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Nepotism and Hotel Employees' Intention to Leave: Does Ethical Leadership Matter?

Hazem Ahmed KHAIRY*
Hotel Management Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, University of Sadat City, Sadat City, Egypt, Email, hazem.khaiery@fth.usc.edu.eg
Corresponding author

Asier BAQUERO
Faculty of Business and Communication, International University of La Rioja, 26006 Logrono, Spain, Email, asier.baquero@unir.net

Viju MATHEW
College of Economics and Business Administration, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman. Email, mathew.v23@gmail.com, viju@utas.edu.om

Mohammed A. EL-MELIGY
Applied Science Research Center, Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan, MEU Research Unit, Middle East University, Amman, Jordan, Email, mohammedali2000@gmail.com

Omaima Munawar ALBADRY
Management and Marketing Department, College of Business, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia, Email, oalbadry@jazanu.edu.sa

Omar ALSETOOHY
Hotel Management Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, University of Sadat City, Sadat City, Egypt, Email, omar.alsetoohy@fth.usc.edu.eg

Abstract

This research explores the influence of nepotism perception on hotel employees' intention to leave their jobs, focusing on ethical leadership as a moderator. The data collection process involved 383 employees from five-star hotels in Egypt. PLS-SEM as a significant analytical tool in hospitality research was used. The statistical data analysis was conducted using WarpPLS software version 7.0. Findings revealed that nepotism perception increases employees' intention to leave. Furthermore, a negative effect of ethical leadership exists on nepotism perception and employees' intention to leave. In addition, ethical leadership has been found to moderate the relationship between nepotism perception and employees' intention to leave. This study contributes to the hospitality literature and leadership theory by examining the interplay between nepotism perception and employees' intention to leave, with ethical leadership playing a moderating role. The findings offer insights that may prove valuable for hoteliers seeking to enhance their management practices and foster a positive work environment.

Keywords Nepotism, employees' intention to leave, ethical leadership, hotels, Egypt

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Introduction

The hotel industry has been contending with a significant challenge related to staff turnover over the past several years (Khairy et al., 2023). The intention of employees to leave refers to a conscious psychological willingness on the part of employees to voluntarily depart from their place of work, as highlighted by studies such as Takase (2010) and Panatik et al. (2012). This phenomenon is linked to reduced individual and organizational performance, diminished employee morale, and heightened organizational expenses, as indicated by Li & Jones (2013). Decision-making regarding job departure is shaped by psychological factors, working conditions, and the interplay of various workplace events, as emphasized by turnover experts like Moreno-Jiménez et al. (2012). The perception of nepotism is identified as one of the factors contributing to this decision-making process. Nepotism, a widespread organizational phenomenon globally, is frequently criticized and considered a global issue by scholars like Jaskiewicz et al. (2013), Yavuz et al. (2020), and Khairy & Elzek, (2024). Elbaz et al. (2018) highlight nepotism as a prevalent issue in the Egyptian sector for tourism and hotels, hindering talent acquisition and promotion. Nepotism is a prejudice that goes against moral recruiting and appointment practices in organizations by selecting employees based only on their social connections to managers or other decision-makers, regardless of their qualifications (Ponzo & Scoppa, 2011). Researchers are actively exploring leadership styles that prioritize ethical considerations to mitigate negative practices, with ethical leadership emerging as a particularly effective approach (Dlamini et al., 2017; Arici, 2018; Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019; Taheri et al., 2019; Alghamdi et al., 2024). Despite the substantial conceptual and empirical support for ethical leadership (Yammarino et al., 2008), there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the moderating impact of ethical leadership in environments marked by nepotism (Arici et al., 2020). This study addresses this gap by investigating the influence of perceived nepotism on the intention of hotel employees to leave their positions, with a specific focus on the moderating role of ethical leadership. The research makes a valuable contribution to hospitality literature by examining the relationship between employees' perceptions of nepotism and their inclination to leave their jobs, taking into account the moderating effect of ethical leadership. Nepotism's substantial impact on unjust privileges within the hospitality sector has been acknowledged, but there is a scarcity of empirical studies exploring its potential ramifications for employees (Arici et al., 2020). Furthermore, this

research extends contributions to leadership theory by scrutinizing the moderating function of ethical leadership in the nexus between perceived nepotism and the intention of hotel employees to leave.

Literature review and developing hypotheses

Nepotism, a type of conflict of interest, refers to the practice of favoring one's relatives and providing them with good jobs in the same organization especially when they hold power or high office (Tytko et al., 2020). Nepotism in businesses can hinder human resource management practices, preventing meritocracy. Employee motivation may be affected, as they may compete with those with family members, relatives, or friends in higher positions (Arasli & Tumer, 2008). This can make it difficult to promote employees to managerial or non-managerial roles. Nepotism can also directly affect employee satisfaction and behavioral intentions, such as quitting intention. The hospitality industry, a highly labor-intensive sector, is significantly impacted by nepotism, which significantly impacts employee retention (Yücekaya et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2023). An unfair competitive environment can lead to employee dissatisfaction, demoralization, and disloyalty, potentially causing them to lose work interest, coworker cooperation, and coordination in the activities of a hotel, which may upset many employees and push them towards leaving the job (Arasli et al., 2006). In addition, nepotism, where individuals are given privileged access to a firm's resources based on their kinship, can lead to discontent, especially among non-family members (Arasli et al., 2006). This can result in discrimination between family and non-family employees, as suggested by the RD theory (Melkonian et al., 2011). The relative deprivation (RD) theory suggests that non-family members may become discouraged about their future professional prospects and fear job loss due to an unstable work environment (Crosby, 1976). This can lead to a negative employee outcome, for example, high turnover intention, which can negatively impact hotels (Arici et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Nepotism positively increases hotel employees' intention to leave.

Ethical leadership has become a significant aspect of leadership research, gaining incremental validity over other approaches (Arici, 2018; Taheri et al., 2019). Ethical leaders can boost employee motivation and morale by promoting values and integrity. This can inspire subordinates, leading to positive relationships and improved trust and well-being (Avolio et al., 2004). A highly ethical leader who opposes nepotism-driven behaviors could potentially reduce corporate negative acts (Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019). Nepotism disregards fairness, honesty, and ethics, while ethical leadership values honesty, fairness, transparency, optimism, and high moral standards in daily interactions with followers, as per Avolio & Gardner (2005) and Cassar & Buttigieg (2013). Leaders with certain characteristics may not tolerate nepotism as it goes against their integrity, values, and beliefs. Honesty is highly admired by followers, and ethical leaders prioritize fairness over serving their interests, they also avoid favoritism and strive to make decisions that benefit everyone, not just one party (Hassan & Ahmed, 2011). Mhatre et al. (2012) and Kalshoven et al. (2011) suggested that ethical leadership is a suitable construct for leaders to address nepotism perceptions, as unfair treatment of nepotism can be considered unethical leadership practices. High-justice supervisors tend to be less likely to favor family members, friends, and acquaintances in the workplace. Furthermore, contemporary researchers propose that ethical leadership has the potential to reduce adverse attitudes and intentions, including the intention to leave, as indicated in studies by Arici (2018), Alkaabi & Wong (2019), and Arici et al. (2020). Ethical leaders' values and characteristics, such as fairness and trustworthiness, are believed to lower turnover intentions among their subordinates (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Employees believe leaders and workplaces share similar values, leading to lower turnover intentions and stronger job attachments, as subordinates perceive workplaces as ethically led (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Ethical leaders foster commitment among employees in workplaces with strong ethical cultures, leading to increased intentions to stay working (Loi et al., 2015). Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H2: Ethical leadership negatively impacts nepotism perception.

H3: Ethical leadership negatively impacts hotel employees' intention to leave.

H4: Ethical leadership moderates the relationship between nepotism and hotel employees' intention to leave.

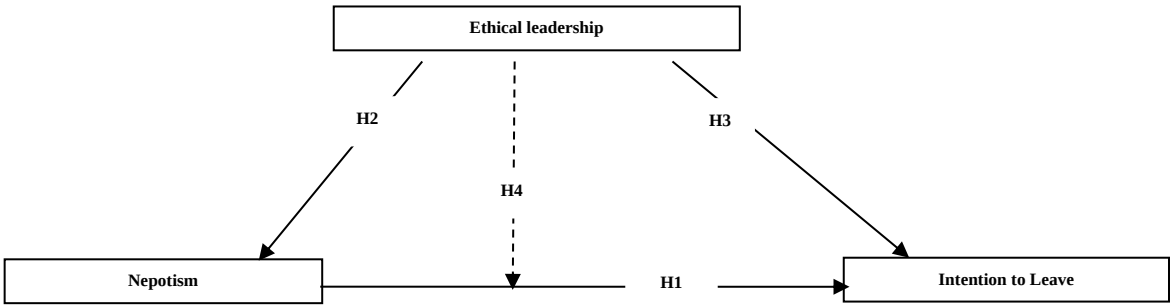

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the study and hypotheses

Research methods

A quantitative survey-based approach was used in this study to investigate and test the three-variable proposed model "nepotism, ethical leadership, and hotel employees' intention to leave". The survey included 21 items evaluating employees' perception of the three investigated variables; it also included another four questions regarding employees' gender, age, education, and tenure. We refer to Elbaz et al. (2018) to evaluate nepotism on an 8-item scale. Item sample include: "I always feel that I need someone I know or a friend in a high-level position", and "Supervisors are afraid of subordinates who are related

to high-level executives." In addition, intention to leave was assessed by a 3-item scale developed by Babakus et al. (2008). For example, "I will probably be looking for another job soon" and "I often think about leaving this hotel." Moreover, a 10-item scale developed by Brown et al. (2005) was used to measure ethical leadership. For instance, "Your manager disciplines employees who violate ethical standards" and "Your manager discusses business ethics or values with employees." The research model was assessed using data collected from full-time staff employed in five-star hotels in Greater Cairo, Egypt, during the period between October and November 2023. According to the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism's 2018 report, there were a total of 158 five-star hotels in Egypt, with 34 situated in the Greater Cairo Region. Given the extensive population and limited resources available to the researchers, a convenience sampling strategy was employed. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed across 25 selected hotels for research purposes. The survey yielded 383 valid responses, resulting in a response rate of 76.6%. In accordance with the suggestion by Hair et al. (2010) to determine an appropriate sample size based on the number of variables, maintaining a minimum acceptable ratio of "variable: sample = 1:10," the research model comprised 21 items. The study deemed a sample size of 383 employees adequate for the investigation. Hair et al. (2020) emphasize the significance of PLS-SEM as a key analytical tool in tourism and hospitality research. Therefore, this study employed PLS-SEM to scrutinize both the measurement and structural model and to assess the research hypotheses. The statistical analysis of the data was conducted using WarpPLS software version 7.0.

Results

Participant's profile

This study involved 383 participants, with 330 men (86.16%) and 53 women (13.84%). The survey included 180 (47.00%) aged under 30, 149 respondents (38.90%) aged 30 :< 45, and 54 (14.10%) aged 45 or more. The majority (n=253, 66.06%) held a bachelor's degree, 78 (20.37%) held a high school/institute degree, and 52 (13.58%) held a Master/PhD degree. In addition, job experience varied with 139 (36.29%) having 1 :< 2 years, 119 (31.07%) having 2 to <6 years, 75 (19.58%) having 6 to < 10 years, and 50 (13.05%) having ≥10 years.

Table 1. Participant's profile (N=383)

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	330	86.16
	Female	53	13.84
Age	< 30 years	180	47.00
	30 : < 45 years	149	38.90
	45 or more	54	14.10
Education	High schools/institute	78	20.37
	Bachelor	253	66.06
	Master/PhD	52	13.58
Tenure	1:< 2 years	139	36.29
	2 to <6 years	119	31.07
	6 to < 10 years	75	19.58
	≥10 years	50	13.05

Reliability and validity

The item loadings were deemed appropriate because they were more than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010). Table 2 also shows that Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values greater than 0.7 indicate strong reliability.

Table 2. Loadings, Cronbach's α , CR, AVE, and VIF

	Loading	CR	AC	AVE	VIF
Ethical leadership	-	**0.931**	**0.916**	**0.577**	**1.090**
"EL.1. Your manager listens to what employees have to say	0.811**				
EL.2. Your manager disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	0.855**				
EL.3. Your manager conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	0.765**				
EL.4. Your manager has the best interests of employees in mind	0.763**				
EL.5. Your manager makes fair and balanced decisions	0.515**				
EL.6. Your manager can be trusted.	0.766**				
EL.7. Your manager discusses business ethics or values with employees	0.725**				
EL.8. Your manager sets an example in terms of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics	0.677**				
EL.9. Your manager defines success not just by results but also by the way that they are obtained	0.809**				
EL.10. Your manager when making decisions, asks "What is the right thing to do	0.852**				
Nepotism	-	**0.917**	**0.895**	**0.580**	**1.330**
Nepo.1. I always feel that I need someone I know or a friend in a high-level position.	0.696**				
Nepo.2. Supervisors are afraid of subordinates who are related to high-level executives	0.780**				
Nepo.3. I am always careful when speaking to family or relatives of hotel executives	0.775**				
Nepo.4. Executives are more interested in keeping friends and acquaintances in good positions than they are in those employees' performance or the organization's profitability	0.862**				
Nepo.5. The expectations of executive relatives and acquaintances are given priority	0.827**				
Nepo.6. Hotels permitting employment of executives' relatives have a hard time attracting and retaining quality people who are not relatives	0.775**				
Nepo.7. Hotels permitting employment of executives' relatives have a difficult time firing or demoting them if they prove inadequate	0.717**				
Nepo.8. High-level executives of this hotel have a hard time demoting or firing friends and acquaintances »	0.639**				
Intention to leave	-	**0.889**	**0.812**	**0.727**	**1.328**
ITL.1. I will probably be looking for another job soon.	0.846**				
ITL.2. It would not take much to make me leave this hotel.	0.869**				
ITL.3. I often think about leaving this hotel. »	0.842**				
** p value<0.05					

Similarly, it has been shown that the scales are valid because the AVE values are more than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020). In addition, the research model is found to be free of common method bias, as indicated by the variance inflation factors (VIFs) values of ≤3.3 (Kock, 2015). Table 3 presents the discriminant validity assessment of the research model, following the criteria outlined by Franke & Sarstedt (2019), which mandates a meaningful correlation among latent variables and an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value surpassing the highest common value.

Table 3. Discriminant validity' results

	EL	Nepotism	ITL
Ethical leadership (EL)	0.760	-0.218	-0.116
Nepotism	-0.218	0.762	0.469
Intention to leave (ITL)	-0.116	0.469	0.852

The HTMT was calculated to confirm the satisfactory validity of the constructs, as it is less than 0.85, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. HTMT ratios for validity

HTMT ratios "good if < 0.90, best if < 0.85"	**EL**	**Nepotism**	**ITL**
Ethical leadership (EL)			
Nepotism	0.237		
Intention to leave (ITL)	0.152	0.550	
P values for HTMT ratios "good if < 0.05"	**EL**	**Nepotism**	**ITL**
Ethical leadership (EL)			
Nepotism	<0.001		
Intention to leave (ITL)	<0.001	<0.001	

The research model's fit

The study met the ten requirements suggested by Kock (2021) for model fit, as detailed in Table (5).

Table 5. Model fit and quality indices

	Assessment	**Criterion**	**Supported/Rejected**
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.227, P<0.001	P<0.05	Supported
Average R-squared (ARS)	0.179, P<0.001	P<0.05	Supported
Average adjusted R-squared (AARS)	0.175, P<0.001	P<0.05	Supported
Average block VIF (AVIF)	1.182	acceptable if ≤5, ideally ≤3.3	Supported
Average full collinearity VIF (AFVIF)	1.205	acceptable if ≤5, ideally ≤3.3	Supported
Tenenhaus GoF (GoF)	0.359	small ≥0.1, medium ≥0.25, large ≥0.36	Supported
Sympson's paradox ratio (SPR)	1.000	acceptable if ≥0.7, ideally = 1	Supported
R-squared contribution ratio (RSCR)	1.000	acceptable if ≥0.9, ideally = 1	Supported
Statistical suppression ratio (SSR)	1.000	acceptable if ≥0.7	Supported
Nonlinear bivariate causality direction ratio (NLBCDR)	0.875	acceptable if ≥0.7	Supported

The research study's structural model

The results of the structural model are illustrated in Figure 2 to evaluate the research hypotheses. Findings revealed that there is a positive effect of nepotism on hotel employees' intention to leave (β=0.47, P<0.01). This means that increased nepotism in hotels leads to higher employee intention to leave, supporting hypothesis H1. Furthermore, a negative effect of ethical leadership exists on nepotism (β=-0.23, P<0.01) and employees intention to leave (β=-0.10, P=0.03). This indicates that ethical leadership reduces nepotism and employee turnover, supporting H2 and H3, as employees are less likely to leave.

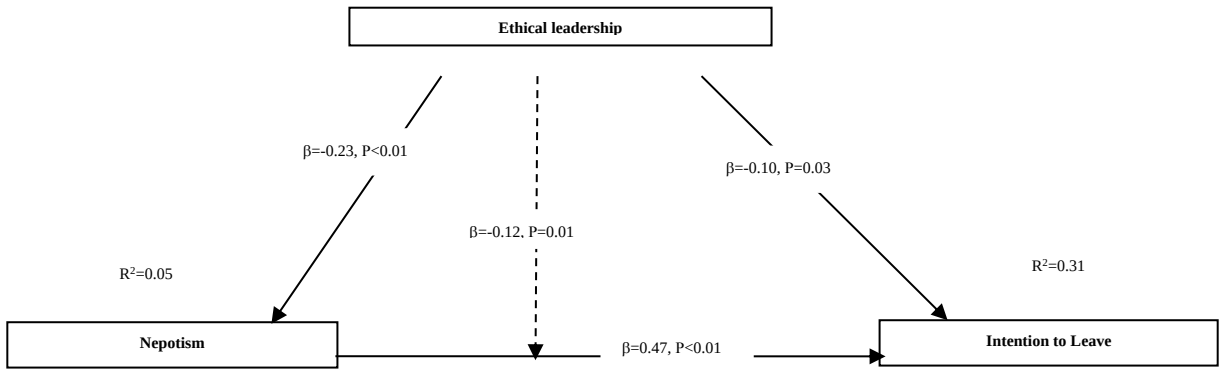

Figure 2: The structural model for testing study hypotheses

In addition, ethical leadership has been found to moderate the relationship between nepotism and employees' intention to leave (β=-0.12, P=0.01). This means that ethical leadership can reduce the positive correlation between nepotism and employee intention to leave, thus supporting H4 (see Figure 3). Figure 2 also reveals that ethical leadership explains 5% of nepotism variance (R2=0.05). Further, nepotism and ethical leadership together explain 31% of employees' intention to leave variance (R2=0.31).

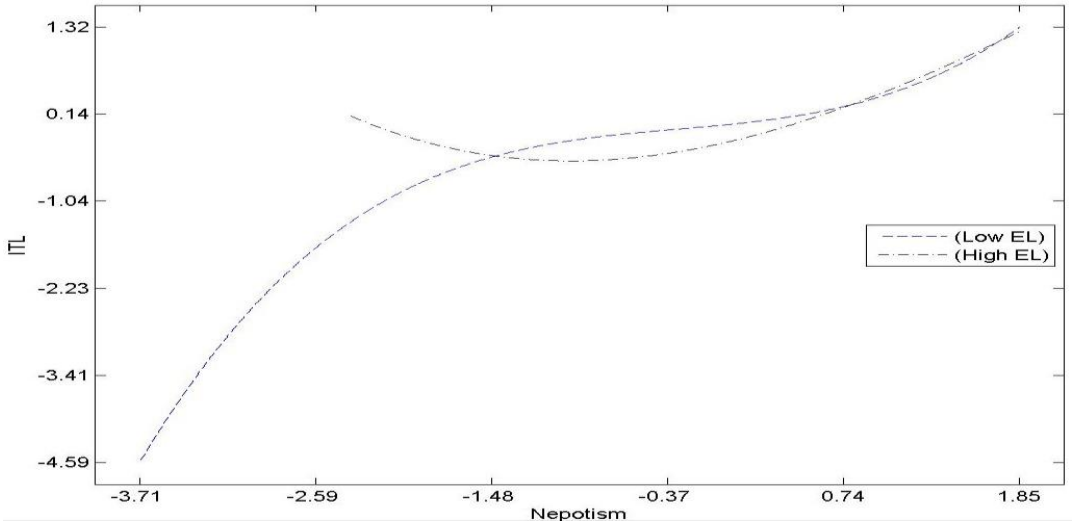

Figure 3: Focused graph with low-high values of moderating variables (EL)

Discussion

The current study aims to examine the effect of hotel employees' perception of nepotism on their intention to leave with a focus on ethical leadership as a moderator. To attain this goal, a research model with four hypotheses was formulated and tested. The findings supported the four proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, and H4). Findings revealed that hotel employees' perception of nepotism positively impacts their intention to leave (H1). This finding is consistent with those of Yücekaya et al. (2016), Arici et al. (2020), and Lim et al. (2023) who argued that employees' perception of nepotism increases their intention to leave the work. In a nepotistic organization, employees perceive their perceived nepotisms as protected by the organization, rather than having personal autonomy based on knowledge and capabilities (Keles et al., 2011). Non-family-member employees "employees who do not benefit from nepotism practices" are often treated as "second-class citizens" (Dyer, 2006), leading to a perception of disadvantaged members. RD theory suggests that employees' perception of deprivation increases when management promises are not fulfilled, often due to unfair and dishonest relationships with employers (David & Singh, 1993; Arici et al., 2020). Discriminatory characteristics of nepotism can also contribute to relative deprivation, causing employees to leave the organization (Hauswald et al., 2016; Arasli et al., 2019). The results also indicated that ethical leadership has a detrimental effect on hotel employees' perception of nepotism (H2) and their intention to leave (H3), while it has a moderate impact on the connection between the perception of nepotism and employees' intention to leave (H4). These outcomes align with earlier studies (e.g., Arici, 2018; Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019; Taheri et al., 2019) that emphasized the significance of ethical leadership in alleviating employees' intention to leave and their perception of nepotism. Ethical leaders' values and characteristics, such as fairness and trustworthiness, are believed to lead to lower turnover intentions among their subordinates, promoting a focus on common goals over selfish ones (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Employees perceive that their workplaces exhibit comparable values and traits to those of their ethical leaders, resulting in reduced intentions to leave their jobs and fostering stronger connections to their roles. This is because subordinates commonly believe that leaders and workplaces align in terms of values (Kurtessis et al., 2017)."Ethical leaders who foster strong ethical cultures and climates in their workplaces are likely to boost employee commitment (Loi et al., 2015; Shareef & Atan, 2019), and hence, reduce their perception of nepotism practices.

The research implications

The research has both theoretical and practical implications. This research provides compelling theoretical findings. It explores the concept of nepotism in the Egyptian hotel industry, which fills significant gaps in understanding this concept. It also enhances the understanding of ethical leadership in the workplace by incorporating nepotism, a crucial area for hotel management practitioners and researchers. Moreover, this current research contributes to the existing leadership theory literature by examining the impact of ethical leadership on hotel employees' views regarding nepotism and their inclination to depart from the organization. Additionally, the study reinforces the RD theory by exploring the nepotism phenomenon in the context of discrimination among hotel employees. This study offers valuable insights for hoteliers, especially those seeking to establish a healthy work environment in a nepotistic hotel context. First, the study reveals that unethical nepotism practices lead to employees leaving hotels. Since nepotism significantly hinders human resource practices and impacts the perceived level of justice among employees, hoteliers should strive to enhance meritocracy and establish more equitable HR systems. Hotel businesses should adopt fair and free methods for appointing and promoting employees with necessary skills, rather than appointing family members without merit. Second, this research contributes to understanding ethical business practices, specifically in the area of nepotism, by providing practical implications. This study emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership in mitigating the negative impact of nepotism on hotel employees in terms of their intention to leave. The ethical leadership approach effectively addresses nepotism practices, as it aligns with ethical guidelines and prevents unfairness and injustice (Mhatre et al., 2013). This essential information can be beneficial for hoteliers aiming to address unprofessional

practices in hotel management and establish a positive work environment. In this vein, training programs aimed at stimulating and enhancing hotel managers' ethical traits in their leadership executions would significantly yield positive results. Hotel management should prioritize training programs and ethical guidance to foster a trustworthy organizational culture, fostering ethical attitudes and behaviors that uphold justice principles and ethical standards within the team.

Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations that warrant consideration in future research. The data were collected from five-star hotels in Egypt, and the generalizability of the findings may be limited to countries with similar cultural backgrounds. The results may not be applicable to regions that diverge from Egypt in cultural beliefs, such as Europe, Asia, and specific African countries. Additionally, the findings should not be universally extended to different sectors, including manufacturing, education, or other hospitality establishments such as restaurants. Future research endeavors could benefit from exploring cross-country studies to elucidate how cultural context influences the dynamics of ethical leadership and nepotism practices among leaders. It is equally important to conduct cross-sectoral studies, given the variation in the intensity of skills and knowledge utilization across different industries. Such investigations could offer valuable insights into the influence of diverse knowledge and skills on leaders' behavior within the realms of ethical leadership and nepotism practices.

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