

Exploring Leadership's Role in Transforming Meaningful Work into Social Sustainability Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

While more and more people seek work that has meaning and reflects their personal values, organisations find it increasingly difficult to translate these personal experiences of meaning into those outcomes that are fair, inclusive and contribute to wellbeing. This research examines if meaningful work (MW) predicts social sustainability (SS) in organizations and if value-based leadership (VBL) is the intervening mechanism mediating the relationship between MW and SS. Data from 400 employees who work in private organizations were gathered and analyzed using partial least-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings suggest that MW has a positive and statistically significant influence on SS, implying that employees who feel that their work has meaning are more likely to support policies related to equity and inclusion and well-being. MW is also positively related with VBL, and VBL in turn plays a significant role in SS. Through mediation analysis, it is found that VBL mediates the MW-SS relationship partially, supporting that employee's sense of purpose, institutionalized by the leadership of authenticity, ethics, and service, translates into socially responsible practices. This research further conceptualizes employees as internal consumers of meaning and highlights that the experience of purpose and fairness in the workplace functions as a form of internal value consumption and consequently impacts organizational sustainability outcomes at large. By bringing together MW, VBL and SS in a cohesive framework, the research contributes to human-centred research on sustainability and highlights that the design of meaningful work and the development of value-based leaders are critical ways for attaining social sustainability.

Keywords: Meaningful Work, Leadership; social sustainability; employee well-being; internal consumers; human-centered sustainability; PLS-SEM



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1. INTRODUCTION

The work has radically changed, as it has ceased being a subsistence source and has become an identity, dignity, and meaning source. In the contemporary companies, the workers want not just a pay or a stable position but chances to develop, belong, and make some contribution to a larger cause (Pratt, Ashforth, and Wrzesniewski, 2013; Bailey et al., 2019). This is a response to the growing demands of the knowledge economy which is characterized by people looking beyond financial rewards to their work to assess it based on the purpose it fulfills and the values it enshrines. In this capacity, meaningful work (MW) has become a core construct of organizational psychology, human

resource development, and management research. Feeling the significance of their work, employees are more likely to exhibit greater engagement, innovation, commitment, and resilience in implementing the company and the whole society goals and objectives (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Allan, 2017). The pursuit of meaningfulness however, usually comes into collision with realities of modern organizational life. Organizations are under tremendous pressure in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments to ensure that short-term deliverables and financial performance are taken seriously. These requirements may limit the free will of the workers and the desire to motivate them to be more than profit-driven

in their contributions. This imbalance may cause emotional exhaustion, stress, and disengagement with time, which negatively affects both the individual and the organizational performance (Kira & Van Eijnatten, 2008). The pursuit of sustainability particularly the social aspect of the same has become more urgent as companies struggle with these issues.

The body of empirical literature is expanding that focuses on the microfoundations of sustainability, through the interaction of individual-level experience, attitudes and behaviors with organizational sustainability outcomes. Meaningful work (MW) is especially applicable to the present discussion as the inner sense of purpose of employees is related to the missions of the organization that can serve the common interests. Workers who feel that their work matters tend to participate more in prosocial activities and volunteer in programs that can enhance equity, and reflect the ethical and social goals of their companies (Bailey et al., 2019; Martela & Pessi, 2018). From a consumer behavioral point of view, employees may be viewed as internal consumers of organizational meanings and values. Just as external consumers evaluate brands based on their authenticity and purpose, internal consumers evaluate their workplaces based on the degree to which they offer fairness and dignity and provide a common sense of purpose. This notion of "internal consumption" connects the psychology of work with the marketplace of values, suggesting that organizations that build meaningfully for their employees at the same time strengthen their social legitimacy in the eyes of consumers and other stakeholders on the outside. However, this hypothetical connection between MW and SS is still not sufficiently studied. A large part of the literature imagines MW as an individual psychological construct that affects the outcomes of a person, including satisfaction, engagement, or resilience (Allan, 2017). Much less attention has been given on how these personal experiences of purpose and significance can be translated into institutionalized collective practices which increase fairness, inclusivity, and well-being the three fundamental dimensions of SS. This is a very notable gap considering the growing interest in employee experience as a source of corporate reputation, employer branding, and internal sustainability stories. This gap is filled by the current research which suggests that MW should be perceived as a motor of social sustainability, as far as employees who can experience meaning in their job would naturally do something that would benefit social cohesion, fairness, and mutual respect. That is, MW is not merely a personal value, but a tactical organizational asset that contributes to social legitimacy in the long term. Whereas meaningful work is the psychological energy which encourages employees toward socially responsible behavior, meaningful work converts to tangible sustainability outcomes in the presence of a supportive organizational environment. Leadership is one of the most important mechanisms in this shift - it determines values, defines the culture, and sets the moral tone of organizations. Leaders can build or damage employees' sense of

purpose by being inconsistent and selfish with their behavior.

Of the plurality of leadership paradigms, value-based leadership (VBL) is the most relevant for connecting meaningful work with social sustainability. VBL itself is not one cohesive model but a meta-framework which comprises three interrelated forms: authentic leadership, servant leadership and ethical leadership (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Hoch et al., 2018; Brown & Trevino, 2006). True leaders value transparency, awareness, and integrity; servant leaders value the growth, well-being, and stewardship of their employees; and ethical leaders create fairness and moral accountability as an institutional culture. What all these strategies have in common is a humanistic background and a long-term vision for the welfare of stakeholders - ideals that are directly linked to the spirit of social sustainability. In value-led organizations, workers feel psychologically safe and trust that will enable them to express their inner purpose through collective engagement and prosocial behavior. This means that leadership is the cultural channel through which energy of meaningful work is translated into institutionalized practices of equity and inclusion. As Copeland (2014) sees it, leaders function as "value bearers," which turn abstract ideals into organizational norms. In the absence of this kind of leadership, the impact of meaningful work can be limited to individual cognition, and not result in collective and systemic change.

Although there are theoretical synergies between MW, VBL, and SS, empirical studies that include all three constructs are scarce. While the previous research has studied MW mainly as a precursor to individual well-being or work performance, there is insufficient research regarding the role of MW in promoting larger sustainability outcomes (Bailey et al., 2019; Martikainen, 2022). Similarly, although the moral and relational aspects of VBL have been acknowledged in the leadership literature, there has been a limited amount of research exploring the interaction of VBL with MW to advance the social aspect of sustainability in organizations. To address this gap, this thesis presents and tests empirically a model where VBL is introduced as a mediator in the relationship between MW and SS. Using dataset of private-sector employees' survey responses, the study uses partial least-squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) for testing both direct and indirect effects. The specific aims of the study are:

- To examine the impact of the relationship between meaningful work and social sustainability.
- To analyze the mediating role of value-based leadership in this relationship.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The concept of meaningful work (MW) has gained growing prominence in organizational scholarship as organizations change to human-centered management paradigms that focus on sustainability. The initial definition of MW is simply: Employees' perception that their work has significance and purpose and contributes

to something greater than the individual (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). "It goes beyond job satisfaction and motivation to incorporate identity, values, and moral satisfaction into the work experience." Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) define MW from three overlapping dimensions: positive meaning, meaning-making via work, and greater-good motivation. Scholars have argued that MW supports the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, which in turn support wellbeing and prosocial orientation (Bailey et al., 2019; Martela & Pessi, 2018). Workplace meaning has been identified as a source of employee resilience to stress, employee organisational citizenship behaviours and congruence between employees' individual purposes and the organisation's mission (Allan, 2017). In contrast to hedonistic pleasure, or the satisfaction inherent in our lives, MW represents eudaimonic wellbeing - a life lived in accordance with our values and purpose. As a result, it is especially relevant to sustainability discourses which increasingly include moral, ethical, and human developmental aspects along with economic and environmental results. However, despite the huge body of literature on the individual benefits of MW, its collective implications have not been sufficiently examined. Generally, empirical research has treated MW as an individual property rather than an organisational resource that has the potential to intervene into organisational norms, culture and long-term sustainability impacts (Bailey et al., 2019). This limitation limits understanding of the aggregation or institutionalisation of the perceived meaningfulness experienced by employees to enhance equity, inclusion and organisational wellbeing-the hallmarks of social sustainability (SS).

While sustainability is classically described through the three pillars of economic, environmental, and social perspective, the social perspective has been receiving comparatively little empirical attention (Missimer, Robert and Broman, 2017; Martikainen, 2022). Social sustainability (SS) is focused on the protection and improvement of human well-being by providing equitable treatment and opportunities for inclusion, participation and fairness to all members of an organization (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017). It is concerned with the structural processes by which people function effectively -- not simply survive -- in both organisations and society at large. At the organizational level, SS is expressed through labor practices that are ethical, policies of diversity and inclusion, programs of support for employees' wellbeing, and participatory decision making. McKenzie (2004) defines SS as the ability of the institutions to create processes that promote social equity and cohesion. In addition to confidentiality, Missimer et al (2017) state that SS is based on three principles: protection of health and influence of individuals, development of competence and impartiality, and the integrity of interpersonal relationships.

From the human resource development and management perspectives, SS is the sustainability

dimension where employees are directly affected as beneficiaries and contributors. A company is not justified in claiming sustainability if its internal environment is a source of inequality, discrimination or an indifference to human well-being. As the expectations of consumers and stakeholders change, the social element has become a part of corporate legitimacy and brand authenticity (Higgins, Stubbs, & Love, 2014). Accordingly, understanding how internal experiences such as meaningful work affect SS may help organisations to create human-centred approaches to sustainability that trickle out as credible ESG narratives. Given its emphasis on dignity, purpose and inclusion, meaningful work offers a psychological support for social sustainability. Employees who see meaning in their work are more likely to engage in ethical, cooperative, and community-oriented behaviors that promote the social climate of the organization. They may voluntarily endorse initiatives to promote diversity, fairness and well-being which create operationalization of social sustainability through day-to-day actions. According to scholars like Martikainen (2022) and Aguinis & Glavas (2019), meaningful work adds to the prosocial sense-making process, which, in this case, has to do with the contribution of the employee to a collective sustainability journey. Consequently, meaningful work may be considered a micro-foundational for social sustainability.

H1: Meaningful work is positively related to the results of social sustainability.

Although motivational work (MW) can be used to encourage socially responsible behaviour, the transfer of individual meaning to systemic change requires supportive organisational structures and effective leadership. We end with a strong argument that leadership creates the meanings of meaningfulness that are shared by the employees and to which the meanings become institutionalised into organisational culture. Copeland (2014) focuses on the role of leaders as "value carriers," supporting translation of personal values into socially shared norms in the organisation. To take MW from a private experience to a collective, socially sustainable practice is a question of leadership. Finally, Value-Based Leadership (VBL) is a theory that is particularly relevant to leadership because it focuses on ethical principles and human-centred values, rather than transactional exchanges. VBL is a broad term that incorporates authentic, servant, and ethical leadership styles, all of which provide pathways to social sustainability but in different but complementary ways. Based on Avolio and Gardner (2005), authentic leaders demonstrate "self-awareness, relational transparency and internalized moral awareness." They "walk their talk" and therefore create trust and congruence between personal and organisational values (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014). Authentic leadership increases psychological safety and helps employees express their sense of meaning verbally. This transparency allows MW to be used by organisations for common goals, such as fairness and inclusion. Servant leadership is based on the philosophy of Greenleaf (1977) that service

is greater than power. Servant leaders invest in people, community, and the resources of the organisation (Hoch et al., 2018). By prioritizing people over performance, servant leadership turns workplaces into communities of joint development - a key condition for social sustainability. Subordinates of servant leaders feel that their efforts are significant, which supports MW and is also likely to trigger altruistic actions to promote social sustainability. Ethical leadership puts an emphasis on fairness, justice, and accountability (Brown & Trevino, 2006). In institutional settings, ethical leaders consider the moral standards embedded in decision making and resource distribution practices, and thus, they ensure fair treatment across hierarchical levels. These systems of fairness translate employees' innate moral agenda into official organizational policies that facilitate strategic sustainability. Collectively, the three forms of leadership identified create an ethical and relational framework or scaffolding for the channeling of moral will into organizational sustainability. They can provide employees with a sense of exceptional role modeling and systematic frameworks that legitimize their sense of purpose, directing it toward the greater whole - the collective welfare of people.

At the same time, leadership acts as an intermediary and a moderator to the effects of meaningful work by translating individual meaning into organizational values. In strong VBL relationships, the leaders emphasize an understanding that meaningful work is related to a larger organizational mission, and therefore, personal fulfillment and social good are intertwined. Employees then adopt a shared view of their activities and engage in behaviors that encourage inclusion, fairness, and well-being (Suriyankietkaew,

Krittayaruangroj, & Iamsawan, 2022; Abay, Gomes, & Mengistu, 2023). The existence of this pathway is supported by empirical results. In a recent study, Hoch, K., A. Zhang, E. L. Pierce, & J. S. Eulo, (2018) demonstrate that authentic, servant, and ethical leadership jointly predict higher levels of employee commitment and prosocial behavior. Likewise, Purnomo and Ausat (2024) note that value-based leadership fosters sustainable organizational culture by aligning individual purpose with collective ethical values. Therefore, VBL is a channel in which the psychological gains of meaningful work are translated into social outcomes.

From the systems-theoretic perspective, VBL performs two important roles. First, it is normative legitimacy because it ensures that organizational structures incorporate the idea of fairness and responsibility (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Second, it enhances cultural harmony by making sure that the stories shared within the corporate narrative are inclusive of the employees' experience of meaningful work and the importance this has for them. Through these processes, leadership converts subjective meaning into practice in terms of sustainability. Hence, in the proposed conceptual model, value-based leadership is a mediator of the relationship between meaningful work and social sustainability. Meaningful work produces a sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation; value-based leadership translates this motivation into purposeful, collective, value-based action; and those actions produce socially sustainable results.

H2: Value-based leadership moderates meaningful work-social sustainability outcomes relationship.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Meaningful work is positively associated with social sustainability outcomes.
- **H2:** Value-based leadership mediates the relationship between meaningful work and social sustainability outcomes.

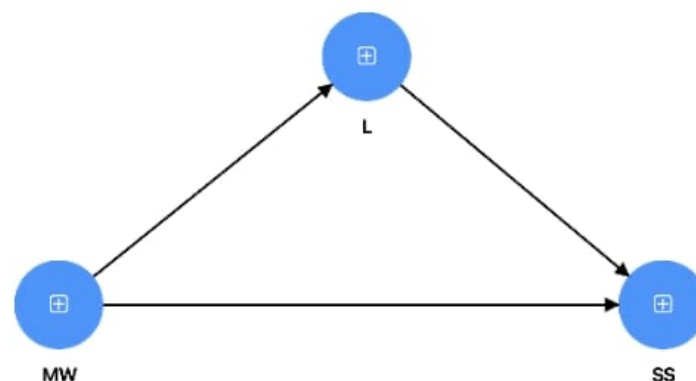


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Figure 1 describes the hypothesized relationships in which MW serves as the independent variable, SS as the dependent variable, and VBL as the mediating variable. The direct pathway (H1) suggests that MW increases SS by motivating employees to participate in inclusive and prosocial behaviors. The indirect pathway (H2) is that VBL strengthens this relationship by putting meaning in leadership practices and organizational systems. This

framework is based on positive-organizational-behavior theory and the stakeholder theory. The former, for example, stresses human flourishing and moral agency in organizations (Dinh et al., 2014), whereas the latter acknowledges that sustainability requires balancing different stakeholder interests, including that of the employees. By combining these perspectives, the model explains the impact of micro-levels of meaning on

macro-levels of social sustainability through leadership mediation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate hypothesized interrelations between meaningful work (MW), value-based leadership (VBL), and social sustainability (SS). This methodological choice was based on its ability to allow empirical evaluation of the direct and indirect relationships between latent constructs using structural equation modeling. The design provides a simultaneous picture of perceptions in multiple organizations, which allows the aggregated effect of MW and VBL on SS to be understood at any given point in time. Surveys were considered to be an appropriate form of research tool for this study because they allow standardized data to be collected from a large and diverse sample of employees. The technique can be used to measure attitudes and perceptions that cannot be observed directly, thus guaranteeing statistical reliability and comparability among respondents (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). The quantitative analysis was further strengthened with stringent reliability and validity checks to be sure that the patterns observed are real relationships and not artefacts of measurement.

3.2 Target Population and Sampling

The target population included full-time employees working in medium and large private sector organisations from service, manufacturing, and knowledge-intensive industries in India. Employees were selected as the unit of analysis as they are the direct recipients of the management work, are exposed to leadership behaviours and are active participants in sustainability efforts within their organisations. A stratified random sampling technique with several stages was used. First, industries were deliberately chosen to represent both human-focused (service, education, healthcare) and for production-focused (manufacturing, technology) industries. Therefore, the human-resource departments of the selected firms were contacted to assist with the distribution of an online questionnaire. Finally, stratified random sampling was used within each organisation to ensure that respondents were adequately representative in terms of gender, age and hierarchical strata. In accordance with the PLS-SEM guidelines, which suggest that there should be at least ten observations for each estimated parameter (Hair et al., 2019), target sample size was estimated at 300. Because of the potential non-response and to increase statistical power, 450 questionnaires were distributed. After screening the collected data, only 376 respondents were found to be valid with an effective response rate of 83.5%.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered using a self-administered online questionnaire that was distributed through secure survey platforms. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity to reduce the possible social desirability bias. Participation was completely voluntary and

informed consent was used at the onset of the questionnaire. The survey was designed so as to take about 15-20 minutes to complete, the importance of being thorough and in-depth versus respondent convenience. To minimize the effects of common method bias, items that represent multiple different constructs were interspersed throughout the instrument and positive and negative worded items were included.

3.4 Measurement of Constructs

The constructs in this study were measured using instruments of proven validity in the literature with small contextual modifications where necessary. Respondents' answers were obtained using a five-point Likert scale from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree').

- Meaningful Work (MW) was defined by the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012), which measures three dimensions: positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and motivations for the common good. Examples of these items are: "I know how my work is central to my life" and "My work helps me to make sense of the world."
- Value-Based Leadership (VBL) was assessed using a composite of sub-scales of authentic, servant, and ethical leadership. The scale of Walumbwa et al. (2008) was used to measure authentic leadership, the scale of Liden et al. (2008) was used to measure servant leadership, and the scale of Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005) was used to measure ethical leadership. Items were combined to create an upper-level VBL construct. Examples include "My leader follows what he/she says" (authentic), "My leader puts my development ahead of his/her personal profit" (servant), and "My leader makes decisions that are fair and balanced" (ethical).
- Social Sustainability (SS) was measured with items adapted from McKenzie (2004) and Missimer et al. (2017), focusing on the dimensions of fairness, inclusivity, and well-being. Such statements include "My organization ensures equity and inclusion in its practices," and "Well-being of employees is a stated objective in organizational decision making."

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was performed in a systematic approach of steps. The first stage involved preliminary studies including careful data screening, imputation of missing values and testing of assumptions (e.g. normality, multicollinearity). Reliability was measured using such techniques as Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, and construct validity was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Discriminant validity was based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion and on the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio. To test the proposed hypotheses, a structural equation model (SEM) augmented with bootstrapping procedures was used. SEM was selected because it allows the direct and indirect effects to be estimated simultaneously while adjusting for measurement error. The first hypothesis (H1) was tested by testing the direct pathway from MW to SS. The second hypothesis (H2) was tested using a

mediation analysis, the indirect effect of MW on SS via VBL was computed, and statistical significance of the mediation effect was computed using bootstrapped confidence intervals. Model fit was evaluated using commonly used indices Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), to assess the overall adequacy of both measurement and structural elements of the model.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Following the screening process, a total of 376 valid responses were kept for further analysis. Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the respondents. Male respondents had a percentage of 71.8 per cent while female respondents were 28.2 per cent. A majority of participants (63.8 percent) were under the age of 40 and 58 percent reported less than ten years of organizational experience, suggesting a cohort of participants in the early to mid-career stage. These characteristics are aligned with the youthful profile of India's private-sector workforce, where younger employees are increasingly seeking out organizations with a broader and bigger sense of purpose and social responsibility.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Below 40 years	240	63.8%
Above 40 years	136	36.2%
Gender		
Female	106	28.2%
Male	270	71.8%
Organizational Tenure		
Less than 10 years	218	58.0%
10 years and above	158	42.0%

Source: Authors' Calculation

4.2. Measurement Model

Table 2 presents the descriptive measures and validity and reliability of the measurement model. Internal consistency reliability was shown by values of Cronbach's α ranging from 0.86 to 0.95, which were above the commonly used value of 0.70. Composite reliability (CR) coefficients ranged from .90 to .95 and thus support high reliability for all constructs. Convergent validity was established since all average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the .50 criterion with values ranging from .65 to .77.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Meaningful Work	0.927	0.945	0.775
Value-Based Leadership	0.863	0.902	0.648
Social Sustainability	0.945	0.953	0.671

Source: SmartPLS Output

The Fornell-Larcker and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were used to establish the discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker analysis revealed that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of any construct was larger than its correlations with all the other constructs thus demonstrating the uniqueness of constructs presented in Table 3. In addition, there was no critical cutoff less than .85 of all the HTMT ratios, which was another indication of discriminant validity. Collectively, these findings contribute to the fact that the measurement model is acceptable in terms of its reliability and validity, and thus, it is a good empirical basis to test a hypothesis.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratios)

Constructs	Leadership	Meaningful Work	Social Sustainability
Leadership	—	0.755	0.827
Meaningful Work	0.755	—	0.783
Social Sustainability	0.827	0.783	—

Source: SmartPLS Output

4.3 Structural Model

Bootstrapping was used to test the hypothesized pathways, with 5000 resamples to test the significance of the structural model showing in Figure 2. This assessment incorporated the direct effect of meaningful work on social sustainability, as well as the indirect effect of meaningful work via the value-based leadership.

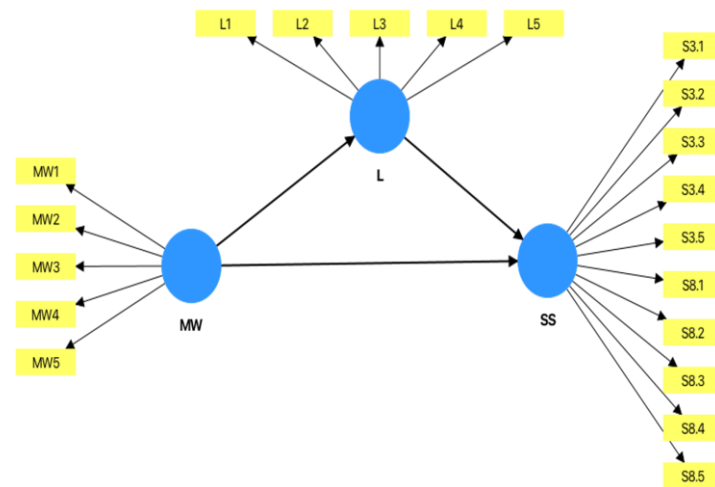


Figure 2: Model (Source: SmartPLS)

This direct relationship between meaningful work and social sustainability was positive and statistically significant ($b = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) hence hypothesis H1 was accepted. Such results indicate that when employees feel a sense of meaning in their work, they will come forward to report better organizational outcomes in terms of fairness, inclusivity and wellbeing. The mediation analysis also indicated that meaningful work greatly influenced value-based leadership ($b = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$) and that value-based leadership influenced social sustainability significantly ($b = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect impact of meaningful work on social sustainability, which was determined based on value-based leadership, was also identified as statistically significant ($b = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), which

confirmed evidence of partial mediation. This finding supports the findings of hypothesis H2 and proves the fact that leadership plays a significant role in the transfer of personal perceptions of meaningful work into organizational practices that are shared by the entire organization and help to enhance social sustainability. Model fit statistics showed that the performance was satisfactory, and the coefficient of determination (R^2) showed that meaningful work and value-based leadership were significant predictors of social sustainability, explaining 61 percent variance in social sustainability. In addition, the predictive relevance (Q^2) values were found to be more than zero, thereby indicating strong predictive ability.

Table 4. Structural Model Results

Path	β (Coefficient)	t-value	p-value	Result
MW $\rightarrow$ SS	0.42	8.71	0.000	Supported (H1)
MW $\rightarrow$ VBL	0.57	12.34	0.000	–
VBL $\rightarrow$ SS	0.38	7.56	0.000	–
MW $\rightarrow$ VBL $\rightarrow$ SS (Mediation)	0.22	6.43	0.000	Supported (H2)

Source: SmartPLS Output

The analysis confirms that meaningful work has a direct effect on social sustainability outcomes, while at the same time indirectly influences social sustainability outcomes through value-based leadership. These results highlight the centrality of employees' sense of purpose as a foundational factor for sustainable practices as well as the centrality of leadership as a key mechanism that converts meaning from the individual to the social outcomes of the organisation.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper aimed to determine how the experience of meaningful work (MW) by employees can yield social-sustainability (SS) consequences within organizations

and how a leadership approach that is value-based leadership (VBL) can lead to such change. Two major findings were made using the PLS-SEM analysis resulting in the analysis of data on 376 employees. To begin with, MW has a potent direct effect on SS that proves that employees who find their work meaningful and meaningful are likely to strengthen fairness, inclusion, and well-being within their organizations. Second, VBL is a large partial mediator, which means that leadership based on authenticity, service and ethics transforms the energy of MW into socially sustainable behaviors that are institutionalized. A combination of these results demonstrates that social sustainability is not a compliance objective but an internally produced

process that is based on lived experience of meaning at work and moral orientation of leaders. The fact that there is a good correlation between MW and SS supports the fact that personal sense making in the workplace can be shared by the community. Employees are more involved in the organization life when they have a sense that their work is important and thus they display empathy, cooperation and ethical behavior. These actions are consistent with the concepts of SS-equity, inclusion, and human well-being (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017). That is, MW has the psychological basis of sustainability: it triggers the intrinsic motivation beyond extrinsic reward systems and develops the culture of common responsibility.

The discovery builds on the previous studies that related MW to job satisfaction and resilience in the first place (Allan, 2017; Bailey et al., 2019). The current findings show that MW does not only impact the individual but improves the social fabric of the organization. Workers who find meaning in their jobs are more likely to promote diversity initiatives, volunteer in outreach to the community, and assist in ethical decision making. Such micro-behaviors add up to systematic effects that make the organization legitimate among the internal and external stakeholders. In terms of sustainability-communication, MW increases the degree of authenticity within the ESG stories. Companies whose staff feels that their work is not in vain are able to legitimately assert that they are trying to achieve social objectives since it has been confirmed in practice and is not a mere form of rhetoric. MW is, therefore, considered to act as an internal legitimacy which does not replace external reporting.

The partial mediation effect of virtuous behavioral leadership (VBL) suggests that leadership is the cultural channel through which meaningful work becomes organizational sustainability. When leaders are authentic, serve and are fair, they legitimize the meaning that employees seek and provide the structural mechanisms to translate individual values into collective norms. Without such leadership, motivation of meaningful work may be individual and episodic and not systemic and permanent. Authentic leaders build transparency and trust by aligning verbal communications with the actual behavior (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This congruence validates perceptions that the work employees do is valuable and is in line with organizational purpose and thereby facilitates the extension of personal meaning to the wider community and re-enforces perceptions of fairness and wellness. Servant leaders value growth and empathy and are stewards (Greenleaf, 1977; Hoch et al., 2018). Their service-oriented orientation changes hierarchical structures into cooperative communities that represent the principles of social sustainability, such as inclusion and community care for each other. Employees in such contexts feel that their work is not only for the organizational performance but also for the common good. Ethical leaders integrate justice and accountability in decision making processes (Brown & Trevino, 2006). By institutionalizing fairness, they

ensure meaningful work rises above a private sentiment and becomes a shared moral commitment in the form of policies, rewards, and engagement with stakeholders. As a result, ethical leadership is the translation of the intent of meaningful work into measurable social results. Collectively, these value-based forms of leadership are a coherent moral infrastructure. They maximize the impact of meaningful work by incorporating meaningful work into the organization's ethical framework and the sustainability agenda in the organization. The discovery of partial rather than full mediation implies that while leadership enhances and stabilizes the relationship between meaningful work and sustainable results, meaningful work has its own inherent motivational power; employees with high personal purpose continue to contribute to social sustainability even in the absence of ideal leadership, but to a lesser degree.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The main contributions of this paper to theory are threefold. First, they broaden the construct of meaningful work (MW) as not just a source of personal fulfillment, but as a precursor to sustainable stewardship (SS). Most previous research has focused on individual-level outcomes like job satisfaction or engagement (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Allan, 2017). By showing how it relates to equity, inclusiveness, and legitimacy of the organization, this paper extends the theoretical reach of MW and places it in the context of sustainability rhetoric. Second, our results provide a nuanced understanding of the mediating role of virtuous business leadership (VBL) in the relationship between MW and organizational outcomes. Leadership is here presented not only as a background variable but as a crucial passage. Authentic, servant, and ethical leaders institutionalize employees' sense of meaning and turn personal belief into collective practices. This insight contributes to the argument that leaders are the value carriers (Copeland, 2014) and further develops it by emphasising how leaders play a role in integrating sustainability into the organisational system (Suriyankietkaew, Avery & Poonpol, 2022). Finally, by setting its focus on SS, this paper contributes to sustainability theory by focusing on its social dimension, which has received much less attention compared to environmental or economic aspects (Missimer, Robert, & Broman, 2017; Martikainen, 2022). It posits MW and VBL as key agents in driving forward SS, and therefore connects human experience and organizational systems to the overall objectives of sustainable development.

5.2. Practical Implications

For organizations, the results indicate two areas of focus: First, job design must go beyond the focus on efficiency and productivity to support employees in their relating with purpose and value in the work that they perform. What many of us term rewards for the "greater good," recognition systems, and opportunities for self-actualization, are not luxuries; they are the basic ingredients of a recipe for meaningful work. Second, leadership development must have a stronger focus on values as well as skills. Organisations that want to

improve their sustainability profile should develop leaders who are genuine, ethical, service-minded, and authentic. Alongside enhancing the well-being of employees, such leaders ensure that employees' meaningful work experiences are strengthened and translated into inclusive and fair practices. This implies that leadership training programmes ought to consciously incorporate modules on ethics, self-awareness, and stewardship, along with traditional management skills. For policymakers, these findings suggest that sustainability regimes should explicitly acknowledge the social dimension of sustainability. Supporting organizations to disclose not only environmental or financial performance but also measures of social well-being can act as a driver for meaningful work and leadership to become part of sustainability agendas.

6. CONCLUSION

This manuscript aims to challenge the relationship between meaningful work (MW) and social sustainability (SS), and specifically the mediating role of value-based leadership (VBL). What has evolved from two initial, one-lined research objectives has become a wide-ranging inquiry into the interplay between individualized senses of purpose and the nature of the larger organizational context and leadership style. In fact, the empirical evidence presented challenges the idea of MW as an isolated, psychological construct; rather, it emerges as a powerful driver of collective outcomes, shaping the operationalization of fairness, inclusivity, and well-being within corporate contexts. By showing how workers who create meaning from their work are ready to support socially sustainable efforts, the inquiry claims that sustainability is not an addition to, but arises spontaneously from the lived experience of organizational actors. At the same time, the data focuses the mind on leadership, because it does so much more than just provide strategic guidance or performance oversight. The importance of the work and the emphasis employees place on the work are validated by and provided direction through leadership. In the absence of such reinforcement, the impact of MW would probably only be spread at the individual level. Under a value-based leadership paradigm, however, individual purpose is lifted to the status of such cultural norms and institutional practices that they become permanent. As he pointed out, leadership is not simply an enabling input, but the fundamental process through which meaning is embedded into the everyday fabric of organisations. The findings therefore support the view that the social dimension of sustainability - which often remains at a peripheral status when compared to environmental measurements or economic calculations - cannot be marginalized. Instead, it's a key ingredient for developing resilience, legitimacy, and long-term value. Employees can be thought of as internal consumers of organisational significance, involved in a continual consumption process where they are critical consumers of fairness, leadership authenticity and purposeful orientation in a similar way to the way external consumers evaluate brand trust, transparency and social responsibility. The experiential feedback

loops produced by these inner consumer evaluations affect not only workforce engagement and retention dynamic but also discursive narratives that are circulating outwards to other audiences.

When the trajectories of the internal and external consumer experiences align - that is, when employees genuinely buy into the values promulgated by their organization - corporate sustainability discourses gain enhanced credibility and increased emotional wheelhouse.

6.1. Implications

Conceptually, this research is an extension of consumer theory in the sense that a construct is introduced, namely internal value consumption. Employees, which are conceptualized as internal consumers, "consume" the values, fairness and purpose embedded in organizational life in a way that is analogous to how external consumers evaluate brands in terms of experiential and symbolic dimensions. By approaching meaningful work and leadership as internal consumption processes, the study bridges the worlds of organizational behavior and consumer research, which emphasize that sustainable organizations are created when both internal and external consumers find authentic meaning in their interactions with the firm.

6.2. Future directions

Although the current analysis is very informative, new questions can be asked. Longitudinal studies would enable us to capture the changing dynamics of meaningful work and leadership and their impact on sustainability in different stages of organisational development. Examining alternative paradigms of leadership, such as transformational or inclusive leadership, could shed light on other trajectories of value-based leadership. Given that purpose and leadership are viewed very differently across industries and societies, thinking about sectoral and cultural diversity would enhance our understanding. Methodologically, future research could use multiple data sources (such as peer-report and organisational indicators) to supplement self-reported measures. Finally, an analysis of the relationship between meaningful work, leadership, and the environmental and economic pillars of sustainability would result in a more integrated view.

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