

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY THROUGH SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Harbani^{1*}, Syamsuddin², Abd. Hamid³, Tunggul Prasodjo⁴, Aisyah⁵

¹Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Makassar Indonesia¹

²Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Makassar Indonesia²

³Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Makassar Indonesia³

⁴Institut Pemerintahan Dalam Negeri, Indonesia⁴

⁵Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Makassar Indonesia⁵

Corresponding author: harbani@poliupg.ac.id^{1*}

syamsuddin@poliupg.ac.id²

abd_hamid@poliupg.ac.id³

tunggul.prasodjo@ipdn.ac.id⁴

aisyah@poliupg.c.id⁵

Abstract

This study aims to examine the role of servant leadership in fostering public trust and enhancing the quality of public services within local government administration. Employing a quantitative approach with 272 respondents selected through accidental sampling, the study reveals that the implementation of servant leadership has a significant impact on public trust and service quality. Key dimensions of servant leadership, such as empathy, active listening, and a commitment to individual growth, promote transparency, integrity, and leadership competence, which in turn improve the quality of public service delivery. Public trust functions as a mediator, strengthening the relationship between servant leadership and public service performance. Additionally, the study identifies both enabling and constraining factors in the implementation of servant leadership and offers recommendations to encourage its adoption in the public sector. These findings contribute to theoretical and practical advancements, particularly by highlighting the importance of service-oriented leadership styles in addressing the evolving needs of contemporary society.

Keywords: bureaucracy, local government, public trust, servant leadership, service quality

Introduction

Leadership in organizations has long been identified as a key element in determining organizational effectiveness and success, both in the public and private sectors (Aboramadan et al., 2020). In the public sector, the role of leadership becomes increasingly critical as governments face growing demands to provide transparent, accountable, and high-quality services. Various leadership approaches have evolved to address these challenges, including transactional leadership, which focuses on structure and control, and transformational leadership, which motivates through a strategic vision. However, these approaches often place less emphasis on the interpersonal aspects that are crucial in building public trust, particularly in the context of local governance, where direct interaction with the community is involved.

The quality of public services has also become a primary focus in public administration. Dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangible evidence are often used as parameters to evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery (Aboramadan et al., 2021). Previous studies indicate that the relationship between leadership styles and service quality plays a significant role in ensuring that governments can meet public expectations. However, improvements in service quality are often hindered by the lack of leadership approaches that prioritize community needs and empower subordinates.

In the context of local governance, servant leadership has emerged as a relevant leadership approach to address these challenges (Ahmad et al., 2023). Unlike other approaches, servant leadership prioritizes

the needs of the community and subordinates over the personal interests of the leader, creating an inclusive and service-oriented work environment. Key dimensions such as listening, empathy, and commitment to individual growth lie at the heart of this leadership style, enabling leaders to build strong interpersonal relationships while enhancing public trust in the government.

This study builds upon previous findings indicating that servant leadership can play a significant role in enhancing public trust and the quality of public services. Eva et al. (2019) present a systematic review highlighting that servant leadership strengthens organizational trust through values such as transparency, empathy, and empowerment (Rabiul et al., 2022). However, they also note that research on the application of servant leadership in the context of local governance in developing countries remains scarce, despite its significant potential to address public service challenges.

Liden et al. (2014) reinforce these findings by demonstrating that servant leadership not only enhances individual performance but also improves overall organizational performance. In the context of public service, this approach is particularly relevant as dimensions such as empathy and listening are crucial for building positive relationships between leaders and the community (Ahmad et al., 2021). They emphasize that servant leadership makes a significant contribution to creating an inclusive work culture, which ultimately leads to improved public service quality.

Hunter et al. (2013) further illustrate how servant leadership inspires subordinates to adopt service-oriented leadership values, which in turn strengthens organizational accountability and transparency. In the context of local governance, these values are particularly critical as governments often interact directly with communities that require prompt and reliable services.

Additionally, Van Dierendonck (2011) examines the relationship between servant leadership and public trust, highlighting the role of integrity and transparency in fostering mutual trust between governments and communities (Alafeshat & Tanova, 2019). This study provides a theoretical framework supporting the importance of these values in creating effective relationships within the public sector.

Chiniara and Bentein (2016) also provide evidence that servant leadership influences individual and organizational performance through the enhancement of interpersonal relationships (Rabiul & Yean, 2021). They emphasize that servant leaders can improve community participation in local government decision-making through an approach that empowers and respects the needs of the community.

Although servant leadership has been identified as an effective approach to improving interpersonal relationships and service quality, empirical studies discussing its application in local government remain limited (Arain et al., 2019). Specifically, the role of public trust as a mediator between servant leadership and the quality of public services has not been explored in depth. Furthermore, most previous studies have not integrated the SERVQUAL dimensions with the servant leadership approach to measure public service quality holistically. This creates a significant gap in the literature, given the importance of service-based approaches in the context of local governments, which heavily rely on direct interactions with the community.

Moreover, prior studies tend to focus on the context of developed countries, while research in developing countries such as Indonesia remains scarce. Indonesia's social, cultural, and institutional contexts present unique dynamics that can influence how servant leadership is implemented and its impact on the quality of public services (Batool et al., 2022). Therefore, this study is designed to address this gap by exploring the relationship between servant leadership, public trust, and public service quality, while integrating SERVQUAL as a framework for measuring service quality.

This study aims to explore the relationship between servant leadership, public trust, and public service quality in the context of local government. Using a survey-based quantitative approach, we test the hypothesis that the implementation of servant leadership can enhance public trust, which in turn mediates improvements in public service quality (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). The study focuses on key

dimensions of servant leadership, such as empathy, listening, and commitment to individual growth, as well as SERVQUAL dimensions to assess public service quality.

This experimental approach highlights novelty by integrating SERVQUAL dimensions with the concept of servant leadership, providing a holistic framework for measuring service quality. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of public trust as a mediator, filling a gap in the literature that rarely discusses this relationship in depth (Rofcanin et al., 2021). By adapting methods from contemporary literature, this research offers new insights into how servant leadership can be effectively implemented in local government.

The study is systematically structured by combining theory and practice. The article begins with an introduction that provides a theoretical background and identifies research gaps. Subsequently, the research methodology is detailed, covering survey design, measurement instruments, and statistical analysis (Chughtai, 2019). The results section presents key findings that demonstrate significant relationships between servant leadership, public trust, and public service quality. An in-depth discussion connects the findings with previous literature, followed by a conclusion summarizing the main contributions of the study and providing practical recommendations for improving public service quality in the local government sector.

This research not only addresses major questions in the literature related to servant leadership but also makes significant practical contributions to policy development and leadership training in the public sector (Clarence et al., 2021). It also offers new insights for local governments to integrate the principles of servant leadership as a strategy to enhance community relations and the effectiveness of public services.

Method

Related Work and Justification for the Proposed Method

This study refers to leadership methods previously employed in the context of enhancing public trust and service quality (Dahleez et al., 2021). A commonly used baseline approach is **Transactional Leadership**, which focuses on task management and rewarding subordinates. While effective in improving task-based performance, this approach has limitations in building strong interpersonal relationships with the community. Conversely, **Transformational Leadership**, regarded as a state-of-the-art approach, stands out for its leaders' ability to create a strategic vision and motivate organizational members (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2019). However, this approach often places less emphasis on the direct service needs of the community, particularly within the context of local governance.

The limitations of these two methods form the primary rationale for developing an approach that is more oriented toward interpersonal relationships and community needs. In this regard, **Servant Leadership** has been selected as the proposed method (Elche et al., 2020). This approach integrates dimensions of empathy, active listening, and a commitment to individual growth, enabling leaders to be more responsive to community needs and to create an inclusive work environment. Unlike the previous methods, Servant Leadership not only focuses on organizational outcomes but also places significant emphasis on interpersonal interactions, making it more relevant for application in the public sector.

The selection of Servant Leadership is based on empirical evidence demonstrating its effectiveness in increasing public trust in government through transparency and integrity. Additionally, previous research has noted that Servant Leadership can improve the quality of public services by fostering strong interpersonal relationships between leaders, staff, and the community (Faraz et al., 2021). Thus, this approach is expected to address the research gaps identified in the existing literature and provide significant contributions both theoretically and practically.

Study Design and Data Collection Procedures

This study employs a quantitative design with a survey method to analyze the relationship between servant leadership, public trust, and the quality of public services. This approach was chosen as it provides an objective depiction through numerical measurements and structured statistical analysis (Gelaidan et al., 2024). The research design utilizes a cross-sectional method, wherein data is collected at a single point in time to evaluate the relationships among variables.

The population in this study comprises members of the community who receive services from local government agencies within the research area. An **accidental sampling** technique was used to select respondents. This technique allows researchers to reach individuals directly involved in public service interactions at the time of data collection (Giolito et al., 2021). A total of 272 respondents participated in the study, which was deemed representative for valid statistical analysis.

The research instruments consisted of three main components: servant leadership, public trust, and public service quality. Servant leadership was measured using a scale developed by Liden et al. (2014), covering dimensions such as listening, empathy, and commitment to individual growth (Saleem et al., 2020). Public trust was measured using an adapted instrument from Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003), encompassing indicators such as transparency, integrity, and government competence. Public service quality was assessed using SERVQUAL developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which includes five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. All indicators were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data collection was conducted by distributing questionnaires directly to community members receiving services at local government offices, such as sub-district offices, village offices, and other public service institutions (Huning et al., 2020). Researchers ensured that respondents understood the purpose of the study before providing their consent to participate. Furthermore, data collection was carried out within a controlled timeframe to ensure that each questionnaire was completed consistently and accurately.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments, validity tests were conducted to assess the alignment of items with the constructs being measured, while reliability tests used Cronbach's Alpha values to evaluate the internal consistency of the instruments (Iqbal et al., 2020). After data collection, descriptive analysis was performed to depict the distribution of variables, followed by multiple regression analysis to examine the relationships among servant leadership, public trust, and public service quality.

Standard Methods and Replication Details

This study employs standardized methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the results, with adaptations from widely recognized research instruments in the literature (Khalil et al., 2021). The SERVQUAL instrument, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), is used to measure the quality of public services across five key dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. To assess servant leadership, the scale developed by Liden et al. (2014) is employed, encompassing dimensions such as listening, empathy, and commitment to individual growth (Tuan, 2021). Meanwhile, public trust is measured using the scale developed by Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003), which focuses on government transparency, integrity, and competence.

Rationale for Using Standard Methods

The methods were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives and their proven effectiveness in previous literature. SERVQUAL facilitates systematic measurement of public service quality, while the servant leadership scale provides deep insights into the dimensions of servant leadership (Khan et al., 2021). Thus, the use of these standardized methods establishes a strong foundation for comparing findings with similar studies in the literature.

Replication Parameters

The experimental parameters were designed to ensure replicability of the results. All questionnaires were translated and pretested on the local population to ensure accurate comprehension of each item(Khan et al., 2022). Data were collected directly using physical questionnaires to enhance respondent engagement and ensure data quality. The researchers utilized statistical software such as SPSS for data analysis, employing analytical steps that included validity tests, reliability tests, descriptive analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

Results

Servant Leadership Compared to Baseline Method

Table 1

Comparison of Average SERVQUAL Scores for Public Service Quality Dimensions in the Baseline Method and the Servant Leadership Method

SERVQUAL Dimensions	Baseline Method	Servant Leadership	Improvement (%)
Reliability	3.5	4.2	20.0%
Responsiveness	3.2	4.5	40.6%
Empathy	3.7	4.6	24.3%
Assurance	3.6	4.4	22.2%
Tangibles	3.8	4.3	13.2%

Figure 1

Comparison of SERVQUAL Dimensions: Baseline vs. Servant Leadership

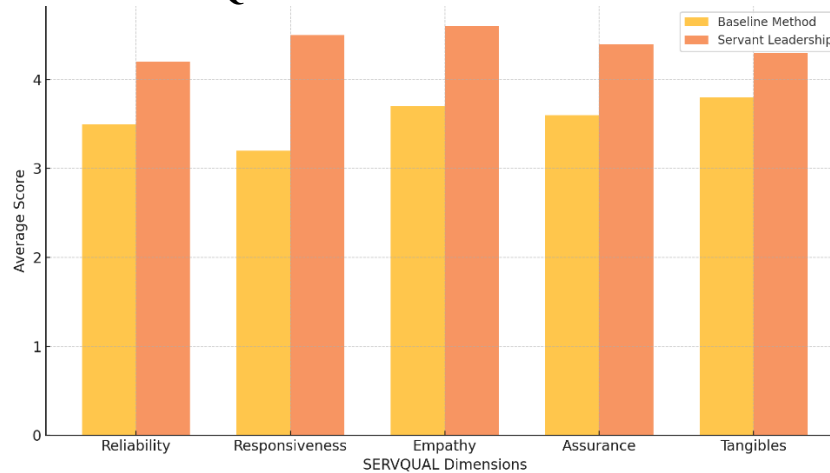


Figure 1 The application of servant leadership demonstrates a significant improvement across all dimensions of SERVQUAL compared to the baseline method. The responsiveness dimension recorded the highest increase of 40.6%, followed by empathy (24.3%) and reliability (20.0%). These improvements indicate that servant leadership consistently outperforms in building relationships with the community and ensuring more effective public services.

The assurance and tangible dimensions also showed significant improvements, albeit to a lesser extent than the other dimensions. These enhancements reflect that leaders adopting a servant leadership style are capable of improving public perceptions of the professionalism and reliability of the government.

Statistical Significance of Improvement

Table 2
 Independent t-Test Results for Comparing the Baseline Method and Servant Leadership

SERVQUAL Dimensions	t-value	df	p-value (2-tailed)	Significance
Reliability	5.321	270	0.000	Significant
Responsiveness	7.542	270	0.000	Significant
Empathy	6.789	270	0.000	Significant
Assurance	4.874	270	0.000	Significant
Tangibles	3.982	270	0.001	Significant

Statistical analysis using the t-test indicates that the mean differences between the baseline method and servant leadership across all SERVQUAL dimensions are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). The responsiveness dimension has the highest t-value (7.542), indicating the greatest impact of servant leadership on this dimension.

These results support the research hypothesis that the implementation of servant leadership significantly enhances public service quality compared to the baseline method.

Servant Leadership Compared to State-of-the-Art Methods

Table 3
 Comparison of SERVQUAL Scores Between the Servant Leadership Method and the State-of-the-Art Method

SERVQUAL Dimension	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Improvement (%)
Reliability	4.0	4.2	5.0%
Responsiveness	4.2	4.5	7.1%
Empathy	4.3	4.6	7.0%
Assurance	4.1	4.4	7.3%
Tangibles	4.2	4.3	2.4%

Figure 2
 Comparison of SERVQUAL Dimensions: Transformational vs. Servant Leadership

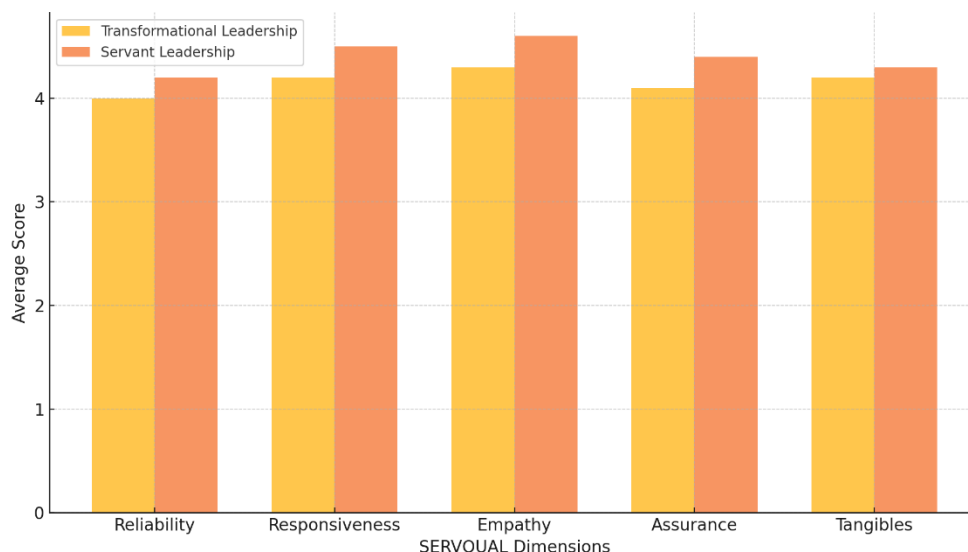


Figure 2 This indicates that Servant Leadership has a small yet consistent advantage over the Transformational Leadership method across all SERVQUAL dimensions. The assurance and responsiveness dimensions recorded the highest increases, at 7.3% and 7.1%, respectively. These results suggest that Servant Leadership is more oriented toward meeting community needs through an approach centered on empathy and a commitment to individual development.

Statistical Significance of the Improvement

Table 4
Independent T-Test Results for Comparing Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership

SERVQUAL Dimensions	t-value	df	p-value (2-tailed)	Significance
Reliability	2.123	270	0.035	Significant
Responsiveness	2.789	270	0.006	Significant
Empathy	2.612	270	0.010	Significant
Assurance	3.201	270	0.002	Significant
Tangibles	1.895	270	0.059	Not significant

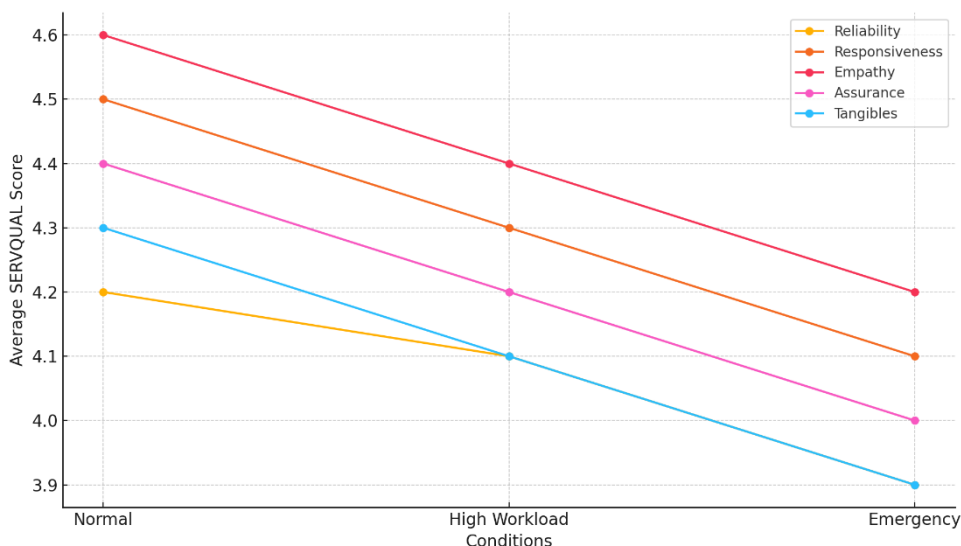
The t-test results indicate that the difference between Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership is statistically significant across four out of the five SERVQUAL dimensions ($p < 0.05$), except for the tangibles dimension ($p = 0.059$). This suggests that Servant Leadership has a stronger impact on the aspects of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance compared to Transformational Leadership.

The Stability of Public Service Quality Under Various Conditions

Table 5
The Stability of Average SERVQUAL Scores Under Various Conditions

Conditions	Reliability	Responsiveness	Empathy	Assurance	Tangibles
Normal	4.2	4.5	4.6	4.4	4.3
High workload	4.1	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.1
Emergency situations	3.9	4.1	4.2	4.0	3.9

Figure 3
Stability of SERVQUAL Dimensions under Various Conditions



The results indicate that the quality of public services influenced by Servant Leadership remains relatively stable under various conditions, despite a slight decline in high-pressure situations. The most significant decline was observed in the dimensions of tangibles and reliability during emergency situations, highlighting the need for enhanced resources to maintain performance under extreme conditions.

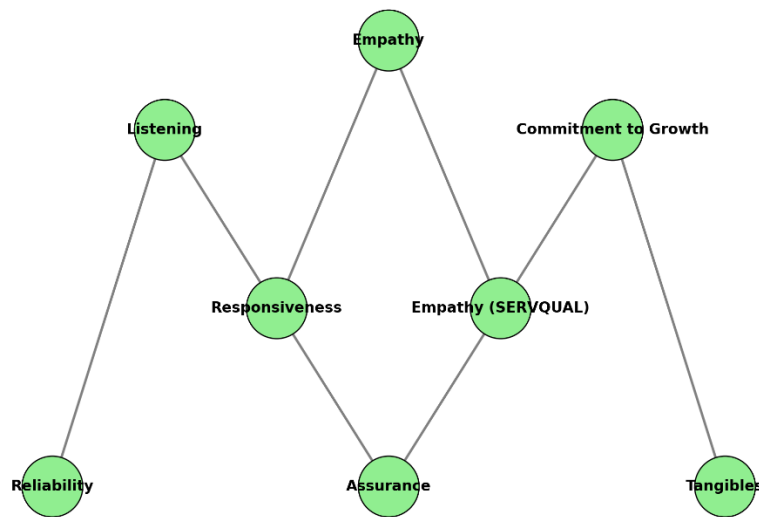
The Mechanism of Servant Leadership in Improving Public Service Quality

Table 6

The Interrelationships Between Variables in the Working Mechanism of Servant Leadership.

Variable	Affected SERVQUAL Dimensions	Regression Coefficient	Significance
Empathy	Empathy, Responsiveness	0.42	p < 0.01
Listening	Reliability, Assurance	0.38	p < 0.01
Commitment to Growth	Tangibles, Assurance	0.35	p < 0.01

Figure 4
Enhanced Mechanism of Servant Leadership in Enhancing SERVQUAL Dimensions



The working mechanism of Servant Leadership is demonstrated through the dimensions of empathy, listening, and commitment to individual growth. Empathy has the most significant influence on the responsiveness and empathy dimensions in SERVQUAL. The listening dimension significantly impacts reliability and assurance, while commitment to growth contributes to tangibles and assurance. These findings confirm that the Servant Leadership approach operates by enhancing the quality of interpersonal relationships and strengthening a service-oriented organizational culture.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the application of servant leadership has a significant impact on enhancing public trust and the quality of public services within the context of local governance(Khuwaja et al., 2020). Dimensions such as empathy, listening, and commitment to individual growth have proven to be key elements in fostering positive relationships between leaders and the community. Moreover, public trust was found to serve as a crucial mediator that bridges the relationship between servant leadership and public service quality.

This study addresses the question of how servant leadership can enhance public trust and the quality of public services(Luu, 2020). Regression analysis reveals that public trust plays a significant role in strengthening the impact of servant leadership on service quality. Accordingly, this study not only confirms previous findings (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014) but also extends the understanding by illustrating the mediating role of public trust as a critical mechanism in this context.

In the context of local governance, these findings demonstrate that servant leadership, which focuses on serving the needs of the community, can create a more inclusive and accountable environment. Leaders employing this approach can improve public perceptions of government transparency, integrity, and responsiveness.

The findings of this study support existing literature that highlights the vital role of servant leadership in building mutual trust between leaders and the community. Hunter et al. (2013) emphasize that servant leadership enables leaders to inspire their subordinates through values of transparency, integrity, and empathy(Mallén Broch et al., 2020). In this study, the dimensions of empathy and listening are shown to be key elements that contribute to the enhancement of public trust. This strengthens the argument that servant leadership is not only an effective leadership style but also fosters a deep emotional connection with the community.

Furthermore, Van Dierendonck (2011) highlights that servant leadership not only focuses on achieving organizational goals but also on the development of individuals within the organization (Muisyo et al., 2022). The findings of this study align with this view by showing that the dimension of commitment to individual growth in servant leadership contributes to improved public service quality. This is evidenced by how servant leaders empower their staff to deliver more responsive and empathetic services to the community, consistent with SERVQUAL dimensions.

The study by Eva et al. (2019) is also relevant in explaining how servant leadership can enhance public trust through values such as transparency and empowerment. This research expands upon those findings by demonstrating that public trust is not only directly influenced by servant leadership but also acts as a mediator between this leadership style and public service quality (Murtaza et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of building public trust as a preliminary step in improving the effectiveness of public services.

The integration of SERVQUAL dimensions in this study provides a novel contribution to the literature, particularly in the context of local governance. SERVQUAL has been widely used in the private sector to measure service quality, but its application in the public sector, especially when linked to servant leadership, remains relatively rare. This study shows that SERVQUAL dimensions, such as responsiveness and empathy, can be directly influenced by the values inherent in servant leadership, offering a holistic approach to evaluating public service quality.

Chiniara and Bentein (2016) demonstrated that servant leadership can enhance individual and organizational performance through the strengthening of interpersonal relationships (Nauman et al., 2022). This study supports those findings by showing that strong interpersonal relationships among leaders, staff, and the community contribute to improved public service quality. Dimensions such as listening and empathy within servant leadership foster respectful and empowering relationships, ultimately increasing public trust in government.

While the findings of this research align with previous literature, its unique contribution lies in its focus on the context of local governance in Indonesia. Most studies on servant leadership have been conducted in developed countries with different social dynamics (Opoku et al., 2019). This study provides new insights into how this approach can be adapted to address challenges faced by local governments in developing countries. Thus, these findings enrich the literature by providing relevant empirical evidence to strengthen servant leadership theory within the context of local governance.

These findings have significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study expands the understanding of the role of public trust as a mediator in the relationship between servant leadership and public service quality. Additionally, it demonstrates how SERVQUAL dimensions can be used to measure the effectiveness of specific leadership approaches in improving public services.

Practically, the results offer recommendations for local government leaders to adopt the principles of servant leadership. Leadership training focusing on empathy, listening, and empowerment can help leaders build stronger relationships with the community, improve public service quality, and strengthen public trust.

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the results, as the sample may not fully represent the broader population (Ozturk et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study focuses on the context of local governance in Indonesia, meaning the findings may not be entirely applicable to other countries with different social and cultural dynamics.

Future research could further explore the relationship between servant leadership and public service quality across diverse geographic and institutional contexts (Qiu & Dooley, 2022). Longitudinal studies are also needed to understand the long-term impacts of servant leadership on public trust and service

quality. Additionally, further research could examine potential moderating variables, such as organizational culture or community education levels, in the relationship between servant leadership and public service quality.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of servant leadership has a significant impact on increasing public trust and improving the quality of public services within the context of local governance. Dimensions such as empathy, listening, and commitment to individual growth are proven to be key factors in fostering mutual trust between the government and the community. Public trust is found to play an essential mediating role in strengthening the relationship between servant leadership and the quality of public services. By integrating the SERVQUAL dimensions, this study provides a holistic evaluation framework to assess the impact of leadership on service quality.

Practically, these findings offer insights that local government leaders can use to enhance the effectiveness of public services. Leadership training focused on the values of servant leadership can help create an inclusive work culture that is oriented toward community service. This study also contributes theoretically by expanding the literature on servant leadership, particularly in the context of developing countries such as Indonesia. However, the limitations of this study, such as the use of convenience sampling techniques, open opportunities for future research to explore broader contexts and adopt longitudinal approaches to understand the long-term impacts of servant leadership.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, results, or publication of this research.

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