

Ethical Leadership and Employee Voice Behavior: The Moderating Role of Organizational Culture

Dr. Naveed Hussain Shah¹, Dr. Salman Ahmad Khan², Dr. Tania³, Dr. Mahboob Ullah^{*4},
Muhammad Farhan Amjad⁵, Ahmed Nawaz Kandhro⁶

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Business and Management Sciences, University of Lakki Marwat

² Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Iqra University Chak Shahzad Campus
Islamabad

³ Associate Professor, Institute of Business Administration, University of Sindh Jamshoro

^{*4} Associate Professor, Department of Management Sciences, Abasyn University Peshawar

⁵ Manager Performance, Power Plant

⁶ Student, Department of Public Administration, University of Sindh Jamshoro

¹ Naveedshah@ulm.edu.pk, ² salmanahmad.phd@gmail.com, ³ tania.mushtaque@usindh.edu.pk,
^{*4} mahboob.ullah@abasyn.edu.pk, ⁵ farhan.sheikh@ymail.com, ⁶ ankdl99@salu.edu.pk

Abstract

This study examined the impact of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior, while investigating the moderating role of organizational culture in this relationship. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, the research employed a quantitative design using primary data collected from 320 employees working in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression techniques were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, indicating that employees are more likely to express their ideas and concerns when they perceive their leaders as ethical and fair. The results further demonstrated that organizational culture significantly moderates this relationship, such that the positive effect of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior is strengthened in organizations with a supportive and open culture. The study concludes that employee voice behavior is shaped not only by leadership style but also by the organizational environment in which leadership is practiced. These findings provide important implications for enhancing leadership effectiveness and fostering open communication in organizations, particularly in developing country contexts.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; Employee voice behavior; Organizational culture; Social exchange theory; Psychological safety; Pakistan; Organizational behavior

Introduction

In contemporary organizational settings, employee voice behavior has become a vital factor influencing organizational learning, innovation, and performance improvement. Employee voice behavior refers to the discretionary expression of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions aimed at improving organizational functioning. In dynamic and competitive environments, organizations increasingly depend on employees' willingness to speak up as a mechanism for identifying problems, enhancing decision-making, and fostering continuous improvement. Recent studies emphasize that

employee voice behavior is not solely an individual attribute but is strongly shaped by leadership practices and organizational context (Yang et al., 2023).

Ethical leadership has been widely recognized as a significant predictor of positive employee behaviors, including employee voice behavior. Ethical leaders demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct through actions, communication, and reinforcement of ethical standards, thereby building trust and fairness within the organization. Such leadership reduces employees' fear of negative consequences and encourages them to express constructive opinions. Empirical evidence suggests that ethical leadership significantly enhances employee voice behavior by fostering psychological safety and promoting open communication (Hu et al., 2018). Additionally, ethical leadership has been associated with improved employee engagement, creativity, and innovative behavior through mechanisms such as trust development and psychological empowerment (Abuzaid et al., 2023).

However, the influence of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior is not uniform and is shaped by contextual factors. Organizational culture plays a critical moderating role in determining how leadership behaviors are interpreted and translated into employee actions. Organizational culture reflects shared values, norms, and behavioral expectations that guide employee conduct within an organization. A supportive and ethical organizational culture strengthens openness, trust, and psychological safety, thereby enhancing the impact of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior. In contrast, rigid or hierarchical cultures may suppress employee voice despite ethical leadership practices due to fear of criticism or punishment.

Recent literature highlights that organizational culture acts as a boundary condition that influences the strength of leadership-outcome relationships. Ethical organizational culture reinforces positive leadership effects on employee attitudes and behaviors, including communication willingness and organizational commitment (Aslam et al., 2023). In this context, organizational culture is expected to amplify the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior by creating an environment where employees feel safe to express their ideas without fear of retaliation.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, there remains a notable research gap in integrating ethical leadership, employee voice behavior, and organizational culture within a unified framework, particularly in emerging economies. Most existing studies have focused on direct relationships or mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety, while limited attention has been given to the moderating role of organizational culture. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining the impact of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior and the moderating role of organizational culture in strengthening this relationship.

Problem Statement

In contemporary organizational environments, employee voice behavior is widely recognized as a critical mechanism for enhancing innovation, problem-solving, and organizational effectiveness. Despite its importance, many organizations continue to experience low levels of employee voice due to fear of negative consequences, hierarchical barriers, and lack of supportive workplace environments. Ethical leadership has been identified as a key antecedent of employee voice behavior because it promotes fairness, transparency, trust, and psychological safety. However, empirical findings regarding the strength and consistency of this relationship remain mixed, particularly in developing and culturally diverse organizational contexts.

A key limitation in existing literature is the insufficient consideration of contextual factors that may strengthen or weaken the influence of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior. Organizational culture, which reflects shared values, norms, and behavioral expectations within an organization, is a critical but underexplored moderating factor in this relationship. In many organizations, even ethically oriented leadership may fail to encourage employee voice if the organizational culture does not support openness, participation, and psychological safety. Conversely, supportive cultures may amplify the positive effects of ethical leadership on employee behavior.

In the context of emerging economies, including Pakistan, organizational structures are often characterized by power distance, hierarchical decision-making, and limited upward communication, which further restrict employee voice behavior. Therefore, there is a significant need to empirically investigate how ethical leadership influences employee voice behavior and how organizational culture shapes this relationship. The absence of an integrated framework considering both ethical leadership and organizational culture limits a comprehensive understanding of employee voice dynamics. This study addresses this gap by examining organizational culture as a moderating variable in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior?
2. How does organizational culture influence employee voice behavior?
3. Does organizational culture moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior?
4. To what extent does ethical leadership contribute to enhancing employee voice behavior in organizations?
5. How do different organizational cultural environments affect employees' willingness to express their opinions and suggestions?

Research Objectives

General Objective

To examine the impact of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior and to analyze the moderating role of organizational culture in this relationship.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the direct effect of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior.
2. To examine the influence of organizational culture on employee voice behavior.
3. To analyze the moderating role of organizational culture in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior.
4. To determine the extent to which ethical leadership enhances employee voice behavior in organizational settings.
5. To provide empirical evidence on how organizational culture shapes employee communication and voice behavior.

Significance of the Study

This study holds considerable significance in both theoretical and practical domains of organizational behavior by providing an integrated understanding of ethical leadership, employee

voice behavior, and organizational culture. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by extending ethical leadership literature beyond direct behavioral outcomes. While prior research has largely examined the direct influence of ethical leadership on employee attitudes and behaviors, this study advances the literature by incorporating organizational culture as a contextual boundary condition. In doing so, it provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how leadership effectiveness is shaped by the cultural environment within organizations.

Furthermore, the study enriches employee voice behavior literature by identifying ethical leadership as a key antecedent and organizational culture as a moderating mechanism. This integrated model helps address inconsistencies in previous empirical findings by explaining why ethical leadership may produce varying levels of employee voice behavior across different organizational contexts. The findings also contribute to social exchange theory and leadership-behavior frameworks by highlighting the role of perceived fairness, trust, and cultural support in shaping employee communication behavior.

From a practical perspective, the study offers valuable insights for organizational leaders, human resource practitioners, and policymakers. It emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership practices in fostering an open and supportive work environment where employees feel psychologically safe to express their ideas and concerns. Organizations can utilize these findings to design leadership development programs that strengthen ethical decision-making, transparency, and trust-building among managers.

Additionally, the study highlights the critical role of organizational culture in shaping employee behavior. Managers are encouraged to cultivate a culture that promotes openness, participation, and mutual respect, as such an environment enhances the effectiveness of ethical leadership. For policymakers and organizational developers, the findings provide guidance on designing organizational systems and policies that encourage upward communication and employee participation, ultimately improving organizational performance and innovation.

In the context of emerging economies, where hierarchical structures and power distance often limit employee voice behavior, this study is particularly relevant. It provides evidence-based insights that can help organizations in such contexts develop more inclusive and ethically driven cultures that empower employees to contribute meaningfully to organizational growth and decision-making processes.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership has emerged as a significant construct in organizational behavior literature, emphasizing the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes. Ethical leaders act as role models by exhibiting integrity, fairness, honesty, and accountability, which in turn shape employee attitudes and behaviors. According to leadership theory, ethical leadership is grounded in social learning theory, which suggests that employees observe and imitate the behavior of leaders perceived as credible and morally sound. In organizational settings, ethical leadership has been consistently associated with positive employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in leadership, and citizenship behavior.

Recent empirical studies indicate that ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping employee psychological states, particularly trust and psychological safety. When employees perceive their leaders as ethical and fair, they are more likely to feel secure in expressing their opinions and concerns without fear of retaliation. This psychological safety becomes a key mechanism through which ethical leadership influences employee behavior, particularly in relation to upward communication and voice behavior. However, despite growing interest in ethical leadership, the strength of its impact on employee outcomes varies across different organizational and cultural contexts, suggesting the need to explore moderating factors.

Employee Voice Behavior

Employee voice behavior refers to discretionary communication by employees aimed at improving organizational functioning. It includes the expression of constructive ideas, suggestions, concerns, and opinions related to work processes, policies, or practices. Voice behavior is considered a vital component of organizational learning and innovation, as it enables organizations to identify problems early and implement corrective actions.

The literature identifies two main forms of voice behavior: promotive voice, which focuses on suggesting new ideas for improvement, and prohibitive voice, which involves expressing concerns about harmful practices or potential risks. Both forms are essential for organizational effectiveness; however, employees often hesitate to engage in voice behavior due to perceived risks such as rejection, criticism, or punishment.

Research has shown that voice behavior is strongly influenced by leadership style, particularly those that promote openness, trust, and psychological safety. Employees are more likely to speak up when they perceive that their contributions will be valued and not lead to negative consequences. Despite its importance, employee voice behavior remains underutilized in many organizations, particularly in hierarchical and high power-distance cultures where upward communication is often restricted.

Ethical Leadership and Employee Voice Behavior

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior. Ethical leaders foster an environment of trust, fairness, and respect, which encourages employees to express their opinions without fear. By modeling ethical conduct and reinforcing organizational values, leaders create a psychological climate that supports open communication.

Empirical evidence suggests that ethical leadership positively influences employee voice behavior through several mechanisms, including psychological safety, leader-member exchange quality, and employee empowerment. When employees perceive ethical leadership, they are more likely to believe that their voices will be heard and respected, which increases their willingness to engage in constructive communication.

However, existing studies have reported inconsistent findings regarding the strength of this relationship. In some organizational contexts, ethical leadership strongly predicts voice behavior, while in others, the relationship is weak or indirect. These inconsistencies suggest that additional contextual variables may influence this relationship, highlighting the need for further investigation.

Organizational Culture as a Moderating Variable

Organizational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape behavior within an organization. It provides a social framework that influences how employees interpret leadership actions and organizational expectations. A supportive organizational culture encourages openness, collaboration, and psychological safety, whereas a rigid or hierarchical culture may discourage employee participation and upward communication.

The literature suggests that organizational culture plays a crucial moderating role in leadership-outcome relationships. In supportive cultures, the positive effects of ethical leadership are amplified because employees feel more comfortable expressing their ideas. Conversely, in cultures characterized by high power distance or fear-based control systems, even ethical leaders may struggle to encourage employee voice behavior.

Recent studies emphasize that organizational culture not only shapes employee behavior directly but also influences how leadership behaviors are perceived and acted upon. Therefore, organizational culture is expected to strengthen the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior by creating an environment conducive to open communication and mutual trust.

Despite extensive research on ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, several gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies have focused on the direct relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, with limited attention to contextual factors that may influence this relationship. Second, while organizational culture has been recognized as an important organizational variable, its moderating role in the ethical leadership-voice behavior relationship remains underexplored.

Third, there is a lack of empirical evidence from emerging economies, where organizational hierarchies, cultural norms, and power distance may significantly affect employee communication behavior. This gap is particularly relevant in contexts such as Pakistan, where organizational environments often discourage upward communication.

Therefore, there is a need for an integrated framework that simultaneously examines ethical leadership, employee voice behavior, and organizational culture to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership influences employee communication in different organizational contexts.

Underpinning Theory: Social Exchange Theory

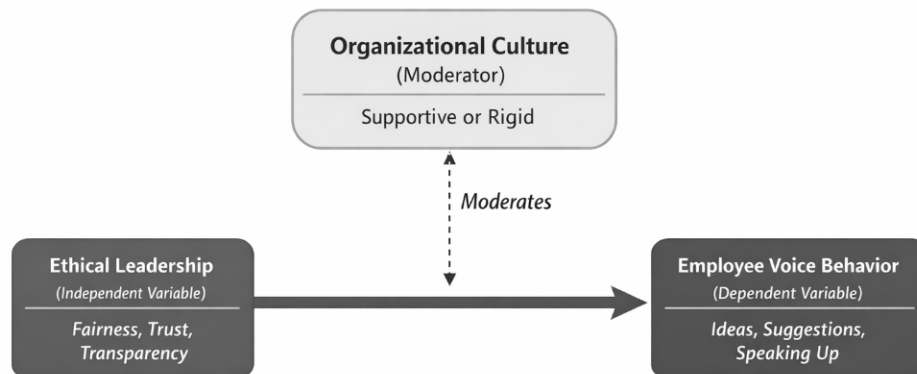
This study is primarily grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), which explains organizational behavior as a series of reciprocal interactions between employees and their organization. The theory posits that relationships in the workplace are built on mutual trust, perceived fairness, and the expectation of balanced exchanges between parties. When employees perceive positive treatment from their organization or leaders, they feel obligated to reciprocate with favorable attitudes and behaviors such as commitment, cooperation, and discretionary contributions.

In the context of this study, ethical leadership represents a key form of positive social exchange. Ethical leaders demonstrate fairness, integrity, transparency, and concern for employees' well-being. According to Social Exchange Theory, when employees perceive such ethical treatment, they develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate through constructive behaviors, including employee voice behavior. Speaking up with ideas, suggestions, or concerns is viewed as a form of positive reciprocity that benefits the organization.

Furthermore, organizational culture strengthens or weakens the exchange relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior. A supportive and open organizational culture enhances perceived fairness and trust, thereby reinforcing the social exchange process. In such environments, employees feel psychologically safe to engage in voice behavior because they believe their contributions will be valued and not penalized. Conversely, in rigid or hierarchical cultures, the social exchange process is weakened, and employees may withhold their voice despite ethical leadership.

Thus, Social Exchange Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for this study by explaining how ethical leadership fosters employee voice behavior through reciprocal relationships, and how organizational culture shapes the strength of this exchange process.

Conceptual Farmwork



Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and theoretical foundation of ethical leadership, employee voice behavior, and organizational culture, the following hypotheses are developed for empirical testing:

H1: Ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on employee voice behavior.

H2: Organizational culture has a significant positive effect on employee voice behavior.

H3: Organizational culture significantly moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, such that the relationship is stronger in organizations with a supportive and open culture.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, along with the moderating role of organizational culture. A deductive approach was employed based on established behavioral and leadership theories to empirically test the proposed hypotheses.

Population

The population of the study consisted of employees working in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan. These organizations included manufacturing, service, education, and corporate institutions where leadership practices directly influence employee communication and

decision-making behavior. The target population was estimated at a broad organizational employee base across major cities of Pakistan.

Sample

The study selected a sample of 320 employees working in different organizations located in major cities of Pakistan, including Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi. These respondents included both managerial and non-managerial employees to ensure variation in organizational roles and perceptions of leadership behavior and organizational culture.

Sampling Technique

A purposive and convenience sampling technique was used to select respondents. Employees were chosen based on their availability and their exposure to supervisory and leadership structures within their organizations. This technique was considered appropriate due to accessibility constraints and the need to obtain relevant responses from employees directly experiencing leadership practices.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed both physically and electronically among respondents. Standardized Likert-scale instruments were used to measure ethical leadership, employee voice behavior, and organizational culture.

Measurement of Variables

Ethical leadership was measured using items reflecting fairness, integrity, and ethical guidance. Employee voice behavior was assessed through promotive and prohibitive voice dimensions. Organizational culture was measured using indicators of openness, supportiveness, and hierarchical orientation.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression techniques. The moderating effect of organizational culture was tested through interaction terms in regression analysis. Statistical significance was assessed at 5% and 1% levels.

Ethical Considerations

The study ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation of all respondents. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and the data were used solely for academic purposes without disclosure of personal identities.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data and understand the distribution, central tendency, and variability of the study variables, including ethical leadership, employee voice behavior, and organizational culture.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ethical Leadership	320	3.78	0.74	1.80	5.00
Employee Voice Behavior	320	3.65	0.69	1.90	4.95
Organizational Culture	320	3.72	0.71	1.85	4.98

The results indicate that the mean value of ethical leadership ($M = 3.78$) reflects a moderately high perception of ethical behavior among supervisors. Employee voice behavior ($M = 3.65$) also shows a moderate level, suggesting that employees are somewhat willing to express their ideas and concerns in organizational settings. Organizational culture ($M = 3.72$) indicates a moderately supportive environment, although variation in responses suggests differences across organizations. The standard deviation values show moderate dispersion, indicating that respondents' perceptions were not highly uniform.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship among study variables.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variables	EL	EVB	OC
Ethical Leadership (EL)	1		
Employee Voice Behavior (EVB)	0.61**	1	
Organizational Culture (OC)	0.54**	0.57**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

The correlation results show a strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior ($r = 0.61$), indicating that employees are more likely to speak up when they perceive leadership as ethical. Organizational culture is also positively correlated with both ethical leadership ($r = 0.54$) and employee voice behavior ($r = 0.57$), suggesting that supportive cultures foster both ethical leadership effectiveness and employee communication behavior.

Regression Analysis (Direct Effect)

A regression analysis was conducted to test the effect of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior.

Table 3: Direct Effect of Ethical Leadership on Employee Voice Behavior

Predictor	Beta	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Ethical Leadership	0.58	0.05	11.60	0.000
Constant	1.42	0.21	6.76	0.000

$R^2 = 0.37$

$F = 134.56, p < 0.001$

The results indicate that ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on employee voice behavior ($\beta = 0.58, p < 0.001$). This implies that employees are more likely to express their opinions and concerns when they perceive their leaders as ethical and fair. The R^2 value of 0.37 suggests that ethical leadership explains 37% of the variation in employee voice behavior, indicating moderate explanatory power.

Moderation Analysis (Organizational Culture)

A moderation analysis was conducted using interaction terms to examine whether organizational culture strengthens the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior.

Table 4: Moderation Effect of Organizational Culture

Variable	Beta	t-value	p-value
Ethical Leadership	0.41	8.92	0.000
Organizational Culture	0.32	6.48	0.000
EL × OC (Interaction Term)	0.21	4.87	0.000

R² Change = 0.06 (p < 0.01)

The results confirm that organizational culture significantly moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior. The positive and significant interaction term ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$) indicates that the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior becomes stronger in organizations with a supportive and open culture. The R² change of 0.06 shows that moderation adds explanatory power to the model.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the proposed relationships between ethical leadership, employee voice behavior, and organizational culture. The results confirm that ethical leadership significantly enhances employee voice behavior, indicating that employees are more willing to express their ideas, suggestions, and concerns when they perceive their leaders as fair, trustworthy, and morally grounded. This finding is consistent with social learning theory, which suggests that employees tend to imitate the behavior of leaders who demonstrate ethical conduct and integrity in decision-making processes.

The study further reveals that organizational culture plays a dual role in shaping employee voice behavior. First, it has a direct positive effect on voice behavior, indicating that supportive, open, and participative cultures encourage employees to communicate freely. Second, and more importantly, organizational culture significantly moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior. The results show that the positive impact of ethical leadership becomes stronger in organizations characterized by a supportive and open culture. This suggests that even ethically oriented leaders may not fully succeed in promoting employee voice behavior if the organizational culture does not reinforce openness, psychological safety, and trust.

These findings highlight that employee voice behavior is not solely a function of leadership style but is also deeply embedded in the organizational environment. In contexts where hierarchical structures and power distance are high, such as many organizations in developing economies, cultural barriers may suppress employee willingness to speak up, even in the presence of ethical leadership.

Conclusion

The study concludes that ethical leadership is a significant predictor of employee voice behavior, and this relationship is strengthened by a supportive organizational culture. Ethical leaders foster trust, fairness, and psychological safety, which encourage employees to express their opinions and concerns. However, the effectiveness of ethical leadership is contingent upon the organizational culture in which it operates. A culture that promotes openness, participation, and mutual respect enhances the influence of ethical leadership, whereas a rigid or hierarchical culture may weaken it. Overall, the integrated model demonstrates that both leadership behavior and organizational culture are essential determinants of employee voice behavior. The findings provide a more comprehensive

understanding of how internal organizational factors interact to shape employee communication and participation.

Implications

The study offers several important theoretical, managerial, and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it extends ethical leadership literature by incorporating organizational culture as a moderating variable, thereby providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding employee voice behavior. It also contributes to leadership-behavior theories by demonstrating that leadership effects are context-dependent rather than universal.

From a managerial perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of ethical leadership development within organizations. Managers and supervisors should be trained to adopt ethical decision-making practices, demonstrate fairness, and build trust with employees. Such leadership behaviors can significantly enhance employee willingness to contribute ideas and concerns.

The study also highlights the critical role of organizational culture in shaping employee behavior. Organizations should foster a culture that encourages openness, communication, and psychological safety. HR policies and organizational systems should be designed to support upward communication and reduce fear of negative consequences associated with speaking up.

From a policy perspective, organizations, especially in emerging economies, should promote cultural transformation initiatives aimed at reducing hierarchical barriers and encouraging participative decision-making.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that organizations invest in leadership development programs that emphasize ethical values, integrity, and fairness. Managers should be trained to actively encourage employee input and respond positively to suggestions and concerns.

Organizations should also focus on developing a supportive and inclusive culture that values employee participation. This can be achieved through open-door policies, regular feedback systems, and transparent communication channels.

Furthermore, organizations should establish formal mechanisms such as suggestion systems and employee forums to facilitate voice behavior and ensure that employee contributions are recognized and implemented where appropriate.

Future Directions

Future research should extend this study by exploring additional mediating variables such as psychological safety, trust in leadership, and employee engagement to better explain the mechanisms underlying employee voice behavior. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts could also be conducted to enhance the generalizability of findings.

Moreover, future studies may employ longitudinal research designs to examine how ethical leadership and organizational culture influence employee voice behavior over time. Advanced analytical techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or multi-level modeling could also be used to capture complex relationships more accurately.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to common method bias and response bias.

Third, the sample was limited to employees from selected organizations in Pakistan, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other countries or organizational contexts. Finally, the study focused only on organizational culture as a moderating variable, whereas other contextual factors may also influence employee voice behavior and could be explored in future research.

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