

“Ethical leadership: a dual path model for fostering ethical voice through relational identification, psychological safety, organizational identification and psychological ownership”

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Dual path model for fostering ethical voice

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to identify the impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice by determining two paths covering relational identification and psychological safety. The first path focused on relational identification and psychological safety. Alternatively, the second path focused on organizational identification and psychological ownership leading to ethical voice. The specific objective of the study is to develop and test an integrated model of ethical leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The objectives were achieved through the adoption of quantitative research techniques. Two hundred forty-eight samples were collected from the banking sector using quantitative research techniques, and data was gathered through a self-administrated questionnaire. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were used through AMOS to generate the results and test hypotheses.

Findings – The results suggested a significant impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice, while the other paths' results, such as relational identification, psychological safety, organizational identification and psychological ownership, suggested partial mediation. The study result adds new insights into ethical leadership and social exchange theory since it tested overlooked paths in the literature, such as relational identification and psychological safety.

Research limitations/implications – The research highlights the significance of ethical voice as a desirable organizational behavior. Ethical voice contributes to a culture of accountability, transparency and ethical decision-making. Organizations should establish channels and platforms for employees to voice ethical concerns and suggestions. This may involve regular feedback sessions, anonymous reporting mechanisms



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and protection policies for whistleblowers. Leaders should actively encourage and value ethical voices as a valuable contribution to the ethical climate of the organization.

Practical implications – The study found that ethical leaders influence their followers in such a way that they adopt ethical behavior. It is also validated that organizational ethics are shared by employees who interact with ethical leaders. So, departments should train such leaders because ethical leadership positively affects followers' attitudes and behaviors, and organizations should encourage ethical behavior in supervisors and subordinates. The study also found that relational and organizational identification helps employees develop psychological capabilities, which leads to reporting workplace misconduct. The current study tested these mechanisms collectively and found that ethical leadership significantly contributes to ethical voice.

Social implications – The current study highlighted the role of ethical leaders in promoting ethical behavior, improving employee well-being and engagement, cultivating collaboration and inclusion, and making a contribution to the overall ethical climate within organizations and society as a whole. Organizations can have a positive impact on the social fabric by cultivating a culture of ethics, respect and social responsibility if they make these considerations their top priorities.

Originality/value – The current study is unique since it is intended to develop and test an integrated model of ethical leadership and ethical voice. This research combines an integrated model, focusing on employees' identities and self-concepts and examining ethical voice as a behavioral outcome.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Relational identification, Psychological safety, Organizational identification, Psychological ownership, Ethical voice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Ethical leadership has emerged as an essential leadership style in the literature, especially after a series of corporate scandals in organizations (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). In this regard, several empirical evidence and systematic reviews revealed the positive impact of ethical leadership on organizational and individual-level attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Chung et al., 2015; Chen & Hou, 2016; Rice, Young, Johnson, Walton, & Stacy, 2020). It has also been observed that ethical leadership is identified as an essential determinant of employees' ethical behavior (Mayer et al., 2012). In this context, ethical voice is the behavior of employees that plays an imperative role in organizational settings (Huang & Paterson, 2017). Moreover, Huang and Paterson (2017) defined ethical voice as a form of expression of an employee seeking to change and challenge the behavior that contradicts ethical practices and is ethically inappropriate. With the help of an ethical voice, organizations could take corrective actions because it can potentially reveal the unethical practices being performed in the organization. Burhan, Khan, and Malik (2023) acknowledged that prior research failed to identify how ethical leadership influences the attitude and behavior of employees' related outcomes.

Furthermore, the empirical studies mainly focused on the mechanisms implicitly covered by the definition of ethical leadership, i.e. social exchange aspects, trust and role models (Piccolo, Greenbaum, Hartog, & Folger, 2010; Rice et al., 2020). Antonakis (2021) accepted that, regardless of the available empirical studies evolving through the definition of ethical leadership, these studies also provided and added valuable insights into the ethical leadership literature. The current research is intended to further explore the impact of ethical leadership by focusing on employee's identities and self-concepts as sequential mediation to ethical leadership, and ethical voice is taken as the behavioral outcome of employees. Gerpott, Fasbender, and Burmeister (2020) highlighted that the current literature is still silent about the process and self-concepts through which ethical leaders evoke morality and ethics in their followers.

Previously, Lord, Brown, and Freiberg (1999) also explained that the personal identities of employees (followers) as a self-concept are a powerful determinant of followers' behavior. Initially, personal and organizational identification took place in the literature; however, the advancement of literature and growing knowledge presented other types of identities, such as organizational identification and relational identification, through which ethical leadership influences their followers' positive behavior (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). In this regard, it is evident that ethical leaders have the potential to facilitate organizational-individual value convergence, which is an essential component for the development of ethical norms in the organization. The defined value internalization covers the aspects of the followers' self-concept aligned with ethics-related identities.

Moreover, it is widely accepted that ethical and moral values gained significant attention from scholars because advancements in technologies and globalization enabled organizations to identify the misconduct and unethical practices of top management and leaders. Al-Khatib, Al-Habib, Bogari, and Salamah (2016) cited unethical practices in Russia's organizations *vis-à-vis* the USA; top executives of ImClone, WorldCom and Enron companies were also involved in corruption cases. In developing countries like Pakistan, unethical practices in organizations, specifically in the banking sector, were also found because of vague policies, rules and regulations (Rehman et al., 2020). Unethical and immoral acts taken by the private banks of Pakistan affect the banks' financial health and impact the country's economy (Raza, Ul-Hadi, Khan, & Mujtaba, 2020). Even though the 1991 Act for Banks directed harsh actions against the employees involved in unethical practices, some flaws in the judicial banking system created a vacuum for culprits to be involved in unethical practices. To overcome such unethical practices and immoral activities, leaders have an inevitable role because they are the best source to introduce and implement moral conformity and ethical guidelines in the organization.

Despite promising progress in the ethical leadership literature, several questions are open to further investigation. First, although a broad range of criteria has been examined, some fundamental mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences the behavior of followers-employees. These mechanisms did not receive the required attention from scholars (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2019; Zheng, Graham, Farh, & Huang, 2021). Zheng et al. (2021) study suggested that future research should include missing aspects of self-identities (individual, relational and collective) and associate them with relevant voice types.

Based on the substantial literature gap (s), and enhancing the identification theory, the objectives of the current study were to identify the impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice by determining two paths covering relational identification and psychological safety. Alternatively, the second path focused on organizational identification and psychological ownership of ethical leadership and ethical voice. The study was conducted in the banking sector of Pakistan. Despite this, a significant amount of literature is available and concluded that ethical leaders have the potential to influence the ethical voice behavior of followers or employees working in the organization.

However, the literature overlooked some critical mechanisms through which ethical leaders control the ethical voice (Zheng et al., 2021). Moreover, in the context of Pakistan, limited literature is available on ethical leadership and ethical voice. Some studies were conducted on ethical leadership (Sheraz, 2020; Mehmood, Norulkamar, Attiq, & Irum, 2018; Shafique, N Kalyar, & Ahmad, 2018), but these studies did not cover the mechanisms through which ethical leaders can influence their followers. In this context, the current study is critical because it focuses on mechanisms, such as relational identification and psychological

safety, organizational identification and psychological ownership, that have been overlooked in previous studies.

The introduction section of the current study explains the background of the selected variables, research objectives and gaps; the literature review then explains the relationships between different variables studied together with theoretical support and cited accordingly. Similarly, the methodology section focuses on the research design, population, instrumentation and data analysis techniques. The results section includes the demographic profile of respondents, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and hypothesis testing. Finally, the discussion section contains the relevant discussion about the results and is aligned with the prevailing context, accompanied by implications and a conclusion.

Literature review

The current section consists of a review of relevant literature according to the developed model. The model is related to ethical leadership, which further leads to relational identification, and has been taken as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical voice. Similarly, it has been identified that ethical leadership can contribute to developing a positive attitude toward organizational identification in their followers or employees, further leading to psychological ownership. This mechanism further leads to the generation of ethical voices for the betterment of the organization. It has also been identified that psychological safety and psychological ownership have been examined as mechanisms in the leadership-voice relationship (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). However, it has not yet been tested on the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical voice (Zheng et al., 2021; Burhan et al., 2023). Previously, Malik, Khan, and Mahmood (2021) tested the relationship between authentic leadership and relational identification and highlighted the importance of relational identification to evoke positive psychological states in an individual.

Therefore, the current study considers relational identification concerning ethical leadership. Moreover, it adds psychological ownership and psychological safety as the sequential mediators in the ethical leadership and ethical voice relationship through relational and organizational identification. The study is conducted with the expectation of adding new insights to the literature and theory of ethical leadership as well as to the identification-related literature and theory. The following sections consist of a discussion of the relationships among different variables.

Ethical leadership and ethical voice

Rubin, Dierdorff, and Brown (2010) and Klein and Kozlowski (2000) described the ethical voice as the phenomena linked with a particular group; hence, it could be described as a shared unit property. Later, it was examined that ethical leadership is imperative in generating a group-level ethical voice (Huang & Paterson, 2017). Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) identified and accepted the role of ethical leadership and individual behavior of ethical voice. Zheng et al. (2021) hypothesized the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical voice and explained that ethical leaders have the potential to influence the self-concepts, and interpersonal influence of followers and can affect the ethical voicing behavior of their followers. Voice is explored in empirical studies as the episodic occurrence in specific settings, a specific event and a specific coworker, and through a specific type of leader (Detert & Treviño, 2010). In this regard, it has also been defined that the influence of a leader can also be determined as person-specific. Prior studies have defined ethical voice as the employee's/follower's response to showing confidence about suggesting something and/or reporting any misconduct without fearing the situation. Social identity and information

processing theories have widely supported the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical voice (Zheng et al., 2021). Based on the prior studies and theories, the formulated hypothesis for the said relationship is as under:

H1. Ethical leadership is positively related to ethical voice.

Ethical leadership and organizational identification

Ethical leadership is described as the display of normatively acceptable behavior in the workplace (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership has the potential to create and maintain interpersonal relationships with followers and the propagation of such behavior to followers through two-way contact, reinforcement and decision-making. Kapur (2017) described that an ethical leader's role is to consider the organization's expectations, ideas, beliefs, rules and ethics. Ethical leaders are trustworthy role models for their followers, show acceptable actions, and handle them accordingly (Brown et al., 2005). Prior literature established that ethical leadership positively influences followers' attitudes and behaviors and impacts employees' identification with their organization (Al-Aidarous, 2021). In the organization, ethical leaders are identified as solid characters who spread compassion and integrity toward employees (Stouten, Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2012). Such types of leaders also create bonding between their followers and the organization. They have the potential to create a positive image of the organization toward their followers through the display of positive behavior, thereby creating organizational identification. Followers of ethical leadership take it as the organization's initiative, so they tend to develop high organizational identification (Zheng et al., 2021). Social identity theory broadly defines how individual employees at the workplace distinguish themselves from the identity of the organization they belong to (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Therefore, we proposed *H2* as follows:

H2. Ethical leadership has a positive and significant impact on organizational identification.

Organizational identification and psychological ownership

Haslam & Reicher (2006) defined organizational identification as detrimental outcomes on the attitude and behavior of individuals. Organizational identification is recorded as the important antecedent of individuals losing their distinctiveness and objectivity (Conroy, Henle, Shore, & Stelman, 2017). It creates ownership feelings in the organization's members, i.e. employees. Existing research implicitly defined organizational identification's positive impact on psychological outcomes in employees. Employees with high organizational identification tend to own their organization and act accordingly. Psychological ownership posits that employees with ownership feelings have a sense of possession of a particular organization; hence, it is identified as a cognitive form, and employees with organizational identification establish connections between themselves and their organization. Psychological ownership allows the owner to regard the target object as a social entity. The current study inferred that organization identification could be affected by stimulation, knowing intimately, self-identity, exercising control and owning a place.

Hence:

H2a. Organizational identification has a positive impact on psychological ownership.

Psychological ownership and ethical voice

Psychological ownership is defined as the phenomenon in which an employee develops possessive feelings toward the organization (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Organization-based psychological ownership is linked with the voice regarding any misconduct implemented (Ng, Leung, Chu & Qiao, 2021). This study also reported that employees who felt more contempt for the organization expressed their voices. Some prior research defined that the relationship between psychological ownership and ethical voice is not worked better in isolation; instead, it should be studied through a mechanism, such as Lu, Zhou & Chen, (2019) and Ng, Leung, Chu & Qiao, (2021) did, with an antecedent such as ethical leadership. Zheng et al. (2021) defined the context role of a relationship: an employee with high psychological ownership generates a voice at the workplace when finding any misconduct in the organization. Employees who have personally connected with their work and display more significant effort and energy toward success at work will potentially have a positive attitude and behavior. Hence:

H2b. Psychological ownership positively and significantly impacts the ethical voice.

The mediating role of organizational identification and psychological ownership

Zheng et al. (2021) identified that ethical leadership has the potential to evoke identification in followers/employees. Moreover, social identification theory also validated that identifying with an organization or individual at a personal level recorded several positive outcomes. In line with the theory and literature, Markus and Wurf (1987) also identified that any individual self-identities can positively contribute to a particular attitude or behavior. It was also identified that the said attitude or behavior worked through a psychological mechanism such as psychological ownership (Brown et al., 2005). Van Dyne and Pierce (2004) defined that psychological ownership concurs with self-identities, effecting, efficacy motives and psychological ownership. Specifically, psychological ownership aims to satisfy the need to be efficacious and in control of an individual's environment to produce self-perceived desirable work outcomes (Olickers, 2013) through the self-identity of the organization, and it can create belongingness. Leadership literature explains that leaders can get better results from followers through identification (Malik et al., 2021). Ethical leaders can provide a mechanism to their followers, so they place themselves within their organization and own it. If they feel any misconduct in the organization, they produce a voice and whistleblow about the misconduct. Hence:

H2c. Organizational identification and psychological ownership sequentially mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical voice.

Ethical leadership and relational identification

Relational identification is potentially defined in leader-member relationships and as a novel construct (Ashforth et al., 2008). In the context of social identity theory, ethical leaders are the best source of the emergence of relational identification in their followers (Zheng et al., 2021). Under the tenet of social identity theory, it was explained how an individual in the workplace differentiate themselves from the identity of their belongingness (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Specifically, social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership to a particular leader with emotional significance through a categorization process, where I become us" (Brewer, 1991). Malik et al. (2021) explored relational identification with authentic leadership and identified that it

significantly impacts the development of relational identification. Later, [Zheng et al. \(2021\)](#) identified that ethical leaders also could emerge with relational identification in their followers. In this regard, and by using the theoretical lens of social identity theory, the formulated hypothesis is as under:

H3. Ethical leadership has a positive impact on relational identification.

Relational identification and psychological safety

[Wang et al. \(2022\)](#) investigated the relationship between psychological safety with servant leadership. The relationship between relational aspects and psychological safety was also studied. In the role relationships, it has been identified that relational identification significantly impacts psychological safety. [Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv \(2010\)](#) also investigated and reported that high-quality interrelationships influence psychological safety tendencies. [Sluss and Ashforth \(2007\)](#) presented the concept of relational identification, which has been identified with several psychological outcomes at the employee level.

On the other hand, [Jyoti and Bhau \(2015\)](#) exposed that high-quality leader-member exchange can generate relational identification in the followers so that they feel safe in the organization's environment and act accordingly. Other researchers broadly discuss the relationship between relational identification and psychological safety. [Sluss and Ashforth \(2008\)](#) also argued that relational identification significantly impacts employees' cognitive elements. The empirical evidence also suggests that relational identification is an essential determinant of employee creativity through psychological safety ([Shen, Yuan, Yi, Liu & Zhan, 2019](#); [Burhan et al., 2023](#)). LMX theory supports the defined relationship, suggesting that employees with high relational identification feel safe in the organization and display positive attitudes and behavior. Hence:

H3a. Relational identification has a positive impact on psychological safety.

Psychological safety and ethical voice

Social exchange theory ([Blau, 1964](#)) defines mutual exchange between organization initiatives and employees might have a positive outcome. [Newman, Donohue, and Eva \(2017\)](#), using the lens of social exchange theory, defined that psychological safety can give better attitudinal and behavioral outcomes at the employee level. Most of the literature that covered employee creativity and innovative behavior identified that psychological safety is the critical determinant of the employee's positive and extra-role behaviors ([Newman et al., 2017](#)). Employees in organizations analyze and understand the situation before speaking. In this regard, psychological safety is observed as the belief that particular behaviors of the employee in the organization, i.e. generating voice, will not lead to personal harm ([Detert & Burris, 2007](#)). [Edmondson \(1999\)](#) categorically mentioned that psychological safety is a "shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking". Therefore, it is clear that psychological safety reflects the organization's members' belief that they will not be punished for adverse consequences. This concept is characterized as a scenario generated by trust and mutual respect. People feel comfortable in this scenario ([Liu, Liao, & Wei, 2015](#)). Team psychological safety partly mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and internal whistleblowing. [Walumbwa and Schaubroeck \(2009\)](#) established that ethical leaders influence followers' voice behavior through the mediating influence of psychological safety. Based on the literature, the formulated hypothesis is under:

H3b. Psychological safety has a positive impact on the ethical voice.

The mediating role of relational identification and psychological safety

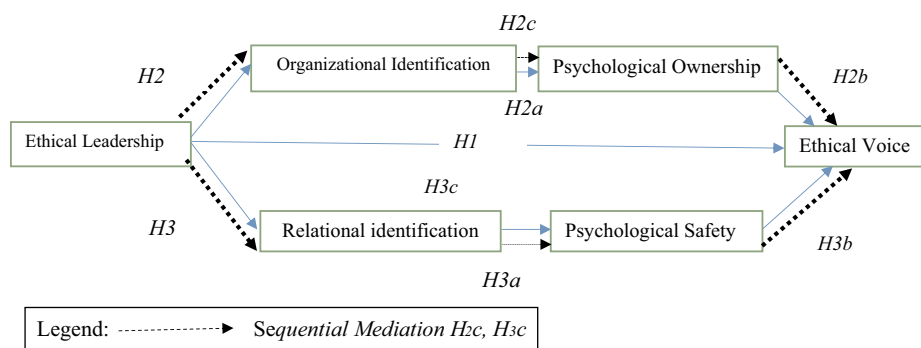
Scholars like [Markus and Wurf \(1987\)](#) initially identified that any self-identities of the individual employee/follower in organizational settings contribute more to adopting a particular behavior. The reason behind adopting a specific behavior is the psychological attachment of the said individuals. Though identity and integration work through the sharing of common traits in interpersonal relations, morality and ethics are directly influenced by closed relationships in the organization ([Brown et al., 2005](#)). The followers of ethical leaders with high levels of relational identification will tend to feel secure in the organization, and henceforth, they come up with ethical voicing behavior. Psychological safety is the feeling of an individual defining that the environment is safe for taking personal initiatives ([Kahn, 1990](#)). In the organization, psychological safety is a robust influential concept for altering the attitude and behavior of an individual employee. Organizations have a more focused approach to developing feelings of safety or a psychological safety climate in the workplace to achieve better performance from their most important resource, i.e. human resources.

Different researchers determined psychological safety antecedents, e.g. [Ashforth et al. \(2008\)](#) defined that organization identification and psychological safety are correlated. Similarly, [Carmeli et al. \(2010\)](#) focused on relationships with coworkers and supervisors in response to creating a psychological safety scenario where the individual feels free to take the initiative and help exhibiting positive attitudes and behaviors. [Newman et al. \(2017\)](#) identified that due to identification, individuals feel the positive and perceived environment as helpful and positive ([Edmondson, 2004](#)). [Edmondson \(2004\)](#) further explored that the psychological safety perception is based upon the qualities of a leader and group membership. [Ashforth et al. \(2008\)](#) relate psychological safety and identification with self-validation. Besides the thoughts about organizational personal, and relational identification, transparency and positive psychological capabilities can also lead to psychological safety. The individual must obtain a psychologically safe scenario through relational identification, which can help them perceive a psychologically safe environment. Role relationship theory, which has the basis for relational identification, can help build the perception of psychological safety ([Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009](#)). High-quality relationships work as potential contributors to building a psychologically safe environment. Incorporating the arguments above, the current study proposes a sequential mediation relationship linking ethical leadership and ethical voice through relational identification and psychological safety, as follows:

H3c. Relational identification and psychological safety sequentially mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical voice.

Research model

[Figure 1](#) of the research model is developed based on the above-stated hypotheses and literature. It displays the relationships among different variables from ethical leadership through ethical voice. The supporting literature and theoretical background provided sufficient support to produce the model presented below:

Figure 1.
Research model

Source: Authors' own work

Research methods

Research design

In line with the objectives of the current study, i.e. to identify the impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice and the role of relational identification and psychological safety as sequential mediators, the study opted for positivism as a research philosophy, a deductive approach, and a survey method. The impact of selected variables on ethical voice is determined after collecting quantitative data from the employees working in the banking sector. The causality of the variables was checked by running the regression analysis. The current study applied structural equation modeling (SEM-AMOS) techniques to test the formulated hypotheses. Other studies, such as (Mehmood et al., 2018; Shafique et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2021), took a similar approach to test the phenomena.

Population

Methodological experts such as Sakaran (2003) described that a research population refers to the entire group of events and groups of people where problems have been identified, according to the researcher's interest. It was also defined that the study population should be the group of individuals through which the study's results can be generalized (Rice et al., 2020). The current study identified the ethical voice-related issue in the banking sector, so data were collected from the employees in the sector, mainly, banking officers, human resource officers and account opening officers, considered the potential population for the study. The data was collected in Pakistan, a developing country with unethical practices due to vague policies and procedures (Malik et al., 2021). Pakistan is categorized as having a high-power distance culture, hindering the employees' ability to generate voice.

Moreover, the unemployment rate in Pakistan is significantly increasing, and the market is also dealing with an economic crunch. So, the employees retain their jobs and tend not to generate a voice. The sample size calculated for the study is 248, a moderate sample size for SEM analysis. The sample size was determined by using the G-Power formula. The purposive sampling technique was used as a sampling technique. Overall, 275 questionnaires were distributed among the employees of different branches nationwide. However, only 249 returned, with a response rate of 90%. Out of 249 questionnaires, one had unattended items and duplicate responses. So, for data analysis, 248 questionnaires were found correct in all manners.

Instrumentation

For testing the impact of variables, the Likert insert scale was identified as the best option (Miller and Brewer, 2003). The collection of responses with the help of a questionnaire is an economic tool and is widely used in a similar nature of research. The questionnaire consisted of demographic-related information, and the subsequent section contained the items for assessing the main variables of interest. The respondents rated all the items related to the variables adopted from the already developed questionnaires on a five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree or otherwise stated. Ethical leadership was measured through a ten-items scale by Brown et al. (2005). Relational identification-related responses were collected using a ten-items scale by Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003). Psychological safety was also measured through the adopted questionnaire. This scale consists of six items, including three reverse questions. It is a self-reported questionnaire, and the sample items "My manager often encourages me to take on new tasks or to learn how to do things I have never done before," "if I have a problem in this company, I could depend on my manager to be my advocate" and "often when I raise a problem with my manager, he/she does not seem very interested in helping me find a solution." The last item, as stated, is the reverse question; after collecting the response, the researcher treated the said item and the other two questions accordingly. Miller, (2000) scale was used for organizational identification. The shortened version of the questionnaire consists of three categories. However, the current study took membership-related items and assessed them accordingly. The four-item scale by Shukla and Singh (2015) was used to assess psychological ownership. The items related to obligation have been considered and added to the questionnaire. The dependent variable, i.e. ethical voice, was measured using the scale of Zheng et al. (2021). The scale is a self-reporting questionnaire where the individuals rated the tendency of ethical voice.

Data analysis techniques

Numerical data were analyzed to study the relationship and test the hypotheses. The data analysis techniques were applied using the guidelines of Hair, Sarstedt, Matthews, and Ringle (2016) presented for SEM-AMOS. Before formal hypotheses testing, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), CFA and assumptions for regression analysis, e.g. normality, multicollinearity and data reliability, were assessed. After testing the regression assumptions, a formal path model was obtained from AMOS to test the impact of different variables. Before all this, EFA was run on the current model. EFA's primary purpose is to identify the items' discrepancies. In EFA, item-wise reliability, appropriateness of data, factoring method, rotation types and commonalities are determined. The rotation type selected for EFA is Promax, identified as the best-fit method for SEM.

Moreover, all other principal component matrix methods have been used to estimate model fitness and identify differences among factors. Above all, KMO and Bartlett's tests were carried out for the appropriateness of data. Researchers like Lowry and Gaskin (2014) defined that the range of KMO 0.60 and above are in the excellent acceptance range. The result of the said test value of KMO was 0.817, which is according to the range. Furthermore, commonalities with the range set more significant than 0.4 were also identified for a good data set, and the results were within the range. Any cross-loading among items was also determined, and two items were removed from relational identification. No cross-loadings were found in the data for the remaining variables, and a smooth factor analysis surfaced.

Results*Demographic analysis*

The results related to the profile of respondents revealed that a diverse audience participated in the study. Overall responses of 248 respondents were finalized for the study.

Among the respondents, gender-wise analysis notifies that balanced responses were received from males and females *vis-à-vis*; other categories, such as the educational level of respondents, their experience, age and social media usage, were also recorded and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 analyzes the gender-wise values, and it notifies that 197 males, a percentage of 79.4, took part in the study. On the other hand, 51 females, with a ratio of 20.6, have filled out the questionnaires. The ratio of female respondents is identified as being lower than male respondents, which indicates that in Pakistan, males dominate the culture, and females are discouraged from taking jobs other than specific professions. Moreover, the current study adopts the purposive sampling technique, and according to this technique, most of the population is taken based on their qualification level. So, Table 1 also produced the values related to the educational level of respondents, and it has been identified that most respondents reported their academic level as master, with a percentage of 62.1 (154); 86 respondents reported a bachelor's degree, and only eight, or 3.2% overall, reported their education level as intermediate. The table further reported the age bracket of respondents. A total of 120 respondents reported their age bracket as 26–30 years, eight as 20–25, 57 are from 31 to 35 years of age, 42 have age from 36 to 40 and 21 are 41 and above years of age, respectively. The age-wise analysis revealed that the majority of the respondents reported their age bracket as 26–30 years, and such employees are trying to learn new things from their seniors, and it is imperative to work with ethical leaders to gain the experience that would further lead them to fulfill their work in more ethical manners.

Estimation of model with structural equation modeling

The current research aims to identify the impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice by determining two paths covering relational identification and psychological safety. To achieve the objectives, the current study used the guidelines of SEM. The following analysis consisted of four sections, from data screening to path modeling. Before testing the path model, CFA was conducted to fulfill the analysis requirement. The section-wise illustration of SEM follows.

	Frequency	%	Valid (%)	Cumulative (%)
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	197	79.4	79.4	79.4
Female	51	20.6	20.6	100.0
<i>Education</i>				
Intermediate	8	3.2	3.2	3.2
Bachelor	86	34.7	34.7	37.9
Master	154	62.1	62.1	100
<i>The age bracket of respondents</i>				
20–25	8	3.2	3.2	3.2
26–30	120	48.4	48.4	51.6
31–35	57	23.0	23.0	74.6
36–40	42	16.9	16.9	91.5
41 Above	21	8.5	8.5	100.0

Source: Authors' own work

Table 1.
Profile of respondents
(N = 248)

Screening of data

In the first phase of data analysis, data screening was conducted to identify whether data had any missing values, outliers, abnormality or linearity; besides, a test was run to identify the multicollinearity since these tests are prerequisites to running the formal regression and testing the hypotheses. After a thorough investigation, no missing values were found in the data; similarly, no outliers were found that would impact the construct being incorporated into the study. **Table 2** displays the overall normality and descriptive stats such as minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis-related values to test the normality of the data. The values under skewness are between 1 and -1, so data is interpreted as normal. Similarly, the values of Kurtosis are according to the range defined by previous researchers. Moreover, the mean and standard deviation are also according to the range. Overall results presented in **Table 2** support the statement that the data are normal and allow further formal analysis.

Confirmatory factor analysis

The current study identified validity, reliability and model fitness-related tests under CFA and ran the formal regression to test the hypotheses. **Table 3** shows the factor loading and reliability of the variables.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity in **Table 4** broadly discusses the correlation among different variables. The table also included VIF and tolerance values to determine the multicollinearity-related issues, and no concerns were found of multicollinearity as well as moderate correlations among the variables being examined. Moreover, the VIF value was less than 3, confirming that the ready is fit for further analysis.

Path analysis outcomes

Path analysis was conducted after the attainment of confirmatory results from the CFA. There were no issues of common method biases; therefore, a common latent factor was not created. The following **Tables 5** and **6** provide path analysis results in which all the literary foundations established were accepted.

Direct and mediation analysis

Tables 5 and **6** discuss the results related to the mediated path and provide the values for checking the direct impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice. **Table 5** incorporated the

Descriptive statistics	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	Skewness		Kurtosis	
					Stats	S.E.	Stats	S.E.
EL	0.93	4.33	3.4323	0.61406	-0.821	0.155	1.487	0.308
OI	0.94	4.45	2.1330	0.70165	0.760	0.155	0.622	0.308
PO	0.88	4.03	2.4725	0.62931	-0.108	0.155	-0.542	0.308
RI	0.71	3.47	2.0068	0.58261	0.125	0.155	-0.627	0.308
PS	1.07	4.88	3.6427	0.61925	-0.660	0.155	1.140	0.308
EV	0.74	3.67	2.5701	0.66837	-0.610	0.155	0.225	0.308

Table 2.
Normality-
descriptive statistics
(N = 248)

Notes: EL = ethical leadership; OI = organizational identification; PO = psychological ownership; RI = relational identification; PS = psychological safety; EV = ethical voice
Source: Authors' own work

Constructs and items	<i>P</i>	Λ	<i>a</i>	AVE
Psychological Ownership	0.788	0.638	0.804	0.563
PO2	0.795	0.666		
PO3	0.823	0.661		
PO4	0.715	0.634		
Organizational Identification	0.850	0.769	0.883	0.616
OI2	0.904	0.842		
OI3	0.908	0.823		
Ethical Voice	0.740	0.707	0.924	
EV2	0.834	0.753		
EV3	0.952	0.919		
EV4	0.946	0.919		
Ethical Leadership	0.958	0.803	0.961	0.653
EL2	0.852	0.839		
EL3	0.838	0.808		
EL4	0.881	0.718		
EL5	0.827	0.817		
EL6	0.791	0.651		
EL7	0.759	0.569		
EL8	0.947	0.753		
EL9	0.851	0.823		
EL10	0.825	0.762		
Relational Identification	0.728	0.563	0.947	0.654
RI2	0.943	0.843		
RI3	0.780	0.640		
RI4	0.773	0.666		
RI5	0.815	0.679		
RI6	0.845	0.707		
RI7	0.647	0.521		
RI8	0.931	0.814		
Psychological Safety	0.839	0.714	0.878	0.691
PS2	0.910	0.811		
PS3	0.855	0.703		
PS4	0.802	0.716		
PS5	0.659	0.566		
PS6	0.638	0.451		

KMO = 0.819; Chi-square (df = 190) = 3,485.707, *P* = 0.000

Measurement model fit statistics:

a. Absolute fit indices

$\chi^2 = 276.420$, *df* = 146, *P* = 0.000, $\chi^2/df = 1.893$, RMSEA = 0.051, GFI = 0.926, AGFI = 0.893, RMR = 0.043

b. Incremental fit indices

CFI = 0.961, NFI = 0.922 and TLI = 0.950

Notes: ρ = factor loadings at 0.40 using EFA; λ = standardized factors loadings using CFA; *a* = Cronbach alpha; AVE = average variance extracted

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3. Factor loadings, reliability and validity of measurement model (*N* = 248)

path containing ethical leadership, relational identification, psychological safety and ethical voice, and the values show a significant impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice. Moreover, for mediation analysis, it is observed that the total (direct and indirect) effect of ethical leadership on ethical voice is 0.321. That is, due to both direct (unmediated) and indirect (mediated) effects of ethical leadership on ethical voice, when ethical leadership goes up by 1, the ethical voice goes up by 0.321. Furthermore, the total (direct and indirect) effect

of relational identification on ethical voice is 0.106, and the total (direct and indirect) effect of psychological safety on ethical voice is 0.283. Hence partial mediation has been observed in the path.

Table 6 provides the second path, i.e. ethical leadership, organizational identification, psychological ownership and ethical voice, and the values show a significant impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice. Moreover, for mediation analysis, it is observed that the total (direct and indirect) effect of organizational identification on ethical voice is 0.103, and the total (direct and indirect) effect of psychological ownership on ethical voice is 0.239. In contrast, ethical leadership's direct (unmediated) effect on ethical voice is 0.244. The said path also reveals partial mediation.

Figure 2 and Table 7 also contain the regression analysis values presented in the above tables. The path model was generated through SEM-AMOS, with standardized weights for each relationship. We found that ethical leadership significantly impacts organization identification and relational identification, as discussed under the direct and mediation

Table 4.
Discriminant validity
of constructs and
correlations
(*N* = 248)

Variables	Tolerance	VIF	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ethical Leadership	0.612	1.634	1					
Org Identification	0.720	1.390	0.313**	1				
Psychological Ownership	0.684	1.463	0.299**	0.481**	1			
Relational Identification	0.703	1.422	0.387**	0.364**	0.437**	1		
Psychological Safety	0.648	1.543	0.574**	0.251**	0.211**	0.354**	1	
Ethical Voice			0.442**	0.341**	0.348**	0.376**	0.438**	1

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)
Source: Authors' own work

Table 5.
Regression analysis
(mediated
hypothesis)

Hypothesis	Effect of EL on RI	Effect of EL on PS	Effect of EL on EV	Effect of RI on PS	Effect of RI on EV	Total effect of EL on EV	Direct effect of EL on EV
Ethical Voice	0.367***	0.518***	0.244***	0.165*	0.138***	0.481***	0.203***

Notes: RI = relational identification; EL = ethical leadership; EV = ethical voice; PS = psychological safety;
****p* < 0.001; ***p* < 0.01 and **p* < 0.05
Source: Authors' own work

Table 6.
Regression analysis
(mediated
hypothesis)

Hypothesis	Effect of EL on OI	Effect of EL on PO	Effect of EL on EV	Effect of OI on PO	Effect of OI on EV	Total effect of EL on EV	Direct effect of EL on EV
Ethical Voice	0.358***	0.168*	0.244**	0.385***	0.110*	0.481***	0.203***

Notes: RI = relational identification; EL = ethical leadership; EV = ethical voice; PS = psychological safety;
****p* < 0.001; ***p* < 0.01 and **p* < 0.05
Source: Authors' own work

analysis headings. In this regard, Figure 2 significantly validates all the results for direct relationships and mediation-related results.

Discussion

This study’s objective was to identify the impact of ethical leadership on ethical voice by determining two paths covering relational identification and psychological safety. The results of the current study defined that ethical leadership has a significant and direct impact on the ethical voice. Zheng et al. (2021) also reported that ethical leadership significantly impacts ethical voice through a sequential mechanism. Literature also revealed that an organization’s leaders and managers encourage the voice behavior of employees/followers (Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012). Moreover, it has also been identified that ethical leadership plays a significant role in developing an ethical climate in the organization (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015).

Similarly, ethical leaders tend to listen to the concerns of their followers, which encourages them to generate their voices (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders generally welcome the suggestions and opinions of their followers because they share high moral standards (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Chen and Hou (2016) also proved that ethical leadership can predict employee voice because of nature and construct. Ethical leaders in an organization are identified as role models and imitated by their followers (Javed & Liu, 2018). They altruistically motivated their followers to speak against inappropriate/unethical working practices (Brown et al., 2005). The current study further explored the relationship

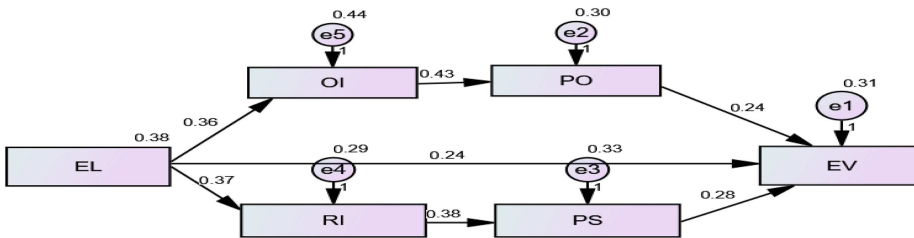


Figure 2. Path model (validation of the hypotheses)

Source: Authors’ own work

Relationships	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Organizational Identification ← Ethical Leadership	0.358	0.07	5.19	***
Relational Identification ← Ethical Leadership	0.367	0.06	6.6	***
Psychological Ownership ← Organizational Identification	0.385	0.05	7.43	***
Psychological Safety ← Relational Identification	0.165	0.06	2.79	0.01
Psychological Safety ← Ethical Leadership	0.518	0.06	9.23	***
Psychological Ownership ← Ethical Leadership	0.168	0.06	2.84	0.01
Ethical Voice ← Ethical Leadership	0.244	0.07	3.33	***
Ethical Voice ← Psychological Safety	0.283	0.07	4.01	***
Ethical Voice ← Psychological Ownership	0.239	0.06	4.02	***

Table 7. Regression analysis (direct relations)

Source: Authors’ own work

between ethical leadership and ethical voice by including identity and psychological mechanisms. It was identified that, through relational identification, leaders can develop positive attitudes toward their followers (Malik et al., 2021; Malik & Khan, 2020).

The empirical evidence (Zheng et al., 2021) and social identity theory (Schlenker, Miller & Johnson, 2009; Markus & Wurf, 1987) also broadly support the results of the current study that ethical leaders influence the attitude and behavior of an individual employee through relational and organizational identification (Zheng et al., 2021). It further contributes to positive psychological development in individual employees. For example, the path related to organizational identification and psychological ownership was validated, which explained that organizational identification has a significant relationship with psychological ownership. Mayhew, Ashkanasy, Bramble & Gardner, (2007) defined that organizational identification contributes to developing organization-based psychological ownership. Due to psychological ownership, the employee generates their voice related to any unethical practice in the organization.

The results of the current study also validated the results of previous research (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Zheng et al., 2021) and reported through data that ethical leadership using organizational identification and psychological ownership influenced the voice behavior of their followers. The other path, i.e. relational identification and psychological safety, got significant results, and in line with previous research (Carmeli et al., 2010; Edmondson & Lei, 2014), it also identified that ethical leaders, through relational identification, can evoke the perception in their followers to feel that the environment is safe to generate their voice. Hirak, Peng, Carmeli & Schaubroeck (2012) empirically tested the relationship between relational identification and psychological safety in the context of relational leaders. The literature categorizes ethical leaders as relational leaders (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). The results of the current study recognized that ethical leadership through relational identification, and psychological safety influences the voicing behavior of employees.

Theoretical implications

The current study significantly contributes to the ethical leadership theory since it integrates the social information process (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and self-concept perspectives (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993). The study added unique paths that have not been tested yet in ethical leadership and followers through comprehensive mechanisms of identification, psychological safety and psychological ownership. The study found that the ethical values of followers emerged through ethical leaders and personal identities that contribute to the body of research since previous studies were conducted with social exchange theory perspectives. These mechanisms were not considered for the research. The current research defined leadership through the lens of self-concept theory and examined that ethical leaders activate follower identities that further drive individual's positive attitudes and behaviors. The research also emphasized that leaders' behaviors are crucial to facilitating followers' internalization of organizational values. Leaders with ethics generate positive signals to followers that contribute to the identification (relational and organizational), further leading to psychological safety, psychological ownership and voicing behavior.

Practical implications

The current study presented several practical implications necessary for organizations. First, it confirmed that ethical leadership is a vital determinant in contributing to the ethical

voice of employees/followers. Employees interacting with ethical leaders tend to share the same ethics in the organization setting. So, organizations should focus on the development of such leaders through training at the departmental level. Moreover, since ethical leadership positively influences followers' attitudes and behavior, organizations must promote moral behavior in supervisors and subordinates.

Second, the study confirmed that relational and organizational identification contributes to the development of employees' psychological capabilities, such as psychological empowerment and psychological safety, which further leads to identifying and reporting any misconduct in the organization. These mechanisms were not considered in previous research, and/or conducted in isolation, whereas the current study tested them collectively and offered unique insights that significantly contributed to generating an ethical voice with the help of process ethical leadership.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the study covering comprehensive mechanisms and identifying significant results, some limitations exist. First, it focused on the banking sector, and a moderate sample was used for the study. Future researchers should conduct in any sector where ethical misconduct prevails, such as in public sector-related organizations. Second, the article only took psychological mechanisms that potentially contribute to generating an ethical voice. Future research should take other behavioral outcomes, such as extra-role and knowledge-sharing behaviors. The literature on ethical leadership is more inclined to investigate ethical leadership outcomes concerning antecedents, so future research should study the antecedents of ethical leadership, such as personality traits.

Finally, leadership-related research cannot be conducted without boundary conditions, so future research should consider culture-related variables as moderators. For example, spiritual leadership is an emerging style recently declared the panacea for modern business issues. Future research can use spiritual leadership as an antecedent for primitive as well as prohibitive extra-role behaviors and knowledge-sharing behavior with the role of sequential mediation. Varying attitudes and emotional states such as psychological safety, perceived organizational justice, employees' attachment, positive affect, and empathy can be used to understand the mechanism with the help of other leadership styles like empowering, and servant spiritual leadership.

Conclusion

The current study examined some novel thoughts to contribute to ethical leadership literature. The study sheds light on the prevailing unethical practices in organizations, specifically in the banking sector and identifies the positive role of ethical leadership. It also emphasized that ethical leaders are inevitable to motivate the employees to generate an ethical voice through the mechanisms of identification and other psychological elements (psychological ownership and psychological safety). These mechanisms have not been discussed in the literature so far. Based on these arguments, the current study concluded that ethical leaders are the best source for employees/subordinates to generate an ethical voice. We also examined that relational and organizational identification contributes more to developing employees' psychological safety and psychological empowerment. The results of the current study holistically provide more significant insights into an ethical leader's-related theory. Literature suggests that ethical leaders can contribute more in the current era; therefore, organizations should focus on developing such leaders to gain a competitive edge and promote the bottom-up approach.

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Research data are not shared.