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Mediating effect of university culture in the relationship between university leadership and employee behaviors

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Abstract

This research explores the impact of university leadership on employee behavior, with the mediating role of university culture. Using a quantitative research approach, this study collected the data from 938 participants. Collected data were analyzed with SPSS 25 and AMOS 24 software. The findings showed a positive relationship between university leadership and university culture, and university culture negatively impact on employee turnover behavior. Furthermore, university leadership indirectly influences employee commitment and turnover behavior through mediating role of university culture. From the discoveries of this research, the authors propose theoretical and managerial implications to fostering a robust university culture. The ultimate goal is to decrease employee turnover behavior, providing valuable insights for university leadership to create a more sustainable work environment. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a comprehensive model that integrates university leadership, university culture, and employee behavior. The managerial contribution not only focusing on university leadership but also cultivating a culture that contribute to a sustainable university.

Keywords: University Leader; University Culture; Employee Commitment; Turnover Behavior

1. Introduction

In the context of higher education, university culture refers to a set of shared values, beliefs and practices that prioritize and ensure standards in teaching and research. The role of universities is determined in shaping the knowledge economy, promoting innovation and contributing to social progress. The quality of education and research conducted by universities directly affects their impact on sustainable development goals. The policies of university leadership can assure the quality of education and training as well as the performance of employees.

Universities in Vietnam are increasingly focusing on improving the quality of education, research and administration to enhance global competitiveness and contribute to the country's development. Some initiatives aimed at promoting a culture of quality include evaluating curriculum and faculty performance to ensure schools meet international standards. University culture is a system of values, standards and quality work habits that have shaped every member of a university to perform work effectively. University culture is affected by the management, policies and strategies of the university. Every educational institution has its own culture, which can affect the job performance of employees within the university. A good university culture will be very beneficial in improving lecturers' performance, it will help achieve goals and improve the quality of education and training. Factors affecting the quality of professional work are important and effective research drivers (Feldman & Paulsen, 1999). Many studies have examined the relationship between university leadership and employee behaviors (Ali et al., 2013); (Bushra et al., 2011); (Shahzadi et al., 2014) (Saleem, 2015). Other authors have discussed university culture and lecturer performance (Hamayun et al., 2011);

(Shahzad, 2014) According to (Vaughter et al., 2013) points out that the literature on sustainable development in universities still mainly focuses on case studies in university activities with little consider policies or the impact of university culture in the relationship between university leadership and employee behaviors. But especially few researchers have considered the influence of university management on employee behaviors (Paracha et al., 2012) (Shah et al., 2017; Torlak & Kuzey, 2019). In this study, the author shows the mediating role of university culture in the relationship between university management and employee behaviors.

From there, the current study will attempt to answer the questions:

- First, does university culture promote the relationship between university leadership and employee behaviors?
- Second, what impact does university leadership have on promoting employee commitment and decreasing employee turnover behavior?
- Finally, what are the suggestions that the university leadership can apply to improve the sustainable development of their universities?

2. Literature review

Contemporary research places a growing emphasis on the university context as a pivotal influencer of behavior within the workplace. Leadership, as a significant university element, is especially impactful when it is grounded in ethics and the well-being of its followers. Consequently, university leadership has become a focal point of extensive research interest in recent years. A comprehensive definition, proposed by (Brown et al., 2005), characterizes university leadership as the embodiment of behavior that aligns with ethical norms, not only in personal actions but also in interpersonal relationships. Moreover, university leadership involves the active promotion of these ethical behaviors among followers through two-way communication and collaborative decision-making. University leadership effectively function as role models for ethical conduct, striving to foster such behavior in their followers through structured communication and a system of rewards (discipline) that reinforce ethical (unethical) conduct. (Tu Yidong, Lu Xinxin, 2013) provided a detailed exposition of the various behaviors inherent in university leadership. Specifically, university leadership is anticipated to demonstrate fairness in their decision-making processes, encompassing transparency, principled and balanced decisions (Kalshoven et al., 2011), honesty, responsible actions, and equitable treatment of employees. Additionally, university leadership entails power sharing, allowing employees to actively participate in decision-making, while also attentively listening to their ideas and perspectives.

University leadership also bring clarity to roles by establishing performance goals, expectations, and responsibilities (Kalshoven et al., 2011). They provide ethical guidance by engaging in conversations about ethics, elucidating ethical issues, and actively promoting ethical conduct. Notably, university leadership exert efforts to encourage their followers to adopt ethical norms. Furthermore, university leadership showcase sensitivity to environmental and sustainability issues, emphasizing their commitment to understanding the impact of their actions on society. Ultimately, university leadership uphold integrity by consistently keeping promises, acting in alignment with their words, and maintaining a high standard of word-deed coherence (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Drawing on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), positive treatment in social relationships tends to elicit reciprocation, often manifesting as the exchange of valuable goods or efforts. Consequently, when employees perceive their managers as ethical and genuinely concerned about their well-being, they are likely to develop a stronger commitment to both the leader and the job, feeling compelled to reciprocate, perhaps through increased dedication and extra efforts. As noted by (Blake E Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, 1989), the trustworthiness of leaders contributes to employees' sense of unity with the university, fostering university identification, especially when employees feel highly valued. Therefore, in situations where university leadership consistently align their words with deeds, establish trust, and exhibit a people-oriented approach (Kalshoven et al., 2011), employees are more inclined to give their best on behalf of their universitys.

The theoretical framework concerning university university culture dates back to as early as 1989. As proposed by Hunt, university university culture comprises the individual ethical values of managers, along with the formal and informal ethical policies within the university. In practical terms, university university culture places a significant emphasis on the roles of leadership and managers in instilling and promoting a university culture. According to Barker et al. (2006), the acceptance and adherence to ethical standards and norms by top-level managers, as well as their widespread adoption among all members of the university, contribute to the enhanced success of the university. Sweeney et al (2009), propose that the promotion of a university culture within an university is facilitated by its highest leadership and the university itself, aiming to encourage employees to make ethical decisions and avoid unethical behavior. This underscores the crucial role of leaders as exemplars of ethical behavior, shaping employees' perceptions of the university culture. University culture perception, as defined by (Lamontagne, 2012), reflects the awareness of individuals who have encountered ethical and unethical situations in the workplace. According to Lamontagne, the

perception of university culture offers insights into how individuals form their values when making ethical decisions, grounded in the university university culture. In essence, a robust university culture in a business leads to employees having a well-defined orientation toward ethical behavior. As individuals align their values with each behavioral decision, their commitment to the university strengthens.

In 2015, Eisenbeiss et al conducted research on university culture in businesses. Similar to previous studies, Eisenbeiss also recognized the significant role of university culture in influencing employee activities. However, the key difference lies in Eisenbeiss establishing university culture as an intermediate mechanism through which university leadership can impact company operations. Thus, university leadership behavior creates and reinforces a university culture, an environment that reflects the ethical messages and values modeled by leaders. Meanwhile, university culture strongly influences the formation of daily employee behavior, including managerial behavior.

2.1. Research model

In light of prior theoretical foundations and existing research, the author proposes a research model as follow:
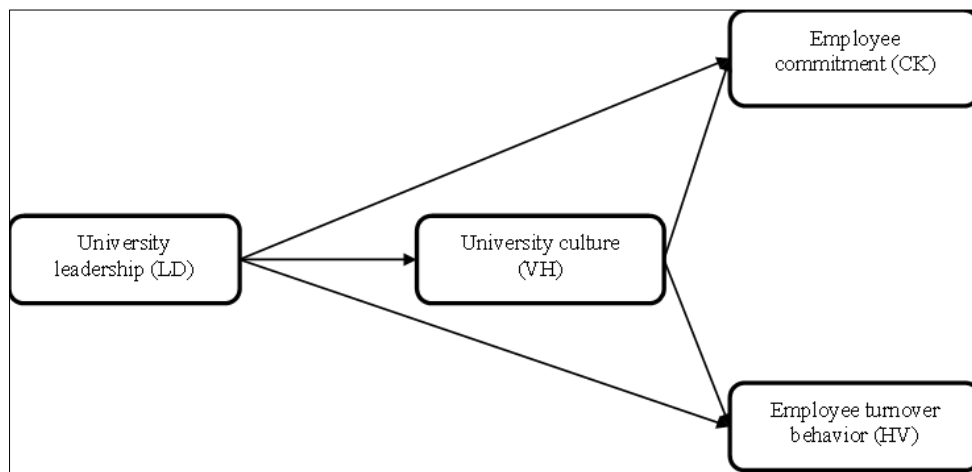
Figure 1 Proposed research model

Leaders play a role as trainers, conveying the university's actions related to culture and societal issues while valuing employees' active participation (Castro-González et al., 2019). Leaders wield substantial authority in instituting and upholding a university culture by instituting university measures for subordinates and exemplifying fair treatment among individuals (Gumusluoglu, 2009). The constructive correlation between university leadership and university culture supports the assertion that university leadership is instrumental in establishing a university culture, ultimately contributing to a decrease in employee turnover (Eisenbeiss et al., 2014). The affirmative influence of university leadership on university culture underscores the commitment of university leadership to foster a university culture within an university. The inherent nature of this relationship attracts employees to leaders and the university, thereby enhancing feelings of familiarity and attachment among employees. These feelings can reduce employee turnover. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: University leadership has a positive impact on university culture
- H2: University leadership has a positive impact on employee commitment
- H3: University leadership has a negative impact on employee turnover behavior

Previous studies have consistently found a significant negative relationship between university culture and employees' intentions to leave the university across various fields (J. Mulki et al., 2008), (DeConinck, 2010). These studies have indicated that employees who desire a university culture are more likely to stay in a university. Additionally, research conducted by (Huhtala et al., 2015) has confirmed that university culture is one of the reasons behind employees leaving their university. It can be observed that an university with a strong university culture fosters employee engagement and reduces turnover intentions. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4: University culture positively influences employee commitment
- H5: University culture negatively influences employee turnover behavior

3. Methodology

To gain a comprehensive and precise understanding of the impact of university leadership on employee behavior, this research utilizes both secondary and primary data sources. Secondary data are collected and cited from existing works and reports. Primary data are gathered through survey activities using a questionnaire. The survey sample is chosen using a convenience sampling method, targeting individuals who are currently employed. The questionnaire is designed on the Google Forms platform and distributed to participants through online tools such as email and social media. Using this method, the author obtained 938 responses.

The content of the measurement scales is derived from previous research and has been adjusted by the author. Specifically, university leadership scale comprises 6 observed variables, the university culture scale comprises 6 observed variables, the employee commitment scale comprises 5 observed variables, and the employee turnover behavior scale comprises 7 observed variables. All scales are in the form of 5-point Likert scale. The survey questionnaire is designed with 29 questions divided into two main sections: (1) Personal Information and (2) Determining the extent of the influence of university leadership on employee behavior through the role of university culture.

In this study, data are processed using SPSS 25 and AMOS 24 software. Data processing and analysis activities are carried out sequentially in the following steps: data cleaning and coding, descriptive statistics calculation, reliability testing of the measurement scales, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM) for research model testing.

4. Research results

4.1. Sample description

At the conclusion of the survey, after conducting checks and eliminating erroneous responses, the research obtained 938 valid responses, equivalent to an approximately 82% response rate. The survey sample was distributed across demographic variables as follows:

Table 1 Sample description

Criteria		Number (people)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	458	48.8
	Female	480	51.2
Age	Below 25 years	192	20.5
	25 - 40 years	426	45.4
	Over 40 years	320	34.1
Education level	Secondary – Vocational	63	6.7
	College	211	22.5
	University	508	54.2
	Postgraduate	156	16.6
Income (VND/month)	Below 10 million	46	4.9
	10 - 15 million	194	20.7
	15 - 20 million	483	51.5
	20 - 30 million	157	16.7
	Over 30 million	58	6.2
Tenure	Less than 3 years	97	10.3
	3 -5 years	276	29.4
	5 - 10 years	386	41.1
	Over 10 years	180	19.2

In the sample of 938 valid responses, there was relatively equal participation between females (51.2%) and males (48.8%). Individuals in the age group of 25 - 40 years were the most represented, accounting for the highest proportion at 45.4% (426 individuals). Following that were those over 40 years at 34.1% (320 individuals) and those below 25 years at 20.5% (192 individuals). The surveyed population mostly had educational backgrounds at the level of college or higher, with 93.3% equivalent to nearly 875 individuals. The remainder had completed secondary or vocational education, totaling around 63 individuals. In this study, the majority of respondents had monthly incomes ranging from 15 - 20 million VND, making up 51.5%. The next two groups, those with incomes between 10 - 15 million VND (20.7%) and 20 - 30 million VND (16.7%), had fairly similar percentages. The groups with incomes below 10 million VND and over 30 million VND had the lowest proportions, at 4.9% and 6.2%, respectively. The analysis also revealed that the group with work experience exceeding 5 years had the highest proportion at 60.3% (566 individuals). The majority had work experience between 3 - 5 years at 29.4%, while a smaller proportion had less than 3 years of work experience.

4.2. Reliability assessment using Cronbach's Alpha

Table 2 Cronbach's Alpha results

Measure	Observed variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
University leadership	LD1	0.908	0.752	0.891
	LD2		0.762	0.890
	LD3		0.716	0.897
	LD4		0.758	0.890
	LD5		0.751	0.891
	LD6		0.739	0.893
University culture	VH1	0.901	0.737	0.882
	VH2		0.719	0.885
	VH3		0.723	0.884
	VH4		0.719	0.885
	VH5		0.716	0.885
	VH6		0.760	0.878
Employee commitment	CK1	0.936	0.809	0.926
	CK2		0.846	0.919
	CK3		0.822	0.923
	CK4		0.796	0.928
	CK5		0.878	0.913
Employee turnover behavior	HV1	0.881	0.641	0.867
	HV2		0.701	0.859
	HV3		0.651	0.866
	HV4		0.619	0.869
	HV5		0.630	0.868
	HV6		0.730	0.855
	HV7		0.690	0.860

The Cronbach's Alpha results demonstrate strong reliability for all scales, with coefficients exceeding 0.8. The corrected item-total correlations are greater than 0.3 for all observed variables, and Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted is lower than the overall Cronbach's Alpha. Therefore, it can be concluded that these scales are reliable.

4.3. Exploratory factor analysis EFA

- EFA on factors influencing university culture: The results of the factor analysis show that the dataset is suitable for EFA: KMO = 0.843 (0.5 =< KMO =< 1), and the total variance extracted is 68.721%, which is greater than 50%. An eigenvalue of 4.123 (> 1) suggests one factor was extracted. All observed variables exhibit factor loadings surpassing 0.5.

- EFA on factors influencing employee commitment: The KMO measure is 0.880 (0.5 =< KMO =< 1), indicating that the sample size is suitable for factor analysis. The Bartlett's test of sphericity (p-value < 0.05) confirms the presence of correlations among variables. An eigenvalue of 2.900 (> 1) was extracted, explaining 67.921% (> 50%) of the variance. All observed variables have factor loadings exceeding 0.5. No items were excluded, and two factors were extracted.

- EFA on factors influencing employee turnover behavior: The KMO measure is 0.880 (0.5 =< KMO =< 1), indicating that the sample size is suitable for factor analysis. The Bartlett's test of sphericity (p-value < 0.05) confirms the presence of correlations among variables. An eigenvalue of 2.900 (> 1) was extracted, explaining 67.921% (> 50%) of the variance. All observed variables have factor loadings exceeding 0.5. No items were excluded, and two factors were extracted.

The factor groups resulting from EFA are as follows: University leadership (EL) with 6 observed variables, University culture (EC) with 6 observed variables, Commitment (C) with 5 observed variables, and Turnover Behavior (TB) with 7 observed variables.

Table 3 Matrix of EFA

Observed variables	Factor groups			
	1	2	3	4
VH2	0.795			
VH6	0.781			
VH4	0.771			
VH1	0.766			
VH3	0.760			
VH5	0.753			
HV2		0.793		
HV6		0.787		
HV7		0.751		
HV3		0.736		
HV1		0.722		
HV4		0.688		
HV5		0.674		
LD4			0.846	
LD5			0.820	
LD1			0.818	
LD2			0.815	
LD6			0.803	
LD3			0.778	

CK5				0.817
CK3				0.794
CK2				0.788
CK1				0.760
CK4				0.752

4.4. Confirmatory factor analysis CFA

To assess the reliability of the measurement scales and perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the study reevaluated the measurement scales using composite reliability coefficients and conducted CFA based on data from the formal study with a sample size of n = 938. The CFA results revealed the following statistics: Chi-squared value 770.358 (p = 0.000), CFI = 0.964, TLI = 0.954, GFI = 0.938 (CFI, TLI, GFI > 0.9), Chi-squared/df = 3.486, RMSEA = 0.052 (CMIN/df < 3, RMSEA < 0.08). These indices indicate that the model fits well with the market data (Nguyễn Đình Thọ, Nguyễn Thị Mai Trang, 2011).
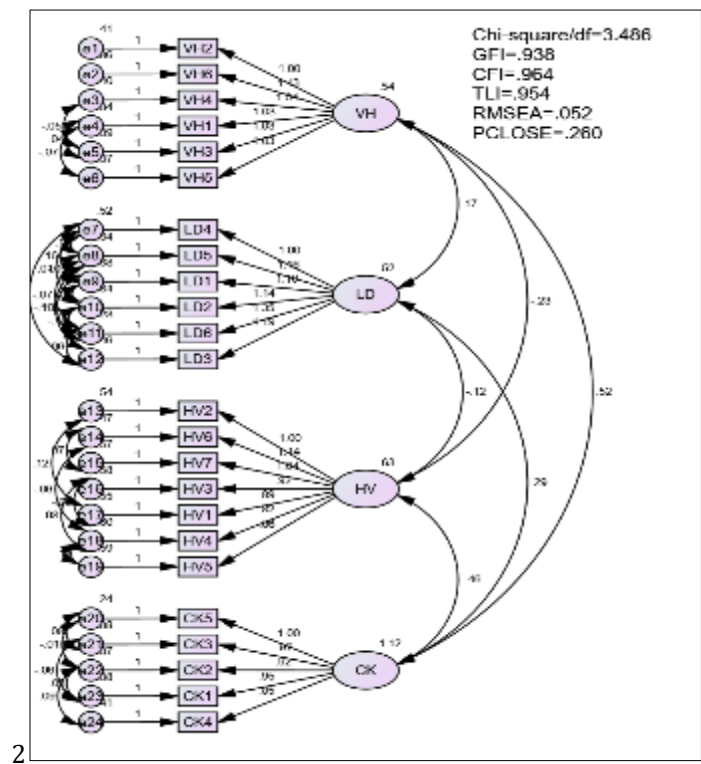
Figure 2 CFA model

Table 4 Summary of measurement model assessment

Concept	Observed Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
LD	6	0.908	0.917	0.648
VH	6	0.901	0.903	0.608
CK	5	0.936	0.933	0.735
HV	7	0.881	0.887	0.505

4.4.1. Convergence validity testing

Table 5 displays the standardized loadings of the observed variables on their respective constructs. All these loadings are greater than 0.6, meeting the standard of being higher than 0.5. Consequently, it can be concluded that the measurement model demonstrates high convergence validity.

Table 5 Standardized loadings of the measurement model

Observed variable		Construct	Standardized Loading
VH2	<---	VH	0.754
VH6	<---	VH	0.811
VH4	<---	VH	0.771
VH1	<---	VH	0.787
VH3	<---	VH	0.768
VH5	<---	VH	0.776
LD4	<---	LD	0.716
LD5	<---	LD	0.816
LD1	<---	LD	0.793
LD2	<---	LD	0.820
LD6	<---	LD	0.886
LD3	<---	LD	0.782
HV2	<---	HV	0.744
HV6	<---	HV	0.819
HV7	<---	HV	0.759
HV3	<---	HV	0.659
HV1	<---	HV	0.692
HV4	<---	HV	0.617
HV5	<---	HV	0.622
CK5	<---	CK	0.915
CK3	<---	CK	0.878
CK2	<---	CK	0.825
CK1	<---	CK	0.848
CK4	<---	CK	0.810

4.4.2. Discriminant validity testing

Table 6 Discriminant validity of the measurement constructs

Construct	HV	VH	LD	CK
HV	0.711			
VH	-0.387	0.780		
LD	-0.210	0.322	0.805	
CK	-0.547	0.661	0.380	0.857

As for discriminant validity, Table 6 illustrates that the diagonal values are greater than the absolute values in the respective rows and columns. This pattern signifies that the measurement constructs possess discriminant validity.

4.4.3. Model fit testing and hypothesis evaluation

The linear structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis reveals that the model's statistical values are as follows: Chi-square is 857.063 (p = 0.000), GFI = 0.933, TLI = 0.947, CFI = 0.958, and RMSEA = 0.055. All these indices assess the goodness of fit and demonstrate that the model fits the data well. The p-value < 0.1 at a 90% confidence level also indicates statistical significance.
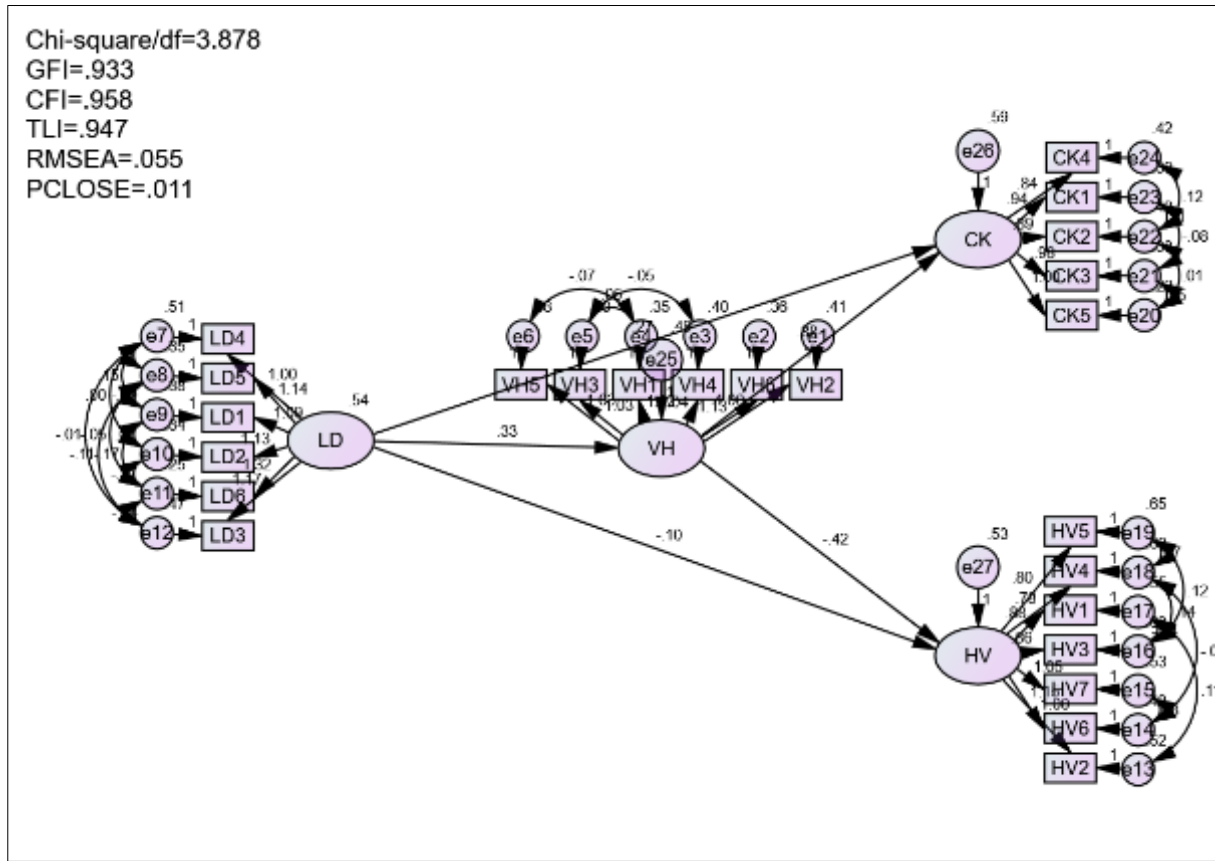

Figure 3 Structural Equation Model (SEM)

Based on Table 7, the standardized results of the structural equation model (SEM) show that the factor of university leadership has a positive influence on university culture and employee commitment but has a negative impact on employee turnover behavior. On the other hand, the university culture factor positively affects employee commitment and negatively affects employee turnover behavior. Additionally, the university leadership factor has the strongest effect (b = 0.323) on university culture, and university culture has the most significant impact (b = 0.609) on employee commitment.

Table 7 Results of the standardized causal relationships between concepts (standardized**)**

	Estimate	SE	CR	P-value
VH <-- LD	0.323	0.037	8.879	0.000
CK <-- VH	0.609	0.050	17.520	0.000
HV <-- VH	-0.386	0.043	-9.751	0.000
HV <-- LD	-0.094	0.038	-2.698	0.007
CK <-- LD	0.187	0.042	6.497	0.000

The test results indicate that all hypotheses are accepted. The measurement test results show that the measurements are reliable, the model fits the market data, and the p-values are less than 0.1, therefore, the relationships among the factors conform to the model as depicted in the figure 4.
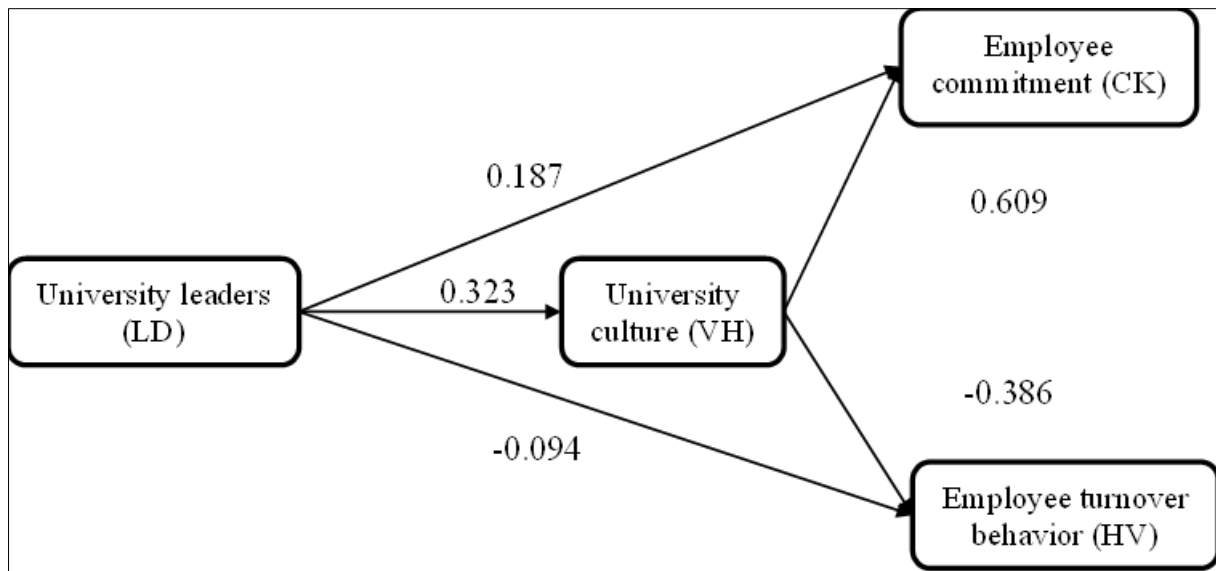
Figure 4 The model of the mediating effect of university culture

4.5. Research contribution

4.5.1. Research discussion

University leadership impact on university culture, employee commitment and turnover behavior

The findings affirm the hypotheses, establishing a positive impact of university leadership on university culture (H1). University leadership act as exemplars, fostering an environment where ethical values are not just upheld but actively promoted. This aligns with the theory that leadership behaviors, such as fairness, power-sharing, and ethical guidance, contribute to shaping the ethical fabric of an university.

University leadership also positively influences employee commitment (H2), emphasizing the crucial role leaders play in gaining employees' trust and commitment. The study echoes prior research suggesting that when leaders exhibit ethical behaviors, employees reciprocate with heightened dedication and engagement. This, in turn, enhances university commitment and employee satisfaction.

One of the noteworthy contributions of the study is the identified negative impact of university leadership on turnover behavior (H3). Ethical leaders, by cultivating a culture of trust and commitment, indirectly reduce the likelihood of employees seeking employment elsewhere. This highlights the strategic importance of university leadership in talent retention and university stability.

4.5.2. University culture's influence on employee commitment and turnover behavior

Consistent with existing literature, the study confirms that University culture positively influences Employee Commitment (H4). An university with a robust university culture provides a sense of purpose and belonging, reinforcing employees' commitment to the company's values and goals. This supports the argument that university culture is a key driver of employee engagement and commitment.

The negative impact of university culture on Turnover Behavior (H5) emphasizes that employees within an ethical university culture are less inclined to leave. This aligns with the idea that a strong university culture fosters an environment where employees feel valued, leading to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions.

4.5.3. The mediating role of university culture

The study further explores the mediating role of university culture in the relationship between university leadership and Employee Behavior. The results show that University culture significantly mediates the relationship between university leadership and both Employee Commitment and Turnover Behavior. The strong indirect effect of university leadership on Employee Commitment through University culture reinforces the argument that a positive university culture enhances the impact of university leadership on commitment. This suggests that university leadership not only directly influence commitment but also do so by shaping the ethical context in which employees operate. Similarly, the study highlights the mediating effect of university culture in the relationship between university leadership and Turnover Behavior. This implies that the influence of university leadership on reducing turnover is, in part, channeled through the establishment of a strong university culture. Employees who perceive their leaders as ethical are likely to stay in a university with a positive ethical climate.

4.5.4. Management Implications

Based on the results of the research model, the authors propose several management implications aimed at enhancing two key factors: university leadership and university culture thereby concurrently fostering employee commitment and reducing employee turnover behavior.

Enhancing university leadership to cultivate a strong university culture

Leaders should demonstrate themselves as role models within the workplace, adhering to corporate policies and legal requirements. Prioritizing the development of leadership responsibility capabilities will contribute to the effective management of employee compliance with ethical policies. Leaders must be genuinely impartial, responsible for establishing and maintaining transparency and fairness, while also providing opportunities for employees to contribute to significant university decisions, reinforcing their sense of value within the university.

Strengthening university culture to increase employee commitment and reduce turnover behavior: Managers should focus on constructing a university culture through specific behaviors within the university, such as establishing clear regulations and implementing consequences for unhealthy competition among employees. This will help employees perceive that they are working in an environment with a healthy competitive culture, thereby increasing their sense of attachment and reducing turnover intentions. Ensuring employees feel secure in an university with a well-established university culture is crucial. Moreover, it is necessary to create a university culture based on the principle of balancing business interests with the expectations of employees, customers, and other stakeholders.

Enhancing university leadership competencies to mitigate turnover behavior by establishing a robust university culture: Regularly training leadership teams in soft skills is essential, helping them recognize their role in the university development. University leadership should embody both professional competence and ethical conduct in their interactions with colleagues and subordinates. University leadership should be proactive, accountable for all activities within their unit's scope, and consistently adhere to ethical standards. Leaders should serve as moral exemplars, encourage subordinates, and protect employees' rights. They should take responsibility for being role models and exhibit cultural behavior both inside and outside the university, as the leader's conduct beyond the workplace also influences employees' perceptions positively or negatively.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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