

Responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance: investigating the mediating role of sustainable HRM

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of responsible leadership in impacting organizational sustainability performance grounded in the stakeholder theory. Further, it delves into the underlying mechanism that accentuates the link between responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance via mediating role of sustainable HRM practices within the organization.

Design/methodology/approach – The study follows a cross-sectional research design using data collected via questionnaire-based survey from employees working in top 100 NSE listed organizations in India. The proposed hypotheses of the research were tested using SPSS Process Macro.

Findings – Results depicted that there is a direct relationship between responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance. However, the relationship is better explained with a mediating role of sustainable HRM practices within the organization.

Practical implications – The study is helpful for the practitioners to understand the instrumentality of responsible leadership and sustainable HRM practices within Indian organizations. Moreover, the study promotes the relevance of achieving sustainability-oriented goals of the organizations.

Originality/value – The study fosters the limited research on the integration of leadership style and HRM function. The results further add to literature on sustainable HRM by studying its antecedents and consequences.

Keywords Responsible leadership, Organizational sustainability performance, Triple bottom line, Sustainable HRM

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding organizational performance has expanded beyond traditional financial metrics to encompass broader considerations of sustainability (Kramar, 2021; Westerman *et al.*, 2020). The governments across nations are proactively engaging with United Nation's sustainability efforts such as sustainable development goals (SDGs) necessitating the participation from the industries to adopt sustainability practices aimed to resolve global grand challenges such as poverty, inequality, employment insecurity and climate change (UNGC, 2024). Given the context of India, the government has put regulatory pressures on the eligible firms to invest into socially-responsible activities targeted toward sustainable development (Gatti *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the Securities exchange board of India (SEBI) has mandated the top 1,000 National Stock Exchange (NSE) listed organizations to publish business responsibility and sustainability reports (BRSR) in India to combat greenwashing and promote sustainable practices in the companies. Resultingly, the firms are actively searching for the ways to enhance their sustainability performance in economic, environmental and social spheres. Keeping in view the imperative agenda of sustainable development for the firms, various scholars have increasingly recognized the significance of



adopting sustainable HRM practices that aim to win competitive advantage as well as enhancing sustainability performance of the organizations (Aust *et al.*, 2020; Stahl *et al.*, 2020; Kramar, 2022). Sustainable HRM encompasses the HR practices embedded into sustainability values, considering economic, environmental, human and social implications (Aust *et al.*, 2020). This approach contributes to meet stakeholder expectations and fostering organizational success (De Prins *et al.*, 2020). It is a novel people management approach extending the realm of strategic HRM that solely aimed to enhance economic performance of the organizations (Kramar, 2022). Hence, a broader lens of sustainable HRM builds on sustainable development goals, promoting employee well-being and various outcomes internal and external to the organization (De Prins *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2023). However, extant literature argues that the effectiveness of sustainable HRM can be influenced by plenty of factors (Gomes *et al.*, 2024; Singh *et al.*, 2024). Herein, the role of leadership is perceived to be very critical for the implementation of sustainable HRM practices furthering sustainable performance (Ahmad and Fatima, 2023; Singh *et al.*, 2024). While conventional leadership styles have been scrutinized for their limited alignment with sustainability goals, emerging paradigms such as authentic (Gardner *et al.*, 2011), servant (Islam *et al.*, 2023) and responsible leadership (Maak and Pless, 2006) have garnered attention for their potential to drive sustainable practices and outcomes. Among these, responsible leadership stands out for its holistic approach to decision-making, considering the needs of multiple stakeholders and fostering long-term organizational sustainability (Javed *et al.*, 2020; Ur Rehman *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, responsible leaders create an ethical framework coupled with relational stakeholder orientation, and ensure that sustainable practices will be implemented within the organization (Khanam *et al.*, 2023; Székely and Knirsch, 2005). Despite the theoretical appeal of responsible leadership, an empirical evidence linking it to meso-level implications such as HR practices (Ahmad and Fatima, 2023; Singh *et al.*, 2024) as well as organizational performance beyond economic terms (Pathak and Jha, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023) remains scarce in the literature.

Furthermore, scholars have suggested that responsible leadership can influence organizational performance directly and indirectly through various mediating mechanisms (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). For instance, responsible leaders may help in creating ethical climate (Khanam *et al.*, 2023), innovation (Javed *et al.*, 2020) and corporate reputation (Javed *et al.*, 2020) that eventually lead to increase in organizational performance. However, there is a need to explore various other pathways to add rigor in studying the impact of responsible leadership on organizational sustainability performance (Javed *et al.*, 2021).

In this regard, Kramar (2022) suggests that sustainable HRM may have the ability to play an intermediary role in advancing environmental and societal sustainability outcomes. Thus, sustainable HRM practices, which prioritize ethical, supportive, responsible and environmentally conscious workforce management, have been posited as a conduit through which responsible leadership can translate into improved organizational sustainability (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Chaudhary *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023). However, an empirical investigation into the interrelationship of responsible leadership, sustainable HRM and organizational sustainability performance remain sparse, leaving a significant gap in the literature.

In light of these gaps, this study aims to achieve two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to explore the impact of responsible leadership on sustainable HRM practices and organizational sustainability performance within organizations. Secondly, it endeavors to investigate the subsequent influence of sustainable HRM on organizational sustainability performance. Additionally, the study aims to uncover the mediating role of sustainable HRM in the relationship between responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance.

By addressing these objectives, this research aims to contribute to the literature in several ways. Firstly, it seeks to enhance understanding of responsible leadership by examining its implications for meso-level outcomes such as organizational sustainability performance

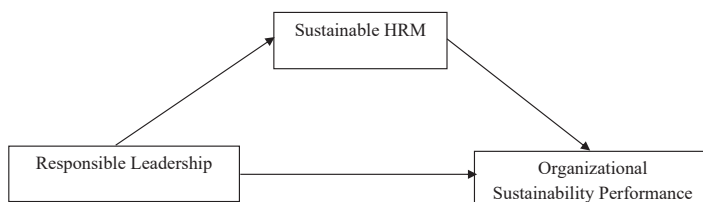
(Miska and Mendenhall, 2018) and sustainable HRM (Singh *et al.*, 2024). Secondly, it endeavors to elucidate the ethical pathways through which responsible leadership influences organizational sustainability, particularly through the implementation of sustainable HRM practices (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012; Doh and Quigley, 2014; Dong and Zhong, 2021). Lastly, by highlighting the interplay between leadership and HRM in fostering organizational sustainability, the study aims to enrich the discourse on sustainable HRM and its firm-level antecedents and outcomes.

In summary, this research endeavors to underscore the critical role of responsible leadership and sustainable HRM in promoting organizational sustainability performance, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of organizational success in the contemporary business landscape.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1 Stakeholder theory

The present study is grounded in the stakeholder theory or stakeholder thinking (Freeman *et al.*, 2004) which conceptualizes firms “as entities enmeshed within a set of interactions between parties inside and outside the company” (Ferraray, 2009, p. 32). More precisely, stakeholder theory emphasizes that the success and survival of the firms depends on creating value for their diverse stakeholders (Freeman *et al.*, 2004). In this study, we focus on the managerial thesis of instrumental stakeholder theory (Donaldson and Preston, 1995) contending that successful stakeholder management necessitates attitudes, structures and practices delineating a crucial role for organizational leaders (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Freeman *et al.*, 2004). The instrumental approach to stakeholder theory further underscores that leaders with a good stakeholder management can equally create and distribute value among stakeholders, thus impacting favorable performance (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Javed *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, in the realm of organizational performance, stakeholder theory highlights the relevance of performance against the expectations of variety of stakeholder groups measured in the terms of triple bottom line performance or organizational sustainability performance (Hubbard, 2009). Therefore, to demonstrate the effectiveness of responsible leadership for organizational performance, Maak and Pless (2006) assert that responsible leaders, with a stakeholder-orientation, coordinate their activities in such a way that can help the firms to achieve the triple bottom line goals or a sustainable performance. However, there must be an ethical qualification of the means by which leaders can contribute to the performance of the organization (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, current research draws on stakeholder theory arguing that responsible leadership can positively impact the sustainable performance of the organization, both directly and indirectly, by influencing organizational culture through the implementation of sustainable HR practices (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Pathak and Jha, 2023; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). The proposed conceptual model is presented in Figure 1 below.



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 1.
Proposed
conceptual model

2.2 Responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance

Responsible leadership is a moral, value-driven and socio-relational phenomenon (Maak and Pless, 2006). In this study, we adopt the conceptualization by Voegtlin *et al.* (2012, p. 4), who define responsible leadership “as the awareness and consideration of the consequences of one’s actions for all stakeholders, as well as the exertion of influence by enabling the involvement of the affected stakeholders and engaging in an active stakeholder dialogue.” This definition provides a procedural understanding of responsible leadership, signifying the leader’s respectful engagement with stakeholders (Voegtlin, 2011). Scholarly studies have established that responsible leadership acts as a driver for organizational performance in economic terms (Lynham and Chermack, 2006; Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2015). However, increased scrutiny due to various cases of ethical lapses has raised the pressure on firm leaders to be socially responsible and contribute to sustainable development (Voegtlin, 2011; Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Sarkar, 2016). Therefore, the social responsibility or corporate sustainability of the firm, defined as “the firm’s actions signaling the firm’s desire to achieve goals or broader societal objectives such as enhancing different aspects of the firm’s environmental and social performance,” has become a salient concern for leaders (Pless *et al.*, 2012; Siegel, 2014, p. 221). This concept of corporate sustainability is also supported by the institutional approach, asserting that “organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983, p. 150). Therefore, organizations are constantly in need of a “license to operate” for their long-term survival, where responsible leaders, through interaction and engagement with stakeholders, can help maintain the organization’s license to operate for long-term survival (Voegtlin, 2011). Such a favorable impact is evident because responsible leaders can exhibit behavioral complexity, responding to various demands and adapting to new circumstances by applying multiple roles such as expert, facilitator and citizen simultaneously (see Voegtlin *et al.*, 2020). Existing literature highlights that responsible leadership positively impacts organizational sustainability performance across various dimensions. For example, Liao and Zhang (2021) argue that responsible leaders, with their relationship-building abilities, sharing orientation and employing relational mechanisms, positively impact radical and incremental environmental innovation, refining products and reducing costs for the organization. Additionally, Javed *et al.* (2020) posit that the innate relational nature of responsible leadership assists leaders in mobilizing support from stakeholders and creating value networks. These value networks further help organizations sustain business and promote the common good for society. A similar notion is supported by the study of Ur Rehman *et al.* (2023), who found the positive impact of responsible leadership on both financial and non-financial performance outcomes. The authors argue that responsible leaders can create network ties that enhance firm performance directly and indirectly through the implementation of sustainable practices.

Thus, responsible leaders can secure the commitment of management towards sustainability practices, eventually rewarded by the market in terms of increased returns and social legitimacy (Pless *et al.*, 2012; Székely and Knirsch, 2005; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2020). In summary, a responsible leader, by offering multiple roles and practicing “avoiding harm” and “doing good” towards stakeholders, brings a positive impact on the organization’s performance (Javed *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, the present study proposes that responsible leaders facilitate the engagement and interaction of stakeholders in a way that helps achieve the triple bottom line goals of the organization. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H1. There is a positive association between responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance.

2.3 Responsible leadership and sustainable HRM

“Sustainable HRM comprises practices that aim to improve the economic, environmental, and social performance of the organization while ensuring the long-term reproduction of the HR base” (Kramar, 2014, p. 16). In simpler terms, it is an alternative approach to people management that explicitly recognizes the broader impact of HR which is beyond organizational economic performance (Westerman *et al.*, 2020). Rooted in stakeholder theory, sustainable HRM practices focus on the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) of employees designed with common good values, and stakeholder orientation, rather than merely functioning as performance-driven resources (Aust *et al.*, 2020; De Prins *et al.*, 2020). There is a greater evidence available in the literature indicating the effectiveness of sustainable HRM to impact various employee and organizational outcomes (Gomes *et al.*, 2024; Singh *et al.*, 2024). However, there is a crucial role of leaders in the organization in the adoption and implementation of HRM practices and shaping perceptions toward them (Dong and Zhong, 2021; Den Hartog and Boon, 2012; Nishii and Paluch, 2018). Essentially, leaders have the ability to personify the HR practices within the organization. It is observed that both responsible leadership and sustainable HRM share common set of values such as pluralistic, responsible, ethical and stakeholder orientation that cascades into win-win outcomes for stakeholders (De Prins *et al.*, 2020; Dong and Zhong, 2021; Stahl *et al.*, 2020). Previous research also has linked responsible leadership to varied, but partial approaches to sustainability-oriented HR systems. For example, Wang *et al.* (2015) argued that responsible leadership drives the implementation of ethical business practices, enhancing the corporate social performance of the organization. Conversely, Ur Rehman *et al.* (2023) emphasized the role of responsible leaders in advocating for environmental management practices, positively impacting both economic and environmental performance. Dong and Zhong (2021) posit that responsible leaders are more likely to support socially-responsible HRM systems compared to other HRM systems focused solely on enhancing employee performance. However, the impact of responsible leadership on an integrated sustainability-oriented HR system like sustainable HRM has not been studied so far (Singh *et al.*, 2024). Hence, recognizing the crucial role of responsible leaders in fostering a sustainability-oriented work environment, we argue that responsible leaders contribute to a positive perception of sustainable HRM practices.

H2. Responsible leadership is positively associated with sustainable HRM.

2.4 Sustainable HRM and organizational sustainability performance

The link between HRM and performance is well-established in the literature (Beer *et al.*, 2015; Kramar, 2014). Recent developments influenced by stakeholder theory emphasize the need to consider outcomes of HRM function beyond financial performance (Beer *et al.*, 2015). Scholars specifically advocate for HRM’s active involvement in triple bottom line business models to achieve goals related to sustainable business performance (Stahl *et al.*, 2020; Westerman *et al.*, 2020). This intersection prompts attention to the significance of sustainable HRM. Sustainable HRM is considered as an alternative model to strategic HRM that primarily aimed to improve the economic performance of the organization (Kramar, 2022). However, sustainable HRM helps in realizing the success of organization in a broader sense aiming at the multiple goals of the organization by bringing a sustainable driven change in the organization (Guerci *et al.*, 2019). For doing so, sustainable HRM shares the sustainability goals and values in the HRM functions, and plays a strategic role in influencing the firm’s sustainability performance (Westerman *et al.*, 2020). Sustainable HRM function solving grand challenges such as employment insecurity, employees’ democracy and providing access to decent work target the employees’ long-term skills and abilities leading to a sustainable competitive advantage to the organization (Almarzooqi *et al.*, 2019; De Prins *et al.*, 2020; Guerci *et al.*, 2019). Literature also established that leaders with the help of sustainable HRM

function can influence its followers to develop a sustainability-oriented culture/mindset, that encourages them to support for achieving the triple bottom line goals of the organization (Guerci *et al.*, 2019; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, sustainable HRM practices become an important pathway providing an impression of a sustainable organization to its stakeholders (Doh *et al.*, 2012; Guerci *et al.*, 2019). Extant literature has demonstrated that sustainable HRM positively impacts organizational performance (Chanda and Goyal, 2020; Lechuga-Sancho *et al.*, 2018; Lee, 2019) or its proxy indicators such as financial performance (Meier *et al.*, 2021), innovation, customer satisfaction (Wikhamn, 2019), organizational attractiveness (Lin-Hi *et al.*, 2019), reputation and innovation (Ramos-González *et al.*, 2022) and forming intellectual capital (Barrena-Martinez *et al.*, 2019) that helps in creating a sustained competitive advantage and maintaining the legitimacy of the organization. Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize:

H3. Sustainable HRM is positively associated with organizational sustainability performance.

2.5 Mediating role of sustainable HRM

The role of HRM function is generally employee-oriented, where the primary objective is to enhance organizational performance (Wikhamn, 2019). It is widely established in the literature that high performing work practices are able to impact organization's financial performance, whereas such practices may undermine the societal and environmental impact of the organizations (Beer *et al.*, 2015; Kramar, 2014). Therefore, sustainable HRM practices are advocated, that are based on sustainability values with an aim to enhance organizational sustainability performance while simultaneously reducing the harm on its employees (Aust *et al.*, 2020; Kramar, 2022). Sustainable HRM comprises certain practices such as access to decent work, ensuring workforce participation and providing sustainable career climate (De Prins *et al.*, 2020) that are able to address global grand challenges of sustainability. These practices embody an ethical and responsible orientation of the employer towards its stakeholders, thus creating a favorable image of a sustainable employer amongst them (Guerci *et al.*, 2019; Stahl *et al.*, 2020). However, given the importance of sustainable HRM for the organizations, there remains a significant call for finding out its antecedents or the driving force for the adoption and implementation of sustainable HRM practices (Singh *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, leadership styles are observed to play a crucial role in determining the outcomes of sustainable practices of the organizations (Islam *et al.*, 2023).

On the other hand, it is argued that responsible leaders are able to impact the organizational performance directly and indirectly through various mediating mechanisms (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, leaders with their ethical and moral stances can promote and encourage such practices which promote economic, environmental and social sustainability goals (Islam *et al.*, 2023). These practices help the leaders face a biggest challenge of building a supportive work atmosphere to enhance knowledge sharing (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2023; Khatoon *et al.*, 2022), encouraging pro-social behaviors (Islam *et al.*, 2023; Özkan *et al.*, 2023) and preventing detrimental consequences (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Chaudhary and Islam, 2023) within the organization, that eventually brings competitive advantage to the firms, and increase performance. Present study contends that responsible leaders through their values are able to impact the organizational culture by altering the traditional HR processes and routines into sustainable practices, allowing the employees to feel the effect of responsible leadership. Thus, responsible leaders prioritizing ethics, social responsibility and sustainability are able to create a virtuous cycle at the organizational level creating a positive impact on employee performance as well as organizational sustainability. Thus, we hypothesize:

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- H4. There is a mediating role of sustainable HRM between responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and data collection

Data were collected from professional employees working at various levels in top 100 National Stock Exchange (NSE) listed organizations in India that are notably ahead in sustainability reporting (Aggarwal and Singh, 2019). According to the latest norms laid by Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the top 1,000 NSE listed organizations are now mandated to publish business responsibility and sustainability reports (BRSR) in India. However, a recent study by Aggarwal and Singh (2019) reported that there is a huge difference between the quality and quantity of sustainability reporting, which makes these sustainability reports less reliable in India. Additionally, Székely and Knirsch (2005) have argued that due to lack of accuracy and uniformity, the sustainability reporting is very difficult to understand and compare. Furthermore, it is asserted that the sustainability reporting is not an end, rather it acts a means to build the trust and image among the stakeholders of a sustainable employer (Lee and Ha-Brookshire, 2018; Székely and Knirsch, 2005). Therefore, for the current study we use measures of responsible leadership (RL), sustainable HRM (SuHRM) and organizational sustainability performance (OSP) to capture stakeholders' perceptions, specifically those with less power and control to evaluate the impact of sustainable practices (Guerci *et al.*, 2019). This approach would help us in devising a clearer picture of what goes on within the organization. With this motive, the authors approached the employees working in the select business organizations via in-person visits and emails. The respondents were guaranteed about their anonymity and were assured about the use of the results solely for the academic purpose. Following the item-to-response approach, there was a minimum target to collect at least 20 responses per item in the questionnaire, i.e. total 440 responses (Khatoon *et al.*, 2022) to run multiple regression. Additionally, the data collected from the top 100 NSE listed organizations represents a heterogeneity in the sample to boost statistical power (Chaudhary, 2020). Thus, total 620 complete responses were collected over the period of four months from diverse companies. Out of the total 620 responses, 451 were males (72.7%), 164 were females (26.5%) and 5 others (0.8%). The mean age of the respondents was 28.25 years (SD = 5.48). Maximum respondents (417, 67.3%) had work experience between 0 and 5 years. Further, a large number of respondents (579, 93.4%), had a permanent position in their organizations, 21 (3.4%) were holding a temporary position and 20 (3.2) were in the other category. Lastly, 140 (22.6%) respondents were from public enterprises, 475 (76.6%) from private and 5 (0.8) were from others category.

3.2 Measures

The survey was administered in English language, and all the constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree") unless stated otherwise. For the purpose of multivariate analysis, we took the average of all the items in the respective measures.

3.2.1 Responsible leadership. RL was measured using five-item scale by Voegtlin (2011) on discursive responsible leadership. The sample items of the scale include: "My direct supervisor considers the consequences of decisions for the affected stakeholders," "My direct supervisor involves the affected stakeholders in the decision-making process," "My direct supervisor weighs different stakeholder claims before making a decision." The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale is 0.912.

3.2.2 Sustainable HRM. SuHRM was measured using 11-item scale by De Prins *et al.* (2020) reflected into dimensions of decent work, workplace democracy and sustainable career climate. The sample items of the scale are as follows: “This organization truly cares about the well-being,” “bottom-up voice is stimulated in the organization,” “There is a range of training and learning opportunities for everyone in this organization.” The Cronbach’s alpha value of the scale is 0.901.

3.2.3 Organizational sustainability performance. OSP was measured using six-item scale by Lee and Ha-Brookshire (2018) reflecting the performance dimensions based on triple bottom line, i.e. financial, environmental and social arenas. The sample items of the scale are as follows: “Our company has competitive advantages in its sales and profit growth,” “Our company has an initiative to reduce the negative environmental impact of its products,” “Our company has a policy to strive to be a good corporate citizen.” The Cronbach’s alpha value of the scale is 0.927.

3.2.4 Control variables. We controlled for the effects of demographic variables such employees’ age, gender, work experience, nature of employment and nature of company. Previous research has mentioned about the possible effects of these variables on organizational sustainability performance (Carballo-Penela, 2019; Dong and Zhong, 2021).

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

Prior to hypotheses testing, we first conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with the help of IBM AMOS 20.0 in order to provide evidence of reliability and validity of measures in the Indian context. We modeled our focal variables as latent variables with construct of sustainable human resource management practices (decent work, workplace democracy and sustainable career climate) and organizational sustainability performance (financial, environmental and social performance) as second order constructs and responsible leadership construct as first order construct. We adopted the model fit criteria suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999). Accordingly, the goodness of fit values such as Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) greater than 0.90 and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) up to 0.08 are acceptable to indicate the model fit. The fit to the three-factor measurement model was: $\chi^2(243) = 1,117.284$, CFI = 0.911, TLI = 0.899 and RMSEA = 0.076. On closely observing the modification indices of the focal items on the latent constructs, we found that the two items (items 1 and 2) of decent work practices were correlated, we thus correlated the error terms of these two items to check the fit of our model. Results revealed that three-factor measurement model has displayed a good fit with the values: $\chi^2(242) = 1,072.158$, CFI = 0.916, TLI = 0.904 and RMSEA = 0.074. This model was compared with a single-factor model, which has shown poor fit with the values: $\chi^2(245) = 1,576.812$, CFI = 0.865, TLI = 0.848 and RMSEA = 0.094. Additionally, we conducted Harman’s single factor analysis to analyze the issue of common method variance in the study. For doing so, the items of various constructs were loaded on a single factor in a principal component factor analysis, and the results of the unrotated one-factor solution were analyzed. The results reveal that one factor explained 45.27% variance in the data, which is less than the threshold of 50% for the existence of common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Hence, the results indicate that common-method variance was not an issue in the current study.

4.2 Reliability and validity of the constructs

To measure the reliability of the constructs, we analyzed the values of the Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR) and compared it against the benchmark value of 0.7 suggested

by Hair *et al.* (2010). We can see that values of both the Cronbach's alpha (Table 2) and CR (Table 1) of all the understudy constructs are greater than 0.7 suggesting the reliability of the constructs. Additionally, to assess the convergent validity of the constructs, we used the criterion by Fornell and Larcker (1981). From the Table 1, we can see that Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of all the constructs understudy is greater than threshold value of 0.5 implying convergent validity.

4.3 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations and inter-correlations among the study variables. RL is positively and significantly associated to sustainable HRM ($r = 0.64, p < 0.01$) as well as organizational sustainability performance ($r = 0.61, p < 0.01$). Further, sustainable HRM is also positively related to organizational sustainability performance ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$).

4.4 Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses were tested using PROCESS Macro Model 4 in SPSS 20 (Hayes, 2018). We controlled the effects of demographic variables, i.e. age, gender, work experience and nature of employment and nature of the company. As proposed in Hypothesis 1, we can see in Table 3 and Figure 2 that responsible leadership is positively related to organizational sustainability performance ($\beta = 0.58, t = 19.15, p < 0.01$) explaining 38% variance in total effect model ($R^2 = 0.38$). Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Additionally, the results revealed that responsible leadership is also positively related to our proposed mediator, i.e. sustainable HRM practices (path a, $\beta = 0.56, t = 20.94, p < 0.01$). The model explained 42% variance ($R^2 = 0.42$) thus, providing support to Hypothesis 2. Further, sustainable HRM is also positively associated with organizational sustainability performance (path b, $\beta = 0.33, t = 7.59, p < 0.01$) providing support to our Hypothesis 3. Lastly, the results reveal that due to the presence of the mediator, i.e. sustainable HRM practices, the effect of responsible leadership on organizational sustainability performance has reduced from $\beta = 0.58, t = 19.15, p < 0.01$ to $\beta = 0.39, t = 10.38, p < 0.01$ and remained

Construct	Items/Constructs	Standardized factor loading	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Responsible Leadership	RL 1	0.827	0.912	0.675
	RL 2	0.818		
	RL 3	0.856		
	RL 4	0.809		
	RL 5	0.798		
Sustainable HRM	Decent Work	0.974	0.948	0.860
	Workplace Democracy	0.909		
	Sustainable Career	0.897		
	Climate			
Organizational Sustainability Performance	Financial Performance	0.827	0.931	0.818
	Environmental Performance	0.942		
	Social Performance	0.939		

Source(s): Authors' compilation

Table 1.
Reliability and
convergent validity

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age	28,25	5,48								
Gender	1,28	0,46	0,10*							
Work Experience	1,46	0,77	0,74**	0,03						
Employment nature	1,09	0,39	0,00	0,09*	-0,04					
Company nature	1,78	0,43	-0,08*	-0,02	-0,05	0,05				
RL	3,69	0,76	-0,06	-0,05	0,00	-0,11**	0,03	0,91 (0,82)		
SuHRM	3,73	0,66	-0,05	0,00	-0,04	-0,11**	-0,00	0,64**	0,90 (0,92)	
OSP	3,93	0,74	-0,05	-0,03	-0,00	-0,11**	0,03	0,61**	0,57**	0,92 (0,90)
VIF	-	-	2,28	1,02	2,26	1,03	1,01	1,74	1,75	-

Note(s): Sample size (N) = 620. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); Cronbach alpha (α) for the variables are shown in the italic letters on the diagonal of the matrix; The square root of the average variances extracted for all the variables are italicized in the parentheses on the diagonal of the matrix. Abbreviations: RL = Responsible Leadership, SuHRM = Sustainable HRM, OSP = Organizational sustainability performance, VIF = Variance inflation factor

Source(s): Authors' compilation

Variables	Organizational sustainability performance Total effect			Sustainable HRM Direct effect			Organizational sustainability performance Indirect effect		
	β	t	p	β	t	p	β	t	p
Constant	1.85	8.07	0.00	1.68	8.36	0.00	1.28	5.56	0.00
Age	-0.00	-0.12	0.90	0.00	0.75	0.45	-0.00	-0.35	0.71
Gender	-0.00	-0.17	0.85	0.05	1.34	0.17	-0.02	-0.59	0.54
Work experience	0.00	0.00	0.99	-0.06	-1.54	0.12	0.02	0.48	0.63
Employment nature	-0.09	-1.50	0.13	-0.07	-1.45	0.14	-0.06	-1.12	0.26
Company nature	0.02	0.44	0.65	-0.03	-0.63	0.52	0.03	0.65	0.51
Responsible leadership	0.58	19.1	0.00	0.56	20.94	0.00	0.39	10.38	0.00
Sustainable HRM	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.33	7.59	0.00
F	64.28			75.95			68.43		
R^2	0.38			0.42			0.43		

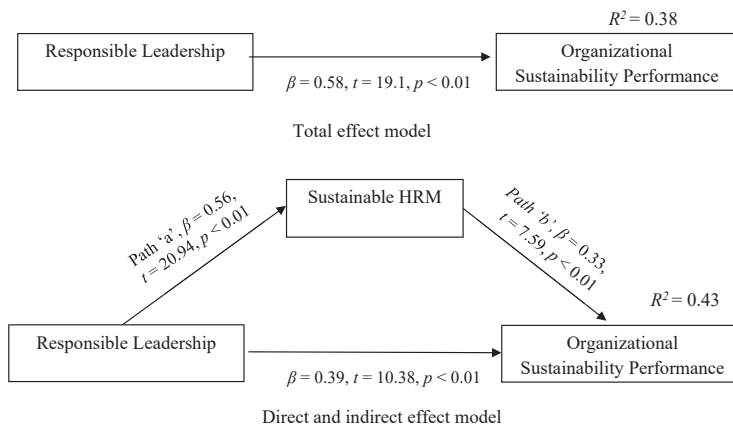
Total, direct and indirect effects of responsible leadership on organizational sustainability performance

	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total effect of RL on OSP	0.58	0.03	0.52	0.64
Direct effect of RL on OSP	0.39	0.03	0.32	0.47
Indirect effect of RL on OSP via SuHRM	0.18	0.03	0.12	0.27

Note(s): $N = 620$, significance = $p < 0.001$, Abbreviations: RL = Responsible leadership, SuHRM = Sustainable HRM, OSP = Organizational sustainability performance

Source(s): Authors' compilation

Table 3.
Results of PROCESS
macro (model 4)
regression



Source(s): Authors' compilation

Figure 2.
Statistical models
(total, direct and
indirect effects) with
path coefficients

significant. Further, the indirect effect of responsible leadership on organizational sustainability performance in the presence of sustainable HRM practices is also found to be positive and significant (path $a \times$ path b , $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). The results thus provide support for our Hypothesis 4. Overall, this model explained 43% variance ($R^2 = 0.43$) in the dependent variable of organizational sustainability performance.

5. Discussion

The study has examined the impact of responsible leadership on organizational sustainability performance of the organization. The study further provides empirical evidence on the mediating role of sustainable HRM between the association of responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance. These results suggest that responsible leadership acts as a facilitator to organization's sustainability performance via reinforcement of sustainable HR practices within the organization. The detailed implications of the findings are given as follows.

5.1 Theoretical implications

First of all, the study is in line with the findings of Javed *et al.* (2020) and Ur Rehman *et al.* (2023) establishing a positive relationship between responsible leadership and firm's sustainability performance in Indian context. As mentioned earlier, Indian companies are now mandated to publish their business sustainability and responsibility reporting practices and their performance beyond financial returns. Therefore, Indian companies need leadership acknowledging the stakeholder approach to enhance their multi-dimensional performance. This is the reason, to why conception of responsible leadership fits best with the Indian companies, whereby leaders possess a wider purpose and create a network with multi-stakeholders leading to enhanced organizational performance (Doh *et al.*, 2012). Thereby, the study highlights the instrumentality of the responsible leadership in achieving multi-dimensional performance of the organization.

Secondly, the study provides the support for the different roles performed by the leaders (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2020), wherein leaders with a combination of expert and facilitator role exhibit behaviors and structure the processes in a way, which aims to fulfill the multi-dimensional performance goals of the organization, and facilitate the employees by taking care of their needs through sustainable HRM practices. The results complement the propositions by Florea *et al.* (2013) wherein, it is argued that organizational sustainability is contingent on not only what the organization does (i.e. HR practices), but also on how the individuals are in the organization (values shared by the managers/leaders). In other words, sustainable HR practices act as "hardware" and the leaders' values in the organization are "software" promoting organizational sustainability (Florea *et al.*, 2013).

Third, the study adds to the scant literature establishing the link between leadership and HR practices (Den Hartog and Boon, 2012; Nishii and Paluch, 2018). More specifically, the findings of the study align with the argument of Den Hartog and Boon (2012) establishing that "some leadership styles fit better with certain types of HR practices or HR bundles than others." Accordingly, the findings reveal that responsible leaders are able to create a favorable perception of sustainable HRM practices within the organization, because responsible leaders provide more support and resources for the successful implementation of sustainable HRM practices than any other type of HR bundles aiming to increase only financial performance (Dong and Zhong, 2021; Stahl *et al.*, 2020). Due to this complementary match of leadership style and sustainable HR practices, it had a potential to positively impact the organizational performance.

Lastly, the study also enhances the literature on sustainable HRM by exploring its antecedents and outcomes. Sustainable HRM aims to achieve the corporate sustainability goals by stimulating the individual and organizational capabilities (Guerci *et al.*, 2019). The study argued that leaders who prioritize responsibility are likely to implement policies and practices that foster a positive work environment, encourage ethical behavior and support sustainable initiatives. In return, sustainable HRM practices contribute to productivity by ensuring that employees are well-supported, continuously developed and aligned with the organization's sustainability goals. In this way, the study highlights the relevance of both

responsible leadership and sustainable HRM practices for the productivity and performance of the organizations.

5.2 Practical implications

The study offers certain implications for the practitioners. First of all, the study highlights the significance of responsible leaders for organizational sustainability performance. Since, Indian organizations are adopting stakeholder perspectives, responsible leaders with their behavioral complexity and abilities can influence the organizational contexts for favorable performance outcomes. India is emerging as a global market where leaders have to foster trust among its stakeholders to thrive and survive. Therefore, mere exhibition of ethical values is insufficient, and leaders have to pursue a constellation of holistic values in the form of sustainable HR practices in the organization to influence responsible behavior among the employees (Sargam and Pandey, 2023). Therefore, organizations must take training initiatives to develop responsible leaders to bring sensitivity toward stakeholder concerns. Additionally, the study offers the mechanism by which responsible leaders can influence positive organizational outcomes. Therefore, leaders must use sustainable HRM practices portrayed as ethical means for favorable performance outcomes. Responsible leaders using such ethical means send a positive signal to the stakeholders which eventually gets rewarded by the market with an increased organizational performance. This framework fosters a common good approach that guides the organizations to move beyond organizational success in economic terms and inculcate an outside-in perspective for building a sustainable workplace. Further, in the emerging era of artificial intelligence, the understudy variables have a transformative impact in the businesses. Although, the integration of AI driven practices can significantly drive sustainable operations, there are inevitable issues related to ethics, trust and bias propagated by AI. Therefore, the leaders' choices and decision making in this regard would help them in employing AI driven practices for sustaining business performance. Lastly, the present framework guides the leaders to institutionalize the sustainable policies and practices to create a sustainability driven environment in the organization. A collaborative effort from each and every stakeholder would help the organization to achieve its sustainability goals.

6. Conclusion and future research directions

The present study grounded in stakeholder theory aimed to explore whether and how responsible leadership creates an impact on organizational sustainability performance. The findings of the study revealed that responsible leadership create a positive impact on organizational sustainability performance. Additionally, the study delineates sustainable HRM as an important underlying pathway in this relationship to realize sustainable success of the organization. However, there is a lot more to be explored in the context of responsible leadership and sustainable HRM. For instance, future research can explore the role of organization's sustainability strategy (Singh *et al.*, 2024) for strengthening the interrelationship between responsible leadership, sustainable HRM and organizational performance. Furthermore, the present study has only considered subjective indicators to measure the organizational sustainability performance. Future research may also consider the objective performance indicators and conduct a comparative analysis to explore the relevance of sustainability reporting. Although, the study has taken suitable measures to reduce common method bias, future research may use multi-source and time-lagged data to strengthen the findings of the study. Thus, further research within the arenas of responsible leadership and sustainable HRM have a potential to solve the organizational financial and non-financial issues.

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