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Leadership Integrity as an Ethical-Climate Mechanism for Green Strategic HRM: Evidence from a Post-Conflict Developing-Country Public University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines leadership integrity as an ethical climate mechanism for Green Strategic Human Resource Management (GSHRM) and sustainability performance at a public higher education institution in a post-conflict developing country. Although research on leadership and green human resource management (HRM) has expanded, leadership integrity remains underexamined as a distinct antecedent of GSHRM, particularly in underrepresented contexts such as Timor-Leste. Drawing on ethical climate theory and transformational leadership theory, this study tests a model that positions leadership integrity as an antecedent, GSHRM as a mediating organizational mechanism, and sustainability performance as the institutional outcome. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL). Quantitative data collected from 150 faculty members and administrative staff across 10 faculties were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with 5,000 bootstrap subsamples, supplemented by a thematic analysis of 41 open-ended responses. The results indicate that leadership integrity has a positive and significant effect on GSHRM ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$), while GSHRM has a positive and significant effect on sustainability performance ($\beta = 0.317$, $p < 0.001$). GSHRM partially mediates the relationship between leadership integrity and sustainability performance ($\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.001$), with the direct effect remaining significant ($\beta = 0.176$, $p < 0.001$). The qualitative findings reveal a persistent gap between formal sustainability policies and their practical implementation, further supporting the ethical climate explanation. The study concludes that leadership integrity establishes a foundation of credibility, GSHRM serves as the organizational mechanism, and sustainability performance represents the institutional outcome. These findings underscore the importance of translating formal sustainability commitments into consistently implemented practices within resource-constrained higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership integrity has increasingly been recognized as an important foundation of credible organizational governance because organizational leaders influence not only formal policies but also the consistency with which institutional values are translated into organizational practices (Dey et al., 2025; Tabuena, 2025). In sustainability-oriented organizations, this consistency is particularly important because environmental and social objectives require employees to translate

formal commitments into everyday organizational behaviors. Recent research on ethical leadership similarly indicates that leadership values can influence sustainability-related outcomes through organizational climate and employee behavior (Dey et al., 2022). Thus, leadership should be understood not only as a source of strategic direction but also as an important organizational resource for embedding sustainability values into institutional systems.

The growing literature on green human resource management (GHRM) further suggests that human resource management systems provide an important mechanism for integrating sustainability into organizational processes (Chowdhury et al., 2025; Jamil et al., 2023). Through green recruitment, training, performance management, employee participation, reward systems, and a sustainability-oriented organizational culture, GHRM can translate environmental and social objectives into employee capabilities and organizational practices. Systematic research has increasingly identified GHRM as an important component of organizational sustainability and has called for stronger integration between green HRM and broader sustainability research (Joshi et al., 2023). Empirical evidence from higher education also indicates that GHRM is positively associated with sustainability outcomes. For example, Abbas et al. (2022) found that GHRM contributes to sustainability in higher education through organizational and employee-level mechanisms.

Importantly, a recent systematic review by dos Santos, Payangan, and Sudirman (2026) provides a direct foundation for the present study. Their review synthesized 30 studies published between 2020 and 2026 and identified recurring relationships among leadership integrity, related values-based leadership constructs, green strategic human resource management (GSHRM), and sustainability performance in higher education institutions (HEIs). The review indicates that leadership can influence the adoption and effectiveness of sustainability-oriented HR practices, while HRM frequently serves as a mechanism through which leadership values are translated into sustainable institutional outcomes. At the same time, the review identified substantial geographical and contextual gaps, particularly the limited empirical representation of Southeast Asia and fragile or post-conflict higher education systems, such as those in Timor-Leste (dos Santos et al., 2026).

These findings create an important opportunity for empirical extension. Whereas dos Santos et al. (2026) synthesized the existing literature and established a conceptual foundation for understanding leadership integrity, GSHRM, and sustainability performance, the present study empirically tests the proposed relationships within a specific public higher education institution in Timor-Leste. In this regard, the present research advances from systematic evidence synthesis to context-specific empirical testing. This distinction is important because relationships identified across international studies cannot automatically be assumed to operate in the same manner in resource-constrained and post-conflict institutional environments (Al Jneid et al., 2026).

The relationship between leadership and GSHRM has also been examined through related constructs, such as transformational leadership, green transformational leadership, and ethical leadership (Alwali & Alwali, 2025; Niazi et al., 2023). For example, Tu et al. (2023) demonstrated that environmentally specific transformational leadership and GHRM can jointly contribute to employees' pro-environmental behavior. Similarly, Ren et al. (2021) showed that CEO ethical

leadership and GHRM are associated with organizational environmental performance. Islam et al. (2021) further demonstrated that GHRM can serve as a mechanism linking ethical leadership to environment-specific discretionary behavior. These studies establish the broader relevance of leadership to green HRM; however, they do not fully establish whether leadership integrity itself functions as a distinct antecedent of GSHRM, particularly within HEIs.

Leadership integrity is conceptually related to, but distinct from, transformational and ethical leadership. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, whereas leadership integrity emphasizes consistency among values, decisions, commitments, and actual conduct. This distinction is important in sustainability implementation because institutions may have formal sustainability policies while exhibiting discrepancies between policy commitments and their implementation in practice. From an organizational ethical climate perspective, consistent leadership behavior can provide employees with credible signals regarding expected standards of conduct and organizational priorities. Dey et al. (2022), for example, demonstrated that ethical leadership can shape the ethical climate and subsequently contribute to sustainability-related employee behavior and performance.

The role of GSHRM is therefore particularly important because it provides the organizational infrastructure through which leadership values can be translated into operational practices. Leadership integrity may establish credibility and normative direction, while GSHRM can institutionalize these values through recruitment, training, performance evaluation, employee participation, reward systems, and other strategic HR processes. In this regard, GSHRM represents more than a collection of environmentally oriented HR practices; it can function as a strategic mechanism through which leadership commitments are embedded in organizational routines. This argument is consistent with the systematic review by dos Santos et al. (2026), which identified GSHRM and sustainability-oriented HR practices as important mechanisms connecting leadership-related factors to sustainability performance in higher education.

The higher education context is particularly significant because universities are complex institutions in which sustainability encompasses environmental responsibility, social contributions, economic and organizational resilience, governance, and human development. Unlike conventional corporations, HEIs simultaneously fulfill educational, research, community engagement, and public service functions. Consequently, sustainability performance depends not only on technical environmental initiatives but also on leadership, organizational culture, human resources, stakeholder participation, and institutional governance. Evidence from HEIs in developing countries indicates that GHRM can contribute to institutional sustainability (Abbas et al., 2022); however, the leadership conditions that facilitate the implementation of such practices remain comparatively underexamined.

This issue is especially relevant in resource-constrained and post-conflict institutional contexts. HEIs in such settings may face limitations in financial resources, administrative infrastructure, technological capacity, and organizational systems while simultaneously being expected to contribute to national development and sustainable development objectives. Under these conditions, leadership credibility and the strategic management of human resources may

become particularly important for translating sustainability commitments into institutional practices. The systematic review by dos Santos et al. (2026) highlighted this contextual gap, noting the limited empirical evidence concerning Southeast Asian and post-conflict HEIs, including those in Timor-Leste.

Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), the national public university of Timor-Leste, therefore provides a relevant empirical setting for examining these relationships. The institution represents a public HEI in a developing country operating within a post-conflict national context. Examining UNTL enables the present study to investigate whether leadership integrity is associated with GSHRM and whether GSHRM subsequently contributes to sustainability performance under institutional conditions that differ from those represented in much of the existing corporate sustainability literature.

Accordingly, two principal research gaps motivate this study. First, although research on leadership and GHRM has expanded considerably, the literature has predominantly emphasized transformational leadership, green transformational leadership, and ethical leadership. Comparatively less empirical attention has been devoted to leadership integrity as a distinct antecedent of GSHRM. The systematic review by dos Santos et al. (2026) confirmed that leadership integrity and related leadership constructs are increasingly discussed in sustainability research but also identified the need for context-specific empirical testing, particularly in underrepresented higher education settings.

Second, the mechanism through which leadership integrity is translated into sustainability performance requires further empirical clarification. Existing research suggests that GHRM can function as an organizational mechanism connecting leadership to environmental and sustainability outcomes (Islam et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2021). However, limited empirical evidence directly tests a model in which leadership integrity is positioned as an antecedent, GSHRM as a mediating organizational mechanism, and sustainability performance as the outcome within a public HEI in a developing country.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining leadership integrity as an antecedent of GSHRM and GSHRM as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between leadership integrity and sustainability performance at UNTL. The study further complements its quantitative analysis with qualitative evidence from 41 open-ended responses to explore how members of the academic and administrative community perceive the relationship between formal institutional policies and their practical implementation. This qualitative component provides contextual evidence that may help explain the organizational processes underlying the statistical relationships.

The study makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it empirically extends the research agenda proposed by dos Santos et al. (2026) by testing the leadership integrity–GSHRM–sustainability performance pathway in an underrepresented HEI in a developing country. Second, it strengthens the theoretical connections among leadership integrity, organizational ethical climate, and strategic green HRM by positioning GSHRM as an organizational mechanism through which leadership values may be translated into sustainability-oriented practices. Third, it

provides context-specific empirical evidence from Timor-Leste, thereby extending the geographical scope of GHRM and sustainability research beyond the institutional contexts that dominate the existing literature.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, in which quantitative analysis was conducted first, followed by qualitative analysis to provide contextual explanations for the quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design was selected to test the hypothesized relationships among leadership integrity (LI), green strategic human resource management (GSHRM), and sustainability performance (SP), while also exploring university community members' perceptions of the implementation of leadership values and green HR practices within their institutional context.

The quantitative phase served as the primary analytical component, examining the direct relationships between LI and GSHRM and between GSHRM and SP, as well as the indirect relationship between LI and SP through GSHRM. The subsequent qualitative phase analyzed participants' open-ended responses to identify themes that helped explain the quantitative findings. The findings from both phases were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among leadership integrity, GSHRM, and sustainability performance within the university's institutional context.

Research Context

The study was conducted at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), the national public university of Timor-Leste. UNTL provides an appropriate empirical setting because sustainability-oriented institutional practices must operate across multiple academic and administrative units within a developing-country higher education environment. The quantitative survey covered respondents from 10 faculties, spanning diverse academic areas including agriculture, economics and business, engineering, social and political sciences, education, health sciences, law, science and technology, philosophy, and tourism, arts and creative industries allowing the study to capture perspectives across organizational units rather than relying on a single faculty or department.

This institutional diversity is relevant because sustainability practices may not be implemented uniformly across organizational units; faculty-level differences can arise from differences in academic missions, leadership practices, employee characteristics, resources, and organizational routines. The study therefore treats UNTL as a multi-unit institutional setting in which leadership integrity and GSHRM can be examined across diverse organizational contexts.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of lecturers and administrative staff at UNTL, selected because they are directly involved in the implementation of institutional policies, academic activities, administrative processes, and human resource practices. A total of 150 usable questionnaires were obtained from lecturers and administrative staff across the 10 participating

faculties, with respondents recruited according to their availability and willingness to participate so as to obtain representation from each organizational unit.

The unit of analysis was the individual lecturer or administrative staff member; respondents were required to have sufficient knowledge of their institutional environment to evaluate leadership behavior, HR practices, and sustainability-related organizational performance. The sample size was considered adequate for the proposed PLS-SEM model, as the analysis focused on a relatively parsimonious structural model with three principal latent constructs. In addition to traditional minimum sample-size logic, PLS-SEM is appropriate when the research objective is prediction and theory development in relatively underexplored contexts (Hair et al., 2021).

Measurement Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of three principal constructs: (1) Leadership Integrity (LI), (2) Green Strategic Human Resource Management (GSHRM), and (3) Sustainability Performance (SP). Each construct was measured using 10 reflective indicators, resulting in 30 substantive measurement items, all assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement approach was designed to capture respondents' perceptions of the extent to which leadership demonstrates integrity, sustainability is incorporated into strategic HRM practices, and the institution demonstrates sustainability performance.

Leadership Integrity was operationalized through indicators reflecting the consistency, honesty, transparency, ethical conduct, responsibility, and credibility of organizational leaders, capturing whether leaders' decisions and actions are perceived to be consistent with the values and principles communicated to members of the institution.

Green Strategic Human Resource Management was operationalized as the strategic integration of environmental and sustainability considerations into human resource practices, with indicators covering green recruitment, employee training and development, performance management, employee participation, rewards, and strategic HR planning.

Sustainability Performance was conceptualized as an integrated institutional outcome encompassing environmental, social, economic/organizational, and governance-related dimensions. In the higher education context, sustainability performance was not restricted to financial performance but also included the institution's capacity to integrate sustainability principles into its educational, administrative, social, environmental, and governance activities.

Reflective Measurement Model

All three constructs were specified as reflective, as the indicators were considered manifestations of their respective underlying latent variables, so that changes in the underlying construct were expected to be reflected in corresponding changes in the observed indicators. The measurement model was assessed according to established PLS-SEM procedures (Hair et al., 2021), including outer loadings, internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity.

Indicator loadings of approximately 0.70 or higher were considered acceptable. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with values of 0.70

or above generally considered satisfactory. Convergent validity was assessed through AVE, with a threshold of 0.50 or higher, while discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT), with values below the recommended threshold indicating adequate discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2021).

Data Collection Procedure

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to lecturers and administrative staff across the participating faculties. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and asked to provide responses based on their perceptions and experiences within the university. The questionnaire used standardized response categories to minimize ambiguity and facilitate comparison across respondents; participation was voluntary, and respondents were given sufficient information concerning the purpose and academic use of the data.

The qualitative component was collected through an open-ended section of the research instrument, inviting participants to describe their perceptions and experiences concerning leadership integrity, GSHRM, and the implementation of sustainability-oriented practices allowing respondents to identify issues that may not have been fully captured by the closed-ended Likert-scale items.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), selected because the study focuses on prediction and explanation of relationships among latent variables and examines a mediation mechanism within a relatively underexplored institutional context. The analysis followed the two-stage logic recommended for PLS-SEM: (1) assessment of the measurement model, followed by (2) assessment of the structural model, conducted using SmartPLS, with statistical significance evaluated through a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure. Following Hair et al. (2021), the bootstrapping procedure used 5,000 subsamples; the significance of path coefficients was evaluated using bootstrapped standard errors, t-values, confidence intervals, and p-values, with statistical significance evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Structural Model Assessment

After establishing satisfactory measurement-model quality, the structural model was assessed to determine the explanatory and predictive relationships among the constructs. The assessment included collinearity diagnostics using variance inflation factor (VIF), coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), path coefficients (β), bootstrapped t-values and p-values, and confidence intervals for the structural paths. VIF values were examined to identify potential multicollinearity among predictor constructs; R^2 values were used to assess the proportion of variance in endogenous constructs explained by their predictors; f^2 was used to assess the contribution of individual exogenous constructs to explained variance; and predictive relevance was assessed using Q^2. The structural relationships were evaluated in accordance with the hypothesized model: LI → GSHRM, GSHRM → SP, and LI → GSHRM → SP.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of GSHRM was examined using the bootstrapping approach, with the indirect effect of Leadership Integrity on Sustainability Performance through GSHRM estimated as LI → GSHRM → SP. The mediation analysis examined whether the indirect effect was statistically significant based on the bootstrapped confidence interval and p-value. The direct effect of LI on SP was also retained in the structural model, enabling the study to distinguish between full and partial mediation: when both the indirect and direct effects are statistically significant, the findings indicate that GSHRM explains part of the relationship between leadership integrity and sustainability performance, while leadership integrity also retains a direct association with sustainability performance. This approach is preferable to relying solely on older causal-steps procedures, as contemporary PLS-SEM mediation analysis emphasizes the statistical significance and confidence interval of the indirect effect.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

The qualitative component consisted of 41 valid open-ended responses obtained from lecturers and administrative staff representing five faculties: Tourism, Economics and Management, Education, Science, and Agriculture. The open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic approach informed by the data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing procedures associated with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The analysis proceeded through several stages: first, responses were reviewed repeatedly to establish familiarity with the data; second, meaningful statements related to Leadership Integrity, GSHRM, sustainability implementation, and organizational practice were identified and coded; third, related codes were grouped into broader categories; and finally, recurring categories were synthesized into overarching themes.

Particular attention was given to statements concerning: (1) consistency between leadership statements and actual behavior; (2) implementation of sustainability-oriented HR policies; (3) employee perceptions of leadership credibility; (4) availability of institutional support and resources; (5) differences between formal policy and practical implementation; and (6) employee participation in sustainability activities. The purpose of the qualitative analysis was not to statistically generalize the responses but to provide contextual and explanatory evidence for interpreting the quantitative findings.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Integration occurred after the quantitative and qualitative analyses had been completed. The quantitative results identified the strength and significance of the hypothesized structural relationships, while the qualitative evidence was used to interpret the organizational processes underlying those relationships. For example, a statistically significant relationship between Leadership Integrity and GSHRM can be interpreted quantitatively as evidence that higher perceived leadership integrity is associated with stronger GSHRM practices, while the qualitative responses provide contextual information concerning how employees perceive leadership consistency, policy implementation, and organizational support for sustainability.

The integration therefore follows the logic: statistical relationship → qualitative explanation → integrated interpretation. This approach strengthens the explanatory value of the research because the qualitative findings do not replace the quantitative evidence; instead, they help explain how the observed relationships may operate within the institutional context of UNTL.

Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

Several procedures were employed to enhance research quality. First, standardized measurement items and a consistent five-point response scale were used across respondents. Second, measurement-model reliability and validity were systematically assessed before interpretation of the structural relationships. Third, bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was used to assess the stability and significance of the estimated relationships. For the qualitative component, coding and thematic interpretation were conducted systematically, with attention to recurring patterns and consistency across responses; the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence provided an additional basis for interpreting the findings.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the research, and responses were treated confidentially. The analysis was conducted at the aggregate level so that individual respondents were not identified in the reporting of results.

Research Model and Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and previous empirical literature, the study tested the following structural model: Leadership Integrity (LI) → Green Strategic Human Resource Management (GSHRM) → Sustainability Performance (SP). The direct relationship between Leadership Integrity and Sustainability Performance was also retained to assess whether GSHRM functions as a partial or full mediator. The hypotheses were formulated as follows:

a) H1: Leadership Integrity has a positive and significant effect on Green Strategic Human Resource Management.
b) H2: Green Strategic Human Resource Management has a positive and significant effect on Sustainability Performance.
c) H3: Green Strategic Human Resource Management significantly mediates the positive relationship between Leadership Integrity and Sustainability Performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Measurement and Structural Model

All three constructs showed outer loadings of 0.859–0.925, composite reliability of 0.972–0.979, and AVE of 0.778–0.825 (Table 1), meeting the criteria for reliability and convergent validity.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Outer Loading (min–max)	Composite Reliability	AVE
Leadership Integrity (LI)	0.859–0.904	0.972	0.778
Green Strategic HRM (GSHRM)	0.881–0.919	0.977	0.808
Sustainability Performance (SP)	0.891–0.925	0.979	0.825

Source: primary data processing, 2026.

Hypothesis testing results (Table 2) show that H1 and H2 were fully supported: leadership integrity significantly and positively affects GSHRM ($\beta = 0.372$; $f^2 = 0.279$, medium category), and GSHRM significantly and positively affects sustainability performance ($\beta = 0.317$; $f^2 = 0.150$, medium category). The direct path LI → SP also remained significant ($\beta = 0.176$), indicating that GSHRM does not fully replace the direct effect of leadership integrity.

Table 2. Results of Direct-Effect Hypothesis Testing

Path	β	t-value	p-value	f²	Decision
LI → GSHRM (H1)	0.372	11.619	<0.001	0.279 (medium)	Significant
GSHRM → SP (H2)	0.317	8.517	<0.001	0.150 (medium)	Significant
LI → SP (direct path)	0.176	6.117	<0.001	0.074 (small)	Significant

Source: primary data processing, 2026 (bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, $\alpha = 0.05$).

Mediation testing (Table 3) shows that GSHRM significantly mediates the effect of leadership integrity on sustainability performance (H3: $\beta = 0.118$; $t = 6.971$; $p < 0.001$). Because the direct path LI → SP remained significant, this mediation is classified as partial mediation.

Table 3. Results of Mediation Effect Testing

Indirect Effect	Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Decision
H3: LI → GSHRM → SP	0.118	6.971	<0.001	Significant mediation (partial)

Source: primary data processing, 2026 (bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, $\alpha = 0.05$).

Ethical Climate as the Explanatory Mechanism

Qualitative data reinforce the ethical-climate interpretation. Analysis of the 41 open-ended responses identified three themes within the Leadership Integrity dimension: (1) transparency and policy consistency perceived as suboptimal, (2) a gap between written policy and its field implementation, and (3) positive assessments from a subset of respondents. On the first theme, a respondent from the Faculty of Science noted limited transparency in decision-making and insufficient support for human-resource development. On the second theme, a respondent from the Faculty of Tourism highlighted the lack of participation by junior lecturers in policy formulation and a mismatch between written policy and its implementation in the field. Conversely, a lecturer from the Faculty of Agriculture rated leadership practice and integrity at UNTL as functioning well.

This thematic pattern is consistent with Van Aswegen and Engelbrecht's (2009) proposition that organizational ethical climate understood as a shared perception of expected standards of behavior is a precondition for successful sustainability policy. Where transparency and policy consistency were perceived as weak, as found in a number of UNTL faculties, the resulting ethical climate tends to be weak, such that the LI → GSHRM path, while significant at the aggregate structural level, is likely uneven in strength across units a hypothesis relevant for heterogeneity testing in future research. Conversely, in faculties with relatively positive integrity assessments, such as some responses from the Faculty of Agriculture, the trickle-down mechanism proposed

by Van Aswegen and Engelbrecht appears to function more effectively.

Compared with the University of Cape Town case study (Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht, 2009), which shows that leadership integrity needs to be supported by transparent recruitment and promotion systems for its effects to be realized consistently, the UNTL findings show a parallel pattern: the recruitment and infrastructure support limitations noted by the Faculty of Science respondent indicate that without such systemic support, leadership integrity risks remaining a normative discourse rather than an evenly realized practice.

Theoretical And Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study extends transformational leadership and ethical-climate theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht, 2009) beyond corporate and urban Global South settings into a resource-constrained, post-conflict public higher education institution, showing that the trickle-down mechanism from leader integrity to ethical climate to sustainability practice remains relevant even under far more constrained institutional conditions.

Practically, UNTL leadership is encouraged to strengthen transparency in decision-making and the participation of junior lecturers in policy formulation, consistent with the two critical themes emerging from the qualitative data. Additionally, as the UCT case suggests, strengthening leadership integrity should be accompanied by systemic reform of recruitment and promotion so that its effects on GSHRM and sustainability performance can be realized more evenly.

Limitations And Directions for Future Research

This study has the limitations of a cross-sectional design and self-reported data, which raise the possibility of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003); the term 'mechanism' in this article should be read as interpretive language consistent with the correlational and mediation patterns found, rather than as evidence of a causal process observed over time. Qualitative data were also limited to five of ten faculties, so thematic generalization should be made cautiously. Future research is encouraged to formally test whether the strength of the LI → GSHRM path differs significantly across faculties (e.g., through a Chow test or Multi-Group Analysis), to confirm the ethical-climate heterogeneity hypothesis raised in the discussion.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of leadership integrity in advancing green strategic human resource management (GSHRM) and sustainability performance at a public higher education institution in Timor-Leste. The findings demonstrated that leadership integrity had a positive and statistically significant effect on GSHRM, while GSHRM had a positive and statistically significant effect on sustainability performance. Furthermore, GSHRM significantly mediated the relationship between leadership integrity and sustainability performance, indicating that the influence of leadership integrity operated not only through its direct effect on sustainability performance but also indirectly through the institutionalization of sustainability-oriented human resource management practices.

The findings provided empirical support for the proposition that leadership integrity serves as an important antecedent of GSHRM. Leaders who demonstrate consistency among ethical values, decisions, and organizational actions may establish the credibility necessary to integrate sustainability principles into human resource management practices. In this context, GSHRM serves as an organizational mechanism through which leadership values can be translated into recruitment, training, performance management, employee participation, and other sustainability-oriented HR practices. The significant mediation effect further suggested that sustainability performance was associated not only with leadership integrity itself but also with the organizational processes through which leadership values were translated into strategic HR practices.

The qualitative findings reinforced this interpretation by revealing a persistent gap between formal sustainability policies and their practical implementation. These findings suggested that the existence of sustainability-oriented policies did not necessarily ensure their effective implementation. Instead, the credibility and consistency of leaders in upholding organizational values may influence how institutional members interpret, accept, and implement these policies. The organizational ethical climate perspective therefore offered a relevant theoretical explanation for the observed relationships, although ethical climate was not directly measured as a separate construct in the empirical model.

The study made three principal contributions to the existing literature. First, it extended research on leadership integrity by empirically establishing its role as an antecedent of GSHRM rather than treating it solely as a general leadership or governance characteristic. Second, it strengthened the emerging literature linking GSHRM to sustainability performance in higher education by providing empirical evidence from an institutional context in a developing country. Third, it contributed context-specific evidence from a public university in Timor-Leste, a setting that remains substantially underrepresented in international GHRM and sustainability research. In this regard, the study advanced beyond systematic evidence synthesis toward context-specific empirical testing and provided empirical support for the conceptual relationships identified in previous research, including the systematic review by Dos Santos, Payangan, and Sudirman (2026).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggested that higher education institutions seeking to improve sustainability performance should recognize leadership integrity and strategic HR systems as interconnected components of institutional sustainability. Sustainability policies should be supported by credible leadership behavior, consistent implementation, employee development, participatory mechanisms, and HR practices that reinforce sustainability values. For resource-constrained public higher education institutions (HEIs), this approach may be particularly relevant because strengthening the alignment between leadership behavior and existing HR systems could provide a practical pathway for advancing institutional sustainability without relying exclusively on additional financial resources.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single public university and employed a cross-sectional design, limiting the generalizability of the

findings and preventing definitive causal or temporal inferences. The quantitative sample included only faculty members and administrative staff, while the qualitative evidence was obtained from a smaller subset of respondents. Additionally, organizational ethical climate served as a theoretical explanatory perspective rather than a directly measured construct within the empirical model. Future research should therefore consider multi-institutional and longitudinal designs, include additional stakeholder groups, and explicitly examine the potential mediating or moderating role of organizational ethical climate in the relationship between leadership integrity and GSHRM.

Overall, the findings indicated that leadership integrity, GSHRM, and sustainability performance were significantly interconnected within the institutional sustainability framework of higher education. The study demonstrated that leadership integrity provided a foundation for ethical and credible leadership, GSHRM served as an organizational mechanism, and sustainability performance represented the institutional outcome. By empirically examining these relationships at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), the study contributed evidence from a developing-country, post-conflict higher education context and underscored the importance of translating formal sustainability commitments into credible, consistent, and effectively implemented organizational practices.

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