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Authentic Leadership Perception, Employee Trust, And Customer Satisfaction in Multinational Service Firms

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction in multinational service firms operating in Ghana. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 340 frontline employees and 1,020 customers across eight multinational service firms in the banking, telecommunications, and hospitality sectors. Authentic leadership perception was measured using the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ), employee trust was assessed using an adapted trust scale, and customer satisfaction was measured using SERVQUAL-derived scales. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine relationships and mediating effects. Results revealed significant positive correlations between authentic leadership perception and employee trust ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$), authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.49$, $p < .001$), and employee trust and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.52$, $p < .001$). Hierarchical regression demonstrated that authentic leadership perception significantly predicted employee trust ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$), accounting for 35% of the variance. Employee trust significantly mediated the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction (indirect effect = 0.25, 95% CI: 0.18 to 0.32). The findings highlight that authentic leaders build employee trust, which translates into superior service delivery and customer satisfaction. Implications for leadership development, trust-building, and service quality management in Ghanaian multinational service firms are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Authentic Leadership, Employee Trust, Customer Satisfaction, Service Firms, Multinational Corporations, Ghana, Leadership Perception

INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasing organizational scandals, ethical lapses, and declining public trust in institutions, authentic leadership has emerged as a critical construct for understanding effective leadership and its impact on organizational outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leadership—characterized by leaders' self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing—has been consistently associated with positive employee attitudes and behaviors (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Avolio et al., 2004). In multinational service firms operating in Ghana, where frontline employees interact directly with diverse customers, understanding how authentic leadership perception influences employee trust and customer satisfaction is essential for organizational success.

Authentic leadership is rooted in positive psychology and ethical leadership frameworks (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders demonstrate self-awareness by understanding their strengths, weaknesses, and values; they exhibit relational transparency by being open and genuine in their interactions; they maintain an internalized moral perspective by acting in accordance with their values; and they engage in balanced processing by objectively analyzing information before making decisions (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Research shows that authentic leadership fosters trust, engagement, and positive work behaviors among employees. When employees perceive their leaders as authentic, they develop greater trust in their leaders and organizations, which enhances their commitment, performance, and service delivery.

Employee trust—the willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of a leader's intentions and behaviors—is a key mechanism through which authentic leadership influences organizational outcomes (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Authentic leaders build trust by demonstrating integrity, competence, and benevolence (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). Employees who trust their leaders are more likely to engage in customer-oriented behaviors, provide high-quality service, and represent the organization positively to customers (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005). Employee trust has been shown to enhance teamwork, cooperation, information sharing, and commitment, which leads to improved customer satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction customers' overall evaluation of their service experiences is a critical determinant of organizational success, influencing customer loyalty, repeat business, and profitability (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994). In service firms, customer satisfaction is heavily influenced by the quality of interactions between frontline employees and customers (Schneider et al., 2005). Employees who trust their leaders are more confident, engaged, and motivated to deliver exceptional service, resulting in higher customer satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). The service-profit chain framework (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997) posits that leadership quality drives employee attitudes, which in turn drive service quality and customer satisfaction.

In the Ghanaian context, where cultural values emphasize interpersonal relationships, respect for authority, and trustworthiness (Gyekye, 1996; Nukunya, 2003), authentic leadership may be particularly important. Ghanaian employees value leaders who demonstrate integrity, transparency, and genuine concern for employee welfare (Asare & Nsiah, 2019). Authentic leaders who embody these values are likely to build strong trust relationships with employees, fostering commitment and service excellence. However, limited empirical research has examined the relationships among authentic leadership perception, employee trust, and customer satisfaction in Ghanaian multinational service firms. This study addresses this gap by examining the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction.

Statement of the Problem

Customer satisfaction is essential for the success and sustainability of multinational service firms operating in Ghana. Authentic leadership perception has been shown to influence employee attitudes and behaviors that affect customer outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, employees who perceive their leaders as authentic develop greater trust, which enhances their service delivery and customer satisfaction (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Colquitt et al., 2007). Despite the recognized importance of these relationships, limited empirical research has examined the mediating role of employee trust in the authentic leadership-customer satisfaction relationship in Ghanaian service contexts. This gap hinders the development of effective leadership development and trust-building strategies. This study addresses this gap by examining the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction in multinational service firms operating in Ghana.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction in multinational service firms operating in Ghana. Specifically, the study aims to assess the direct effects of authentic leadership perception on employee trust and customer satisfaction, and to determine the mediating role of employee trust in the authentic leadership-customer satisfaction relationship.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between authentic leadership perception and employee trust in multinational service firms.
2. To assess the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction.
3. To examine the relationship between employee trust and customer satisfaction.
4. To determine the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction.
5. To provide recommendations for authentic leadership development and trust-building strategies in Ghanaian multinational service firms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature

The theoretical foundation of this study draws from authentic leadership theory, social exchange theory, trust theory, and the service-profit chain framework. Authentic leadership theory, developed by Luthans and Avolio (2003) and elaborated by Walumbwa and colleagues (2008), emphasizes leaders' self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. Authentic leaders are genuine, transparent, and value-driven, creating environments where employees feel safe, respected, and empowered. The theory posits that authentic leadership fosters trust, commitment, engagement, and performance through positive modeling and supportive relationships. Research has shown that authentic leadership is the root of building trusting relationships that foster innovation.

Trust theory (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) defines trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on positive expectations of the other's intentions and behaviors. Trust is built on three dimensions: ability (competence), benevolence (caring), and integrity (honesty). Authentic leaders demonstrate these dimensions through consistent ethical behavior, transparency, and genuine concern for employees, thereby building trust. The emotional connection forged by authentic leaders through trust influences perceptions of an organization's ability to deliver satisfying experiences. Trust reduces uncertainty, enhances cooperation, and facilitates positive employee behaviors that benefit customers.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) provides a framework for understanding how authentic leadership perception influences employee trust and subsequent behaviors. Employees who perceive authentic leadership characterized by transparency, integrity, and genuine concern—feel obligated to reciprocate through positive attitudes and behaviors, including trust and customer-oriented service. Research has shown that employees engage in reciprocal relationships with their organizations, exchanging effort and loyalty for support and recognition. Authentic leadership, as a form of organizational support, triggers reciprocal employee responses that benefit the organization and its customers.

The service-profit chain theory (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997) integrates these perspectives by linking leadership, employee attitudes, service quality, and customer satisfaction. According to this theory, internal service quality including authentic leadership drives employee satisfaction and trust. Trusting employees deliver superior service quality, which generates customer satisfaction and loyalty. Research has shown that high-involvement HR practices, which align with authentic leadership principles, support employees in responding authentically to customers, leading to more positive service interactions.

Positive organizational scholarship further explains how authentic leadership creates conditions for employee thriving and customer satisfaction. Authentic leaders foster positive psychological states including hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism that enhance employee well-being and performance. These positive states enable employees to engage authentically with customers, creating positive service experiences that drive satisfaction.

Empirical Literature

Empirical research has established positive relationships between authentic leadership and employee outcomes. Avolio and colleagues (2004) found that authentic leadership positively predicts employee satisfaction, commitment, and performance. Walumbwa and colleagues (2008) demonstrated that authentic leadership predicts employee engagement, creativity, and citizenship behaviors. In service contexts, authentic leadership has been shown to foster employee customer-oriented behaviors and service quality. Research has also shown that authentic leadership leads to higher levels of performance and well-being across diverse industries.

Research on authentic leadership and employee trust has demonstrated consistent positive relationships. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) established the foundational link between leadership characteristics and trust. Colquitt, Scott, and LePine (2007) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that leadership behaviors significantly predict employee trust. In service organizations, authentic leadership has been shown to build trust through transparency and consistency, which translates into improved service interactions. Studies have also found that authentic leadership contributes to employee trust, innovative behavior, and satisfaction.

The relationship between employee trust and customer satisfaction has also received empirical support. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) found that employee trust in leadership positively affects organizational outcomes, including customer satisfaction. Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) demonstrated that employee attitudes, including trust, predict customer satisfaction and business outcomes. Research has shown that trust facilitates role clarity, cooperation, information sharing, and commitment, which lead to improvements in customer satisfaction. Studies in service settings have found that employee trust mediates the relationship between leadership and customer satisfaction.

Studies specifically examining the mediating role of employee trust in the authentic leadership-customer satisfaction relationship are growing. Research has demonstrated that authentic leadership engenders trust, which in turn motivates employees to engage in positive behaviors that enhance the customer experience. Studies have shown that trust in leadership is an important mediating mechanism through which authentic leadership influences employee engagement and creativity. In Ghanaian service contexts, limited research has examined these relationships. This study addresses this gap by examining the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction. The cross-sectional design was appropriate for collecting data at a single point in time to assess relationships and test the hypothesized mediation model (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised frontline employees working in multinational service firms in Ghana and their customers. Eight multinational service firms were purposively selected: three banks (Standard Chartered Bank Ghana, Ecobank Ghana, Stanbic Bank Ghana), three telecommunications companies (MTN Ghana, Vodafone Ghana, AirtelTigo), and two hospitality organizations (Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City, Labadi Beach Hotel). These organizations were selected based on their multinational status, significant customer base, representation of service sectors, and workforce size.

For employees, stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across sectors, job levels, and functional areas. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table, a total of 340 frontline employees were selected, accounting for potential non-responses. Inclusion criteria required that employees had been with their organization for at least one year and had direct customer contact.

For customers, systematic random sampling was employed. A total of 1,020 customers (three per employee) were selected to provide customer satisfaction data. Customers were selected as they exited service encounters at participating organizations. Inclusion criteria required that customers had used the organization's services at least three times in the past six months.

Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were used in this study:

1. **Authentic Leadership Perception Scale**: The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed by Walumbwa and colleagues (2008) was used to measure employees' perceptions of their leaders' authentic behaviors. The scale consists of 16 items measuring four dimensions: self-awareness (4 items), relational transparency (5 items), internalized moral perspective (4 items), and balanced processing (3 items). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include "My leader demonstrates self-awareness," "My leader is transparent in interactions," "My leader acts consistently with his/her values," and "My leader objectively analyzes information."
2. **Employee Trust Scale**: An adapted trust scale, based on Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) and Colquitt, Scott, and LePine (2007), was used to measure employees' trust in their leaders. The scale consists of 12 items measuring three dimensions: ability (4 items), benevolence (4 items), and integrity (4 items). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include "My leader is competent in his/her role," "My leader genuinely cares about my well-being," and "My leader is honest and truthful."
3. **Customer Satisfaction Scale**: Customer satisfaction was measured using a 10-item scale adapted from SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) and customer satisfaction literature (Anderson et al., 1994). Items assessed overall satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and likelihood of recommendation. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include "I am satisfied with the service I receive at this organization" and "This organization meets my expectations."

Demographic information for employees (age, gender, education, tenure, job level, sector) and customers (age, gender, income, frequency of use) was also collected.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, all instruments were reviewed by three experts in organizational behavior, leadership, and marketing. A pilot study with 50 employees and 150 customers was conducted to check clarity, appropriateness, and timing. Reliability analysis showed Cronbach's alpha values of 0.93 for authentic leadership perception, 0.91 for employee trust, and 0.92 for customer satisfaction. All values exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), confirming instrument reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Permission to access employees and customers was obtained from the management of participating organizations. Employee participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed during working hours. Customer data were collected at service points immediately after service encounters. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data collection occurred over a ten-week period.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and PROCESS macro for mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were used to summarize demographic characteristics and study variables. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to examine bivariate relationships. Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test direct effects. Mediation analysis was conducted to test the mediating role of employee trust. Control variables were included in analyses. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Mediation was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any point. Data were securely stored. Organizational permission and institutional review board approval were obtained.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The study sample consisted of 340 employees and 1,020 customers across eight multinational service firms in Ghana. Employee demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The employee sample comprised 53% male and 47% female participants. Employee ages ranged from 22 to 62 years, with a mean age of 34.2 years (SD = 7.6). Educational levels included 45% bachelor's degrees, 31% master's degrees, 15% diplomas, and 9% other qualifications. Organizational tenure averaged 5.6 years (SD = 4.3). Job level distribution included 42% junior staff, 38% middle-level staff, and 20% senior staff. Sector representation included 35% banking, 39% telecommunications, and 26% hospitality.

Customer demographic characteristics presented 52% male and 48% female participants, with a mean age of 31.8 years (SD = 10.0). Customer types included 68% local customers and 32% expatriate/international customers.

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 2. Authentic leadership perception scores ranged from 1.69 to 5.00, with a mean of 3.62 (SD = 0.70). Employee trust scores ranged from 1.75 to 5.00, with a mean of 3.58 (SD = 0.68). Customer satisfaction scores ranged from 1.70 to 5.00, with a mean of 3.60 (SD = 0.67). These statistics indicate moderate-to-high levels of authentic leadership perception, employee trust, and customer satisfaction, with sufficient variability for analysis.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between all study variables. Authentic leadership perception was significantly correlated with employee trust ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$) and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.49$, $p < .001$). Employee trust was significantly correlated with customer satisfaction ($r = 0.52$, $p < .001$). These correlations provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine direct effects. Control variables were entered in Step 1, authentic leadership perception in Step 2, and employee trust in Step 3. Results demonstrated that authentic leadership perception significantly predicted employee trust ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$), explaining 35% of the variance. Authentic leadership perception significantly predicted customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), explaining 30% of the variance. Employee trust significantly predicted customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$).

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples tested the mediating role of employee trust. Results revealed significant paths. Authentic leadership perception significantly predicted employee trust (a path: $\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$). Employee trust significantly predicted customer satisfaction (b path: $\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$). The total effect of authentic leadership perception on customer satisfaction was significant (c path: $\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$).

The indirect effect of authentic leadership perception on customer satisfaction through employee trust was significant ($\beta = 0.25$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI: 0.18 to 0.32). The bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero, confirming that employee trust significantly mediates the relationship. The direct effect remained significant (c' path: $\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. Approximately 64% of the total effect was mediated through employee trust.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings provide robust support for the hypothesized relationships among authentic leadership perception, employee trust, and customer satisfaction in Ghanaian multinational service firms. The significant positive relationships between all study variables confirm that authentic leadership enhances employee trust and customer satisfaction. These findings align with authentic leadership theory (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), trust theory (Mayer et al., 1995), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and the service-profit chain framework (Heskett et al., 1997).

The significant relationship between authentic leadership perception and employee trust ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$) confirms that employees who perceive their leaders as authentic develop greater trust. This finding is consistent with prior research (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Avolio et al., 2004). Authentic leaders who demonstrate self-awareness, transparency, moral perspective, and balanced processing build trust through consistent ethical behavior, genuine concern, and openness. In the Ghanaian context, where trustworthiness and integrity are highly valued, authentic leadership aligns with cultural expectations and fosters strong trust relationships.

The significant relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.49$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$) highlights the direct impact of authentic leadership on customer outcomes. Authentic leaders who model integrity and transparency create service climates where employees feel empowered and motivated to deliver exceptional service. This finding is consistent with research showing that authentic leadership fosters customer-oriented behaviors. The service-profit chain framework supports this direct effect, as leadership quality influences service quality and customer satisfaction.

The most significant finding is the mediating role of employee trust in the authentic leadership-customer satisfaction relationship. The significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.25$, 95% CI: 0.18 to 0.32) confirms that employee trust is a mechanism through which authentic leadership influences customer satisfaction. Authentic leaders build trust, and trusting employees deliver service that satisfies customers. This finding aligns with research showing that trust in leadership mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and employee outcomes. The partial mediation (64% of total effect) suggests multiple pathways, including direct leadership influence on customers and indirect effects through employee attitudes.

The strong mediation effect (64%) underscores the centrality of trust in translating authentic leadership into customer satisfaction. Employees who trust their leaders are more confident, engaged, and motivated to deliver exceptional service. Trust reduces uncertainty and facilitates cooperation, enabling employees to focus on customer needs. In service contexts where frontline employees represent the organization, trust relationships are essential for delivering authentic, high-quality service experiences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction in multinational service firms operating in Ghana. The findings revealed significant positive relationships between authentic leadership perception, employee trust, and customer satisfaction. Employee trust significantly mediated the relationship between authentic leadership perception and customer satisfaction. The findings highlight that authentic leaders build employee trust, which translates into superior service delivery and customer satisfaction.

Recommendations

1. **Authentic Leadership Development**: Organizations should invest in authentic leadership development programs that build self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. Training should include self-reflection exercises, feedback mechanisms, and ethical decision-making frameworks.
2. **Trust-Building Initiatives**: Organizations should implement initiatives that build employee trust in leadership, including transparent communication, consistent ethical behavior, and genuine concern for employee well-being.
3. **Service Quality and Customer Focus**: Organizations should integrate authentic leadership with customer service strategies. Leaders should model authentic service behaviors and support employees in delivering exceptional service.
4. **Psychological Safety and Voice**: Leaders should create psychologically safe environments where employees feel comfortable expressing ideas, offering feedback, and taking initiative.
5. **Ethical Culture and Integrity**: Organizations should develop and maintain ethical cultures that reinforce authentic leadership values. Codes of conduct, ethics training, and accountability mechanisms should be implemented.
6. **Further Research**: Future research should examine moderating factors such as organizational culture and individual differences. Longitudinal research could examine how authentic leadership and trust evolve over time.

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