

Adaptive leadership in wellness tourism: navigating digital transformation

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how spa and wellness managers address adaptive challenges stemming from rapid technological advancements in the wellness tourism sector. It aims to bridge a notable gap in leadership literature concerning the application of adaptive leadership frameworks within this context, particularly as digital innovations redefine service delivery and customer experience.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a phenomenological design, the research centers on the lived experiences of 11 spa and wellness directors. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom. The interview guide was developed based on adaptive leadership theory and cognitive labor frameworks. An inductive approach rooted in grounded theory was used to analyze the verbatim transcripts.

Findings – The findings illuminate adaptive leadership through four interconnected processes: assessing opportunities (e.g. revenue diversification, efficiency), assessing challenges (e.g. high costs, employee anxiety, human-machine balance), assessing resources (e.g. software, space repurposing), integrating technology in human labor (enhancing rather than replacing human interaction) and learning from customers' feedback (adapting services based on guest reception). Leaders consistently negotiate the tension between technological efficiency and human-centered values.

Originality/value – This study offers a first-hand, in-depth account of leadership practices in digitally evolving wellness environments. By explicitly applying and empirically demonstrating adaptive leadership, it provides a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of how leaders maintain organizational resilience and customer well-being amidst technological disruption. It extends existing theory by illustrating how empathy, reflexivity and distributed decision-making guide transformation in a service-intensive industry.

Keywords Adaptive leadership, Wellness tourism, Digital transformation, Spa managers, Organizational resilience

Paper type Research paper



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健康旅游中的适应型领导：应对数字化转型的挑战

摘要

研究目的 – 本研究探讨在健康旅游行业中，水疗与健康管理者如何应对快速技术变革带来的适应性挑战。研究旨在弥补领导力文献中的重要空白，即在数字创新重塑服务交付与顾客体验的背景下，适应型领导框架在健康旅游领域的应用问题。

研究方法 – 本研究采用现象学研究设计，聚焦11位水疗与健康中心总监的真实经验。数据通过Zoom平台开展的半结构化深度访谈收集。访谈提纲基于适应型领导理论与认知劳动框架设计。研究采用以扎根理论为基础的归纳分析方法，对逐字稿进行系统分析。

研究发现 – 研究揭示了适应型领导通过五个相互关联的过程得以体现：评估机会（如收入多元化与效率提升）、评估挑战（如高成本、员工焦虑、人机平衡问题）、评估资源（如软件系统与空间再利用）、在人类劳动中整合技术（强调增强而非替代人际互动），以及从顾客反馈中学习（根据顾客反应持续调整服务）。领导者始终在技术效率与以人为本价值之间进行平衡与协商。

研究价值 – 本研究提供了数字化转型背景下健康旅游领域领导实践的第一手深入分析。通过明确应用并实证检验适应型领导理论，研究为理解领导者如何在技术变革中维持组织韧性与顾客福祉提供了情境化视角。研究进一步拓展了理论边界，揭示同理心、反思能力与分布式决策在服务密集型行业转型中的关键作用。

关键词 – 适应型领导, 健康旅游, 数字化转型, 水疗管理者, 组织韧性

1. Introduction

Rapid technological advancement is driving a profound transformation in the hospitality and tourism industry. This shift challenges approaches to leadership, service design and organizational structure. Particularly within wellness tourism, where human connection and holistic care have been central, digital technologies are reshaping both the delivery of services and the nature of customer experiences. Tools such as artificial intelligence, biometric monitoring and self-service technologies are becoming increasingly embedded in wellness offerings, redefining the form and substance of customer engagement (Neuhofner, *et al.*, 2015). For example, technology is shaping not only treatment modalities, including advanced skincare or light-based therapies, but also front-office interactions through check-in, checkout and customer messaging systems, as well as back-office processes such as customer data management. Although these innovations promise greater efficiency and personalization, they also introduce complex leadership demands that extend beyond technical implementation and require deep cultural and structural adaptation (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Dryglas and Salamaga, 2018).

In response to these challenges, leadership in wellness tourism should increasingly be understood as an adaptive rather than a directive process. Managers are no longer simply responsible for implementing technological upgrades; they are tasked with guiding their teams through complex transformations involving value realignment, role redefinition and the integration of new skills (Yeoman, 2008). These demands are particularly acute in service contexts reliant on interpersonal engagement and emotional labor (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Together with interpersonal engagement, this places pressure on leaders to harmonize digital innovation with human-centered care. Recent leadership literature emphasizes the need for models that foster flexibility, learning and collaboration. Adaptive leadership is now closely associated with empathy, resilience and innovation that enable teams to maintain cohesion amid technological change (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). In such contexts, leaders should go beyond technical adoption to build digital capabilities and a growth mindset across their organizations (Bughin *et al.*, 2018; Northouse, 2021). In the hospitality and wellness sectors, leaders who encourage experimentation, openness to feedback and cross-level collaboration are shown to enhance both organizational adaptability and employee engagement (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2021).

Thus, the adoption of digital technologies in wellness tourism represents not only a technical enhancement but also a fundamental reconsideration of organizational values and practices. Leaders should cultivate environments that support continuous learning and participative problem-solving.

Although recent studies have acknowledged the importance of leadership in hospitality and tourism, a notable gap remains regarding the application of adaptive leadership frameworks in wellness contexts. To address this gap, this study investigates how spa and wellness managers are responding to adaptive challenges amid technological advancement. Using a phenomenological design centered on the lived experiences of wellness leaders, it provides an in-depth, first-hand account of leadership practices in digitally evolving environments. Guided by the adaptive leadership framework and based on semi-structured interviews, the study explores the concrete strategies managers use to navigate technological change in wellness tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1 Adaptive leadership

Adaptive leadership is a theoretical framework developed by Heifetz (1994) and further elaborated by Heifetz *et al.* (2009) to provide guidance in navigating complex, uncertain and rapidly changing environments. This model addresses the limitations of traditional leadership approaches when facing challenges that lack clear solutions and cannot be resolved through existing expertise or standard procedures. These challenges, termed “adaptive challenges,” require deep organizational learning, reevaluation of values and shifts in behavior across multiple stakeholders. The theory differentiates between technical challenges, which can be solved using known methods and authoritative expertise and adaptive challenges, which demand transformational approaches that reconfigure the norms, expectations and roles within an organization. The latter are particularly salient in contexts where change is systemic and disrupts conventional modes of operation.

Central to adaptive leadership are four interrelated practices that form the conceptual foundation of the model. Leaders are called to effectively diagnose the nature of the challenges their organizations face, carefully distinguishing between those that can be addressed with existing knowledge and those that require adaptive learning. They should also regulate the emotional climate within the organization, maintaining a level of tension that stimulates progress without leading to burnout or disengagement. Another core aspect is the capacity to maintain sustained and focused attention on the real issues, especially when stakeholders may be tempted to divert, deny or delay engagement. Additionally, adaptive leaders redistribute responsibility by fostering environments where members are empowered to take initiative and contribute to solutions. Crucially, these leaders protect and uplift diverse perspectives, particularly those voices from within the organization that may lack formal authority but offer critical insights essential for innovation (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Adaptive leadership is not simply a collection of techniques but a leadership orientation that centers on the capacity for learning, experimentation and shared responsibility. It is inherently developmental, emphasizing the cultivation of adaptive capacity throughout all levels of an organization. This orientation aligns closely with complexity theory, which posits that in nonlinear systems, leadership must function through distributed networks rather than top-down command (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007).

Previous studies have applied adaptive leadership in various sectors, illustrating its versatility and relevance. Daly and Chrispeels (2008) highlighted its utility in fostering systemic change in underperforming school systems. In health care, Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2007) showed how it supports innovation and adaptability in settings characterized by clinical

uncertainty and regulatory complexity. [Van Wart \(2013\)](#) further extended its application to public administration, emphasizing its role in cultivating leadership resilience in public institutions undergoing reform. These studies collectively underscore the relevance of adaptive leadership in any domain where change is both urgent and complex.

2.2 Adaptive leadership in hospitality and tourism

Leadership in hospitality and tourism sectors has emphasized transactional and transformational models, focusing on operational efficiency and motivational leadership ([Brownell, 2010](#); [Testa and Sipe, 2012](#)). However, the accelerating pace of global change, including health crises, environmental concerns, digital disruption and sociocultural shifts, has revealed the limitations of static leadership approaches. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has magnified the importance of adaptive capability. Hospitality organizations worldwide were compelled to rapidly revise service models, retrain employees and reimagine guest experiences under volatile and ambiguous conditions ([Baum et al., 2020](#)). In this context, adaptive leadership emerged as an essential approach to navigating uncertainty and catalyzing transformation. [Alonso-Almeida et al. \(2015\)](#) identified adaptive behaviors in Spanish hotel managers during economic downturns, such as delegating authority, supporting team autonomy and reorganizing service delivery to meet new market realities. Similarly, [Leung and Lam \(2004\)](#) documented how hotel managers in Hong Kong used improvisation, open communication and real-time problem solving to respond to these disruptions. While these cases do not explicitly invoke adaptive leadership theory, their alignment with its principles is evident. Similar adaptive patterns have been observed in other global hospitality markets. For example, wellness leaders in Thailand have balanced technology adoption with traditional healing philosophies, emphasizing mindfulness-based guest care and collective staff learning cultures ([Smith and Puczkó, 2014](#)). In the Middle East, luxury spa operators in Dubai have adopted technology-supported personalization while preserving ritual-driven hospitality grounded in cultural wellness traditions, illustrating adaptive leadership in hybrid service environments ([Stephenson, 2014](#)). Despite these studies, the explicit integration of adaptive leadership theory into hospitality and tourism research remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship continues to emphasize leadership typologies that prioritize individual charisma or directive power, rather than distributed adaptation and organizational learning. A few recent studies have explored the theory's relevance in sustainability leadership and post-crisis recovery planning ([Hao et al., 2020](#)), pointing to a broader need for empirical studies that examine how adaptive leadership operates in everyday hospitality contexts, particularly in response to technological transformation.

Adaptive leadership is particularly important in a sector where emotional labor is critical, and frontline staff should manage both operational demands and guest expectations. Recent work has highlighted that emotional labor in wellness contexts is evolving, as technology reshapes the scope of relational and affective service work ([Liu et al., 2025](#)). Rather than diminishing emotional labor, digital wellness tools often increase the need for empathy, reassurance and emotional guidance, as guests integrate technologically mediated treatments into holistic well-being practices. These dynamics underscore the importance of leadership approaches that protect emotional authenticity, cultivate psychological safety and support staff in navigating hybrid care interactions. Creating "holding environments" ([Heifetz et al., 2009](#)), psychologically safe spaces for exploration and feedback, becomes essential in hospitality organizations undergoing change. Leaders who enable experimentation, support collective problem solving and embrace complexity are better positioned to ensure both organizational resilience and service quality in the face of ongoing volatility ([Biggs et al.,](#)

2012). Despite its central role of emotional labor, few studies have examined how emotional regulation operates within leadership processes, particularly when managers navigate technological change.

2.3 *Adaptive leadership in the context of technological change in wellness tourism*

Wellness tourism is a distinct segment of the tourism industry that emphasizes holistic well-being, preventive health care and transformative personal experiences. It encompasses a wide range of services, including spa treatments, mindfulness programs and integrative medical services. In recent years, wellness tourism has been at the forefront of digital transformation, adopting technologies such as AI-driven service personalization, biometric health monitoring and mobile health apps (Smith and Puczkó, 2014; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015). The infusion of technology into wellness services introduces a multidimensional adaptive challenge. Unlike technical problems, where new tools can be integrated with minimal disruption, the incorporation of digital solutions in wellness tourism fundamentally alters the expectations and delivery mechanisms of wellness experiences. For instance, the use of predictive analytics to design customized spa programs or the introduction of virtual meditation sessions transforms not only the mode of service delivery but also the underlying value proposition of personal connection and care (Dryglas and Salamaga, 2018). This balance between innovation and human-centered wellness is also evident in Asia-Pacific wellness hubs, where Korean medical-wellness resorts integrate automation and wellness technologies while preserving emotional guest care. These hybrid approaches illustrate that digital transformation in wellness is not uniform globally but shaped by cultural expectations surrounding healing rituals, guest intimacy and relational service practices (Smith and Puczkó, 2014). Such changes demand a leadership approach that goes beyond implementation management. Adaptive leadership, in this context, is essential for navigating the nuanced tension between technological efficiency and experiential authenticity. Leaders should not only assess the strategic fit of new technologies but also mediate their integration in ways that uphold the relational and therapeutic integrity of wellness services (Yeoman, 2008). This requires the capacity to hold divergent stakeholder values within a coherent decision-making framework. Furthermore, the emotional dimensions of wellness care present unique challenges for leaders. Technologies, such as biometric sensors or AI chatbots, may offer personalization, but they risk undermining the human empathy and intuitive understanding that many clients associate with healing and wellness (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Leaders should develop cultural competence and emotional intelligence to navigate these tensions, fostering dialogue among staff, technologists and clients to co-create service models that preserve essential human elements.

Adaptive leaders in wellness tourism are also tasked with designing and sustaining learning-oriented environments. These include mechanisms for frontline staff feedback, iterative experimentation and cross-functional collaboration. Such environments serve as incubators for organizational adaptation, enabling continuous recalibration in response to both internal and external cues. This is aligned with complexity leadership principles that emphasize agility, decentralized decision-making and emergent change (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). Recent studies further underscore the rapid evolution of wellness tourism in the post-COVID era, where travelers increasingly prioritize preventive health, immune-strengthening activities, digital well-being and stress recovery experiences (Global Wellness Institute, 2022). Studies have also highlighted growth in hybrid wellness models that combine digital platforms with embodied therapeutic experiences, such as virtual meditation paired with onsite spa programs and biometric-enabled wellness coaching (Tung and Ritchie,

2011). These developments signal an expanded definition of wellness tourism in which technology is not merely operational but becomes part of the transformative experience itself, reinforcing the need for leadership models that balance innovation with holistic care and experiential authenticity.

3. Methodology

The study followed all ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, prior to data collection. Interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling from professional associations in the wellness industry. Potential participants were initially contacted via email and provided with a brief description of the study's objectives. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with a short description of the study, informed of the risks and benefits of participation and their rights as interviewees and verbal consent was obtained from those agreeing to participate.

The study prioritized the depth and richness of qualitative insights rather than statistical representativeness. Thematic saturation was achieved with 11 participants. Core patterns began to stabilize after the ninth interview, and the final two interviews confirmed the completeness and consistency of the identified themes. This sample size aligns with established qualitative research guidelines suggesting that saturation typically occurs after 10–12 interviews when the participant group is relatively homogeneous and the research focus is clearly defined (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). A total of 11 in-depth semi-structured online interviews were conducted via Zoom with spa and wellness directors between April and June 2022. All participants were over 18 years old and had served in director-level positions for at least five years. Interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling from professional wellness associations and were contacted initially via email with an overview of the study's objectives. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of the study purpose, potential risks and benefits, and their rights, and verbal consent was reconfirmed. The final sample included nine female (82%) and two male (18%) directors. Eight participants (73%) were based in the Southwestern USA, whereas three (27%) represented other regions. In terms of professional background, five directors (45%) held massage therapy certifications. Additional demographic details are presented in [Table 1](#).

3.1 Data collection procedures

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews via the Zoom video conferencing platform. Each interview was scheduled for 60–90 min, with actual durations ranging from 45 to 75 min, depending on the participant's responses and level of engagement. Prior to each interview, participants received a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits and their rights as research participants. At the beginning of each interview session, the researchers provided participants with a comprehensive overview of the study objectives, informed them of confidentiality measures and requested verbal consent for participation and recording. All interviews were recorded with both video and audio capture enabled through Zoom's recording function.

To uncover in-depth professional experiences and meaning-making processes, we asked open-ended questions based on an interview protocol that supported the exploration of participants' experiences with leadership challenges, decision-making, service personalization strategies and organizational adaptation. For example, asking, "What words come to mind when you hear wellness technology?", "How do the spa's guests speak about wellness technology innovation?" and "What do you feel are the advantages of wellness

Table 1. Sample characteristics of spa and wellness directors ($n = 11$)

Demographics	No.	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	2	81.8
Female	9	18.2
<i>Geographic region</i>		
Southwest USA	8	72.7
Other US regions	3	27.3
<i>Certification</i>		
Hospitality management	2	18.2
Wellness/spa management	2	18.2
Wellness education/holistic health	2	18.2
<i>Years in director role</i>		
5–9 years	4	36.4
10+ years	7	63.6
<i>Range</i>		
Mean (SD)		5–15 years 10.7 (2.9) years
<i>Total industry experience</i>		
7–9 years	4	36.4
10–12 years	4	36.4
13–15 years	3	27.3
<i>Range</i>		
Mean (SD)		7–15 years 10.9 (2.6) years

technology in a spa?” helped us uncover managers’ lived experiences. Therefore, thanks to this in-depth approach, we could move beyond surface-level explanations and focus on a more nuanced understanding. The interview protocol included probing questions that encouraged more profound reflection on specific incidents and leadership practices, enabling rich, detailed narratives to emerge.

Following each interview, we transcribed the recordings *verbatim* using Descript transcription software and subsequently exported them to Microsoft Word format for analysis. To ensure participant confidentiality, the researchers assigned each respondent a numeric code (SD1-SD11) and removed all identifying information, including spa names, specific locations and personal details, from the transcripts prior to analysis. While conducting the study, we leveraged the work of [Ellis and Berger \(2002\)](#), who view interviews as co-constructed narratives. More precisely, we adopted Kvale’s (1996) semi-structured lifeworld interview technique, which aims to understand and interpret individuals’ meanings of a given phenomenon by gathering descriptions of their lifeworld. As such, while talking with participants, we were constantly aware that in-depth interviews require efforts to make interviewees feel comfortable sharing intimate experiences. These strategies entailed building rapport with respondents by being respectful of their time, creating a relaxed environment and carefully listening, per [Creswell’s \(2013\)](#) definition of *good interview procedures*. Our research process often involved reflecting on positionality, constantly trying to understand how personal biases could influence every stage of the study, from the research design to the development of the findings section ([Schiffer, 2020](#); [Wilson et al., 2022](#)).

We concluded the data collection phase when we reached theoretical saturation, recognizing that no new insights were emerging. This process entailed focusing on the idea

that theoretical saturation worked as a guideline for developing our themes and that theoretical sampling was strongly intertwined with them (Moura *et al.*, 2022). We kept collecting new data to understand better the categories and themes we were developing. In this case as well, we considered the works of scholars who focus on theoretical saturation as an arbitrary concept (Kerr *et al.*, 2010; Rowlands *et al.*, 2016). Thus, we aimed to understand the role of reflexivity and subjectivity in defining saturation, being aware that it is a subjective process.

Interrater reliability supported our findings from a transparency and validity perspective. This methodology is rooted in the idea that “(h)aving two or more researchers independently analyze the same qualitative data set and then compare their findings, can serve to provide an important check on selective perception and blind interpretive bias” (Cole, 2024, p. 1945). Moreover, we adopted Sanjek and AES Invited Sessions’s (1990) concept of theoretical candor, which holds that providing truthful descriptions of the analysis process enhances the credibility of the findings (Lofland *et al.*, 2006). Finally, to enhance trustworthiness, we relied on thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) by providing detailed accounts. This technique not only provides analytical depth but also enhances validity and trust by offering a comprehensive picture of participant experiences, thus reducing potential bias. To code our data, we adopted an inductive grounded theory approach, which entails generating theories from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The iterative grounded theory process, which offers high flexibility, supported the generation of categories and themes. Important for this approach are the presence of analytical notes on patterns that inform the data analysis and the integration of analytical memos (Noble and Mitchell, 2016). As such, we continuously drafted analytical written records on ideas and emerging concepts. By collecting rich and nuanced data on spa directors’ experiences, theories emerged organically from the data, co-creating knowledge in collaboration with the respondents.

First, we conducted open coding by condensing the data, comparing them and grouping key concepts to generate categories (Vollstedt and Rezat, 2019, p. 86). By labeling every element deemed relevant, we divided the data into small groups and adopted an open, descriptive approach. Second, axial coding helped us connect categories and subcategories. Here, the goal was to organize the categories by identifying relationships. At this stage, we used the *paradigm model* proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), “denoting causal conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, actions/interactional strategies, and consequences” (p. 99). Third, by formulating “a descriptive narrative about the central phenomenon of the study” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 116), we undertook theoretical coding. This entailed refining the theory as core categories emerged.

4. Results

While the grounded theory approach we undertook supported our presentation of the findings in a narrative format, we prepared a Figure 1 that breaks down the processes and relationships among themes. From our interviews, it emerged that managers described a process that starts with assessing four main components: technology-related opportunities; technology-related challenges; existing resources and technology; and customers’ experience with technology.

An adaptation stage followed this initial phase: after learning from the assessment results, managers adjusted their approaches. Specifically, after discovering the opportunities in the wellness field enabled by technology, participants planned the following steps, deciding which technologies to adopt. Similarly, evaluating technology-related challenges helped managers identify how to improve in those areas. An assessment of existing resources within the spa supported interviewees’ understanding of how to implement technology-based strategies to optimize resources. Finally,

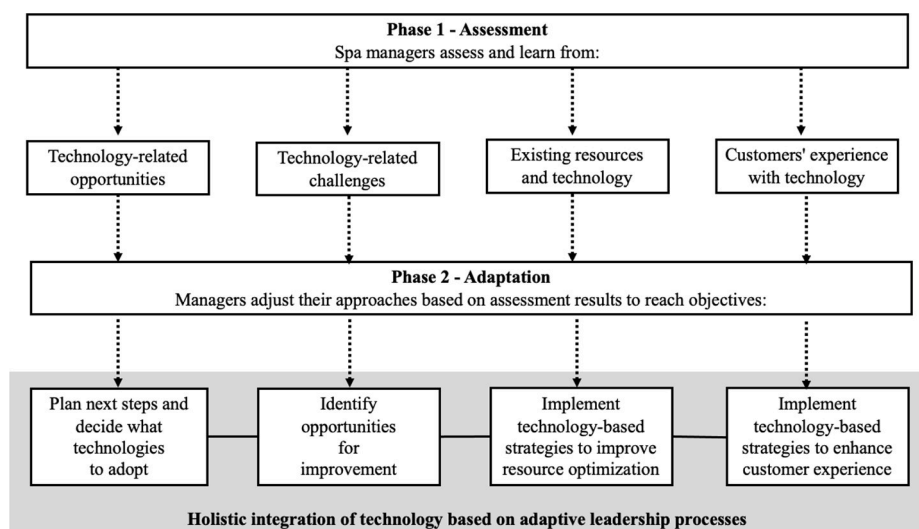


Figure 1. Processes and relationships among themes

customer feedback on their experience with spa technology guided managers in refining technology strategies to enhance the customer experience. As we clarified in the discussion, only through a holistic integration of technology, grounded in adaptive leadership processes, can managers achieve positive outcomes. This entails that technology integration in spa can succeed to the extent that it takes into account the interrelationships among the different assessment and adaptation strategies.

4.1 Assessing the opportunities

Evaluating their professional experiences with technology, spa directors explained that opportunity assessment is a key part of their decision-making process. First and foremost, even if costly, offering up-to-date machinery can positively impact their revenue. When asked about the opportunities that would bring technology-based investments, a director (SD 1) explained:

I think revenue will be the first thing because it's very hard to find enough body workers to do body work, or even estheticians, or whoever the service provider is. It's just hard to find enough people for the demand that is out there. (Technology) will bring in more options. You mentioned self-check-in, and it's similar to those types of things, too.

They also pointed out how streamlining the services becomes key:

(Technology) could free someone up to be able to do other tasks. All that, at the end of the day, as an owner, comes to revenue. It would simply create more revenue to simplify or streamline things, which is ultimately the goal. In a spa, you have one-on-one services, but then you want to streamline things as much as possible, because that's part of the experience.

Besides the economic benefits, the improvements brought by technology could make spas' everyday operations more efficient, as this participant (SD 5) pointed out:

It's easy to pull a guest when you're just looking at guest profiles and past signatures. That makes it a lot easier on us and them if they request some information. I feel like it expedites the process for us.

Moreover, directors believe that technology can enhance customers' experiences. On the one hand, this efficiency could lead to a smoother process, for example by reducing check-in times. A director explained (SD 1), "If a guest feels like everything's smooth sailing and streamlined, then it elevates the experience. Technology will start to support that and work well with that eventually." On the other hand, new machinery can improve guests' well-being. A director (SD 7) underscored:

(Technology) helps the guests with their overall well-being [...] every wellness and well-being is different for every single person. I think it's important that all the things we're doing help. Each person finds their well-being and what they can do for themselves.

Another participant (SD 8) focused on rethinking price versatility:

We are taking what we were traditionally doing and offering alternative options, including a variety of budget options. Sometimes wellness technologies can be priced either more or less expensive than a traditional massage. It (technology) also allows for greater pricing flexibility.

This also entails viewing revenue benefits through the lens of space use, often rethinking the function of some less-used rooms. As an interviewee (SD 4) pointed out:

There's an opportunity to gain additional revenue in space. I see it across the (Las Vegas) Strip. I've got some empty space. I've got a bed treatment room that [...] why don't guests like to be in that room? We've put a red-light therapy bed in there. So that absolutely has gains and is an opportunity to add additional revenue.

While commenting on the opportunities brought by technology in spas, a respondent (SD 1) declared, "No matter if we want it or not. It is coming." Such a statement, shared by many interviewees, helped us understand that while technology-based investments offer several benefits, they are not risk-free, as the following finding shows.

4.2 *Assessing the challenges*

Even though technology offers significant opportunities, spa directors underscored the importance of ongoing evaluation and assessment of the challenges posed by such investments. One of the most pressing issues for spa directors is the high costs. This is particularly true of the equipment our interviewees test at wellness expositions, which usually showcase the most advanced machines. As a respondent (SD 6) described:

Some of them are really expensive. At the last expo, I was looking at one of those infrared boots. You find a tiny boot that you get into, but then, I don't have the space. I don't have the money. [...] The budget is not there, especially for that expensive equipment. That's what makes it difficult sometimes.

A pressing issue here is that interviewees must balance costs with the need for up-to-date equipment to stay competitive with other spas, while also offering something unique. However, in such a rapidly evolving context, they often struggle to do so. An interviewee (SD 7) explained:

When I told somebody I was bringing in red-light therapy, they were like, "Well, you're behind. That's just going to set the level playing field for you." I felt like, "I'm behind." I don't understand, how am I behind? But it's so true: wellness technology, at its core, all the cool shit, costs money.

Similarly, another respondent (SD 2) explained that the constant need to keep up with the latest technology can create a sense of anxiety among the team members:

The disadvantage is that sometimes you can't get ahead of it; you feel like you're behind because you don't have a, b, c, or d, like, because I don't have self-check-in. Am I behind in the industry? [...] It tends to put the providers on edge, "Will it take my share of revenue? Is it going to make me obsolete?" It starts to build a little bit of internal anxiety with your teams.

Investing in new technologies also means that employees must know how to operate and promote them, which is a challenging task. According to a respondent (SD 8), education plays a key role:

Education. There's still that apprehension about trying something new. Being able to have the marketing support, the language, and the training that comes along with it. So the reception is still just as comfortable talking about it. That's been our challenge, getting people comfortable with explaining the verbiage and the education that comes along with it.

Moreover, many participants focused on the human-machine relationship as a pressing issue. First and foremost, spa directors recognize the need to assess the risks associated with substituting equipment for human labor. An interviewee (SD 3) pointed out that such a situation requires them to address employees' trust concerns:

Just like with AI coming out right now, there are some people who are probably a little bit worried about their jobs. [...] And there's that concern, "Am I valued?" or "What is my value?" And I've seen that sometimes when you bring technology, the therapists are thinking, "Okay, and how does that benefit me? What am I here for?" The disadvantage can be losing some of that trust with the team.

Directors also fear that an excessive use of technology can worsen customers' experiences:

When you put it into a treatment room, a machine massaging you, your machine isn't going to ask how your day was, or you want to tell them about your horrible shopping experience, or something you just want to vent to the machine. Is that really going to answer back? I think that's where that disconnect could be. (SD 4).

Similarly, another director (SD 5) highlighted:

Anything can become too technology-based, and the fear is that you lose human interaction. And you're not engaging with guests as much because now they're doing the tasks that you were doing. You're having it done electronically.

Thus, the same interviewee (SD 5) spoke about their effort in finding balanced solutions:

If I know I can sit in a chair for 25 minutes and get compression on my legs done, I fear it would take away a service from someone getting a full-on service, deep tissue massage. Figure out a way to balance it, it being utilized if we're fully booked, or a shortened amount of time, or as an add on.

Addressing this point, interviewees emphasized the need to find ways to ensure that customer interactions, such as during a nail salon social hour, are not hindered by technology.

4.3 *Assessing the resources*

According to interviewees, assessing their current resources to decide how to adapt them to new technologies is key. In this sense, it is essential to think in terms of software development and reflect on what they are currently using. As a director pointed out (SD 4):

We do have software, and we do online bookings. But we are working on an online self-check-in process, and a little bit more. We just launched texting to our guests: we can talk to them via

texting, which is new for us. We are considering upgrading some aspects, but the problem is that everything requires a significant amount of money.

Here, a respondent (SD 8) noted that the main transition occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they permanently transitioned to a paper-free system. From that moment, “Everything that we do is digital, from the menu to the booking process.” At the same time, as the previous findings show, space resources are a fundamental element of technological innovation. The following interviewees’ quotes align with the opinion of other directors who believe that investing in new technologies requires finding creative ways to manage existing spa spaces. They declared that they plan on taking advantage of new equipment to repurpose rooms that are not in use: “Maybe a red-light therapy or something. Because we have a room that doesn’t get used very often. So, utilizing that room, attendants can monitor and make tips to get them set up for that.” Moreover, virtual solutions can help solve limited space availability issues:

I would like to do a virtual reality one. We have a very small spa. I do realize that I don’t have as much space and opportunity as I had in my previous spa. In this spa, I have to create it and understand how it would fit within the smaller space. I was going to start with the virtual and then set up a recovery station for our fitness guests so they can start using the Theragun and the tablets. (SD 5).

Analogously, directors are working hard to adapt existing amenities to new technologies. A respondent (SD 6), for example, explained that they plan to offer hydrotherapy in the rooms that feature bathtubs.

Our analysis revealed that, often, assessing existing resources also means exploring the effectiveness of amenities, especially in terms of customer satisfaction, as this interviewee (SD 8) declared, “We’ve been exploring the red-light tables that are available for the recovery of the body. We’ve been exploring compression boots, trying to just offer them as an alternative to our guests at the gym.”

Resource assessment strategies also entail reflecting on human resources. As already mentioned in the previous findings, the relationship between human labor and technology is a significant component of spa directors’ experiences. The starting point here is that many interviewees stated that the wellness sector is firmly rooted in manual, human labor and that they do not perceive automation positively. An interviewee (SD 9) noted that amenities such as water massage beds, LED therapy beds and meditation pods often lack human interaction and, in their experience, have poor ROI, except for certain skincare technologies such as HydraFacial machines. Similarly, another director (SD 4) expressed skepticism about fully mechanized experiences, “You have a machine massaging my body, I don’t know [...] That one sounds a little odd.”

In this context, it is also important to address employees’ concerns about their jobs being replaced by machines, as we mentioned in our second finding. The primary pattern in this sense is rooted in the idea that spa directors believe technology can enhance, rather than replace, human labor. This participant (SD 4) explained how technology can undertake preparatory work to ease employees’ jobs: “If you’re able to incorporate (technology) and you get on a table and it’s going to loosen up your muscles before the massage therapist gets you started... then yes.” When asked about the human–technology relationship, another respondent explained that red light therapy is the first thing that comes to mind, seeing technology as something that can “Enhance the services, but not necessarily take over that connection that you get with people to people.” As this director (SD 8) pointed out, technology can also be seen as a tool to elevate the service:

I think (technology) helps to elevate whatever we were doing. I don't think that it takes away from manual service. It's enhancing it to the next place that maybe we couldn't do with our own hands. [...] It helps to elevate whatever we were doing.

While the previous quotes show that interviewees have different feelings about technological innovations, the common thread is that these investments require spa directors to dedicate significant time to understanding how to integrate technology into human labor.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that resource assessment also involves recognizing a lack of technology use. For some, this is a limit they would like to overcome, while for others, it is a deliberate choice. As the next director (SD 9) explained, they prefer to leverage interpersonal relationships:

We don't offer any of those things (self-check-in, digital key, massage chairs, in-room features). We do have digital lockers. We don't do online waivers. No, we would not introduce any type of technology again, because you are, are pulling out that, that interpersonal relationship for that experience that sets the tone.

As this statement reveals – and as the following finding suggests – in such a context, reflections on integrating technology in human labor are much needed.

4.4 *Assessing customers' experiences*

The iterative nature of adaptive leadership also entails constantly shaping technology-based experience based on customers' feedback. Guest reception activities were a prominent example. An interviewee (SD 5) focused on demographics, explaining that older guests were "not as welcoming to the technology and moving away from paper." This also entailed finding strategies to address the fact that some guests are hesitant to use technology because they "don't want to do anything wrong" (SD4).

Overall, however, spa directors reported that most customers are positively receptive to technology-based solutions when checking in and out. This is particularly the case with introvert guests, as a participant (SD5) explained, "If I'm someone who is extremely introverted, I can check in via mobile. I get to bypass all the people at the front desk. And when I'm done, I get to leave." Similarly, a director emphasized that the impersonal nature of technology can address the needs of more reserved individuals, such as those who feel uncomfortable being unclothed during treatments. Another respondent (SD 7) noted receiving highly positive feedback on text-message communication.

Furthermore, when asked if they believe that technology adds significant value to their offer, a director underlined, "110% I do. I think that the people who come here, and those who come here pretty regularly as well, want to know that we're upping the game. We're continuously evolving and getting better." This entails spa staff being able to show that they are constantly up to date with the newest trends.

A significant theme that emerged from our analysis is that spa adaptive leadership firmly centers on customers' reactions to new technology-based treatments. Most respondents reported noticing enthusiastic reactions, especially for red-light therapy and HydraFacial. A participant (SD7) described, "We've had really good feedback about it. Guests have come out, and we have guests who are now regulars of the red-light therapy. So, they booked several appointments." Similarly, an interviewee (SD9) declared they witnessed particularly positive reception to skincare technology: "Our guests who receive facials that offer technology, love it. When they get out of the room, they really do see the difference in their skin." Additionally, another director (SD8) observed that new technologies seem to adapt well to individual needs: "There's something about that technology that is giving you what you need that you maybe not get from a massage or anybody else."

As such, while learning from and adapting to customer feedback, spa directors must reflect on different aspects. On the one hand, improving guests' experiences means leveraging technology to make logistical processes, such as check-in and check-out, more efficient. On the other hand, directors must focus on the treatment side, constantly innovating their menu while ensuring that guests are positively welcomed by these changes. Such strategies require spa workers to thoroughly understand their customers' preferences, including factors such as demographics and personality.

5. Discussion and implications

As wellness tourism increasingly integrates innovation, leaders should balance technology with the relational and empathic qualities that define authentic wellness experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This study explored how spa and wellness managers address adaptive challenges arising from technological advancement through a phenomenological approach grounded in qualitative interviewing (Ellis and Berger, 2002; Kvale, 1996). It provides a nuanced understanding of how leaders navigate technological disruption while preserving the human-centered values that are central to wellness experiences. The findings reveal that adaptive leadership unfolds through four interconnected processes, each offering practical insight for guiding technological transformation.

Managers make sense of technology-based innovation through a series of dynamic steps that begin with an assessment stage, followed by an adaptation phase in which they adjust their approaches. This assessment–adaptation process reveals that successful outcomes can be achieved only if managers consider the various elements involved, from resource optimization to customer experience enhancement. In such a context, where holistic integration of technology is key, adaptive leadership helps managers adjust as conditions change.

Assessing opportunities shows that spa directors proactively use technology to drive personalization, streamline processes and diversify revenue, emphasizing the need for continuous environmental scanning and strategic foresight to sustain competitiveness (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Assessing challenges highlights that technological innovations can trigger emotional, cultural and operational tensions such as high costs, staff anxiety and concerns about eroding authentic guest relationships. Framing these as adaptive rather than technical problems enables leaders to promote dialogue, collaborative sense-making and psychological safety (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). In practice, this can involve communication platforms, feedback loops and team workshops that build trust and resilience (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2021). Assessing resources illustrates how leaders reconfigure existing human and financial assets to support transformation. Conducting resource audits and investing in reskilling programs help align underutilized spaces and skills with emerging technologies (Bughin *et al.*, 2018). Assessing resources also entailed reflecting on ways to integrate technology in human labor, demonstrating how leaders preserve the relational and therapeutic essence of wellness tourism by embedding technology to complement rather than replace human care. Designing hybrid service models that prioritize empathy while automating routine tasks ensures a balance between efficiency and authenticity (Voigt *et al.*, 2011). Learning from customer feedback further underscores the iterative nature of adaptive leadership, as directors continuously refine technology-enhanced services through digital surveys and direct engagement to sustain trust and satisfaction (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

This study extends adaptive leadership theory into technology-mediated and emotion-intensive service environments. While traditional adaptive leadership emphasizes mobilizing people to address complex change through shared learning, the findings introduce several

refinements. Relational and emotional stewardship emerges as a central leadership function in wellness settings, where leaders protect emotional authenticity and guest trust while introducing digital tools. Well-being protection and psychological safety appear as strategic adaptive practices, highlighting leaders' responsibility to support employees' emotional resilience and identity continuity during technological role shifts. Moreover, unlike typical organizational contexts, wellness environments require leaders to balance innovation with care-centered and ethical values, suggesting an expanded view of adaptive leadership that integrates operational, emotional and moral adaptation. These insights refine adaptive leadership theory by showing that in experiential wellness environments, leadership involves not only enabling change but also preserving meaning, ethics of care and relational integrity during transformation.

The findings also reflect the Technology Acceptance Model and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which emphasize that adoption depends on perceived usefulness, ease of use, performance expectancy and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). Leaders who engaged in experimentation and continuous learning demonstrated high-performance expectancy and perceived usefulness, viewing digital tools as enablers of service personalization, efficiency and quality improvement (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). Conversely, hesitation toward automation reflected low effort expectancy and affective resistance, revealing that technology adoption involves both cognitive and emotional dimensions (Morosan and DeFranco, 2016). Organizational support, peer learning and visible role modeling from senior managers, which are key elements of UTAUT's facilitating conditions and social influence, strengthened collective readiness and transformed technology from a potential source of disruption into a catalyst for innovation (Park and Gretzel, 2007; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003).

Practically, this study offers guidance for leaders, employees and guests navigating technological transformation in wellness settings. For leaders, the results highlight the importance of proactive resource audits, continuous learning and reskilling to ensure effective collaboration between humans and technology (Bughin *et al.*, 2018). Embedding empathy within hybrid service protocols co-created with frontline staff can help ensure that technology enhances rather than replaces human interaction. For practitioners, the findings emphasize that emotional communication and authenticity remain vital, as technological tools shift but do not reduce emotional labor. For guests, structured feedback systems such as digital surveys and direct interactions allow organizations to iteratively refine technology-enhanced services while maintaining emotional connection. Collectively, these implications affirm that adaptive leadership in wellness tourism requires ongoing negotiation between technological opportunity and human-centered values, supported by reflexivity, empathy and distributed decision-making (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). As technological innovation accelerates, leaders' ability to adapt across stakeholder levels will be critical for sustaining organizational resilience and guest well-being.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the adaptive leadership experiences of spa and wellness directors, its findings have limited generalizability because of the relatively small and context-specific sample. The results reflect participants' perspectives within particular organizational and cultural settings and therefore may not represent the global wellness industry. Specifically, the majority of participants were located in the southwestern region of the USA (73%), and the demographic composition of the sample lacked broader diversity. These factors may limit the generalizability and transferability of the findings to other regions or populations. Future studies should aim to recruit more geographically and demographically diverse participants to strengthen external validity and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena examined. Additionally, as the data are self-

reported, there is potential for social desirability or recall bias. Future research using longitudinal or cross-cultural designs could enhance generalizability and further examine how adaptive leadership evolves as wellness technologies and guest expectations continue to develop.

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