 2024), shared leadership (Fu et al., 2020), and visionary leadership (Saleem et al., 2024). With respect to the above-mentioned significant leadership style, HMBL appropriately assesses oneself, highlights the capabilities of others, and demonstrates ability among enterprises' employees (Xu et al., 2022). While focusing on EMPF, there might be inherent advantages to promoting a favorable effect and attitude. Nevertheless, it has not been demonstrated that HMBL and EMPF are directly related in tourism context. To remedy this gap in the literature, the current study aims to measure the influence of HMBL on employee performance. First and foremost, humble leaders are able to accept their own limits, accept failures of their employees, as well as inspire them to raise enquiries concerning issues throughout the workplace (Yang et al., 2022). According to Ye et al. (2020), these actions help to establish a secure atmosphere that accepts failures and encourages vulnerability and risk-taking. As a result, EMPF may benefit because of employees being able to cope with work-related stress more easily and having more strength, faith, and confidence to find innovative solutions to problems (Natria et al., 2023). Additionally, HMBL displays a "other-oriented" strategy where supervisors embrace all of their staff workers' development and appreciate their professional abilities (Qu et al., 2024). Apart from enhancing workers' self-efficacy and sense of purpose in their work, this leadership approach may also positively communicate that there are chances for growth in skills and self-awareness (Saleem et al., 2024). According to He et al. (2023), these signals inspire employees' initiative to find various solutions to challenging challenges, urge them to embark on additional duties for their continually expanding professional tasks, and drive them to seek the best solution. Employees are consequently more likely to continue functioning at a high level. Lastly, humble leaders welcome obtaining knowledge, exhibiting readiness to shifting beliefs and empower to encourage and support their workers in acquiring new abilities and absorbing knowledge proactively (Ali et al., 2020; Fujii, 2025). By fostering a mutually reinforcing learning environment, these attitudes may assist employees acquire repeatedly and respond promptly, whose might enable them to take proper action while confronting multifaceted, distinctive, and ambiguous creative duties as well as perform more efficiently (Zhang et al., 2024). Drawing on these discussions, the following hypothesis was suggested:

H1:*HMBL positively and directly influences EMPF*

Humble Leadership and Psychological Safety

To date research (e.g., Liu et al., 2023; Mrayyan, 2023; Elhadidy& Gao, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024; Zheng & Ahmed, 2024) have revealed a significant relationship between HMBL and PSYSF. According to SDT, employees' core psychological needs e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled by promoting HMBL which foster intrinsic motivation and ultimately lead to enhanced EMPF. Throughoutdecreasing the anxiety of undesirable consequences linked to taking risks and being honest with others, the psychologically safe workplace made possible by HMBL inspires this fundamental drive (Mrayyan, 2023). A study conducted by Elhadidyand Gao (2024) who exposed that employees felt more psychologically protected when their leaders were humble. According to El-Gazar et al. (2022), who explored the impact of HMBL on proactive work behavior among nurses in the healthcare industry. The results confirmed that nurses who experience HMBL are more psychologically empowered, which results in more proactive job behavior and better service. Similarly, the study conducted by Tao (2024), whorevealed that PSYSF climate is positively impacted by HMBL, and that this

effect is amplified by high-quality leader member exchange interactions. Furthermore, the study of Zhang et al.(2024) revealed that HMBL generates a psychologically secure environment that drives employees to do effectively by reinventing services thus fostering PSYSF. Based upon these discussions it would be proposed that:

H2: *HMBL positively and directly influences PSYSF*

Psychological Safety and Employee Performance

Several studies (e.g., El-Gazar et al., 2022; Lehmann et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Din et al., 2024; Tao, 2024; Qu et al., 2024) have shown a strong positive link between PSYSF and EMPF in which employees who feel free to voice ideas are more creative, enthused, and efficient. Moreover, the investigation of Lehmann et al. (2023) who studies how leadership styles and staff performance are linked by means of PSYSF. Furthermore, research suggests that PSYSF fosters a learning environment where individuals are more willing to share knowledge and seek feedback, leading to improved skill development and overall individual performance (Liu et al., 2023; Din et al., 2024). The absence of PSYSF, conversely, can lead to decreased creativity, higher error rates, and reduced organizational effectiveness (Qu et al., 2024). However, previous research (i.e., Lehmann et al., 2023; Elhadidy, I. A., & Gao, 2024; Mrayyan& Al-Rjoub, 2024) has separately explored the positive impacts of both psychological safety and humble leadership, but this investigation uniquely explores how a psychologically safe climate, fostered by HMBL, specifically facilitates improved EMPF. While, this research is considered the first attempts to uncover the role of PSYSF in the relationship between HMBL and EMPF. Therefore, the following hypotheses was postulated:

H3:*PSYSF positively and directly influences EMPF*

H4:*PSYSF has indirect influence between HMBL and EMPF*

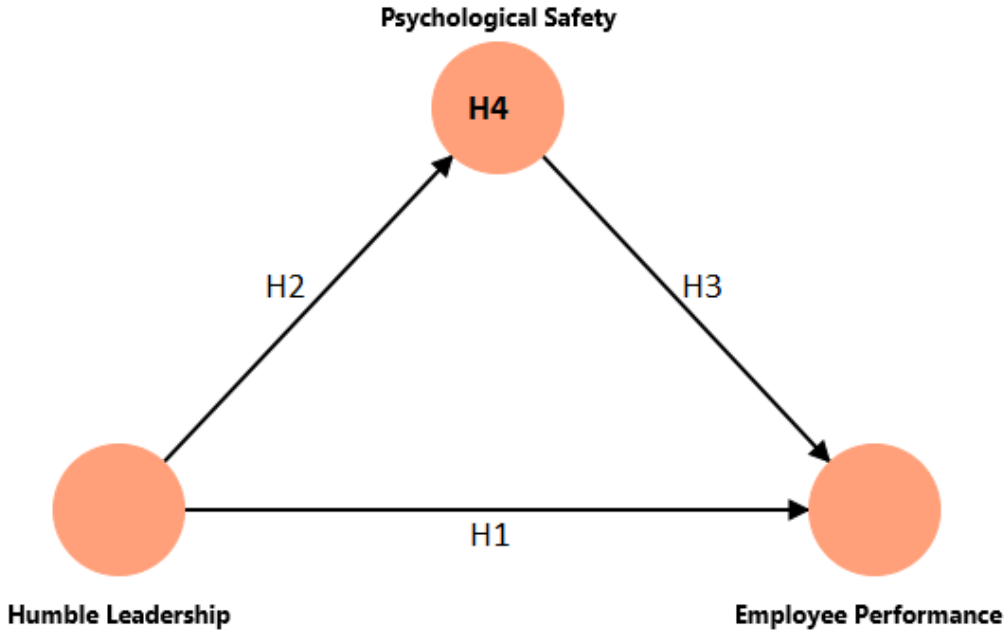

Figure 1. Study Conceptual Framework

Materials and Methods

Study Constructs:

The scale used to measure the variables in this study was developed based on the literature reviews.The humble leadershipwas measured by nine-item scale, representing 3 dimensions "willingness to perceiving oneself clearly"; "Recognition of others' strengths and contributions"; and "Willingness to learn and grow", developed by Owens et al. (2013). The phrases used in this scale to measure the variable were such: This leader actively solicits feedback, even if it is unfavorable; This leader is eager to learn; and this leader is receptive to other people's opinions.In order to measure the variable of “Employee Performance”, the scale developed by Jansson and Yperen (2004) was adopted. The scale consists of five statements, investigating: the extent to which the employee successfully performs his/her basic duties, the employee's accomplishment of the duties specified in the job description, the employee's fulfillment of all official performance requirements of the job, the performance of all responsibilities required by the job, and the employee's failure to neglect the requirements of the work to be done. As for the mediating variable of this study "Psychological Safety", a scale developed from the proposed scale by Potipiroon and Ford (2021) was adopted, consisting of 5 measurement statements, which are: In our organization, expressing your authentic feelings is encouraged; In our organization, I feel comfortable sharing my genuine feelings about my job; No one in our organization will criticize me for having different opinions; In our organization, I am free to share my thoughts openly; and I fear that expressing my true thoughts in our organization could have negative consequences for me.

Research Population and Sampling*:*

The study focuses on employees within the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia as the target population for the study. Given the difficulty in accurately determining the workforce size in the tourism industry, and following Veal's recommendations for large or undefined populations, the sample size is estimated based on a population of 20,000 individuals (Ayad, 2024). The suitable sample size was calculated using the Herbert Larkin equation (Ayad & Hasanein, 2024), yielding 377 responses.

Data Collection:

The study employed self-administered questionnaires as part of its quantitative research approach to collect primary data. To ensure the efficiency and validity of the questionnaire, a panel of academics and experts in the field of tourism reviewed and revised the questionnaire. In October and November 2024, the questionnaires were distributed to 445 employees working in the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia. in the end, 402 completed surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 90.3%, and were analyzed statistically. To meet the objectives of the study, the questionnaire was divided into four sections. The demographic data was collected in the first section, and the three sections that follow concentrate on the three research variables:humble leadership "HMBL", employee performance "EMPF", and psychological safety "PSYESF". On a 5-point Likert scale, respondents evaluate items related to these criteria.

Data Analysis Techniques:

In order toglean valuable insights from the collected data, which enabling informed decision-making, the Excel v.15-2013 and SPSS v.29-2022 were used to analyze descriptive data and to explore the sample's demographic characteristics. Additionally, the study hypotheses were tested and the relationships between all variables were examined using the partial least squares structural equation modeling PLS-SEM v.4.1.0.9.2024.

Results

The Outer Model:

Examination of "CV":

The convergent validity test was conducted to determine whether a test that is designed to measure a specific construct correlates with other tests that evaluate the same construct, which was achieved in this study, as the analysis results showed that the reliability of all the items tested were greater than the recommended cut-off-point of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2017).Also, the composite reliability test was conducted to measure the internal consistency in scale items, and results showed that the "rho_a" of all variables were greater than 0.7, which meet the cut-off-point developed by Bryman and Cramer (2012) and Hair (2017).Moreover, andin order to measure the extent of variance that is explained by a construct in comparison to the variance due to measurement error, the average variance extracted "AVE" test was conducted. The results showed that the "AVE" of all variables were above 0.5, which meet the recommended cut-off-point of Fornell and Larcker (1981). This is a positive result, as the "AVE" for each construct in any measurement model have to be at least 0.50; otherwise the items account for more errors than the variance in the constructs. See table 1 for more details.

Variables	Items	"λ"	"AVE"	**"α"**	"rho_a"
Humble Leadership "HMBL"	HMBL-1	0.937	0.696	0.946	0.966
	HMBL-2	0.731			
	HMBL-3	0.932			
	HMBL-4	0.652			
	HMBL-5	0.859			
	HMBL-6	0.730			
	HMBL-7	0.937			
	HMBL-8	0.751			
	HMBL-9	0.917			
Employee Performance "EMPF"	EMPF-1	0.782	0.770	0.925	0.949
	EMPF-2	0.962			
	EMPF-3	0.962			
	EMPF-4	0.822			
	EMPF-5	0.842			
Psychological Safety "PSYSF"	PSYSF-1	0.789	0.658	0.847	0.912
	PSYSF-2	0.898			
	PSYSF-3	0.903			
	PSYSF-4	0.947			
	PSYSF-5	0.782			

Table 1. Construct Validity

Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity test, a subtype of construct validity, was performed to evaluate how accurately a test measures the concept it was designed to measure and to verify that two tests, which should not be highly correlated, are indeed unrelated. In brief, this test demonstrates the distinctiveness of the constructs within the model, ensuring that each variable in the model is different from the others, thus confirming the discriminant validity of Kock's model (Kock, 2020). This was achieved using the cross-loading method and the Fornell-Larcker criterion test (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).See table 2 and figure 2.

Variables	HMBL	EMPF	PSYSF
HMBL	**0.834**		
EMPF	0.775	**0.877**	
PSYSF	0.685	0.750	**0.811**

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

The square root of the Average Variance Extracted is shown by the bolded figures.

According to results in table 2, each variable in the suggested model more well explains the variation of its constituent parts than the other factors, as per the guidelines of Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2017). The discriminant validity of the model is therefore confirmed. Moreover, every item has a higher loading on its corresponding construct than on any variable construct in the suggested model of the study. Also, the model's discriminant

validity, as proposed and confirmed by Chin (1998), is highly supported by these findings.Additionally, Theheterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations were less than cut-off-point of 0.9, as stated and proposed by Henseler and Ringle (2015). See table 3.

Table 3. HTMT Results

Variables	EMPF	HMBL	PSYSF
EMPF			
HMBL	0.834		
PSYSF	0.807	0.715	

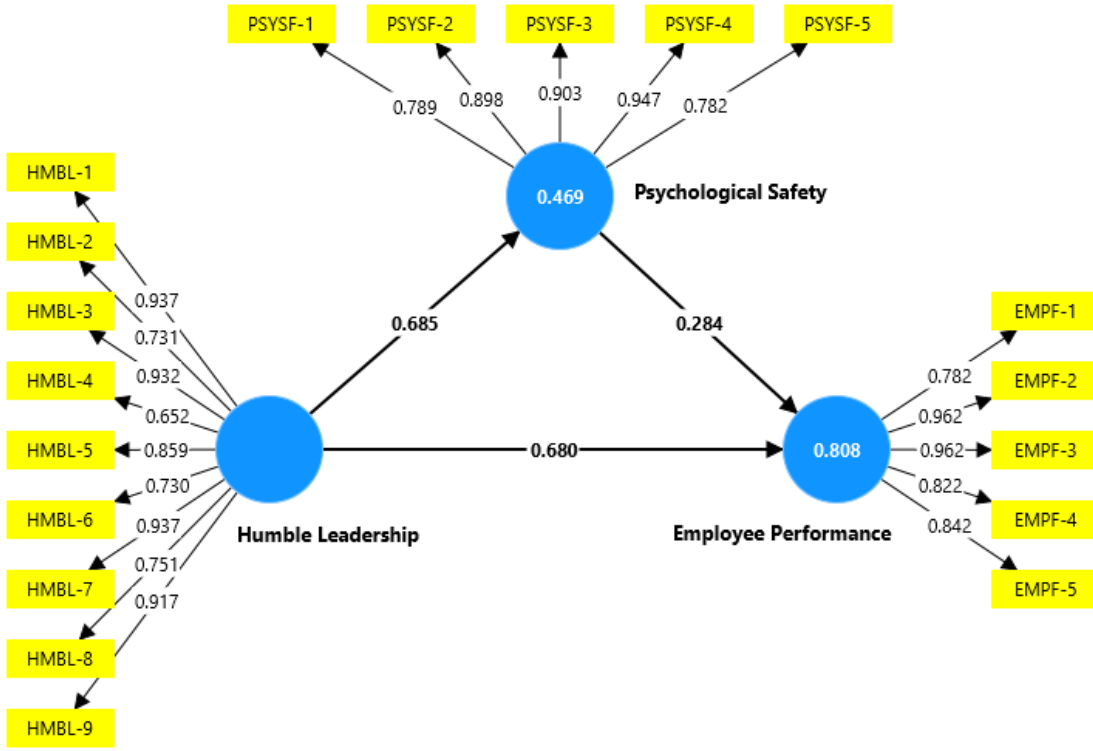

Figure 2. Measurement Model

The Inner Model:

Examination of "R²":

In order to determine how effectively the statistical model predicts the outcome and interpret the proportion of variation in the dependent variable that is predicted by the statistical model. The predictive power of the suggested model was evaluated using the test "R²", which is a value between 0 and 1. A value of 1 signifies a perfect match, while a value of 0 implies that the independent variable has no explanatory power.According to Chin's threshold, the results shown in table 4 prove that the "IV" significantly influenced the "DV" (Chin, 1998), which was respectively moderate and high.

Variable	R^2	Level
EMPF	0.808	High
PSYSF	0.469	Moderate

Table 4. R^2 Test Results

Examination of "f^2":

The Effect size test "f2" was performed to determine the individual constructs power and impact of an "IV" on a "DV" in the proposed model. According to the recommendations of Cohen (1988), the results shown in table 5 indicate that the effect sizes of the "IVs" on the "DVs" were medium and large effects.

Variables	EMPF	PSYSF
HMBL	1.281 (Large)	0.883 (Large)
PSYSF	0.224 (Medium)	

Table 5. Effect Size (f^2)

Examination of "GoF":

"GoF" examination was performed across the measurements, structural, and general model performance levels to ensure that the study's advised model fulfills the requirements for a global comprehensive fit measure model, as stated and proposed by Chin (2009):

$$GoF = \sqrt{R^2 \text{ x } AVE}$$

GoF = 0.672

According to the goodness of fit test result and the recommended point of reference provided by Wetzels et al. (2009), it is possible and conceivable to conclude that the GOF of the advised model is adequate enough to be considered appropriate to serve as a global PLS model.

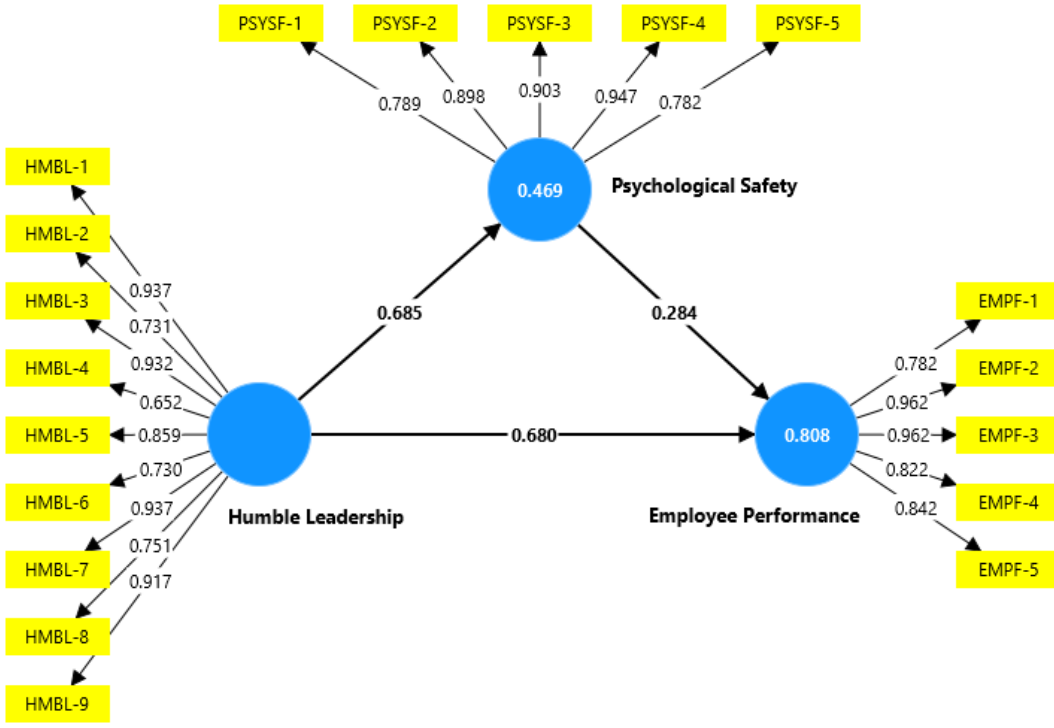

Figure 3.The Final Model

Examination of the Hypotheses:

The effectiveness of the suggested theoretical model's compatibility with the primary data was evaluated using the path coefficient significance test. Tables 6 and 7 present the findings of each hypothesis examination.

Hypothesis	β	Σ	t-score(O/STDEV)	Sig.	Result
H-1: HMBL ->EMPF	0.680	0.032	20.932	0.000	√**
H-2: HMBL ->PSYSF	0.685	0.030	22.819	0.000	√**
H-3: PSYSF ->EMPF	0.284	0.035	8.079	0.000	√**

Table 6. Direct Path Coefficient

Significant at P** = 0.000

The SEM results at tables 5&6 and the three direct proposed hypotheses (Figure 1). As demonstrated by Figure 3,"HMBL" has a direct positive and significant impact on "EMPF" [Original sample score = 0.680; f^2 = 1.281; P-value = 0.000] and "PSYSF" [Original sample score = 0.685;f^2 = 0.883; P-value = 0.000]. Moreover, "PSYSF" positively and significantly influences "EMPF" [Original sample score = 0.284;f^2 = 0.224; P-value = 0.000]. Therefore, all of the direct impacts hypothesis H1, H2 and H3 received empirical support.See Figure 4.

Hypothesis	β	Σ	t-score(O/STDEV)	Sig.	Result
H-4: HMBL ->PSYSF ->EMPF	0.195	0.031	6.313	0.000	√**

Table 7. Indirect Path Coefficient

Significant at P** = 0.000

As for the indirect relationship between the study variables, "PSYSF" shows a mediating impact on the relationship between "HMBL" and "EMPF" [Original sample score = 0.195 and P-value = 0.000].The results revealed a significant mediating effect, leading to the acceptance of hypothesis H4. See table 7 and figure 4.

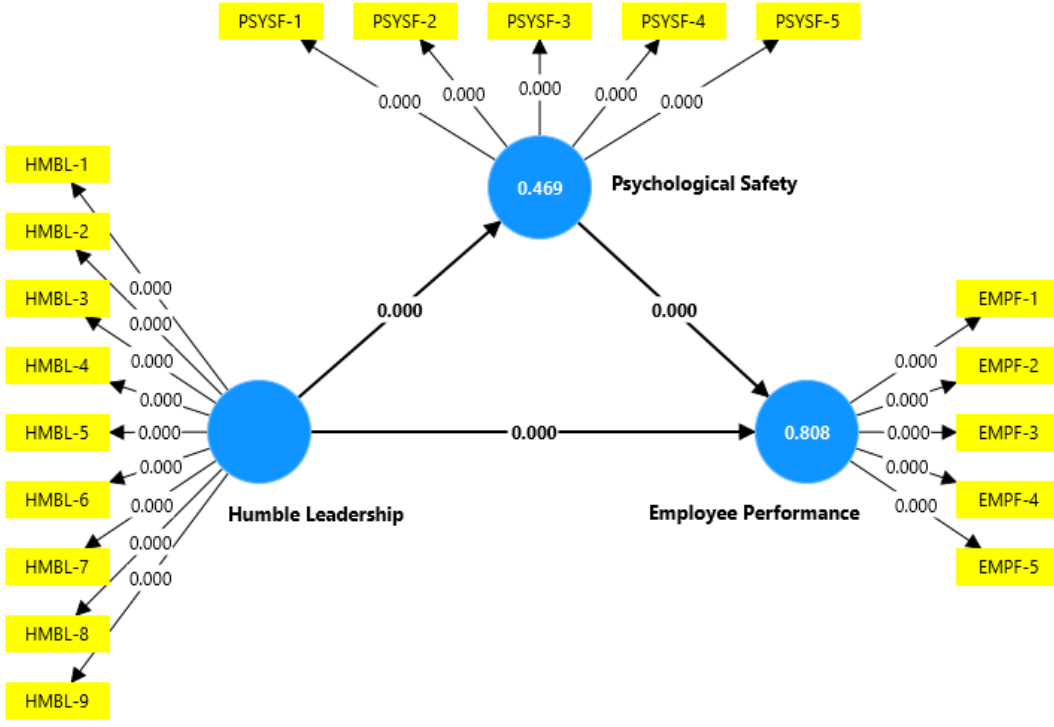

Figure 4. Significance of Path Coefficients

Discussion and Implications

This study aims to investigate how employee performance (EMPF) in the Saudi Arabian tourism sector is impacted by humble leadership (HMBL). It also explores the function of psychological safety (PSYSF) as a mediator in the interaction between "HMBL" and "EMPF." For that reason, every relationship between the variables was looked at. According to the results, "HMBL" significantly and favorably affects "EMPF" among workers in the Saudi tourism sector. This is largely consistent with Zhang et al.'s (2024) argument that humble leadership creates a supportive work environment, meeting the psychological needs of employees and boosting their intrinsic motivation, which in turn improves performance. Furthermore, the findings showed that "HMBL" significantly and favorably affects "PSYSF" among workers. This finding is in line with Elhadidy and Gao's (2024) assertion that humble leadership creates a psychologically safe environment in which workers can take chances and freely express their opinions without worrying about unfavorable outcomes. Furthermore, the results showed that "PSYSF" has a

significant and positive impact on "EMPF" among workers, which is in line with earlier research by Lehmann et al. (2023), who claimed that psychological safety promotes efficiency, creativity, and teamwork by lowering anxiety and promoting knowledge-sharing behaviors. In addition, the results underline the indirect effect of "HMBL" on "EMPF" among employees through the intermediary role of "PSYSF," proving the mediating function of "PSYSF" between these variables.

The research has revealed several findings that grasp significance for both theoretical knowledge and practical implementation within the Saudi Arabian tourism sector.Through growing on the theoretical framework of SDT, it significantly advances our understanding of employee performance (EMPF) in the tourism industry. In order to maintain performance in challenging and shifting circumstances, SDT emphasizes the importance of meeting employees' basic psychological needs i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness as intrinsic motivation drivers. The study demonstrates how managers can combine SDT with humble leadership (HMBL) to create a supportive and psychologically safe work environment, which will increase employee initiative, adaptability, and creativity. This approach broadens the application of SDT beyond individual motivation by highlighting its importance in leadership philosophies that impact both performance results and organizational culture. Moreover, the mediating influence of psychological safety (PSYSF) offers new insights into how SDT-guided leadership styles may subtly increase EMPF, highlighting the theory's adaptability to both interpersonal dynamics and organizational aims.

In terms of practical implications, this research reveals the crucial role of humble leadership (HMBL) in building a psychologically safety (PSYSF) and empowering the workplace that increases employee performance (EMPF) within the tourism industry. Adopting humility-based leadership practices, such as encouraging open communication, appreciating staff contributions, and welcoming criticism, can help managers and decision-makers foster an atmosphere where workers feel comfortable taking chances, expressing their opinions, and coming up with innovative solutions to problems. Additionally, putting psychological safety (PSYSF) first as a mediating factor might assist businesses in creating a culture that encourages creativity and flexibility, especially in the fast-paced, customer-focused tourist industry. Leaders can improve intrinsic motivation, which in turn leads to increased initiative, resilience, and overall job satisfaction, by attending to employees' psychological requirements for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These results motivate business executives to fund leadership development initiatives that prioritize psychological safety and humility in order to guarantee sustained performance gains and organizational success in a cutthroat market.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate how "HMBL" directly affects "EMPF" in the Saudi Arabian tourism sector as well as how "HMBL" indirectly affects "EMPF" through "PSYSF." Information was obtained from 399 Saudi Arabian tour operators. The descriptive statistics were examined using Excel v.15-2013 and SPSS v.29-2022 to assess demographic features of the subjects. In addition, PLS-SEM v.4.1.0.9.2024 was used to evaluate research hypotheses and investigate the direct and indirect correlations between variables. According to the SEM results, "HMBL" has a positive and significant impact on "EMPF" and "PSYSF" in the Saudi Arabian tourism sector. Furthermore, the findings showed that "PSYSF" mediated the relationship between "HMBL" and "EMPF". Recognizing and leveraging these reciprocal dynamics may assist tourism decision-makers in fostering a leadership approach that not only enhances

employee performance but also builds a psychologically safe workplace culture. By emphasizing HMBL practices that encourage openness, empower employees, and value their contributions, managers can create an environment where employees feel motivated to take initiative, innovate, and adapt to challenges. This approach is particularly crucial in the competitive and customer-driven tourism industry, where employee performance directly impacts service quality and organizational success. Furthermore, integrating psychological safety as a mediating factor allows organizations to address underlying workplace anxieties and promote collaboration, resilience, and continuous improvement. These findings provide actionable insights for leaders aiming to strengthen workforce performance and establish a sustainable competitive edge in the dynamic tourism sector.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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