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THE SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP & SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: MEDIATING ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE CULTURE

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Sustainable Leadership, Sustainable Culture, Sustainable Performance, Mediation and Higher Education	This study examined that how sustainable leadership is responsible to the sustainable performance in higher education through sustainable culture as mediating phenomenon. Based upon quantitative survey of academics, results show that sustainable leadership is positively related to sustainable performance, that includes environmental prudence, social responsibility, & institutional sustainability. The relationship amid sustainable leadership and sustainable performance is mediated by sustainable culture implies that sustainable leadership practices based on ethical values, stakeholder engagement, and long-term thinking create the cultural environment that supports sustainable behaviors as well as decision-making throughout the institution. The results provide significant information by extracting the desired information for reaching the conclusion of the study. The findings emphasize the leading fact that sustainable performance is not merely the outcomes of leaders' actions but it is reinforced when leaders develop the common cultural orientation of sustainability. The practical implications highlight the need to ensure that higher education institutions syndicate the sustainable leadership development with the cultural transformation strategies in efforts to produce the sustainable & long-term sustainability outcomes for success.
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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary era, higher education is entered into a more complex and dynamic environment, where institutions are supposed to have not only academic and research-oriented mission, but also extended societal needs in the context of environmental management, social justice, and economic sustainability (Khan, Gerald, Islam & Saif, 2023). The sustainable performance is multidimensional phenomenon that covers institutional ability to act in responsible and sustainable style, add value

towards internal and external community for overwhelming situation as part to required standards (Eustachio, Salvia, Brandli, Trevisan, Barbir & Caldana, 2024). The sustainable leadership focuses on resilience, inclusiveness, strong culture to ensure operational efficiency and long-term success in sustainable manner towards desired reputations (Hadhrami & Rosmelisa, 2024). The sustainable culture is a phenomenon, that may support the competence of leadership toward efforts as designed for promoting sustainability in the institutions (Waqas, Raza, Ali, Muhammad & Malik, 2025). The existing literature offer sufficient evidence about linkages amid sustainable leadership, sustainable culture & sustainable performance that are vital for promoting desired sustainable practices toward required consequences.

The sustainable leadership is a leadership trait that bridges long-term focus, ethical management, engagement, focus upon social and ecological well-being, thus become active driver of sustainable performance (How & Ishak, 2021). The sustainable leadership necessitates valuation & realization of institutional strategies with sustainable development by incorporating sustainable practices in institutional policies, curriculum, community participation for desired outcomes (Iqbal & Piwowar, 2022). The above said phenomenon highlights the necessity to learn more about processes in which leadership develops its impact when it comes to complex academic systems where decision-making is decentralized and cultural norms are utmost significant (Hadhrami & Rosmelisa, 2024). The key aspect of this question is the notion of sustainable culture where sustainable thinking and behavior are provided by set of shared values, beliefs, and practices in academic institution (Holst, Fritz, Lang, Luisa, Thomas, Maike & Mandy, 2025). In theory, sustainability literature suggests that leadership orientations have a major influence on institutional cultures, and performance outcomes, through the effects they have on norms, priorities and allocation of resources for aligning situations towards desired achievements.

The sustainable leadership is idealistic for sustainability to trigger the transformational change by instilling sense of shared devotion & instilling sustainability principles within institutional culture and system (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020). In higher education context, the culture affects the manner of interpretation, internalization and operationalization of sustainability that are considered as key drivers towards desired sustainable consequences (Khan, Idris & Mehmud, 2021). The interactive relationship between sustainable leadership, sustainable culture and sustainable performance has important implications for higher education through dynamic policies and practices for translating leadership vision into actions for desired outcomes (Waqas, Raza, Ali, Muhammad & Malik, 2025). Thus, such a culture that upholds sustainability can support the efforts of leaders over normalization of sustainable practices, teamwork to solve problems, and sense of purpose (Khan, Siddique & Khan, 2024). However, on other hand, without the supportive culture, even visionary leadership cannot reach the lasting influence, thus, the established norms and resistance to changes can dampen the sustainability efforts, so leadership and cultural congruence, is required for institutional legitimacy & ultimate positioning.

Objectives & Hypotheses

1. There is positive and significant association amid sustainable leadership, sustainable culture and sustainable performance in higher educational context (H1).

2. There is significant mediating role of sustainable culture in linking sustainable leadership, and sustainable performance in higher educational context (H2).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sustainable leadership and sustainable performance literature have developed in tandem with sermon of sustainability, organizational behavior and institutional success. The leadership is a result of incorporation of principles of sustainability into the leadership theory with its focus on long-term vision, ethical governance, stakeholder involvement, and a balance between economic, social, and environmental aims (Godemann, Bebbington, Herzig & Moon, 2014). The early leadership models were focused on transactional & transformational traits, with an outline on performance, motivation, commitment and change (Khan & Nawaz, 2016). The sustainable leadership goes further beyond the conventional paradigms of leadership as it preempts the responsibility to various stakeholders, intergenerational equity and sustainability of the organizational systems (Zawahreh, Khasawneh & Jaradat, 2019). This reorientation turns out to be crucial in the higher education when educational institutions are given responsibility of not only producing knowledge but also influencing values of society & ensuring sustainable development (Khan, Idris & Mehmud, 2021). The entire phenomenon overwhelmed at desirability towards excellence and commitment towards sustainability to realize anticipated outcomes.

The literature on effectiveness of sustainable leadership upon organizational performance establish that sustainability-based leadership is positively correlated with various performance indicators, like resource efficiency, community involvement, and innovativeness (Iqbal & Piwowar, 2022). The sustainable leadership in higher education context has been associated with increased institutional reputation, better stakeholder trust, and instilling sustainability into curriculum, research priorities and practices (Eustachio, Caldana & Filho, 2023). Similarly, culture is the mechanism of collecting shared values, norms, and hopes in an institution that promotes the sustainability objective about environmental responsibility, social justice and ethical behavior to understand and implement the sustainability programs (Khan, Siddique & Khan, 2024). The literature revealed that sustainable leaders are change agents for sustainable culture to impact the strategic direction and strengthens the commitment to foster culture of sustainability in institutions (Waqas et al., 2025). The research in educational management emphasized that culture is effective predictor of institutional behavior and outcomes to realize that whether policies are perceived and executed, conflict are resolved and innovation is ensured.

The models of cultural change offer chances of sustainable performance that can be achieved when innovations align with the values and identities of workforces in institutions. The literature revealed that behaviors in organizations are influenced not only by organizational structure and leadership practices, but also by cultural norms and cognition systems (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Thus, strategic vision and policy integration as key ingredients of the ethical behavior and sustainability ensure by sustainable leaders in persistent manners (McCann & Sweet, 2014). The higher institutional context has distinct cultural forces, academic freedom, professional standards & decentralized management systems potentially enable and limit the transfer of sustainability values (Hull, Kimmel, Robertson & Mortimer, 2016). The sustainable culture serves as interpretive & normative environment wherein

leadership initiatives are converted into practice that influences how much sustainability premises get internalized and implemented in institutional spheres (Khan, Shoukat & Waheed, 2019). The leadership in responsible for bringing positive changes in institutional practices aligned with norms and values and ethical dimensions to ensure the sustainability in performance overwhelmed at the desired consequences.

In institutions, where academic culture is effective, freedom is sustained, the sustainable leadership might be more cooperative and sharing in terms of fostering cultural change. It is recognized that external forces, including accreditation policies, regulatory structures, and social demands, interact with internal leadership and cultural dynamics that affect sustainable performance (Khan, Farhat, Minas & Munir, 2020). The literature provides insights that why leadership and culture be viewed together as key towards sustainable performance, & why these two concepts be received integrated approaches that help organizations to promote sustainability (Khan, Idris & Mehmud, 2021). The leaders who are committed to long-term accountability, ethical values, and ensuring stakeholders' involvement are effective in shaping meaning and practice of sustainability in institutions (Ishak & Hussin, 2022). The leadership practices lead to culture of sustainability, promoting the integration of environmental, social & ethical implications into institutional norms, decision making and routine academic and administration practices (Khan, Mughal & Khan, 2023). The leadership over strong culture is effective in managing the environment of trust and commitment toward determination for anticipated developments.

When culture is internalized by workforces and stakeholders, it establishes favorable environment where sustainability-oriented behavior is regularly exercised but not imposed periodically in the institutions (Khan, Farhat, Minas & Munir, 2020). The sustainable performance is manifested over responsible resource utilization, social interaction & ability to withstand challenges of institutions, becomes logical extension of the action of leadership based on culture (Mousa & Othman, 2020). In this manner, the linking process through which sustainable leadership translates into performance in higher education is the sustainable culture (Khan, Idris & Mehmud, 2021). Thus, the sustainable leadership in higher education offers the strategic and ethical guidance in lending the institutional priorities towards long term responsibility and value creation overwhelmed at the desirability and commitment towards excellence and success (Iqbal & Piwowar, 2022). The leadership effective actions are responsible for aligning the workforces' behaviors with institutional norms, values, and related standards from different dimensions to ensure creativity and innovation overwhelmed at desirable outcomes, culminates at sustainability in performance and effectiveness leading towards anticipated successes.

The leadership fosters the existence of a sustainable culture through the encouragement of common values, collective dedication, and routine in line with the principles of sustainability (Khan, Rooh & Naveed, 2022). An effective sustainable culture, in turn, will facilitate sustainable behaviors to be adopted on regular basis & across institution, in turn, will directly lead to sustainable performance in academic quality, social responsibility and environmental stewardship (Khan, Mughal & Khan, 2023). Sustainable leadership, sustainable culture, and sustainable performance are three elements that create interdependent road that will make institutions of higher learning successful, resilient,

and relevant to the societal demands in long-term (Khan, Siddique & Khan, 2024). The literature confirmed active role of sustainable leadership in sustainable performance over stainable culture in different contexts for different consequences (Waqas, Raza, Ali, Muhammad & Malik, 2025). Thus, by aligning the leadership approaches with cultural transformation, higher education institutions achieve enduring development and success that balances educational missions with broader social & environmental responsibilities as required for comprehending the situations toward desired and leading consequences.

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework
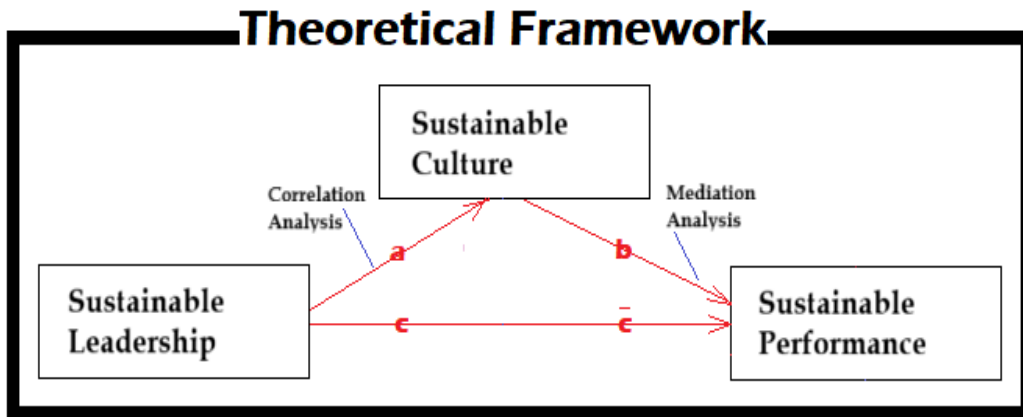
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts the quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of sustainable leadership upon sustainable performance in higher education, with sustainable culture serving as a mediating variable. The target population comprises academics working in the public sector higher education institutions, hailing from southern region, KP, Pakistan, as they are directly involved in leadership processes, cultural practices, and sustainability-related initiatives. The data was collected using a structured questionnaire, adapted from previous research studies, distributed online to ensure larger participation. The established and validated measurement scales from prior studies are adapted in study to assess sustainable leadership, sustainable culture, and sustainable performance, ensuring the content validity and contextual relevance to the higher education sector. The responses of respondents are measured on Likert-type scale to capture perceptions consistently across the constructs.

The sampling strategy follows the purposive approach to ensure adequate representation of faculty across different institutions and departments. Thus, prior to main data collection, the pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability and clarity of the instrumentation, and necessary refinements are made accordingly. The data analysis is performed using statistical software, employing descriptive statistics to summarize respondent characteristics and inferential techniques to test hypothesized relationships. The correlation procedure and structural equation modeling were applied to examine the association and direct effect of sustainable leadership on sustainable performance and indirect effect through sustainable culture. The reliability is assessed using internal consistency measures,

while construct validity is established through factor analysis. The ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, as well as voluntary participations, are strictly observed during the research process.

RESULTS OF STUDY

The results of current study for examining association and mediation analysis among sustainable leadership, sustainable culture and sustainable performance are produced in this section in order to analyze the variables and extract the desired outcomes for reaching the conclusion and making the suitable decisions based upon the outcomes from the correlation procedure and structural equation modeling in study.

Table 1 Mean Standard Deviation and Correlation

Variables	Mean	SD	SUSL	SUSCUL	SUSPER
SUSL	3.4886	.73721	1		
SUSCUL	3.4682	.92092	.547**	1	
SUSPER	3.6263	.70901	.276**	.457**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The tables present the mean, standard deviations and correlation among predictors, mediator, and criterion variables. The mean value of the sustainable leadership is MSUSL = 3.4886, S.D = 0.73721, further analysis of results revealed that mean score of sustainable culture MSUSCUL = 3.4682, SD = 0.92092, likewise, mean score of sustainable performance MSP =3.6263, S.D = 0.70901 respectively. The relationship amid sustainable leadership (SUSL) and sustainable culture (SUSCUL) (r= 0.547**, p<0.01); SUSL and sustainable performance (SP) (r= 0.276**, p<0.01); SUSCUL and SP (r = 0.457**, p<0.01). Thus, hypothesis is substantiated and accepted from the analysis based upon the outcomes from the correlation.

Table 2 Measurement Model (Confirmatory Factor Analysis)

Variables	Items	Alpha	CR (RHO_A)	CR (RHO_C)	AVE	VIF
Sustainable	0.708	0.743	0.805	0.853	0.661	1.332
Leadership	0.908					1.882
	0.811					1.633
Sustainable	0.944	0.876	0.890	0.916	0.733	4.863
Culture	0.749					1.634
	0.841					2.519
	0.880					2.856
Sustainable	0.632	0.758	0.827	0.862	0.681	1.207
Performance	0.891					2.431
	0.923					2.549

Table 3 Discriminant Validity

Fornell Larcker	1	2	3
Sustainable Culture	0.856		

Sustainable Performance	0.874	0.825	
Sustainable Leadership	0.929	0.775	0.813

The PLS-SEM was used for statistical analysis to check the reliability and validity of the scales. the table 2 presents the factor loadings, Cronbach alpha values and composite reliability and average variance extracted. Similarly, table 3 presents the HTMT ratio and Fornell-Larcker criteria for the discriminant validity. Threshold for leadings given by Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle & Gudergan (2018) is each item must score loading higher than 0.70; alpha >0.70, composite reliability >0.70 and AVE >0.50, while table 2 shows that items of sustainable leadership, sustainable culture and sustainable performance met the criteria, moreover, Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015) and Hair et al., (2018) criteria for HTMT and Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria for discriminant validity is also met. Hence, it is assumed that scales used in this study are reliable and valid in order to provide accurate results for desired conclusion.

Figure 2 Measurement Model
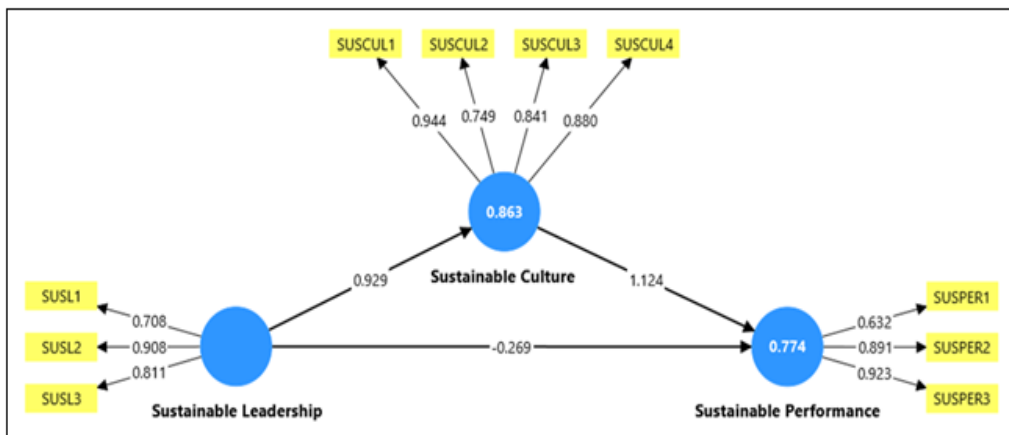
The figure shows the direct effects between SC and SP (0421**, p<0.01); SL and SC (0.929**, p<0.01); SL and SP (0.269**, p<0.05). indirect effects between SL→SC→SP (0.44**, p<0.05) respectively in current research study. In this connection, both the direct and indirect relationships provide significant and required information for realizing the desired outcomes from analysis and reaching the anticipated conclusion in study.

Table 4 Hypotheses Testing

Direct effects	β	SE	T	P
Sustainable Culture→ Sustainable Performance	0.421	0.072	5.84	0.000
Sustainable Leadership → Sustainable Culture	0.929	0.006	161.093	0.000
Sustainable Leadership → Sustainable Performance	0.269	0.085	3.171	0.002
Indirect Effects	β	SE	T	P
Sustainable leadership→Sustainable culture→Sustainable Performance	0.44	0.065	6.76	0.000

Figure 3 Structural Model
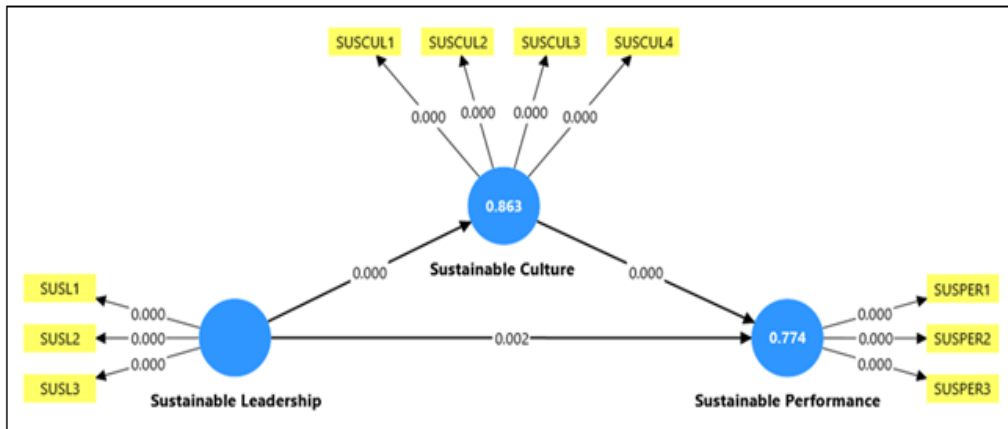
DISCUSSION

The results of study can be considered a complete description of impact of sustainable leadership on sustainable performance of institutions of higher learning and explain the main role of sustainable culture as a mediating variable. The findings show that sustainable leadership has a significant and positive role on sustainable performance, which supports the claim that leadership based on ethical responsibility, long-term orientation and stakeholder inclusiveness play a critical role in promotion of sustainability agendas within the higher institutions (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020). Thus, sustainable leadership serves as the cohesive element in the institutions with complex governance systems and academic autonomy coupled with the stakeholders' expectations that may help to synchronize the strategic priorities with the environmental stewardship, social responsibility as well as institutional resilience in the long term (Iqbal, Ahmad & Li, 2021). Through continued focus on sustainability in the development of vision, policy, and decision-making leaders develop a sense of the clarity and legitimacy on sustainability objectives (Cho & Kao, 2022), a situation that motivates workforces in the institution to be more active in their undertakings concerning sustainability overwhelmed at the desired outcomes.

The study revealed that the linkage between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance is not only direct but it is also greatly influenced by sustainable culture. The facilitating value of the sustainable culture highlights the fact that the effect of the leadership influence is substantial and lasting when sustainability values are incorporated in collective values, norms and practices of the institution (Waqas, Raza, Ali, Muhammad & Malik, 2025). The sustainable culture is the social and cognitive system, where leadership intentions are interpreted and performed by the academics and administrators (Khan, Siddique & Khan, 2024). As part of the organizational culture, sustainability directs routine practices, including utilization of resources, curriculum development, research focus, and community participation, thus making sustainability efforts not an esoteric & symbolic endeavor of institution but systemic practice in institution (Khan & Nouman, 2025). This observation means that the culture can change leadership into top-down order, and the shared commitment, which increases the influence of leadership on sustainable performance. The leadership is vital in ensuring

the desirability & commitment to confirm the sustainable culture over sustainable performance in academic institutions.

The fact realized by study is unique contextual dynamics of higher education which render cultural mediation as study revealed that there are higher linkages between sustainable leaders who focus on participation, dialogue, and shared ownership in building culture that promotes sustainability (Iqbal & Piwowar, 2022). This culturally based practice lessens the resistance to change, builds trust, and makes members of institution feel sense of responsibility, which leads to better sustainable performance outcome (Khan, Siddique & Khan, 2024). These results are in line with organizational culture and institutional theory, which highlights the fact that the performance outcomes are very entrenched in shared meaning and normative forms. This serves to understand why different levels of sustainable performance may show in diverse institutions that have similar resources and policies based on efficiency of sustainability culture (Kisahwan, Priatna, Roswinna, Winarno & Hermana, 2025). Through the illustration of this interdependent relationship, study offers holistic perception of relationship between leadership and culture in contributing to the sustainability and presents a challenging insight into the future development of the theory and practice on sustainability within the higher education.

CONCLUSION

The study finds that sustainable leadership is a decisive factor of sustainable performance in higher institutions that has great influence on ability of institutions to deliver sustainable environmental, social, and institutional results in long term. The results reveal that leaders with a focus on ethical responsibility, long-term perspective and inclusiveness to various stakeholders provide people with positive circumstances to sustainability-related practices and performance. Notably, the study has identified sustainable culture as a key mediating process in which sustainable leadership has its effects that suggests that the influence of the leadership is best achieved when sustainability values are woven into common beliefs, norms, and routines of institution. This finding highlights the fact that sustainable performance in higher education institutions is only achievable with introduction of leadership initiatives, but conducive cultural background is essential that sustainability becomes an organizational value. With its emphasis on leadership and culture in a symbiosis, this study has added to the body of knowledge upon sustainability and educational leadership and provided an explicit implication that institutions of higher education that want to realize long-term sustainable performance should integrate the leadership with purposeful attempts to develop and maintain a sustainability culture.

Recommendations

1. The institutions need to make an investment in developing sustainable leadership through integration of sustainability-focused competencies into leadership and succession planning that may ensure that current and future leaders have vision and ethical orientation, to enact the sustainable performance.

2. The institutional policies and governance systems must strategically foster the sustainability culture through the integrated implantation of sustainability value to the mission statements,

strategic plans, and curriculum development, that sustainability becomes the collective and internalized practice for success.

3. The institutions are supposed to promote extensive stakeholder participation that is achieved over faculty, student involvement in sustainability-related decision-making and activities, as participatory practices enhance cultural ownership and improve leadership commitment to long-term performance results.

4. The institutions need to adopt the unremitting monitoring and evaluation frameworks of the sustainability performance, relying on feedback and learning systems to solidify sustainable culture and empower leaders to modify the approaches to the arising environmental, societal, and institutional diverse issues.

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