A Structural Model of the Impact of Sustainable Human Resource Management on Organizational Legitimacy: The Mediating Role of Employee Loyalty

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Abstract

The present study aims to propose a structural model of the impact of sustainable human resource management (SHRM) on organizational legitimacy with the mediating role of employee loyalty. This research is applied in nature and employs a descriptive–correlational method. The statistical population includes employees of universities in Bonab County, totaling 194 individuals. Based on Cochran's formula, a sample size of 129 participants was determined and selected through stratified random sampling. Data collection tools comprised standardized questionnaires: the Sustainable Human Resource Management Questionnaire by Nazari (2015), the Organizational Legitimacy Questionnaire by Elsbach (1994), and the Employee Loyalty Questionnaire by Ali and Al-Kazemi (2007). To examine the existence or absence of causal relationships among the research variables and assess the fit between the observed data and the conceptual model, the hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) and the Partial Least Squares method (PLS3). The findings revealed that sustainable human resource management has a significant effect on both organizational legitimacy and employee loyalty. Moreover, employee loyalty significantly impacts organizational legitimacy. Additionally, at a 99% confidence level, employee loyalty plays a mediating role in the relationship between sustainable human resource management and organizational legitimacy.

Keywords: *Sustainable Human Resource Management, Organizational Legitimacy, Employee Loyalty.*

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of organizational competitiveness and sustainability, the legitimacy of an organization and the loyalty of its employees have become pivotal constructs in the strategic discourse of management sciences. The increasing complexity of stakeholder expectations and environmental uncertainties has underscored the importance of sustainable human resource management (SHRM) as a foundational driver for achieving long-term organizational viability. SHRM, which integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions into HR practices, not only fosters internal resilience but also contributes to building external legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Griep et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2023).

Organizational legitimacy, defined as the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Bitektine & Song, 2023), has emerged as a key performance indicator in contemporary organizations. In the context of sustainable development, legitimacy is no longer restricted to compliance with institutional norms but extends to perceptions of environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and ethical governance (Fu & Wang, 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). This transformation has prompted scholars and practitioners alike to explore how internal HR practices influence these external evaluations. As such, SHRM strategies, which promote long-term employee well-being and organizational ethics, serve as strategic tools for reinforcing organizational legitimacy (Rahdarpoor et al., 2023; Rajabi Farjad & Touranian, 2023).

Among the internal consequences of SHRM, employee loyalty plays a crucial mediating role in aligning HR strategies with legitimacy outcomes. Employee loyalty, characterized by commitment, engagement, and willingness to contribute beyond contractual obligations, is not merely a function of compensation or tenure but is deeply influenced by perceived fairness, organizational identity, and value congruence (Dutta & Dhir, 2025; Hadj, 2024). Recent empirical findings suggest that loyal employees act as legitimacy ambassadors, transmitting positive signals to external stakeholders and reinforcing trust in organizational systems (Al-Twal et al., 2024; Yao et al., 2024). In this regard, the integration of SHRM practices that prioritize fairness, inclusivity, and well-being can significantly enhance employee loyalty and, consequently, the organization's legitimacy (Hosseini et al., 2024; Pashazadeh & Behrozi, 2024).

The conceptual linkage between SHRM and employee loyalty has been investigated across diverse contexts. For instance, studies have shown that when organizations invest in sustainable HR practices such as work–life balance, environmental consciousness, and social equity, employees reciprocate with heightened loyalty and alignment with organizational goals (SeifBabolani et al., 2024; Sypniewska et al., 2023). This relational dynamic is often mediated by the development of psychological contracts and a sense of organizational justice, which in turn reinforce employees' intrinsic motivation and commitment to the firm (Abdollahi & Bejani, 2024; Nazampour, 2025). Furthermore, in knowledge-based and service-oriented sectors, where intellectual and social capital are crucial, the presence of a loyal workforce contributes directly to performance stability and reputational capital (Jumawan et al., 2024; Zanabazar et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the pathways through which employee loyalty enhances organizational legitimacy have garnered increasing scholarly attention. As employees are increasingly seen as organizational representatives, their attitudes and behaviors—whether online or offline—can shape public perceptions and stakeholder judgments (Illia et al., 2023; Rahnavard et al., 2023). In a digitally connected world, loyal employees are more likely to defend the organization during crises, participate in corporate social initiatives, and contribute to building an ethical work culture that aligns with broader societal expectations (Salehi et al., 2024; Yao et al., 2024). These employee-driven actions act as informal legitimacy mechanisms, complementing formal strategies such as CSR disclosures or environmental reporting (Fu & Wang, 2024; Razmkhah & Sajadi Khah, 2024).

The current study is situated at the intersection of SHRM, employee loyalty, and organizational legitimacy, aiming to explore the structural relationships among these constructs through empirical modeling. While previous studies have addressed each of these variables independently, few have examined their interrelationships in a cohesive framework that integrates mediating mechanisms and contextual dimensions (Mazidi Sharafbadi, 2025; Rahdarpoor et al., 2023). This gap is particularly salient in developing economies and public institutions where institutional pressures, resource constraints, and socio-political dynamics shape both HRM strategies and legitimacy perceptions (Lu et al., 2023; Rajabi Farjad & Touranian, 2023).

In Iran's academic sector, for instance, universities and public institutions face mounting pressure to demonstrate transparency, inclusiveness, and sustainability in their operations. Given the growing emphasis on accountability and quality assurance in higher education, the legitimacy of universities increasingly depends not only on academic output but also on internal governance and HR practices (Nazampour, 2025). In such contexts, the loyalty of employees—especially academic and administrative staff—plays a central role in maintaining institutional coherence and stakeholder trust. Accordingly, the current study focuses on university staff as a critical population for examining how sustainable HR strategies translate into perceived legitimacy through the mediating influence of loyalty.

To frame this inquiry, the research builds upon the theoretical underpinnings of institutional theory and social

exchange theory. Institutional theory posits that organizations must conform to socially accepted norms and expectations to gain legitimacy and survive in the long term (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Zheng et al., 2023). From this perspective, SHRM practices can be seen as strategic responses to institutional pressures that seek to align internal processes with external expectations. In contrast, social exchange theory emphasizes reciprocal relationships within organizations, suggesting that when employees perceive their organization as supportive and ethical, they are more likely to exhibit loyalty and pro-organizational behavior (Abdollahi & Bejani, 2024; Sinitsyna et al., 2024).

The convergence of these theories provides a robust foundation for examining the mediating role of employee loyalty. SHRM initiatives—such as fostering work autonomy, facilitating work–life balance, and enhancing employability—signal organizational commitment to employee well-being. These signals, in turn, cultivate emotional bonds and normative commitments among employees, who are then motivated to support and legitimize the organization in both internal and external domains (Griep et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2023). Such outcomes are not merely incidental but are essential for organizational survival, especially in environments marked by volatility and increased stakeholder scrutiny.

This study, therefore, seeks to address the following key research questions:

1. Does sustainable human resource management significantly influence organizational legitimacy?
2. Does sustainable human resource management enhance employee loyalty?
3. Does employee loyalty significantly contribute to organizational legitimacy?

Does employee loyalty mediate the relationship between sustainable human resource management and organizational legitimacy?

2. Methods and Materials

This study is applied in terms of its objective and descriptive–correlational in terms of its method. The statistical population consisted of 194 employees from universities in Bonab County. The sample size was estimated at 129 individuals based on Cochran's formula and selected through stratified random sampling. First, the statistical population was divided into three strata based on university affiliation. Then, using stratified random sampling, a proportional number of samples were drawn from each stratum according to its size. After calculating the share of each stratum in the sample, simple random sampling (lottery method) was applied to select the required number of individuals from each university. Table 1 presents the sample size and the share of each university in the sample.

Table 1

Sample Size and University Share in the Sample

Row	University	Population	Share in Sample
1	Islamic Azad University, Bonab Branch	65	43
2	Bonab University	98	65
3	Payame Noor University of Bonab	31	21
	Total	194	129

In this study, data were collected using three questionnaires. The first questionnaire, developed by Nazari (2015), assesses sustainable human resource management based on three components: work–life balance, autonomy, and employability. The second instrument is the standard questionnaire by Elsbach (1994), which evaluates organizational legitimacy using 12 items. The third is the standardized questionnaire by Ali and Al-Kazemi (2007), which assesses employee loyalty using 7 items.

To evaluate the validity of the research instruments, face validity was used and confirmed by academic experts and specialists. To assess the reliability of the instruments, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Instrument Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha Method)

Research Variable	Number of Components and Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Sustainable HR Management	(3 components, 18 items)	0.915
Organizational Legitimacy	(No component, 12 items)	0.841
Employee Loyalty	(No component, 7 items)	0.862

The data analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) with PLS3 software. The results are reported in the findings section of the study.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, structural equation modeling (SEM) and the Partial Least Squares (PLS3) method were used to test the hypotheses and assess model fit. The software output, following the testing of the conceptual model, is displayed in Figures 1 and 2. Below, the results of the two main sections—measurement model testing and structural model testing—are presented in detail.

Figure 1

Structural Model with Standardized Coefficient Estimates
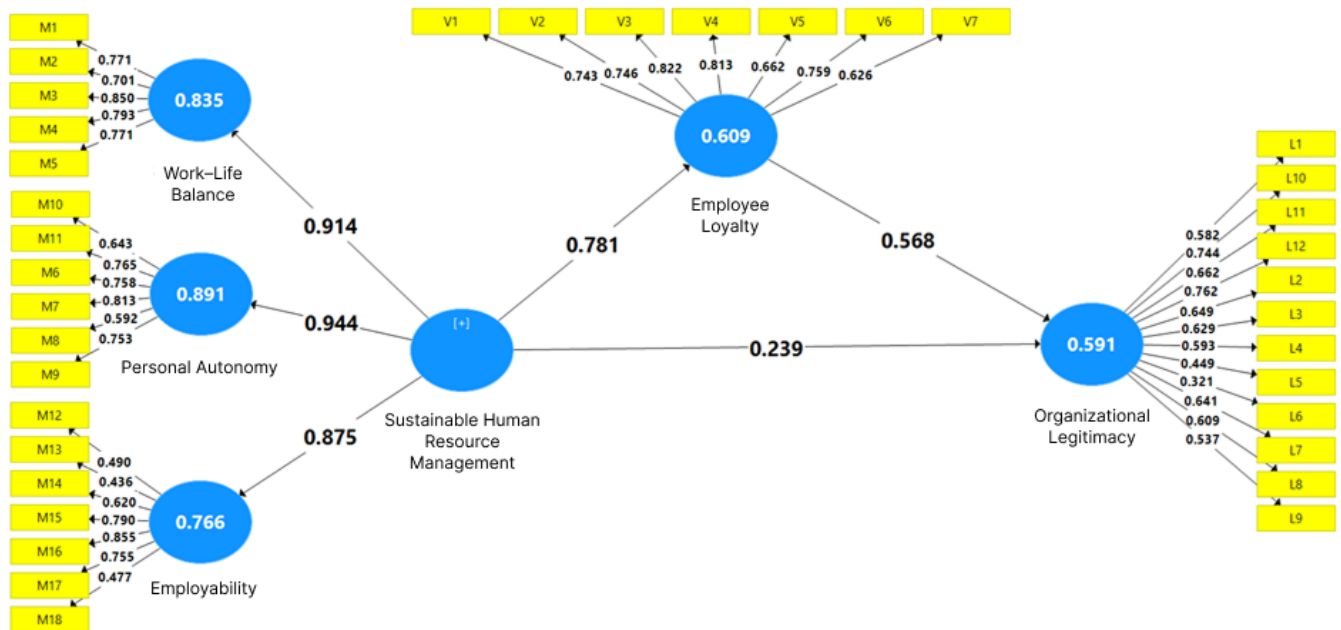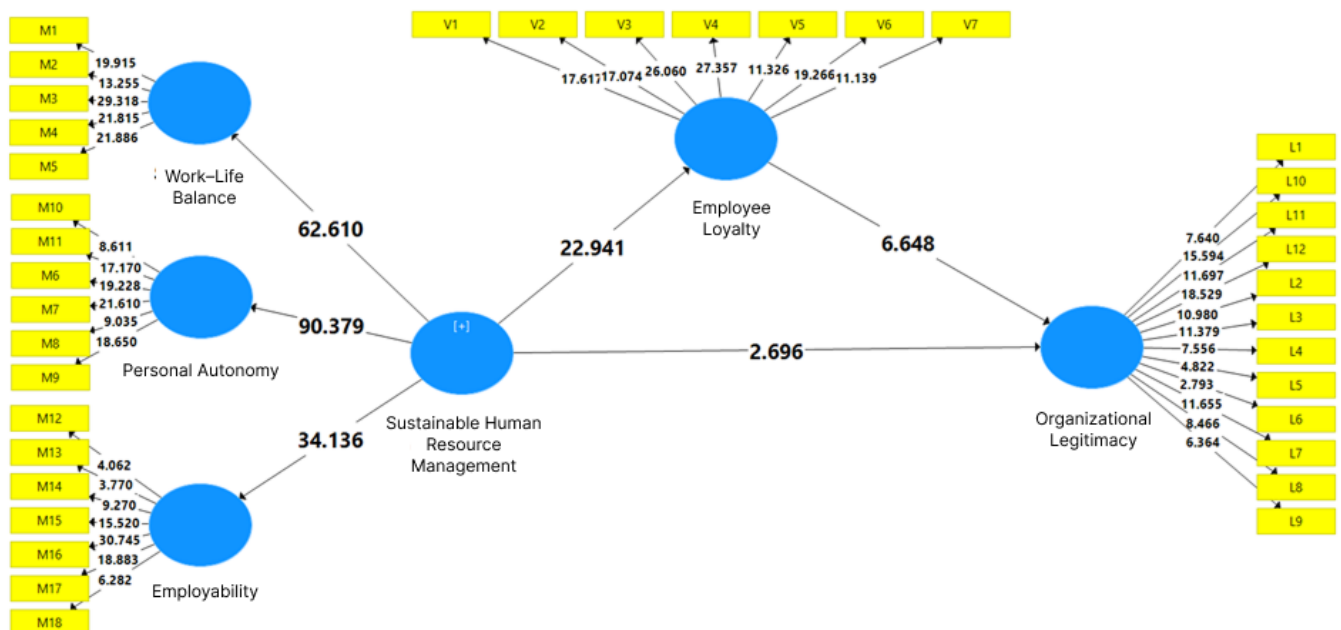

Figure 2

Structural Model with Significance of Coefficients

To assess the reliability of the model, four indicators were used: Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), Spearman's Rho (Rho-A), and communality.

Table 3

Results of Reliability Tests for Latent Variables

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha (α > 0.7)	Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7)	Spearman's Rho (Rho-A > 0.7)	Communality (> 0.5)
Sustainable HR Management	0.915	0.927	0.924	0.520
Organizational Legitimacy	0.841	0.872	0.862	0.571
Employee Loyalty	0.862	0.895	0.874	0.550

According to the results in Table 3, all indicators have acceptable values for the latent variables, confirming the reliability of the research model.

Table 4

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Test

Variables	AVE
Sustainable HR Management	0.520
Organizational Legitimacy	0.571
Employee Loyalty	0.550

As shown in Table 4, all AVE coefficients for the variables are greater than 0.50, satisfying the first condition for convergent validity: CR > AVE.

Table 5

Comparison of Composite Reliability and AVE

Variables	CR	AVE
Sustainable HR Management	0.927	0.520
Organizational Legitimacy	0.872	0.571
Employee Loyalty	0.895	0.550

According to Table 5, the composite reliability (CR) values for all research variables exceed their respective AVE values. Therefore, the second condition for convergent validity is also met, confirming that the research model has acceptable convergent validity.

Table 6

Fornell–Larcker Test

	Sustainable HR Management	Organizational Legitimacy	Employee Loyalty
Sustainable HR Management	0.721		
Organizational Legitimacy	0.682	0.755	
Employee Loyalty	0.581	0.609	0.742

The results in Table 6 indicate that the square root of AVE for each variable is greater than its correlations with other variables, confirming the discriminant validity of the model variables.

Table 7

HTMT Test Results

	Sustainable HR Management	Organizational Legitimacy	Employee Loyalty
Sustainable HR Management			
Organizational Legitimacy	0.756		
Employee Loyalty	0.869	0.826	

Since the acceptable threshold for HTMT is below 0.90, and the values in Table 7 fall within this range, the discriminant validity of the model variables is confirmed.

To assess the overall model fit, the GOF (Goodness-of-Fit) index was used. The values 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36 are considered weak, moderate, and strong fit levels, respectively, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Overall Model Fit Results

Communality	R²	GOF
0.547	0.600	0.572

According to Table 8, the GOF value of 0.572 indicates an excellent fit for the overall model.

Table 9

Hypothesis Significance Testing Results

No.	Hypothesis Title	Path Coefficient (β)	T-Value	P-Value	Result
1	Sustainable human resource management has an effect on organizational legitimacy.	0.239	2.696	0.007	Confirmed
2	Sustainable human resource management has an effect on employee loyalty.	0.781	22.941	0.000	Confirmed
3	Employee loyalty has an effect on organizational legitimacy.	0.568	6.648	0.000	Confirmed
4	Employee loyalty mediates the effect of sustainable human resource management on organizational legitimacy.	Sobel Test Z = 2.491			Confirmed

Following the assessment of the measurement and structural models and confirmation of the model fit, the research hypotheses were examined and tested. The following section presents the standardized path coefficients, significance levels, and interpretation for each hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Sustainable human resource management has an effect on organizational legitimacy.

Based on Figures 2 and 3, the standardized path coefficient between sustainable human resource management and organizational legitimacy is $\beta = 0.239$. The associated significance values are $t = 2.696$ and $p = 0.007$, both exceeding the critical threshold of $|1.96|$. These results indicate a statistically significant relationship. Therefore, at the 99% confidence level, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted, confirming that sustainable human resource management has a significant effect on organizational legitimacy. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2: Sustainable human resource management has an effect on employee loyalty.

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the standardized path coefficient between sustainable human resource management and employee loyalty is $\beta = 0.781$. The corresponding significance values are $t = 22.941$ and $p = 0.000$, which exceed the critical value of $|1.96|$. This demonstrates that the relationship is statistically significant. Thus, at the 99% confidence level, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted,

indicating that sustainable human resource management significantly affects employee loyalty. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

Hypothesis 3: Employee loyalty has an effect on organizational legitimacy.

According to Figures 2 and 3, the standardized path coefficient between employee loyalty and organizational legitimacy is $\beta = 0.568$. The corresponding significance values are $t = 6.648$ and $p = 0.000$, which exceed the critical threshold of $|1.96|$. These findings confirm a statistically significant relationship. Consequently, at the 99% confidence level, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted, affirming that employee loyalty significantly impacts organizational legitimacy. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Hypothesis 4: Employee loyalty mediates the effect of sustainable human resource management on organizational legitimacy.

To test the mediating role, the Sobel test was applied in this study. This test uses the unstandardized path coefficient and its standard error to compute the z-value. The result showed a z-value of 2.491 for the mediating role of employee loyalty in the relationship between sustainable human resource management and organizational legitimacy, which exceeds the threshold of 1.96. Therefore, at the 99% confidence level, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. It can thus be concluded that employee loyalty significantly mediates the effect of sustainable human resource management on

organizational legitimacy. Accordingly, Hypothesis 4 is also confirmed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the structural relationship between sustainable human resource management (SHRM), employee loyalty, and organizational legitimacy, with a particular focus on the mediating role of employee loyalty. The findings provided robust empirical support for all four hypothesized relationships, demonstrating the significant and interrelated roles that sustainable HRM and employee loyalty play in enhancing organizational legitimacy.

The first hypothesis, which posited a significant effect of sustainable human resource management on organizational legitimacy, was confirmed with a standardized path coefficient of $\beta = 0.239$ and a significance level of $p = 0.007$. This finding reinforces the theoretical assumption that SHRM practices—characterized by fairness, work–life balance, autonomy, and employability—positively influence external stakeholder perceptions and evaluations. This is consistent with the argument that legitimacy is shaped not only by formal institutional conformity but also by normative and cognitive expectations of stakeholders, which are often conveyed through internal HR practices (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Fu & Wang, 2024). For instance, organizations that adopt sustainable HR policies signal to the public and regulatory bodies that they are responsible and ethical employers, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy in the societal and institutional environment (Salehi et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2023).

The second hypothesis confirmed that sustainable human resource management significantly influences employee loyalty, with a strong path coefficient of $\beta = 0.781$ and a significance level of $p = 0.000$. This result aligns with a growing body of literature that identifies SHRM as a core antecedent to employee loyalty (Griep et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2023). Organizations that foster inclusive, transparent, and employee-centered HR practices build psychological contracts characterized by trust, mutual respect, and emotional investment. Employees who perceive that their organization is committed to sustainability and fairness are more likely to internalize organizational values and exhibit loyalty through continued commitment, reduced turnover intention, and advocacy behaviors (Dutta & Dhir, 2025; Hosseini et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies suggest that this loyalty is not only affective but also normative, whereby employees feel a moral obligation to support an organization that upholds shared societal and environmental values (Pashazadeh & Behrozi, 2024; Sypniewska et al., 2023).

The third hypothesis, which tested the direct relationship between employee loyalty and organizational legitimacy, was also supported with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.568$ and a significance level of $p = 0.000$. This finding highlights the role of employees as organizational ambassadors who shape external perceptions through their behaviors, both within and outside the organization (Illia et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2024). Loyal employees are more likely to embody organizational values, participate in socially responsible initiatives, and respond constructively to reputational threats, all of which contribute to enhanced legitimacy. As the boundaries between internal and external stakeholder interactions blur—particularly in digital and service-oriented contexts—the role of employees in co-producing organizational legitimacy becomes increasingly salient (Al-Twal et al., 2024; Rahnavard et al., 2023).

Finally, the fourth hypothesis confirmed the mediating role of employee loyalty in the relationship between SHRM and organizational legitimacy, with the Sobel test indicating a significant indirect effect ($z = 2.491$). This finding suggests that SHRM does not only have a direct impact on legitimacy but also works indirectly by cultivating a loyal workforce that acts as a conduit for legitimacy reinforcement. The mediating mechanism identified here provides empirical support for theoretical models that integrate institutional theory with social exchange theory. From a social exchange perspective, SHRM serves as an antecedent condition that initiates reciprocal relationships, resulting in loyal employees who, in turn, promote and protect the organization's legitimacy (Abdollahi & Bejani, 2024; Sinitsyna et al., 2024). This integrative view underscores the dynamic interplay between internal HR practices and external stakeholder evaluations.

Moreover, the study's findings are in line with those of (Rahdarpoor et al., 2023), who emphasized that legitimacy in the context of public institutions is shaped by both performance outcomes and employee-driven relational signals. Similarly, (Razmkhah & Sajadi Khah, 2024) demonstrated that employee-oriented HR policies enhance trust and moral legitimacy, especially in service sectors where human interaction is central to value delivery. In line with (Mazidi Sharafbadi, 2025), this study also confirms the strategic value of green and sustainable HRM practices in creating a value-driven culture that resonates with both internal and external stakeholders.

It is also important to highlight that loyalty is not merely a consequence of SHRM but a critical resource for achieving sustainable legitimacy. As shown by (Jumawan et al., 2024) and (Zanabazar et al., 2023), factors such as employee training, recognition, and equitable advancement opportunities not only enhance performance but also strengthen employees' identification with the organization. In contexts where external legitimacy is volatile or contested, such as public universities or government agencies, a loyal workforce serves as a buffer and an active agent in sustaining institutional trust and continuity (Hadj, 2024; Nazampour, 2025).

The mediating role of employee loyalty further indicates that organizational legitimacy is not solely the outcome of top-down strategies or external branding efforts. Instead, it emerges through complex internal dynamics and the quality of organizational relationships. As noted by (Rajabi Farjad & Touranian, 2023) and (Rahnavard et al., 2023), legitimacy is increasingly co-constructed through everyday interactions, signaling the importance of building a culture where loyalty and sustainability are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Thus, organizations seeking to enhance their legitimacy must not overlook the foundational role of internal relational capital.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that sustainable HRM provides a strategic platform not only for employee development but also for broader legitimacy outcomes. These findings advocate for a shift in managerial mindset—from viewing HRM as a cost center to recognizing it as a strategic driver of organizational legitimacy and stakeholder engagement. As demonstrated, employee loyalty serves as a key mediating mechanism through which internal HR practices translate into external perceptions, positioning employees as central agents in organizational value creation and legitimacy construction.

Despite its theoretical contributions and empirical validation, the present study is subject to several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a specific geographic and institutional context—universities in Bonab County, Iran—which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sectors or regions. Second, the use of self-reported questionnaires introduces potential bias related to social desirability and respondent subjectivity. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes causal inference, as the relationships among SHRM, loyalty, and legitimacy may evolve over time. Lastly, while the study employed robust statistical techniques using PLS-SEM,

qualitative insights or longitudinal data could have enriched the understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

Future studies could address these limitations by expanding the sample to include diverse industries, including the private sector and NGOs, to enhance the generalizability of the results. Longitudinal research designs would allow for the examination of how changes in HRM practices influence loyalty and legitimacy over time. Moreover, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or case studies could provide deeper insights into employees' lived experiences and the symbolic dimensions of legitimacy construction. Future research might also explore the moderating effects of organizational culture, leadership style, or digital transformation on the proposed relationships.

For practitioners, this study highlights the critical importance of aligning HRM strategies with sustainability principles to cultivate employee loyalty and reinforce organizational legitimacy. HR managers should prioritize inclusive and equitable practices that promote autonomy, work–life balance, and continuous development. Organizational leaders should recognize employees as strategic partners in legitimacy-building efforts and invest in systems that empower staff to act as brand ambassadors. Finally, institutions—particularly in the public sector—should leverage their human capital not only for operational effectiveness but also for building trust, transparency, and reputational capital in the broader social environment.**Authors' Contributions**

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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