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Exploring moral voice in Vietnam's public sector: a study of socially responsible human resource management, public service motivation, and ethical leadership

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Abstract: This research delves into the potential influence of socially responsible human resource management (SRHRM) on moral voice (MV), emphasising the mediating effect of public service motivation (PSM) and the moderating impact of ethical leadership (ETL) through the lens of social information processing (SIP) theory. Using a questionnaire-based survey and a cluster sampling technique, we gathered data from 434 public servants and cadres in Tien Giang province, Vietnam, which we analysed using a structural equation modelling technique. The results highlight a significant connection between SRHRM and ETL with impacts on MV. Additionally, there is an indirect link between SRHRM and MV channelled through PSM. Ethical leadership was found to play a crucial moderating role in the relationship between SRHRM and both PSM and MV. In this pioneering study in the field, we also discuss various theoretical and practical insights.

Keywords: ethical leadership; ETL; moral voice; MV; public service motivation; PSM; public sector; socially responsible human resource management; SRHRM; Vietnam.

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1 Introduction

While strategies within governments and other organisations aim to combat unethical acts like corruption, bribery, and minor integrity infringements (Hossain et al., 2020; Ripoll and Ballart, 2020), such issues persist, predominantly in developing and transitional nations (Hossain et al., 2020). Here, the effects can lead to dwindling public trust (Thaler and Helmig, 2016), eroded confidence (Jurkiewicz and Giacalone, 2016), the undermining of the rule of law (United Nations, 2001), and unfavourable organisational perceptions (Kim and Vandenberghe, 2020). Public servants, with their specialised knowledge and decision-making autonomy (Farr-Wharton et al., 2011), may deviate from or oppose managerial directives (Noordegraaf, 2007), leading to unproductive behaviours (Hossain et al., 2020). This phenomenon has spurred renewed research interest in ethics, highlighting the need for ethical reinforcement in public services, especially in transitional nations (Hossain et al., 2020). As a result, the topic of unethical behaviour in public service has captured widespread attention, with researchers seeking to identify its causes and explore potential mitigation strategies (Belle and Cantarelli, 2017; Ripoll and Ballart, 2020).

Some authors have stressed the promotion of ethical behaviour within organisations (Feldman et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2016). For example, moral voice (MV) (Zheng et al., 2021) encourages employees to address unethical workplace practices (Lee et al., 2017). This proactive approach is invaluable in tackling unethical

issues before they escalate (Lee et al., 2017), as previous studies show that failing to address ethical concerns can increase organisational corruption (Rothwell and Baldwin, 2007) and undermine public respect for laws (Kleinig, 1996). Thus, understanding and encouraging MV is critical (Zheng et al., 2021). However, embracing MV can come with personal risks, such as potential backlash (Morrison, 2011). Despite the challenges, it is vital for organisational health (Lee et al., 2017). Hence, researchers are delving into how to foster employee MV (Zhao et al., 2023a).

Using social information processing (SIP) theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), this study postulates the importance of MV in relation to socially responsible human resource strategies and ethical leadership (ETL) within public organisations. It draws upon Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), who argue that individual behaviour is influenced by social context. Similarly, some studies demonstrate that employees seek signals about the safety of voicing concerns in their work environment, which influences their subsequent actions (Dutton et al., 2002, 1997). The organisational environment plays a significant role in determining how often employees express their concerns, making it more or less prevalent in various settings (Morrison, 2011; Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Socially responsible human resource management (SRHRM), which can be described as the application of corporate social responsibility (CSR) toward employees, is foundational to the effective execution of CSR initiatives (Shen and Benson, 2014). While CSR has often been linked to private entities, there is a growing expectation for the public sector to adopt such responsible practices, primarily because contemporary societies demand greater accountability, transparency, and effectiveness from governmental bodies (Di Bitetto et al., 2015). As a result, numerous governments have started championing and integrating CSR into their operations (Ray and Beddewela, 2022).

Notably, there is a research gap concerning CSR's role in the public sector within developing nations, particularly one that focuses on employees' perceptions and the impact of CSR on their attitudes (Abdelmoteleb and Saha, 2019; Grabner-Kräuter et al., 2023). Organisations adopting SRHRM can foster ethical and sustainable work environments, playing a pivotal role in gaining societal endorsement (Vu, 2022). To decipher the influence of SRHRM on employee MV, we rely on the theory of SIP (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Essentially, when organisations integrate SRHRM, this approach provides employees with insights into the organisation's core principles and their relationship with stakeholders (De Roeck and Farooq, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022).

Previous research largely focused on SRHRM's connection to elements like employee commitment, well-being, and job performance (Luu et al., 2022; Shen and Zhu, 2011; Vu, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Notably, Zhao et al. (2023a) use self-determination theory to expand this understanding by establishing SRHRM's role in enhancing MV. However, the domain of SRHRM requires more extensive exploration, especially to identify and evaluate its broader societal impacts (Barnett et al., 2020) and deeper intricacies related to CSR within HR practices (Xiao et al., 2020). This research leans on SIP theory to clarify SRHRM's effect on employee MV within public institutions.

Leadership and HRM are vital elements influencing multiple organisational-level results (Zhao et al., 2023b), and it is well-understood that HRM strategies should be viewed in tandem with the methods through which these policies and systems are executed (Becker and Huselid, 2006; Steffensen et al., 2019). To ensure HR practices are not merely isolated actions, managers and HRM experts "need to be able to explain conceptually how and why HRM practices lead to their outcomes" [Ulrich, (1997),

p.238]. Previous research has explored the role of leaders in supporting organisations' enhanced performance, success and response to the crisis (Al-Haimi et al., 2021; Mai et al., 2023; Rastogi et al., 2019).

Previous research underscores the significance of ethical leaders in encouraging team members to adopt ethical communication practices (Huang and Paterson, 2014; Lee et al., 2017). Both the academic literature and real-world examples from Vietnam's public sector reform highlight the pivotal role of leadership during organisational change and reform (van der Voet, 2014; Wong, 2015). This effect is even more pronounced in Vietnam, where state bodies adhere to the democratic centralism principle (Pham, 2018). While the positive influence of leadership types like ETL is recognised, no study combines HRM strategies-specifically SRHRM and ETL to bolster MV of public workers. Historically, the evolution of leadership and HRM has been largely independent (Vermeeren et al., 2013), meaning the full benefits and insights of a combined approach have been missed and signalling a pressing need to merge research on both fields across various situations (Steffensen et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2023b). In this piece, we delve into the potential of ETL in supporting public servants who amplify their ethical stance within organisations, specifically focusing on the role of ETL in linking SRHRM with PSM and MV.

In the field of public administration, the topic of public service motivation (PSM) – defined as “the motivation to perform meaningful public service and to unselfishly defend the public interest” [Vandenabeele, (2008), p.144] – has been a central focus (Ripoll and Schott, 2023). PSM is linked not just to positive outcomes at work but also to constructive activities beyond the workplace, like political and civic participation (Ritz et al., 2016). Leadership and management approaches can either boost or suppress PSM, influencing key personnel and institutional outcomes (Hameduddin and Engbers, 2022). A vast majority of PSM research underscores its relationship with ethical results. Some research ties PSM to a propensity to whistleblow (Brewer and Selden, 1998; Caillier, 2015; Potipiroon and Wongpreedee, 2020), while others relate PSM to heightened ethical reasoning (Choi, 2004; Stazyk and Davis, 2015). Further, studies have demonstrated the positive impact of ETL styles on their team's PSM and ethical objectives (Wright et al., 2016), and others have discussed how PSM can decrease tolerance for unethical conduct. Hence, it is evident that PSM promotes ethical behaviour (Ripoll and Ballart, 2020).

Several empirical efforts have explored PSM's mediating role between organisational strategies, such as HRM methods, and worker outcomes (Gould-Williams et al., 2014), as well as the perception of CSR employees regarding PSM and beneficial workplace behaviours (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2019). Although PSM and social responsibility are separate and seemingly contrasting concepts, both offer insights into employees' community-oriented actions (Hammon et al., 2023). Nonetheless, there is a research gap concerning the direct impact of workers' views on their organisation's SRHRM in terms of their embrace of ethical behaviours and the indirect effect through their PSM. This paper intends to investigate the association of PSM with employees' MV concerning SRHRM and their ETL.

The research aims to elucidate how SRHRM and ETL amplify MV among public servants, drawing from SIP theory. Our work offers four key insights. First, we apply SIP theory to the realm of SRHRM, clarifying how SRHRM methods shape employees' MV. Second, we combine SRHRM and ETL to identify the precursors of MV. Third, the results emphasise the significance of PSM, acting as a critical intermediary between SRHRM and MV. Last, our analysis delves into the moderating effect of ETL in the

connection between SRHRM-PSM and SRHRM-MV. We see ETL as a crucial contextual factor for SRHRM's impact. The study's conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

2 Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 *SIP theory*

SIP theory, originally conceived from the need-satisfaction model by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), underscores the role of context in shaping individual attitudes and behaviours. It posits that work environments are subjectively constructed by the individuals within them, impacting their cognitive processes. This theory has gained significant traction in management disciplines, explaining how social settings shape individual cognition, attitudes, and behaviours (Wang et al., 2022). Central to SIP is the belief that individuals adjust their attitudes and behaviours according to their social contexts, informed by their experiences and immediate social surroundings. This environment offers cues that guide individuals in understanding and interpreting events, shaping their attitudes. The social environment directly impacts such interpretations and amplifies certain information, guiding behaviour expectations and outcomes. Attitudes are formed based on a mix of social influences and cognitive evaluations of the job environment, drawing from various informational sources like past behaviours, social interactions, and contextual features (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978).

Employees operate within these social contexts, extracting cues about acceptable attitudes and actions (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978) and leveraging these cues to navigate and interpret workplace events (Aryee et al., 2012). When organisations invest in CSR practices, it signals to public servants a prioritisation of CSR, resulting in heightened engagement and positive outcomes like proactive voice behaviours (Ilkhanizadeh and Karatepe, 2017). Similarly, SRHRM practices offer employees insights into organisational norms and values, clarifying how organisations engage with different stakeholders (Zhang et al., 2022).

Furthermore, SIP research suggests that individuals process information based on their understanding of cognitive and behavioural responses derived from social exchanges (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Zalesny and Ford, 1990). Given the influence of this social information, individual behaviours and attitudes emerge as cognitive outcomes (Boekhorst, 2015). Past research also affirms the relevance of SIP in organisational leadership contexts (Wadei et al., 2021). More specifically, employees often seek leadership cues to decipher their organisational environment, adjusting their beliefs and behaviours accordingly (Gu et al., 2018). Through their actions and statements, ethical leaders reassure members, fostering confidence and creativity. As employees process this information, they develop a collective trust in their interactions, emboldening them to take risks due to the assurance of a safe environment (Wadei et al., 2021).

2.2 *Socially responsible HRM and PSM*

Shen and Zhu (2011) blend HRM and social responsibility to introduce a novel HRM approach called SRHRM. This approach focuses on internal and external interests, aiming to merge organisational and social outcomes. Essentially, SRHRM represents

CSR initiatives aimed at employees, known as internal CSR (Shen and Benson, 2014). It encompasses more than just providing better salaries and work conditions, extending to recruiting responsible employees, offering CSR training, and considering social contributions during evaluations and promotions (Orlitzky and Swanson, 2006; Shen and Zhu, 2011). Thus, SRHRM not only forms a core of CSR efforts but is pivotal for their success since employees are integral to fulfilling CSR goals (Shen and Benson, 2014). Embracing SRHRM practices symbolises an organisation's alignment with social CSR standards and is crucial for effectively implementing CSR activities (Orlitzky and Swanson, 2006). SRHRM's significance in the public sector stems from its goal of nurturing a socially committed workforce (Luu et al., 2022; Shen and Benson, 2014). Concerning employee reactions to CSR, recent micro-CSR studies indicate that positive CSR perceptions correlate with numerous favourable work outcomes (Grabner-Kräuter et al., 2023).

Turning to SIP theory, it offers insights into how SRHRM practices influence employee PSM. According to the theory, employees derive cues, like organisational values and norms, from their work environment to discern the appropriate attitudes and behaviours in a given social context (Griffin, 1983; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Zhang et al., 2022). As such, implementing SRHRM practices offers employees insights into organisational standards and values, clarifying their interactions with different stakeholders (Zhang et al., 2022). Moynihan and Pandey (2007) emphasise that while pre-existing sociohistorical factors shape PSM, the work environment further moulds it. Employees assimilate collective ethics from public institutions, influencing their motivation. Both internal CSR and the drive to serve converge on shared ethical principles, with the former bolstering the latter (Ramdhan et al., 2022).

Regarding PSM, it is perceived by some scholars as a collection of beliefs and values. Vandenabeele (2007) characterises PSM as beliefs and attitudes transcending self and organisational interests, driving individuals toward actions benefiting broader entities. Given the SIP framework, we can deduce that SRHRM initiatives stimulate PSM. The notion of working for a socially impactful organisation (SRHRM) can enhance an employee's sense of purpose. For example, when employees sense their organisation's larger societal contribution, they experience enriched job meaningfulness. By focusing on public servants' well-being through SRHRM strategies, organisations signal a loftier mission to their staff (Glavas and Kelley, 2014). SRHRM undertakings also convey pivotal messages about organisational morals and trustworthiness (Hansen et al., 2011). Building on this notion and the SIP theory, this study posits a link between employee perceptions of SRHRM and PSM:

Hypothesis 1 SRHRM practices are positively related to PSM.

2.3 ETL and PSM

This research emphasises the significance of ETL in enhancing employee PSM, described as a specific type of selfless motivation rooted in the values and principles of public institutions (Perry et al., 2010). In practical terms, individuals with strong PSM believe in prioritising public welfare over personal interests, value meaningful public service, and advocate for others' rights, even when doing so involves personal sacrifices (Potipiroon and Wongpreedee, 2020). While some experts believe PSM remains consistent over time, others suggest it can be influenced by management strategies, including leadership

(Hameduddin and Engbers, 2022). A recent study posits that PSM can stem from prolonged social conditioning, but it might also be shaped by rapid shifts in organisational surroundings (Christensen et al., 2017). Consequently, the academic community has been advocating for deeper insights into the connection between PSM and public administration practices to enhance the workplace experience (Christensen et al., 2017; Piatak et al., 2021).

In studies on public administration, the actions of immediate superiors have been identified as crucial precursors to employee PSM (Paarlberg and Lavigna, 2010). ETL is defined as showcasing appropriate behaviour through personal interactions and promoting this behaviour among followers via open communication, reinforcement, and decision-making processes (Brown et al., 2005). ETLs are viewed as fair and consistent, practising ethical behaviours routinely. Core traits of ETL include integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, respect, and active listening (Moon and Christensen, 2022). By exhibiting fairness and transparency, ETLs set benchmarks for appropriate behaviour and serve as role models (Brown et al., 2005).

Leveraging SIP theory, we posit that constructive feedback from ETLs reshapes employee viewpoints, attitudes, and actions. Employees use these cues to decipher their organisational setting and adjust their perceptions accordingly (Gu et al., 2018). ETLs guide their subordinates toward understanding the importance of appropriate behaviours (Wadei et al., 2021). Specifically, these leaders can facilitate opportunities for employees to act in line with their PSM values. Since employees often perceive their leaders as direct representatives of organisational values (Abubakar et al., 2018), ETL can reaffirm the significance of public service, societal contribution, and personal sacrifices for the greater good. Thus, we argue that ETL can amplify PSM among public servants by aligning organisational and individual values (Potipiroon and Ford, 2017).

In public institutions, clear goals enable employees to discern how their roles benefit society. Given that PSM-driven individuals seek roles with societal impact, it is logical that clear organisational goals can elevate their PSM levels (Caillier, 2016). In support of this view, Treviño et al. (2003) highlight that ETLs provide value-driven guidance, conveying the broader organisational mission and showing employees how their tasks contribute to it. Such connections and the stories ETLs tell help employees see the purpose of their roles (Demirtas et al., 2017). In short, ETL can heighten PSM since individuals with this motivation deeply value meaningful public service. Based on SIP theory, we anticipate a positive correlation between ETL and employee PSM:

Hypothesis 2 ETL is positively related to PSM.

2.4 PSM and MV

Horton (2008) suggests that public servants prioritise serving the community over their interests. Similarly, initial studies examining the link between PSM and ethics (Brewer and Selden, 1998; Kwon, 2012; Wright et al., 2016) propose a central theme: PSM positively influences ethical outcomes because both PSM and ethics embody shared public ideals, emphasising community welfare over personal gains (Ripoll and Ballart, 2020). One can view PSM as a manifestation of public ethical principles, which stem from institutional values and are instilled in individuals through their identity and convictions (Vandenabeele, 2007). These ethical values and identity development shape

individuals' self-awareness and foster a sense of duty, driving them to serve the public (Perry, 2000).

Regarding ethics, some evidence links PSM to actions like whistle-blowing (Brewer and Selden, 1998; Caillier, 2015; Potipiroon and Wongpreedee, 2020), ethical judgment (Choi, 2004; Stazyk and Davis, 2015), and the readiness to identify and report unethical practices (Wright et al., 2016). These insights portray public servants as ethically-minded people who adopt values favouring public welfare and resisting immoral actions (Andersen et al., 2020). Hence, it is plausible to assume PSM can influence one's MV. Further, PSM represents a commitment to benefiting society, showing allegiance to governmental and public entities, advocating for social equity, and exhibiting empathy (Christensen and Whiting, 2009). Researchers highlight PSM as a dedication to activities in the public sector that serve and benefit the community (Andersen et al., 2020).

Relatedly, while general vocal behaviours seek to enhance performance (Morrison, 2011, 2014), MV focuses on refining ethical choices and actions (Huang and Paterson, 2014). Therefore, MV is a specific type of vocal behaviour rooted in employees' discernment of right and wrong. Much like the prosocial voice, this MV involves assessing the potential risks of speaking out (Burris, 2012; Detert and Burris, 2007). However, it also demands a consideration of the moral imperative to address ethical dilemmas at work. In essence, even when faced with potential repercussions, individuals might choose to voice their concerns due to their strong ethical beliefs (Gentile, 2010; Huang and Paterson, 2014).

To date, no research has explicitly probed how PSM positively affects the MV of public workers. However, based on the aforementioned reasoning, we can postulate the following:

Hypothesis 3 PSM is positively correlated with the MV.

2.5 *Socially responsible HRM and MV*

According to SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Thomas and Griffin, 1989), people's attitudes and behaviours are primarily influenced by their immediate social surroundings. Consequently, workers evaluate and mentally assess information from their workplace to decide the best attitudes and actions to display (De Roeck and Farooq, 2018; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Building on this idea, some experts suggest that employee views of an organisation's ethical activities, like CSR initiatives, can shape their moral considerations and the actions they may take to benefit others (De Roeck and Farooq, 2018). Therefore, when organisations adopt SRHRM practices, it provides employees with a glimpse into the organisation's ethical standards and values, helping them grasp the organisation's approach to different stakeholders (De Roeck and Farooq, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022).

SRHRM practices emphasise the importance of ethical rights and actions. They demonstrate an organisation's moral duty toward the mental well-being of its staff. This duty instills a sense of moral commitment in employees toward their roles, and they come to embody these ethical values, heightening their moral consciousness (Ramdhan et al., 2022). As SIP theory suggests, an employee's experiences play a crucial role in determining how social cues guide behaviour (Thomas and Griffin, 1989). Such experiences position SRHRM as a guiding force, encouraging altruistic actions (Ramdhan et al., 2022). SRHRM not only integrates ethical considerations into areas like

hiring, promotion, evaluation, and training but also promotes employee involvement in socially responsible deeds, such as charitable giving (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2019; Shen and Benson, 2014; Zhao et al., 2023a).

First, SRHRM practices attract and retain staff who are deeply committed to CSR (Shen and Zhu, 2011). Such practices signal the organisation's ethical inclinations to employees, making them more likely to engage in moral behaviours. Thus, when confronted with unethical practices, their heightened SRHRM consciousness pushes them to voice their concerns for the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders (Zhao et al., 2023a). Second, SRHRM emphasises ethical considerations in performance evaluations (Orlitzky and Swanson, 2006; Shen and Zhu, 2011), weaving ethical standards into the organisation's fabric (Zhao et al., 2023a). Organisations with strong SRHRM practices indicate to their employees that they act responsibly. Researchers suggest that employees not only gauge their treatment within the organisation but also observe how external entities are treated, which influences their perceptions and attitudes (Zhang et al., 2022). Finally, recognising the ethical stance of an organisation through SRHRM practices clarifies the organisation's position toward unethical behaviour (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2020). By doing so, SRHRM reduces potential risks and encourages employees to voice their concerns over unethical practices (Zhao et al., 2023a). Overall, when the ethical values align between the organisation and its employees, related policies within the organisation effectively drive ethical behaviours (Zhao et al., 2023a).

In light of SIP, we suggest that SRHRM practices undertaken by organisations serve as influential social indicators that bolster their MV. Hence, we put forward the hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 SRHRM positively affects employee MV.

2.6 ETL and MV

ETL is pivotal in fostering ethical conduct within organisations (Mayer et al., 2009; Stead et al., 1990), and past research has underscored that leadership plays a crucial role in influencing the ethical actions of employees (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009; Stead et al., 1990; Treviño et al., 2014). SIP theory posits that social interactions, particularly with influential figures like leaders, shape our cognitive responses and behaviours (Boekhorst, 2015). Drawing on SIP theory, we suggest that when civil servants receive positive feedback or information from their leaders, it reshapes their perceptions, attitudes, and actions, bolstering their willingness to express ethical concerns. Public servants use these cues from leaders to decipher the organisational climate, subsequently adjusting their perceptions to align with the organisational ethos (Gu et al., 2018).

Beyond being morally upright, an ethical leader acts as a moral guide or manager (Treviño et al., 2000). Such a leader embodies attributes like integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, reliability, accessibility, and consistent moral conduct. They are value-driven and utilise ethical principles in decision-making (Treviño et al., 2000). This profile fosters an ethical organisational culture, empowering employees to freely express their thoughts, ideas, concerns, and feedback (Dua et al., 2023). Positive reinforcement from leadership instills confidence in employees, enabling them to take risks in an environment they perceive as safe (Ha and Nguyen, 2023). There is no serious

commitment without belief that can exist. Properly, no promises are made until the public servants are certain that their full trust has been earned (Ha et al., 2023).

However, expressing ethical concerns is not without its challenges (Wadei et al., 2021). Those voicing moral concerns may face backlash, jealousy, or even retaliation, especially from the subjects of their concerns (Morrison, 2011). ETL, however, can cultivate a protective environment where employees can discuss ethical dilemmas without fearing reprisals. If individuals hesitate to raise ethical issues, ETL can assuage such fears (Hassan et al., 2014). Still, MV has inherent risks, as challenging established norms can lead to disagreements or clashes, often with peers. Consequently, we posit that employees will more readily express their ethical concerns in the presence of perceived ETL:

Hypothesis 5 ETL is positively related to MV.

2.7 *The moderating role of ETL*

Our study examines how ETL affects the relationships between SRHRM in relation to both PSM and MV. Leaders have a prominent role in driving HRM practices both on individual and group scales. Their influence extends to shaping employee perspectives on HRM based on their leadership approach and behaviour (Nishii and Wright, 2008). Studies underscore leaders' pivotal role in moulding employee perceptions, attitudes, and actions within an organisation (Avolio et al., 2004). To employees, their leaders are guiding figures who set the standard for appropriate conduct (Kim et al., 2021).

Positive employee perceptions of SRHRM correlate with favourable views about organisational ethics (Abdelmoteleb and Saha, 2020). When organisations exhibit social responsibility internally, employees tend to view them as more morally sound. Actions that display a commitment to social responsibility play a significant role in shaping these perceptions (Ellemers et al., 2011). Research by Shen and Benson (2014) suggests that SRHRM activities, e.g., recruiting socially responsible employees and offering CSR training, signal an organisation's ethical commitment. Drawing from SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), employees look to leaders for insights into the organisation's intentions. Leaders do not just implement SRHRM; they offer crucial insights to employees about its purpose (Beijer et al., 2019; Nishii and Paluch, 2018). Effective communication about SRHRM is achieved when it is clear, consistent, and aligned with the organisation's goals (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004).

At a practical level, ETL showcases normative conduct personally and in relationships while promoting such conduct through interactions and decisions (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders emphasise the broader societal goals in their decision-making and highlight how tasks align with them (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008; Piccolo et al., 2010). They also play a central role in conveying information about organisational decisions, procedures, and SRHRM practices (Den Hartog et al., 2012). Effective communication is paramount to influencing employees effectively (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Given that leaders shape employee perceptions and attitudes, there is likely perceived harmony between the organisation's values (e.g., SRHRM) and the leader's ethical stance. Cooperative behaviour, which hints at the exchange or combination of resources, may appear when trust exists (Ha et al., 2023). In such scenarios, employees may view the manifestation of shared ethical values in organisational systems (Haddad et al., 2022), such as SRHRM practices. From an

employee viewpoint, the morals demonstrated by SRHRM practices are genuine, fostering positive perceptions.

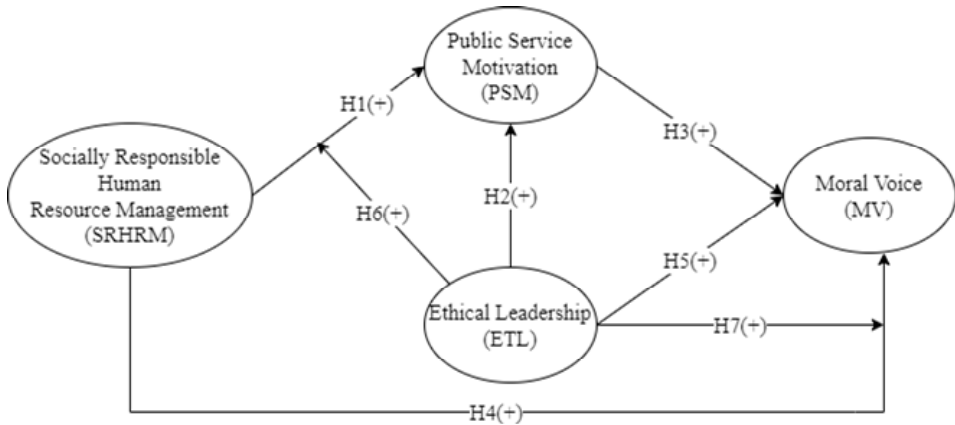
The clarity of SRHRM’s organisational intent largely depends on the quality of ETL’s communication. Precise and relevant information from leaders aids employees in understanding their roles and the organisation’s intent, reducing uncertainties (Den Hartog et al., 2012). Leaning on SIP theory, such cues from leaders shape employees’ understanding and perceptions of the organisational environment (Gu et al., 2018). ETL can guide employees to recognise the importance of normative behaviours, helping them discern organisational offerings and the rationale behind decisions (Ha et al., 2023).

We argue that ETL in the public sector can amplify the positive impacts of SRHRM. By connecting the attributes of ETL with SRHRM-driven organisations, we anticipate a boost in PSM and MV:

- Hypothesis 6 ETL will moderate the positive relationship between SRHRM and PSM such that high ETL will strengthen and low ETL will weaken this relationship.
- Hypothesis 7 ETL will moderate the positive relationship between SRHRM and MV such that high ETL will strengthen and low ETL will weaken this relationship.

Figure 1 presents a hypothesised model of this article that shows the interrelationships among the variables of interest.

Figure 1 Hypothesised model



3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection and sample

We sourced the data for this study from public employees in Vietnam. We chose the Vietnamese public sector due to its intricate administrative structure, large civil servant population, operational inefficiencies, and prevalent corruption. Additionally, the

government's output has not satisfied the needs of its citizens and businesses. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese government has undertaken various initiatives to address these challenges by emphasising good governance (Chien and Thanh, 2022). Within this context, bureaucrats and civil employees serve as crucial components of governmental administration, playing a pivotal role in administrative reforms.

Before the primary data collection, we conducted face-to-face interviews with a select group of participants ($n = 10$) to test the clarity of our questionnaire (Ha et al., 2022). This pre-test aimed to identify potential issues in language, grammar, or phrasing that might be challenging for respondents (Colton and Covert, 2007) and to confirm the questionnaire's construct validity (Shadish et al., 2002). Feedback from the pre-test indicated confusion around the term 'SRHRM'. Based on this, we incorporated its definition and examples into the final questionnaire.

For this study, we employed the cluster random sampling method, which is suitable when creating a comprehensive list of all population elements is challenging or impractical (Babbie, 2016). From a total of 20 departments, 11 were selected through simple random sampling. We then gathered data from all public employees in these 11 departments (Acharyya and Bhattacharya, 2020). This sampling approach enhances the study's external validity (Shadish et al., 2002). Besides, 30% of the minimum sample size can be added to take care of some errors such as improper completion of questionnaires, void questionnaires and failure of some respondents to return the questionnaires (Raji et al., 2021). Data collection spanned from October to December 2022, with a 72.33% response rate, yielding 434 valid responses. Respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 60. Of them, 53.9% were male, while 46.1% were female.

3.2 Measurement of constructs

The survey used for gathering data was split into two main parts. The initial section addressed the demographic details of the respondents, including gender, age, educational background, and job type (as shown in Table 1). The subsequent section featured standardised evaluations of the concepts being researched. These standardised tools were adapted and then translated into Vietnamese. Participants answered using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. First, SRHRM was evaluated using a six-item scale developed by Shen and Benson (2014). The second measure, a seven-item scale from Taylor (2014), focused on PSM. ETL was gauged using a five-item scale adapted by Ren and Chadee (2017). Lastly, MV was assessed with a three-item scale crafted by Lee et al. (2017).

3.3 Data analysis

The data were processed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS24.0. Descriptive statistics and internal reliability measures for all variables were determined using SPSS 24.0. To evaluate the proposed model, structure equation modelling was employed (see Figure 1). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to validate measurement models before establishing the comprehensive model. Subsequently, based on Figure 1, the complete model was set up to examine the study's hypotheses. When applying AMOS, we utilised metrics such as the chi-square test, CMIN/DF, comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), and the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) to determine how well the model fit the data.

Standard benchmarks were adopted to interpret these metrics, which include: a smaller chi-square is desired; values greater than 0.90 for CFI and TLI, though 0.95 is optimal; SRMR and RMSEA values should be 0.08 or lower, with figures under 0.05 being ideal (Bentler, 1992; Burant, 2016).

Table 1 Constructs and their responding measurements

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Loading</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>CR</i>
Socially responsible human resource management (SRHRM)	SRHRM1	My organisation considers individual identity-social responsibility identity fit in recruitment and selection.	0.692***	0.503	0.833
	SRHRM2	My organisation provides adequate training to promote social responsibility as a core organisational value.	0.811***		
	SRHRM3	My organisation provides social responsibility training to develop employees' skills in receptive stakeholder engagement and communication.	0.807***		
	SRHRM4	My organisation considers employee social performance in promotions.	0.595***		
	SRHRM5	My organisation considers employee social performance in performance appraisals.	0.611***		
	SRHRM6	My organisation relates employee social performance to rewards and compensation (d).	-		
Public service motivation (PSM)	PSM1	I feel sympathetic to the plight of the underprivileged.	0.730***	0.515	0.880
	PSM2	When I witness other individuals being treated unfairly, I am quite outraged.	0.780***		
	PSM3	I feel strongly about contributing to society.	0.804***		
	PSM4	I place a high value on meaningful public service.	0.679***		
	PSM5	I am willing to give up things for the sake of society.	0.761***		
	PSM6	People ought to contribute to society more than they take from it.	0.570***		
	PSM7	It is essential that consideration be given to the needs of future generations when formulating governmental policies.	0.671***		
Ethical leadership (ETL)	ETL1	My leader listens to what employees have to say	0.854***	0.759	0.926
	ETL2	My leader has the best interests of employees in mind	0.869***		
	ETL3	My leader makes fair and balanced decisions	0.906***		

Notes: (d) indicates that measures fail the validity and reliability tests. ***Indicates significance at $p < 0.001$.

Table 1 Constructs and their responding measurements (continued)

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Loading</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>CR</i>
Ethical leadership (ETL)	ETL4	When making decisions, my leader asks 'what is the right thing to do?'	0.855***	0.759	0.926
	ETL5	My leader sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics (d)	-		
Moral voice (MV)	MV1	I always confront my peers when they commit an unethical act.	0.822***	0.747	0.898
	MV2	I express displeasure when my peers do unethical actions in the workplace.	0.928***		
	MV3	I always state my views about ethical problems.	0.839***		

Notes: (d) indicates that measures fail the validity and reliability tests. ***Indicates significance at $p < 0.001$.

4 Empirical findings

4.1 Evaluation of measurement model

Before delving into the measurement model, the SRHRM6 item was removed from the SRHRM scale due to its loading factor being less than 0.5 and the ETL5 item was removed from the ETL scale due to cross-loading (Hair et al., 2019).

A critical starting presumption is the normal distribution of the data (Collier, 2020; Kline, 2015). We used kurtosis and skewness tests to check for normality. The data are considered normally distributed if kurtosis is under 7.0 and the absolute value of skewness is less than 3.0. Our normality assessment revealed that kurtosis values lie between -0.544 and 3.786 , and skewness values are between -1.324 and -0.666 , confirming a normal distribution. To address common method variance since the same tool measured all variables, Harman's single-factor test was employed (Jordan and Troth, 2019; Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). The analysis found that the singular factor explained 43.722% of the variance for the 20 variables, which is under the 50% threshold. Thus, there does not seem to be a common method variance problem in our dataset (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986).

Loadings were found to be significant at the 0.001 level, as displayed in Table 1 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Composite reliability (CR) values surpassed the benchmark and ranged between 0.833 (for SRHRM) and 0.926 (for ETL) (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) consistently exceeded the 0.50 benchmark, with values spanning from 0.503 (SRHRM) to 0.759 (ETL) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), highlighting that the criteria for convergence were achieved. Inter-construct correlations did not outstrip the square root of each construct's AVE (refer to Table 2), suggesting adequate discriminant validity for all latent variables (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). According to the model fit indicators, such as chi-square (χ^2) = 461.265 ($df = 143$, $p = 0.000$), CMIN/ $df = 3.226$, SRMR = 0.0591, CFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.929, and RMSEA = 0.072, the data aligned well with the model. Thus, the study's constructs are not only valid and reliable but also distinct, as concluded by Hair et al. (2019).

Table 2 Discriminant validity results

	<i>PSM</i>	<i>ETL</i>	<i>SRHRM</i>	<i>MV</i>
PSM	0.717			
ETL	0.610***	0.871		
SRHRM	0.494***	0.552***	0.718	
MV	0.693***	0.564***	0.434***	0.864

Notes: ***Significant at $p < 0.001$ level. Diagonal figures are the square roots of AVE.

Table 3 Hypotheses testing of the structural model

<i>Hypothesised relationships</i>	<i>Proposed effects</i>	<i>SRW</i>	<i>Results</i>
H1: Socially responsible human resource management → Public service motivation	Positive	0.352***	Supported
H2: Ethical leadership → Public service motivation	Positive	0.459***	Supported
H3: Public service motivation → Moral voice	Positive	0.502***	Supported
H4: Socially responsible human resource management → Moral voice	Positive	0.147**	Supported
H5: Ethical leadership → Moral voice	Positive	0.233***	Supported
H6: Socially responsible human resource management x Ethical leadership → Public service motivation	Positive	0.133**	Supported
H7: Socially responsible human resource management x Ethical leadership → Moral voice	Positive	0.152***	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.05$.

Figure 2 The moderating effect of ETL in the positive relationship between (a) SRHRM and PSM (b) SRHRM and MV (see online version for colours)

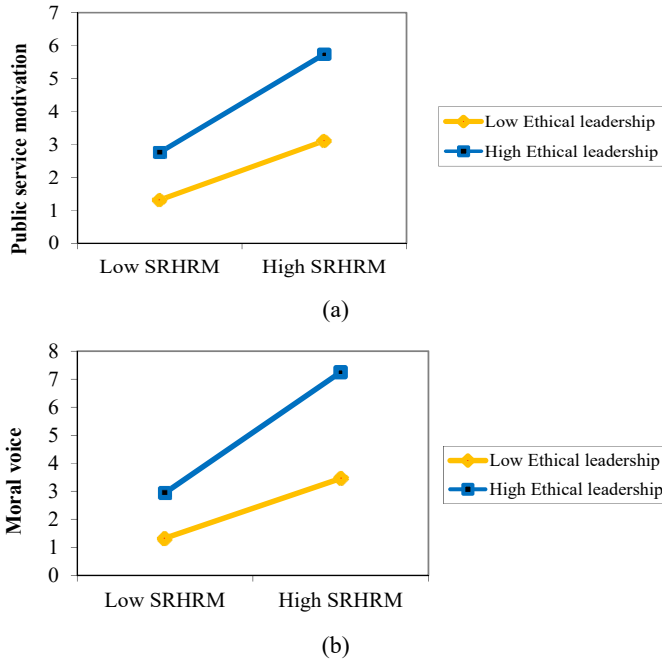
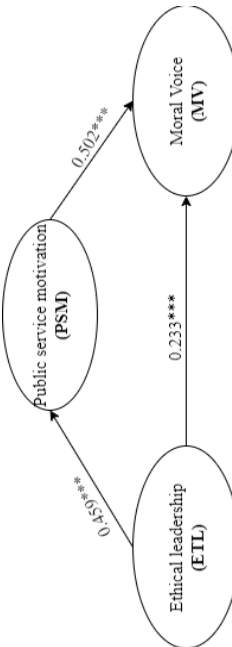


Table 4 Products of the mediation analysis

Relationship	Path of mediation	Estimate	Probability	Conclusion
Socially responsible human resource management – Public service motivation – Moral voice		0.177	< 0.001	Partial mediation
Ethical leadership – Public service motivation – Moral voice		0.231	< 0.001	Partial mediation

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.050$.

4.2 *Evaluation of structural model*

Following the survey, a review of the structural model was conducted to confirm all the proposed hypotheses. The subsequent step involved utilising maximum likelihood estimation to validate all the relationships suggested by the research model (Collier, 2020). The model fit measures indicate that $\chi^2 = 466.284$, $p = 0.000$ with 158 df. The value of χ^2/df is 2.951, which falls within the recommended range of 2–5, showcasing the model's acceptable parsimony (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The values for SRMR stand at 0.0445, CFI at 0.944, TLI at 0.933, and RMSEA at 0.067. Collectively, these indices indicate that the model provides a range from acceptable to outstanding goodness of fit (Hair et al., 2019; Hu and Bentler, 1999). The outcomes of the hypothesis tests based on the evaluation of the structural model are detailed in Table 3. All hypotheses display statistical significance at varying degrees.

4.3 *Mediation analysis*

Furthermore, mediation analysis is conducted using the bootstrapping method to delve into the causal relationship among SRHRM, PSM, ETL, and MV (Hayes, 2009). The analysis is based on a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval and incorporates 2,000 bootstrap samples. The results highlight that SRHRM has a notable correlation with MV, and both ETL and PSM significantly influence MV. That is, PSM acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between SRHRM and MV, as well as between ETL and MV. As a result, all the proposed hypotheses are validated. The outcomes of this mediation study can be found in Table 4.

4.4 *Moderation analysis*

Before confirming the moderating effect of ETL, this study standardises the variables to avoid potential collinearity issues, which can hinder the analysis (Frazier et al., 2004). Standardising variables also simplifies the interpretation of the findings (Dawson, 2014). The model was set up with all relevant variables, including the interaction term, in preparation for evaluation (Collier, 2020).

As shown in Table 3, ETL influences the relationship between SRHRM and both MV and PSM. Specifically, it amplifies the positive effects of SRHRM on PSM ($\beta = 0.133$, $p < 0.05$) and MV ($\beta = 0.152$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypotheses 6 and 7 receive validation. To visually represent the moderation by ETL, the study plots the interactions at both high and low levels of SRHRM, as recommended by Dawson (2014). Figure 2 demonstrates this moderating role. Essentially, ETL enhances the positive ties between SRHRM and both PSM and MV, more so when levels of ETL are elevated.

5 **Discussion**

As noted earlier, previous research has highlighted the positive outcomes of SRHRM in the workplace (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2020; Shen and Benson, 2014), including emphasising the connection between SRHRM and MV (Zhao et al., 2023a). However, this study uniquely merges SRHRM with ETL to investigate how SRHRM practices

impact MV within the public sector of Vietnam. This research further introduces PSM as a mediating factor in the relationships.

The results underline that SRHRM significantly correlates with PSM, aligning with prior findings (Abdelmotaleb and Saha, 2019). Essentially, when employees perceive SRHRM positively, their motivation to serve the public intensifies. This finding follows SIP theory, which suggests that SRHRM practices give employees insights into organisational values (Zhang et al., 2022). As Wright and Pandey (2008) indicate, communication that aligns organisational values with those of employees boosts PSM. Thus, PSM might emerge from prolonged socialisation but can also be influenced by immediate organisational surroundings.

Furthermore, this research found that ETL also impacts PSM. Though leadership's role in fostering PSM has been previously studied (Hameduddin and Engbers, 2022), this research pioneers the application of SIP theory in understanding how ETL promotes PSM. SIP theory posits that employees gain social information through interactions in ETL settings, fostering ethical understanding and behaviour norms.

Emphasising PSM's role, this study suggests that PSM enhances an employee's inclination to express a MV. High PSM employees exhibit heightened ethical behaviour, aligning with the values guiding their identities, e.g., promoting public welfare and addressing societal equity (Wright et al., 2016).

This research confirms the positive link between SRHRM and MV. While Zhao et al. (2023a) previously identified this relationship, our study is pioneering in explaining this link through the SIP lens. We infer from SIP theory that HRM practices inform employee views of desired behaviours by highlighting pivotal information. SRHRM equips employees with the necessary context to voice their ethical opinions, even those that may be potentially risky.

Moreover, this study reveals a strong positive connection between perceived ETL and employee MV in the public sector. Prior studies have underscored ETL's role in employees' willingness to report ethical concerns (Wright et al., 2016). However, our study is the first to delve into this relationship using SIP theory, stressing the importance of ETL in the organisational sphere.

Our results further confirm PSM as a partial mediator among SRHRM, ETL, and MV. Past studies hinted at HRM practices' role in boosting PSM (Mostafa et al., 2015), but this study empirically proves how SRHRM perceptions influence outcomes. By fostering PSM, ETLs can motivate their teams to voice ethical concerns, leading to a more ethical work environment.

Finally, our study showcases the moderating influence of ETL, a facet not previously explored in the relationships among SRHRM, MV, and PSM. Using the SIP framework, this study posits that employees interpret SRHRM practices based on cues from their leaders. Our findings reveal that in environments with high ETL, the positive impacts of SRHRM on PSM and MV are amplified. This research bridges the gap between HRM and leadership studies, emphasising their combined potential in achieving organisational objectives.

6 Conclusions and implications

6.1 Conclusions

Encouraging ethical behaviours among employees is often seen as a means to mitigate organisational misconduct. In this study, we focus on the employee's MV, an active ethical behaviour previously only studied in the context of leadership. Using the SIP theory as a foundation, we delve into the connection between SRHRM and MV, with PSM acting as a mediator and ETL as a moderator. Notably, PSM serves as a bridge between SRHRM and MV, as well as ETL and MV. Furthermore, the presence of ETL shapes the influence of SRHRM on PSM and MV. These insights offer valuable contributions to existing theories and should guide public sector leaders aiming to foster MV among employees.

6.2 Theoretical and practical implications

6.2.1 Theoretical implications

This study's foremost theoretical contribution is crafting and evaluating a model to examine how SRHRM impacts MV via PSM, using ETL as a moderating factor grounded in SIP theory. To our understanding, our research pioneers the exploration of how SRHRM practices influence public employee MV through SIP theory. Past research often relied on social cognitive or self-determination theories to unpack the bond between SRHRM and employee MV. Here, we employ SIP theory in SRHRM, spotlighting the pathways SRHRM practices foster MV in public entities, underscored by PSM's mediating function and the regulating role of ETL.

Given that this study emphasises organisational factors dictating ethical conduct, SIP theory is a helpful approach. SIP theory contends that people decipher workplace cues to mould expectations and steer their actions. Prior ethical behaviour research champions SIP theory for understanding ethical phenomena. Employees should critically gauge workplace norms before acting, especially since expressing concerns is not always welcomed. In this context, SRHRM practices and ETL become crucial signals of organisational standards, assuring employees that voicing concerns is both safe and impactful.

Second, we combine SRHRM and ETL to elucidate the precursors of MV. A synthesis suggests that insights from the HRM and leadership domains can be mutually beneficial, though research integrating these two is in its infancy. This study, anchored in SIP theory, stands out by intertwining SRHRM and ETL as pivotal drivers of public officials' MV.

Third, beyond the direct SRHRM–MV link, we discern that SRHRM indirectly steers MV via PSM. This finding emphasises PSM's central mediating role in the SRHRM–MV nexus. Though many studies have charted PSM's outcomes, scant research has probed its antecedents, especially those shaped by organisational dynamics. Responding to academic calls for integrating PSM into HRM processes, our study pioneers the exploration of the SRHRM–PSM connection in public sectors. We further enhance SIP theory by delving into PSM's mediation, fulfilling the need for a more detailed mediation process within the SIP framework.

Last, we explore how ETL moderates the relationships between SRHRM-PSM and SRHRM-MV. In addressing gaps identified by Zhao et al. (2023a), our study delineates the context in which ETL optimises the benefits of SRHRM. SIP theory intimates that not all social cues align positively with individual perceptions, indicating that other factors negatively affect information processing depth. When credible, the source of information profoundly affects individuals. ETL underscores organisational values within SRHRM practices, bridging organisational and personal values. This embrace fosters moral cognisance, attitudes, and behaviours among employees, illuminating the nuances of how information influences individual stances and actions.

6.2.2 *Practical implications*

This research offers guidance for managers aiming to foster ethical behaviour among employees, thereby minimising unethical practices in public institutions. With Vietnam's public sector transitioning from traditional governance toward new public management (Luu et al., 2022), integrating SRHRM practices becomes essential. These practices will cater to the welfare and concerns of public employees, nurturing a workforce dedicated to internal and external stakeholders. By prioritising SRHRM, Vietnam can bolster its public management, giving employees the necessary PSM to voice ethical concerns proactively.

To this end, organisations must embed social responsibility values within HRM strategies. Consequently, agencies should hire employees aligned with organisational social responsibility goals, offer training on stakeholder communication, and consider social performance during evaluations and promotions. Such measures help instil a robust social responsibility ethos, ensuring that employees remain motivated to voice ethical concerns. Crafting well-thought-out plans around organisational social responsibility, like continuous internal staff development and refining internal curriculums, can further boost employee engagement and the willingness to voice concerns. HR departments should also acknowledge employees' positive social contributions during evaluations and promotions. However, merely investing in employees is not enough. A genuine commitment to social responsibility at the organisational level can foster a stronger moral culture, enhancing both employee MV and overall organisational success.

One crucial discovery from this study is the profound influence of ETL. Ethical leaders not only directly encourage ethical behaviour but also play a pivotal role in determining how employees perceive SRHRM initiatives. Since leaders set organisational norms and standards, their ethical stance can significantly impact how employees view SRHRM efforts. If ETL is lacking, the benefits of moral practices might fade. In essence, employees view leadership ethics as a measure of an organisation's moral authenticity. Hence, public bodies must recognise the multiplying effect ETL has on PSM and MV and strive to nurture it.

Historically, leadership transparency and open communication have not always been the norm in Vietnam. However, successful reforms often hinge on strong individual leadership roles. Ensuring broad-based participation in these reforms can enhance their longevity, as broader engagement often leads to longer-term commitment. Every leadership tier is crucial in rallying various entities and stakeholders for effective reform implementation, as noted by Pham (2018). Given prevailing challenges like corruption, which indicates declining ethical values, there is a pressing need for ethically sound leaders. Leaders' selections should factor in their ethical stance. By championing ETL,

unethical behaviours in organisations can be minimised. When selecting and training leaders, it is essential to emphasise that traits like integrity, honesty, and attentiveness to employee concerns are hallmarks of exemplary leadership.

6.2.3 Limitations and implications for further studies

This study acknowledges several areas of constraint. First, the study's cross-sectional design, combined with potential method biases, restricts making causal connections based on the data. To make more concrete conclusions, additional research should consider longitudinal designs and pull data from varied sources. Such research can be enhanced by monitoring participant activities and behaviours longitudinally.

Second, self-determination theory, which underscores the interplay between individuals and their social contexts, is a vital framework for understanding employee behaviour, as noted by Deci and Ryan (2000). This theory further suggests that certain environmental factors can influence individual motivations. It also argues that meeting basic psychological needs can boost intrinsic motivation, impacting work behaviour (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Further studies might explore the connections between SRHRM, psychological needs satisfaction, PSM, and MV.

Third, while this study explored the linkages among SRHRM, ETL, and MV, a comparative analysis of these relationships might yield more profound insights into their relative strengths. Moreover, it would be worthwhile for researchers to investigate how varied leadership styles, such as servant or responsible leadership, impact followers' perceptions and MV.

Finally, the study's scope was constrained by its focus on public officials from Tien Giang province. This feature limits the broader applicability of the findings to other public officials across different governmental levels or regions. Given the diversity of organisational cultures, future investigations could undertake comparative studies across different provinces, which would not only validate the current findings but also open additional research pathways.

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