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Article

How ethical leadership shapes employee voice in tour operators: The mediating role of psychological safety

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behaviours in Saudi Arabian tour operators, focusing on the mediating role of psychological safety. Drawing on social exchange theory and psychological safety theory, the study employs cross-sectional survey data analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that ethical leadership is positively associated with psychological safety and considerate voice. However, its relationship with aggressive voice reveals opposing pathways: a significant positive direct association ($\beta = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant negative indirect association through psychological safety ($\beta = -0.103$, $p = 0.008$). Psychological safety is also positively associated with considerate voice and negatively associated with aggressive voice. These findings are consistent with a pattern of competitive mediation, highlighting the contrasting direct and indirect associations between ethical leadership and aggressive employee expression. Rather than establishing causal relationships, the findings identify psychological safety as a plausible explanatory pathway linking ethical leadership to different forms of employee voice. The study contributes to leadership and organizational behaviour literature by providing evidence from Saudi Arabia's tourism sector and highlighting the importance of fostering psychologically safe environments alongside ethical leadership practices.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Psychological Safety; Considerate Voice; Aggressive Voice; Employee Voice; Tour Operators.

1. Introduction

In knowledge economies, the ability and readiness of workers to articulate ideas, concerns, or solutions is defined as "voice behaviour". These characteristics are increasingly recognized as essential for organizational learning, innovation, and performance- relating to both customer-staff and staff-staff interactions. Since service quality and customer satisfaction in the tourism industry are directly related to frontline employees' interactions, encouraging constructive voice behaviours can lead to positive organizational outcomes. However, it is important to consider the different types of voice behaviours: some are mindful and solution-oriented while others may be aggressive and confrontational, which can be harmful to the harmony of workplaces. Understanding what motivates such different forms of voice behaviours is imperative for any manager who intends to enhance organizational effectiveness.

Leadership plays a vital role in an employee's feelings of empowerment to speak up. Ethical leadership that is fair, open, honest, and caring about wellbeing is one of the most critical factors in managing employee attitudes and behaviour. This kind of considerate leadership also helps to reinforce shared values (between leaders and employees) by creating environments where employees feel respected. Prior research has documented positive links between ethical leadership and employee outcomes, but not its influence on different forms of voice behaviour

in non-Western service sectors like tourism in Saudi Arabia.

One major mechanism that could explain this relationship is psychological safety: the general perception of employees that they can speak their minds without fears of embarrassment, rejection, or retaliation. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to contribute constructive suggestions and less likely to resort to aggressive or confrontational tones. Despite its importance, the mediating role of psychological safety on the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behaviour has not been sufficiently explored in emerging economies, where cultural and institutional contexts may shape the dynamics of leadership and communication in novel ways compared to established economies.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how ethical leadership influences considerate and aggressive voice behaviours, and the role psychological safety plays, among tourism sector employees in Saudi Arabia. This study is particularly relevant because, under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is focusing on tourism as a key pillar of its new economy. Its context highlights the need for effective leadership to ensure employee engagement, ethical conduct, and sustainable organizational performance.

The objectives of this study are, therefore, threefold:

1. To investigate the direct effect of ethical leadership on psychological safety and on both considerate and aggressive voice behaviours.

2. To examine the direct effect of psychological safety on employees' voice behaviours.

3. To test the mediating role of psychological safety on the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behaviours.

By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to literature on leadership and organizational behaviour in several ways. First, it extends research on ethical leadership and voice behaviours into the underexplored tourism sectors of Arab economies. Second, it highlights psychological safety as a critical mechanism for explaining how ethical leaders influence employee communication styles. Finally, it provides practical guidance for managers and policymakers in building ethical, safe, and participative organizational cultures that support constructive employee engagement while reducing destructive voice behaviours.

2. Literature review& hypotheses development

2.1. Ethical leadership and psychological safety

Ethical leadership is defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Leaders who act with integrity, fairness, and concern for subordinates create environments where employees feel respected and valued. Such behaviours also cultivate trust and predictability, which are critical for enabling employees to feel safe to express themselves without fear of embarrassment or retaliation.

Psychological safety, in turn, refers to a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking -such as voicing concerns or suggesting changes- can occur without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Recent empirical work highlights psychological safety as a key mechanism through which ethical leaders can shape employee outcomes. For instance, Liu et al. (2023) found that ethical leadership enhanced employees' psychological safety, which subsequently promoted innovative work behaviour. Similarly, team-level analyses demonstrate that ethical leadership strengthens the psychological safety climate, enabling employees to take interpersonal risks constructively rather than defensively (Lee et al., 2020).

Studies in hospitality and service organizations further confirm this relationship. Systematic reviews show that ethical leaders foster a supportive climate in which psychological safety mediates links between employee attitudes and behaviours, making it particularly relevant in people-intensive industries such as tourism (Paek et al., 2022). Furthermore, research across different organizational contexts suggests that ethical leadership is associated with favourable psychological conditions, including psychological safety and psychological empowerment, which can encourage employees to express their opinions and concerns more openly (Wang et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2018).

Taken together, these findings provide strong theoretical and empirical justification for expecting ethical leadership to promote psychological safety in the workplace.

H1: "ETHL" is hypothesized to have a significant positive and direct influence on "PSYS".

2.2. Ethical leadership and voice behaviours

Voice behaviour refers to employees' discretionary communication of suggestions, ideas, or concerns intended to improve organizational functioning (Kim et al., 2023). Scholars distinguish between *considerate voice* -constructive, cooperative suggestions- and *aggressive voice* -confrontational, emotionally charged communication. Leadership remains one of the most influential contextual factors in shaping whether a voice emerges as constructive or destructive.

Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, integrity, and concern for employees, plays a central role in encouraging constructive communication. By modelling honesty and respect, ethical leaders create climates of trust and openness that lower the perceived risks of speaking up (Walumbwa et al., 2011). A recent study by Javed et al. (2022) empirically validated this relationship across different sectors by confirming that ethical leadership fosters trust, thereby encouraging constructive voices. Other recent work by Zhu et al. (2023) notes that ethical leadership uplifts the spirits of employees, allowing them to offer proposals related to the value of an organization; its importance was revealed in service contexts where customer satisfaction proves to be critical.

Moreover, ethical leadership is linked to promotive voice (employees offering suggestions for betterment and innovation) as well as prohibitive voice (employees giving warnings not to engage in harmful practices). For example, Liang et al. (2012) confirmed that leaders' supportive and ethical conduct boosts promotive voice by reducing fear of backlash. Newman et al. (2017) also report that ethical leadership amplifies voice behaviours by fostering a psychologically safe climate. These findings highlight the robustness of ethical leadership's effect on constructive voice.

The relationship with aggressive voice, however, is more complex. On the one hand, ethical leaders may suppress aggressive or hostile forms of voice by promoting norms of respect and discouraging adversarial communication (Chen & Hou, 2016). Ethical leaders act as role models and use this position to signal that confrontational expression is inconsistent with organizational values. On the other hand, by legitimizing openness and encouraging employees to "speak up," ethical leaders may inadvertently embolden some employees to express their dissatisfaction more forcefully, particularly when frustrations accumulate (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). In fact, recent evidence by Kim et al. (2023) suggests that openness created by authentic or ethical leaders can sometimes enable both constructive and emotionally charged forms of voice, depending on employees' affective states.

Cross-cultural research further complicates the picture. Li and Sun (2022),

for example, observe that in collectivist and high power-distance contexts, such as many Arab countries, ethical leaders' encouragement of openness may yield a dual effect: while considerate voice is enhanced, employees who feel frustrated may also seize the opportunity to voice their opinions aggressively. Thus, it is crucial to test both pathways of ethical leadership's influence on voice in non-Western service settings, such as tourism in an Arabic context.

H2: "ETHL" is hypothesized to have a significant positive and direct influence on "CNSV".

H3: "ETHL" is hypothesized to have a significant positive and direct influence on "AGGV".

2.3. Psychological safety and voice behaviours

Psychological safety refers to individuals' perceptions that they can engage in interpersonal risk-taking, such as expressing concerns, proposing ideas, or acknowledging mistakes, without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or negative interpersonal consequences. Although psychological safety has also been conceptualized as a shared team-level belief, the present study focuses on employees' individual perceptions of psychological safety and their associations with different forms of voice behaviour (Edmondson, 1999), is widely regarded as a critical antecedent of employee voice. When employees perceive a climate of safety, they are more inclined to express concerns, admit mistakes, and propose new ideas constructively, even in situations where doing so may involve challenging authority (Frazier et al., 2017). In contrast, in environments with low psychological safety, individuals often withhold their input due to fear of reprisal, reputational damage, or social exclusion (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Recent studies support the fact that it is indeed psychological safety that fosters positive, constructive, solution-oriented types of voice. Newman et al. (2017), in their systematic review of the psychological safety literature, highlighted the importance of psychological safety in understanding employee attitudes and behaviours across organizational contexts and emphasized the need for conceptual and methodological clarity when examining psychological safety at different levels of analysis. Kim et al. (2023) likewise found that psychological safety reduces employees' reliance on defensive silence and encourages proactive voice, thereby acting as a protective buffer in conditions of dissatisfaction in the workplace.

Similar results can be found in high-stakes and service-oriented sectors. For example, O'Donovan and McAuliffe (2020) argue that psychological safety leads to open reporting of errors in healthcare teams, which has a direct impact on patient outcome as it allows for more constructive communication related to the same topic. Similarly, Hu et al. (2018), in their study of employees working in a state-owned telecommunications organization in China, demonstrated that ethical leadership promotes employee voice behaviour through improved leader–member exchange and associated perceptions of psychological safety and psychological empowerment. These findings are particularly relevant to service-intensive industries, including tourism, where employees' willingness to communicate concerns and propose improvements is important for organizational learning and service quality.

Beyond encouraging constructive voice, psychological safety also plays a key role in shaping the *tone* of voice behaviours. Research indicates that in low-safety environments, employees who nevertheless choose to speak up may resort to aggressive or confrontational forms of voice to make themselves heard (Liang et al., 2012). Where the concern is less, employees in a psychologically safe environment are more likely to use considerate cooperative voice since they believe that their ideas will be taken seriously, meaning they do not need to

express themselves in an exaggerated way or through hostility.

Recent cross-cultural studies further validate the effect of psychological safety on voice behaviours and how it could be dependent on the cultural norms of hierarchy and communication in an organization. For example, Li and Sun (2022) found that, in collectivist societies, psychological safety allows for the use of more constructive voice by reducing concerns related to power.

Taken together, the evidence strongly supports the role psychological safety plays as a central mechanism for enabling constructive voice and discouraging aggressive voice. This dual role makes psychological safety particularly salient in the tourism context, where frontline employees' communication styles directly shape customer perceptions and service outcomes.

H4: "PSYS" is hypothesized to have a significant positive and direct influence on "CNSV".

H5: "PSYS" is hypothesized to have a significant negative and direct influence on "AGGV".

2.4. Mediation of psychological safety

Ethical leadership influences voice behaviours indirectly through the concept of psychological safety. By modelling fairness and integrity, ethical leaders reduce interpersonal risks, thereby encouraging employees to voice their concerns in constructive rather than aggressive ways. Psychological safety has been widely recognized as a mediating mechanism linking leadership styles to employee outcomes (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

Recent evidence further underscores this mediating role. For example, Liu et al. (2023) found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behaviour. Similarly, Hu et al. (2018) provided empirical evidence that psychological safety forms part of the psychological processes linking ethical leadership to employee voice behaviour, highlighting the importance of a supportive interpersonal environment in encouraging employees to speak up. Furthermore, the broader psychological safety literature identifies perceived interpersonal safety as an important condition associated with employees' willingness to express concerns and suggestions in the workplace (Newman et al., 2017; Frazier et al., 2017; Detert & Burris, 2007).

H6: "PSYS" is hypothesized to have a mediating effect on the relationship between "ETHL" and "CNSV".

H7: "PSYS" is hypothesized to have a mediating effect on the relationship between "ETHL" and "AGGV".

Thus, by grounding itself in the existing literature, this study advances the following conceptual model: See **Figure 1**.

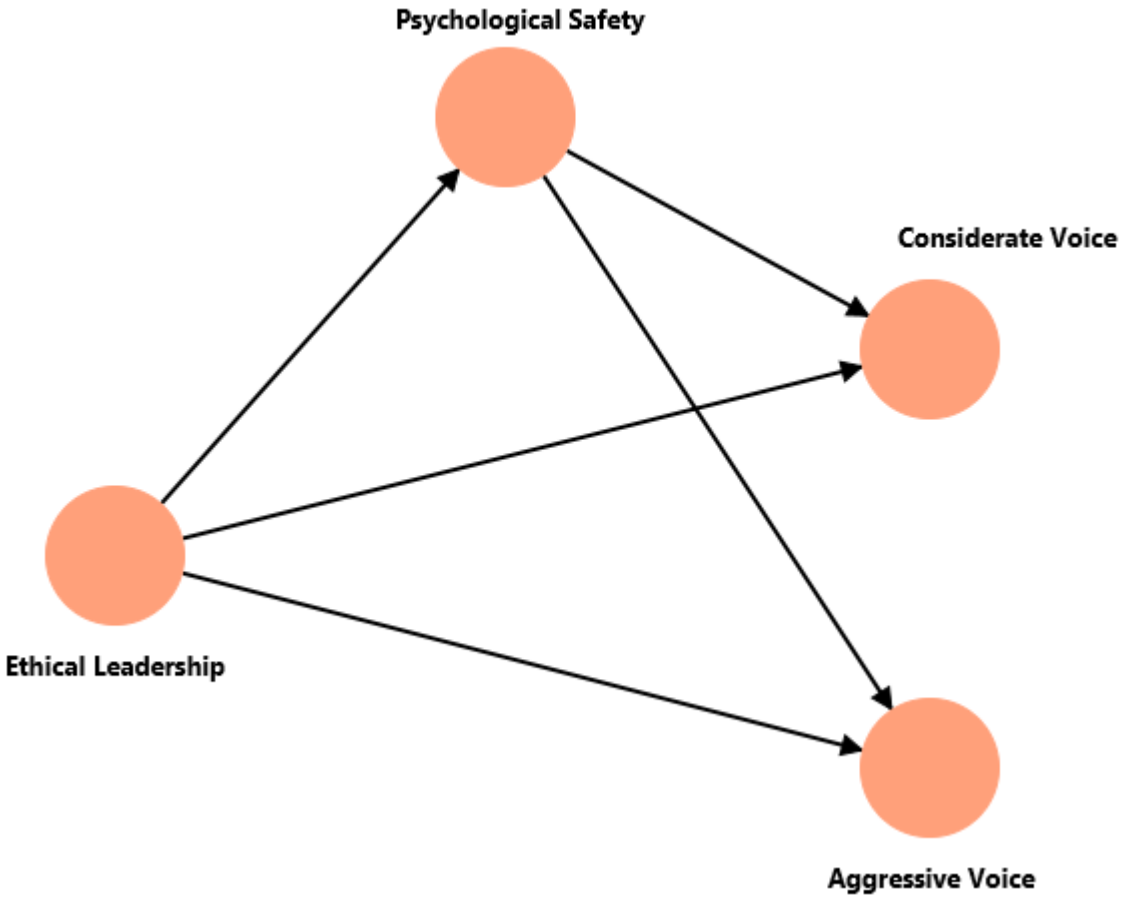

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Measures

The study employed a structured questionnaire comprising 21 items measuring four constructs: ethical leadership (five items), considerate voice (six items), aggressive voice (five items), and psychological safety (five items). All measurement items were drawn or adapted from established scales in the organizational behaviour literature and were evaluated for their conceptual relevance and applicability to employees working in Saudi Arabian tour operators. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale. The complete questionnaire, including the wording of all 21 items, their original sources, response anchors, scoring directions, and reverse-coding information, is provided in Supplementary **Table S1**.

Ethical leadership (ETHL) was measured using five items selected from the ethical leadership measure developed by Kalshoven et al. (2011). The selection was guided by theoretical relevance, content representativeness, and contextual suitability for the tourism sector, with particular attention to leadership behaviours reflecting integrity, delegation of authority, and concern for employees. Examples include "The leader keeps their promises," "The leader delegates authority," and "The leader cares about followers' emotions". The selected items were subsequently evaluated through expert review and pilot testing to assess their clarity, relevance, and suitability for the target population. Given that the study employed a shortened version of the original measure, the instrument was subjected to reliability and convergent validity assessment using the study data.

Considerate voice (CNSV) was measured using six items based on Kim et al. (2023), capturing constructive, cooperative, and solution-oriented communication with supervisors. Examples include "I work with my manager to develop mutually

satisfactory solutions" and "I propose solutions to my manager".

Aggressive voice (AGGV) was assessed using five items based on Kim et al. (2023), reflecting confrontational and antagonistic forms of employee expression. Examples include "I initiate disputes with my manager" and "I exaggerate problems to make them appear worse".

Psychological safety (PSYS) was measured using five items adapted from Potipiroon and Ford (2021). In the present study, psychological safety was conceptualized as an individual-level perception of interpersonal safety, reflecting employees' perceived comfort and freedom to express their thoughts, feelings, and work-related concerns without fear of negative interpersonal consequences. Examples include "In our organization, expressing authentic feelings is encouraged" and "I feel comfortable sharing my genuine feelings about my job". The selected items were intended to capture perceived openness and comfort with authentic expression, which represent relevant aspects of interpersonal safety. The construct was measured and analyzed exclusively at the individual level, without assuming the existence of a shared team-level psychological safety climate.

3.1.1. Instrument translation, expert validation, and pilot testing

To ensure the conceptual relevance, linguistic equivalence, and contextual appropriateness of the measurement instrument, a systematic adaptation and validation process was undertaken before the main data collection. Initially, measurement items were selected from established instruments based on their theoretical relevance to the study constructs and their suitability for the organizational and cultural context of Saudi Arabian tour operators.

The questionnaire underwent expert evaluation involving academics and tourism industry specialists. The reviewers assessed the relevance, clarity, comprehensibility, and contextual suitability of the selected items, with particular attention to their applicability to leadership practices and employee communication behaviours in the tourism sector. Their feedback informed the refinement of the questionnaire while preserving the intended conceptual meaning of the original measures.

A translation and back-translation procedure was also undertaken to ensure linguistic equivalence between the original and translated versions of the instrument. The translated items were compared with their original counterparts, and identified discrepancies were reviewed and resolved to maintain conceptual consistency and minimize potential differences in interpretation.

Subsequently, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with participants drawn from the target population to evaluate item clarity, comprehensibility, and the overall suitability of the survey instrument. Feedback obtained during the pilot stage informed the final refinement of the questionnaire before its administration in the main study.

These procedures were intended to strengthen the content validity and contextual appropriateness of the measurement instrument. The final 21-item questionnaire is presented in Supplementary **Table S1**.

3.2. Description of study population

The target population of this study is employees working at licensed tour operators in Saudi Arabia. While recent official statistics on the exact number of tour operators authorized to bring foreign tourist groups into the Kingdom are not available, the Saudi Minister of Tourism announced during the main dialogue session at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting that the number of licensed tour operators had reached 2,853 by the end of 2024. In the absence of precise employment data, international tourism industry benchmarks were consulted to estimate the workforce size. According to global industry practice,

small-to-medium-sized tour operators typically employ between 10 and 50 staff members, whereas larger operators employ 50 to several hundred employees, depending on organizational scale, geographic reach, service offerings, and strategic partnerships.

For the purpose of sample-size planning, an assumed average of 50 employees per tour operator was used, yielding an estimated workforce of 142,650 employees across 2,853 licensed tour operators in Saudi Arabia. This figure represents an approximate planning assumption rather than an officially established workforce count. Given the absence of comprehensive employee-level statistics, the estimate was used solely as a reference for sample-size calculation and should not be interpreted as an exact representation of the sector's workforce.

3.3. Sample selection method

The study employed a non-probability sampling approach to recruit employees working in licensed tour operators in Saudi Arabia. Given the absence of a comprehensive and accessible employee-level sampling frame, probability-based random selection could not be established. Recruitment focused on eligible employees working in tour operators, with participation being voluntary. Accordingly, the sample should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all employees working in the Saudi Arabian tour operator sector.

To assess the adequacy of the sample size for the intended statistical analysis, Cochran's sample-size formula (Israel, 1992) with finite population correction was used as an initial planning reference, based on an estimated sector workforce of 142,650 employees.

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 P(1-P)}{e^2}$$

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{n_0 - 1}{n}}$$

Where n_0 = sample size for infinite population; n = required sample size; N = population size; P = estimated proportion of the population (commonly 0.5); Z = confidence level at 1.96; and e = margin of error ($\pm$ 5%).

$$n_0 = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}{0.05^2} = 384.16$$

$$n = \frac{384.16}{1 + \frac{384.16 - 1}{142{,}650}} \approx 383.13$$

This calculation yielded a reference sample size of approximately 384 respondents. Given the non-probability sampling approach, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution regarding their statistical representativeness and generalizability to the broader population of tour operator employees in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the achieved sample size was sufficient to exceed the initial sample-size planning reference and was considered in relation to the analytical requirements of the PLS-SEM model.

3.4. Data collection and data analysis techniques

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using a self-administered questionnaire. The instrument was finalized following the measurement selection, translation, expert review, and pilot-testing procedures described in Section 3.1.1. Data were collected over three consecutive months, from January to March 2026. A total of 432 questionnaires were distributed to employees working in various departments of tour operators in Saudi Arabia. Following data screening, 399 complete questionnaires were retained for the

final analysis, representing 92.4% of the distributed questionnaires. The unit of analysis was the individual employee. As the dataset did not include identifiers linking respondents to specific organizations, supervisors, or work teams, it was not possible to establish whether multiple respondents worked under the same leader or belonged to the same team. Consequently, potential within-group dependence could not be formally assessed, and the PLS-SEM analysis was conducted at the individual level without cluster-adjusted estimation. This methodological limitation is acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

The questionnaire was designed to consist of four main sections, covering the three main variables of the study, in addition to demographic data of the respondents. The survey participants were asked to evaluate all items related to the study variables from their point of view on a five-point Likert scale, with an emphasis on the confidentiality of the data they would fill in on the form, and its use only for scientific research purposes, while informing them that they were completely free to withdraw if they wished not to complete the survey, for any reasons pertaining to them. Several data analysis techniques were also employed to obtain accurate results that would facilitate informed decisions regarding the structural relationships between the study variables and the validity of the study hypotheses. For this purpose, Microsoft Excel version 15, SPSS version 29, and SmartPLS version 4.1.1.6 were used.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The outer model

4.1.1. Validation of measurement constructs

The convergent validity level was tested to ensure the degree of agreement and strong correlation between the measures that are supposed to measure the same concept or structure. The results obtained confirmed statistically satisfactory levels of concept validity, as they met all the thresholds recommended by Hair et al., (2017), with values that all exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.50, and most of them were even ideal values, exceeding the value of 0.70. Likewise, composite reliability was tested by calculating the factorial loading weights or internal consistency for each of the items of the measures, and all composite reliability values exceeded the minimum standards proposed by Bryman and Cramer (2012) and Hair et al. (2022), with values that all exceeded 0.70, which confirms the reliability of the measures. Furthermore, calculating the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) evaluates the proportion of variance explained by the constructs relative to measurement error. The results for all variables were higher than the threshold proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), with a borderline value of 0.50, which supports the validity of the calculated convergence of the proposed measurement model. All results are grouped in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Measurement Model Assessment Results

Construct	Items	Convergent Validity		Internal Consistency		
		"λ"	"AVE"	"α"	"rho_c"	"rho_a"
Ethical Leadership "ETHL"	ETHL-1	0.816	0.585	0.821	0.875	0.832
	ETHL-2	0.661				
	ETHL-3	0.822				
	ETHL-4	0.690				
	ETHL-5	0.820				
Considerate Voice "CNSV"	CNSV-1	0.886	0.588	0.858	0.895	0.871
	CNSV-2	0.744				
	CNSV-3	0.827				
	CNSV-4	0.746				
	CNSV-5	0.691				
	CNSV-6	0.686				
Aggressive Voice "AGGV"	AGGV-1	0.961	0.837	0.951	0.962	0.987
	AGGV-2	0.962				
	AGGV-3	0.961				
	AGGV-4	0.954				
	AGGV-5	0.709				
Psychological Safety "PSYS"	PSYS-1	0.802	0.545	0.845	0.772	0.830
	PSYS-2	0.690				
	PSYS-3	0.762				
	PSYS-4	0.717				
	PSYS-5	0.691				

The results presented in **Table 1** demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity across the four constructs. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.821 to 0.951, while rho_A values ranged from 0.830 to 0.987. The composite reliability (rho_C) values were 0.875 for ethical leadership "ETHL", 0.895 for considerate voice "CNSV", 0.962 for aggressive voice "AGGV", and 0.772 for psychological safety "PSYS", all exceeding the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70. These findings support the internal consistency reliability of the measurement constructs.

Regarding convergent validity, the AVE values were 0.585 for "ETHL", 0.588 for "CNSV", 0.837 for "AGGV", and 0.545 for "PSYS", all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50. Although some indicator loadings were below 0.70, these indicators were retained based on their conceptual relevance and the satisfactory overall reliability and convergent validity of their respective constructs. Collectively, the results provide evidence of acceptable internal consistency and convergent validity for all four constructs.

4.1.2. Discriminant validity measurement

To ensure that the statistical measure is not correlated with other measures that are not supposed to be correlated with it -that is, that the instrument measures only the intended concept and not another similar or different concept- the discriminant validity of the study variables was tested. The cross-loading method and the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) were used to determine the discriminatory validity of the variables. The statistical results were consistent with the criteria established by Kock (2020), supporting the distinctiveness of the model construction and confirming that each variable is sufficiently statistically distinct from the others. **Table 2** and **Figure 2** show these

results in detail.

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Results for Discriminant Validity

Construct	ETHL	CNSV	AGGV	PSYS
ETHL	**0.765**			
CNSV	0.698	**0.767**		
AGGV	0.132	0.099	**0.915**	
PSYS	0.611	0.530	-0.025	**0.738**

As presented in **Table 2**, discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, which requires the square root of each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) to exceed its correlations with other constructs. The diagonal values were 0.765 for ethical leadership (ETHL), 0.767 for considerate voice (CNSV), 0.915 for aggressive voice (AGGV), and 0.738 for psychological safety (PSYS). All diagonal values exceeded the corresponding interconstruct correlations, supporting discriminant validity according to the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

All diagonal values exceeded the corresponding interconstruct correlations. Specifically, the highest correlation involving "ETHL" was 0.698 with "CNSV", while the highest correlation involving "PSYS" was 0.611 with "ETHL". These results support the discriminant validity of the four constructs according to the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Furthermore, the HTMT results presented in **Table 3** provide additional support for discriminant validity, as all reported values remain below the recommended threshold of 0.90.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Results using HTMT Criterion

Variables	AGGV	CNSV	ETHL	PSYS
AGGV				
CNSV	0.123			
ETHL	0.152	0.789		
PSYS	0.113	0.529	0.733	

All results reported in **Table 3** confirm acceptable discriminant validity, with all HTMT values remaining below the recommended cut-off point of 0.9 that proposed by Henseler et al. (2015). "AGGV" is clearly distinct from all other constructs, and shows an excellent discriminant validity, as all other values were very low (0.123, 0.152, 0.113). As for "CNSV", it is distinct, although the relationship with "ETHL" is quite high (0.789), and the relationship with "PSYS" is moderate (0.529), but both values are still within acceptable limits. The "ETHL" and "PSYS" are related but still discriminant, the relationship is moderate (0.733), but below threshold and acceptable. As for "PSYS', it shows adequate discriminant validity from other constructs, as all values (0.113–0.733) are below the threshold. Accordingly, the discriminant validity is satisfied for all constructs. "ETHL" and "CNSV" are strongly associated but not redundant, while "AGGV" is the most distinct construct in the model.

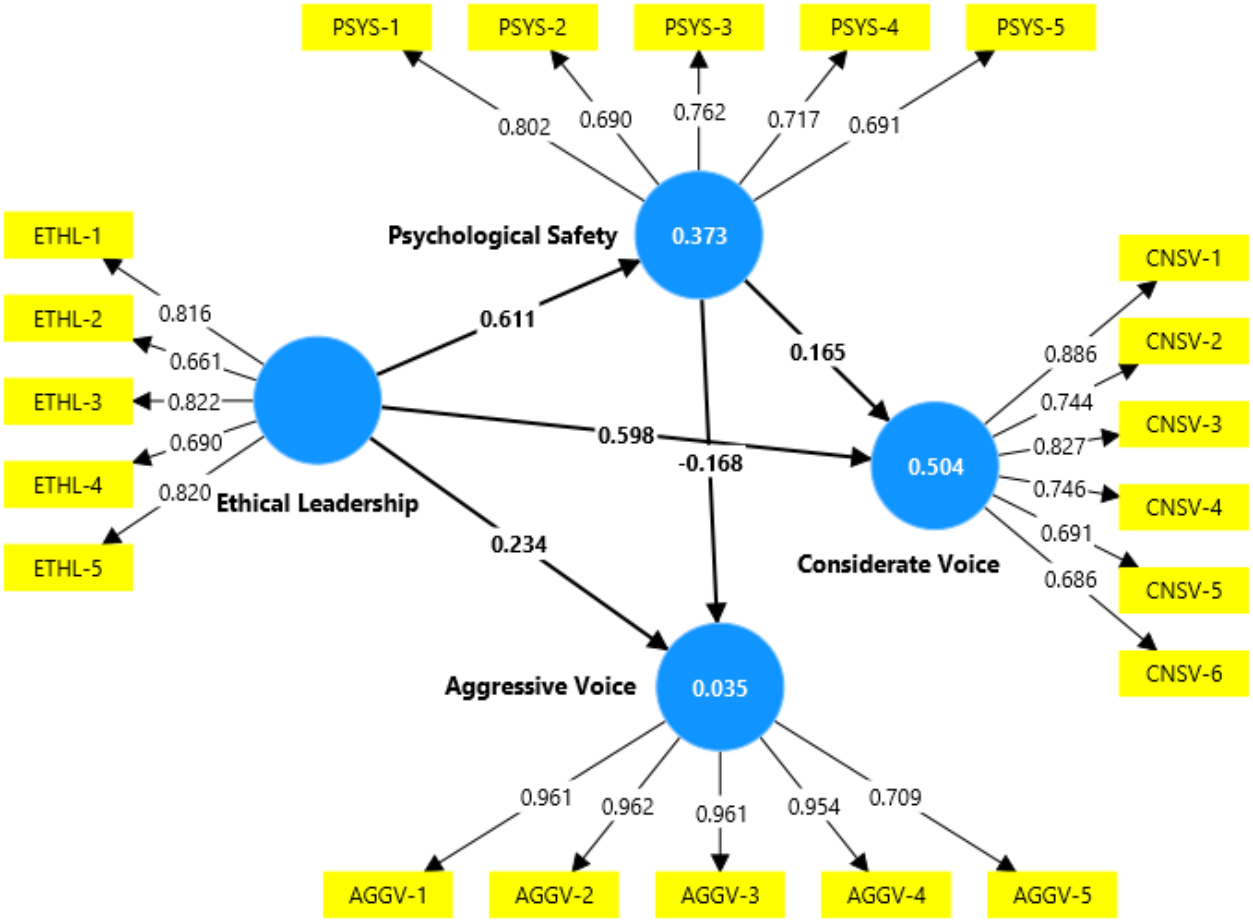

Figure 2. Structural Equation Measurement Model

4.2. The inner model

4.2.1. Explanation power of the model (R^2)

To evaluate the explanation power of the proposed model and to assess the proportion of variance in the dependent variables explained by the independent variables, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was employed. This statistic ranges from 0 to 1, where a value of 1 indicates perfect predictive accuracy, and a value of 0 indicates no explanatory power. As reported in **Table 4**, the R^2 coefficients indicate differences in the variance value explained in the endogenous variables. When interpreted these values against Chin's (1998) cut-off point, the observed values show weak, moderate, and substantial level of explanatory power. Overall, these results indicate that the proposed structural model provides a satisfactory explanation of variation in the endogenous variables.

Table 4. Explanation Power of the Model Results (R^2)

Construct	R^2	Level
CNSV	0.504	High
AGGV	0.035	Low
PSYS	0.373	Moderate

According to results in **Table 4**, the model has strong explanatory power for "CNSV", $R^2 = 0.504$, which means that the independent variables are effective in predicting "CNSV". Additionally, the model is not effective in explaining "GGV", as only 3.5% of the variance in "AGGV" is explained by the predictors. Other unmeasured factors likely influence "AGGV" much more strongly. The

coefficient of determination (R^2) for psychological safety "PSYS" was 0.373 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.372$), indicating that ethical leadership explained approximately 37.3% of the variance in employees' perceived psychological safety. The model demonstrates solid explanatory power for "CNSV" and "PSYS" but struggles to account for "AGGV". Future research may need to include additional predictors (e.g., stress factors and personality traits) to improve the explanation of aggressive voice behaviours.

4.2.2. The effect size of predictors (f^2)

The f^2 statistic was conducted to determine the contribution of each exogenous variable to the explanatory power of its corresponding endogenous variable. Based on Cohen (1988) recommended criteria, the effect size values reported in **Table 5**, range from small to large effect, indicating that differences in the relative influence of the model predictors. These results supplement the R^2 assessment by clarifying the practical importance of individuals relationships within the proposed structural model.

Table 5. Effect Size Assessment Results (f^2)

Construct	CNSV	AGGV	PSYS
ETHL	0.452 (Large)	0.035 (Small)	0.595 (Large)
PSYS	0.034 (Small)	0.02 (Small)	

The results in **Table 5** indicate that "ETHL" has a strong and substantial impact on "CNSV" ($f^2 = 0.452$), which implies that leaders' ethical behaviour is a key driver of employees engaging in constructive voice behaviours. "ETHL" has a weak effect on "AGGV" ($f^2 = 0.035$), which implies ethical leadership does not significantly reduce aggressive voice. Additionally, "ETHL" has a very large effect on "PSYS" ($f^2 = 0.595$), showing that ethical leadership is crucial for fostering a safe climate where employees feel comfortable to speak up. "PSYS" has a minor effect on "CNSV" ($f^2 = 0.034$); while safety matters, considerate voice seems to be driven more strongly by leadership behaviours than by safety alone. Also, "PSYS" has a very small effect on "AGGV" ($f^2 = 0.02$), which suggests that feeling safe does not strongly predict whether employees avoid aggressive expression. Therefore, the explained results show that "ETHL" is the dominant predictor, exerting strong effects on both "CVSV" and "PSYS", while its influence on "AGGV" is minimal. "PSYS" contributes small additional effects, meaning its role is secondary compared to leadership.

4.2.3. Structural model assessment

The structural model was evaluated based on the coefficients of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and the magnitude and statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. The R^2 values indicate the explanatory power of the model for the endogenous constructs, while the f^2 values reflect the relative contribution of individual predictors. Furthermore, bootstrapping was employed to assess the statistical significance of the direct and indirect relationships. Accordingly, the interpretation of the structural model focuses on its explanatory performance and estimated relationships rather than relying on a global goodness-of-fit index. See **Figure 3**.

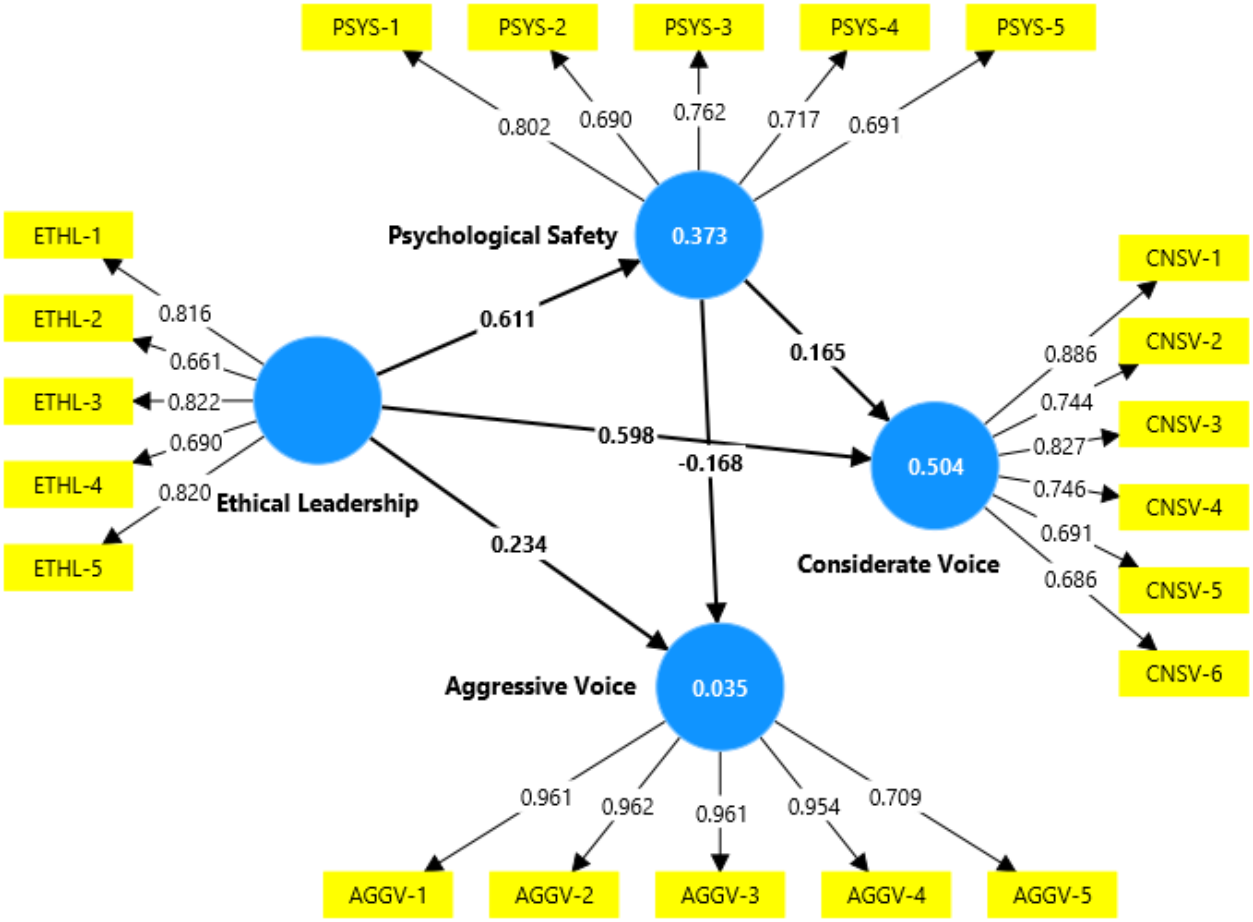

Figure 3. The Final Model

4.3. Assessment of hypotheses "significance of path coefficients"

The significance of the path coefficient was assessed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships specified in the structural model. The results of the hypothesis testing are reported in **Tables 6 and 7**.

Table 6. Structural Model Assessment: Direct Effects

Pathway	Standardized coefficient"β"	σ	Observed t-value	Sig.	Result
H-1: ETHL- > PSYS	0.611	0.044	13.975	< 0.001	√
H-2: ETHL- > CNSV	0.598	0.064	9.299	< 0.001	√
H-3: ETHL- > AGGV	0.234	0.057	4.121	< 0.001	√
H-4: PSYS - > CNSV	0.165	0.066	2.498	0.013	√
H-5: PSYS - > AGGV	-0.168	0.062	2.725	0.006	√

Note: β = standardized path coefficient; t = bootstrap t-statistic; p = two-tailed p-value. Statistical significance was assessed at α = 0.05.

The results of the structural model (**Table 6)** provide strong support for the hypothesized relationships. "ETHL" has a direct significant and positive impact on "PSYS" [$\beta = 0.611$, $t = 13.975$, $p < 0.001$], which indicates that leaders who behave ethically foster a safe environment in which employees feel comfortable speaking up. "ETHL" also demonstrates a strong and positive effect on "CNSV" [$\beta = 0.598$, $t = 9.299$, $p < 0.001$], which shows that employees are more likely to engage in constructive, respectful voice behaviours when guided by ethical leaders. Additionally, "ETHL" shows a moderate direct significant positive effect on "AGGV" [$\beta = 0.234$, $t = 4.121$, $p < 0.001$]. This finding suggests that ethical leaders' encouragement of openness and expression may, in some cases, lead employees to articulate their concerns more assertively or confrontationally.

Moreover, "PSYS" has a weak-to-moderate direct positive impact on "CNSV" [$\beta = 0.165$, $t = 2.498$, $p = 0.013$], which indicates that "PSYS" enhances "CNSV". However, the effect is much smaller compared to direct leadership influence, and feeling safe does promote constructive speaking up, though leadership plays the stronger role. Conversely, "PSYS" exhibits a significant negative effect on "AGGV" [$\beta = -0.168$, $t = 2.725$, $p = 0.006$], supporting H5. This finding indicates that employees who perceive their work environment as psychologically safe are less likely to engage in hostile or confrontational forms of communication. When employees believe that their concerns will be heard and respected without fear of negative consequences, they may be more inclined to express dissatisfaction constructively rather than aggressively. Thus, psychological safety appears to play an important role in discouraging aggressive voice behaviours. Therefore, all direct hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5) are accepted, since the results offer enough evidence to determine that the effect is present. See **Figure 4**.

Table 7. Structural Model –Indirect Path Estimates (PLS-SEM)

Pathway	Standardized coefficient"β "	σ	Observed t-value	Sig.	95% CI	Result
H-6: ETHL - > PSYS- > CNSV	0.101	0.039	2.578	0.010	[0.025, 0.178]	√
H-7: ETHL - > PSYS - > AGGV	-0.103	0.039	2.658	0.008	[−0.180, −0.027]	√

Note: β = standardized indirect-effect coefficient (original sample estimate); t = bootstrap t-statistic; p = two-tailed p-value; CI = 95% percentile bootstrap confidence interval. Statistical significance was assessed at α = 0.05.

The analysis of specific indirect effects (**Table 7**) demonstrates statistically significant indirect associations between ethical leadership and both forms of employee voice through psychological safety. Ethical leadership exhibits a positive indirect association with considerate voice ($\beta = 0.101$, $t = 2.578$, $p = 0.010$, 95% CI [0.025, 0.178]), supporting H6. Conversely, ethical leadership demonstrates a negative indirect association with aggressive voice ($\beta = -0.103$, $t = 2.658$, $p = 0.008$, 95% CI [−0.180, −0.027]), supporting H7. Neither confidence interval includes zero. The negative indirect association with aggressive voice contrasts with the positive direct association ($\beta = 0.234$), indicating a pattern consistent with competitive mediation.

The total association between ethical leadership and aggressive voice remains positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.132$, $p = 0.003$), indicating that the positive direct association outweighs the negative indirect association through psychological safety. The indirect effects were evaluated using 5,000 bootstrap subsamples, percentile-based 95% confidence intervals, a two-tailed significance test, and a fixed random seed. Given the cross-sectional design, these findings represent statistical associations rather than evidence of causal mediation. Consequently, as the mediating relationship was existed and significant, the hypotheses H6 and H7 are accepted

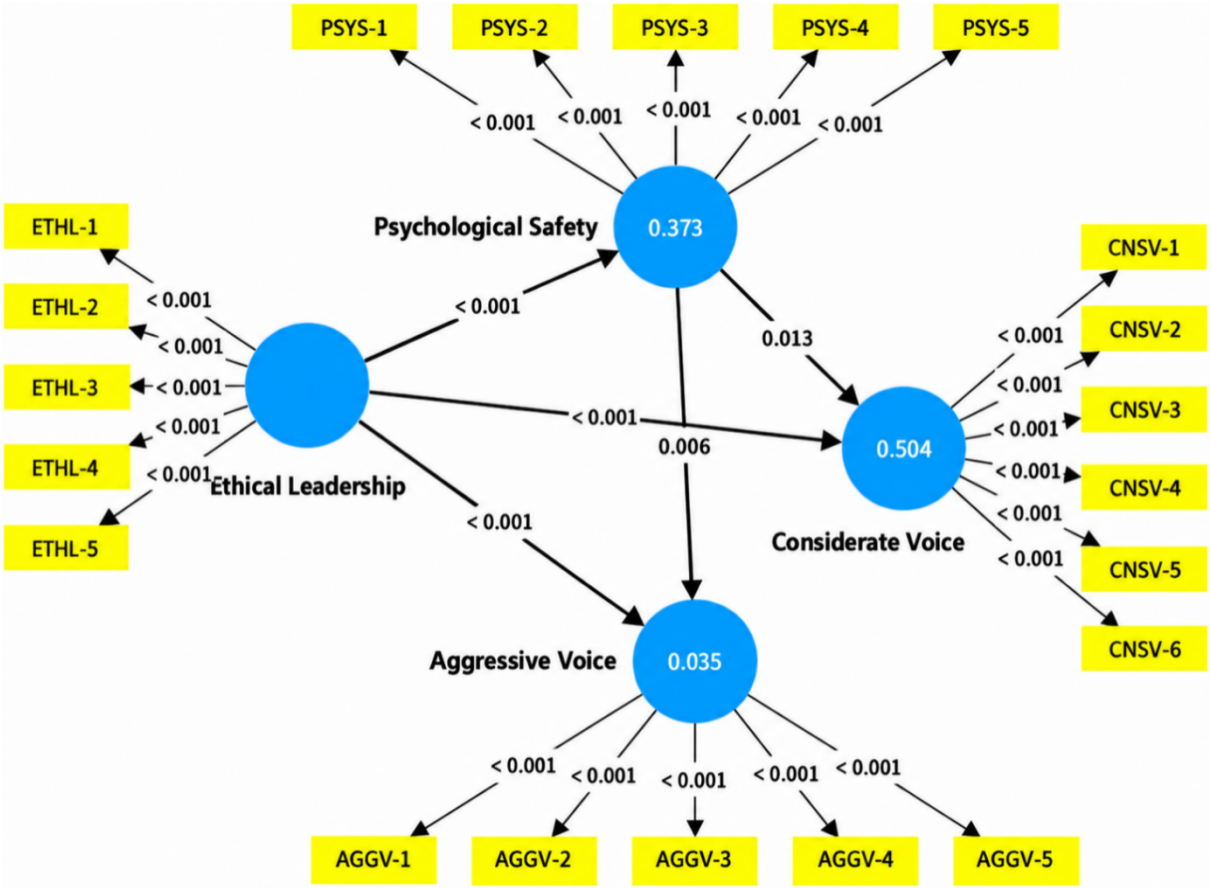

Figure 4. Significance of Path Coefficients

5. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that ethical leadership significantly influences both psychological safety and employees' voice behaviours in the Saudi Arabian tourism sector. First, the findings confirm that ethical leadership fosters psychological safety, which supports the argument, and leaders who demonstrate fairness, integrity, and concern for followers reduce the interpersonal risks that speaking up presents (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2023). This is in line with earlier research findings that shows ethical leadership creates a climate of trust and openness among workers, allowing them to express themselves fully regarding matters that require taking interpersonal risks (Paek et al., 2022).

Second, ethical leadership was found to positively affect considerate voice behaviours, suggesting that employees under ethical leaders are more likely to share constructive, solution-oriented suggestions. This echoes previous studies focusing on service and hospitality contexts, where ethical leaders encourage employees to express ideas that improve organizational functioning (Walumbwa et al., 2011; Javed et al., 2022).

An important finding concerns the contrasting direct and indirect associations between ethical leadership and aggressive voice. Ethical leadership exhibits a significant positive direct association with aggressive voice ($\beta = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with H3. This suggests that ethical leaders' encouragement of openness and employee expression may be associated with a greater willingness among employees to communicate dissatisfaction in confrontational ways. However, ethical leadership also exhibits a significant negative indirect association with aggressive voice through psychological safety ($\beta = -0.103$, $p = 0.008$). The estimated total association between ethical leadership and aggressive voice is positive ($\beta = 0.132$), reflecting the larger positive direct association relative to the negative indirect association through psychological safety. These opposing

pathways are consistent with a pattern of competitive mediation, indicating that psychological safety may represent a plausible explanatory pathway through which ethical leadership is associated with lower levels of aggressive voice, despite its positive direct association.

Theoretically, these findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between the openness associated with ethical leadership and the psychological conditions under which employees express workplace concerns. Although ethical leadership is directly and positively associated with aggressive voice, its negative indirect association through psychological safety suggests that psychologically safe environments may be associated with less confrontational communication. Consequently, ethical leadership should not be interpreted as uniformly reducing aggressive voice. Rather, the findings suggest competing pathways through which ethical leadership relates to employees' communication behaviours. This distinction contributes to a more nuanced understanding of ethical leadership and employee voice in the tourism sector. Nevertheless, given the cross-sectional research design, these findings should be interpreted as statistical associations consistent with the proposed mediation model rather than evidence of established causal mechanisms.

Third, the findings confirm that psychological safety positively predicts considerate voice and negatively predicts aggressive voice. Employees who feel safe tend to give helpful input and do not use hostile words when doing so. This matches past meta-study data (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

Finally, the mediation analysis identified significant indirect associations between ethical leadership and both considerate and aggressive voice through employees' perceived psychological safety. These findings suggest that individual perceptions of psychological safety may represent a plausible explanatory pathway linking ethical leadership to different forms of employee voice. However, the cross-sectional and individual-level nature of the data does not establish causal mediation or demonstrate the existence of a shared psychological safety climate at the team or organizational level (Zhu et al., 2023).

This work adds to leadership and organizational behaviour studies. It takes ethical leadership research into the less-studied field of tourism in Saudi Arabia. There it finds proof from Arab cultural settings, often missing in the main body of leadership studies. This underscores the necessity of examining leadership dynamics beyond Western contexts, particularly where collectivist norms and hierarchical structures could shape voice behaviours in distinct manners. The results also further knit together ethics and voice behaviour by reaffirming psychological safety as a pathway or channel that mediates their relationship. This maintains the social exchange theory, which postulates that treatment of leadership integrity and fairness will elicit similar treatment in return through positive forms of communication from employees. Simultaneously, it advances the psychological safety theory by revealing its dual function: fostering considerate voice yet restraining abrasive voice.

Third, the ambivalent effect of ethical leadership on aggressive voice adds up to the increasing acknowledgment that, indeed, leadership behaviours could have unintended consequences. This calls for more nuanced models in the multiplicity of pathways from leadership to employee outcomes.

The findings offer practical implications for managers of tour operators in Saudi Arabia. Organizations may benefit from promoting ethical leadership practices characterized by fairness, transparency, integrity, and consideration for employees. Managers should also encourage constructive communication by establishing accessible feedback mechanisms, responding respectfully to employee concerns, and fostering an environment in which employees feel psychologically safe to express their opinions. In addition, clear communication norms and appropriate conflict-management practices may help organizations encourage considerate voice

while managing potentially confrontational forms of expression. Although these practices could potentially contribute to service quality, customer satisfaction, innovation, and organizational performance, such outcomes were not directly examined in the present study and should therefore be regarded as possible organizational benefits rather than empirically demonstrated effects.

Tour operators may incorporate ethical leadership principles into managerial development initiatives, emphasizing fairness, transparency, integrity, and respectful employee engagement. Such initiatives could help establish conditions conducive to psychological safety and constructive employee communication. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions requires further empirical evaluation.

Organizations should note that, while ethical leadership encourages the speaking up of employees, it may unintentionally permit the more confrontational expression of voice. Managers should implement communication norms and conflict resolution mechanisms to supplement ethical leadership by channelling openness into constructive dialogue.

On a very practical note, tourism organizations may develop structured channels, inclusive of a suggestion system, team meetings, or even an anonymous reporting mechanism through which employees are enabled to share concerns in a safe and solution-oriented manner. At the same time, managers should reinforce positive examples of considerate voice and discourage hostile or exaggerated communication. By doing so, they can maximize the benefits of ethical leadership while minimizing unintended negative outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between ethical leadership, psychological safety, and employee voice behaviours among employees of tour operators in Saudi Arabia. Drawing on social exchange theory and psychological safety theory, the findings indicate that ethical leadership is positively associated with psychological safety and considerate voice. Importantly, its relationship with aggressive voice involves opposing pathways: a significant positive direct association ($\beta = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant negative indirect association through psychological safety ($\beta = -0.103$, $p = 0.008$). These findings are consistent with a pattern of competitive mediation and highlight the importance of distinguishing between direct and indirect associations rather than interpreting ethical leadership as uniformly reducing aggressive voice.

The study contributes to leadership and organizational behaviour literature by extending research on ethical leadership and employee voice to the Saudi Arabian tourism context. In particular, it identifies psychological safety as a plausible explanatory pathway through which ethical leadership is indirectly associated with lower aggressive voice, despite its positive direct association. This distinction offers a more nuanced understanding of the potentially competing pathways linking ethical leadership to employee communication behaviours. Nevertheless, given the cross-sectional research design, these findings should be interpreted as statistical associations rather than evidence of established causal mechanisms.

For tourism organizations in Saudi Arabia, the findings highlight the practical relevance of ethical leadership and psychologically safe communication environments. Managers may consider strengthening fairness, transparency, and employee participation while establishing clear communication norms and appropriate conflict-management practices. Leadership development and structured feedback mechanisms could encourage constructive employee voice and help organizations manage confrontational communication. These practices may also have potential implications for service quality, customer satisfaction, innovation, and organizational performance; however, these outcomes were not directly measured in this study and warrant further empirical investigation.

However, this study suffers from some limitations. First, because cross-sectional studies are limited, it cannot speak to issues of causality. Thus, an appeal for longitudinal and experimental designs in future studies will help capture the dynamism of relationships across time. Second, since data was based on self-reports and common method bias might be a problem, multi-source or objective measures would most likely be welcomed. Third, as this study is only based on the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia, its generalizability is limited. The above relationships should be tested by future research in different industries and cultural contexts. Also, other mediating (e.g., trust, empowerment) and moderating (cultural values, organizational justice) variables should also be considered.

Additional methodological limitations concern the sampling approach and potential dependence among observations. The use of non-probability sampling limits the statistical representativeness of the sample and warrants caution when generalizing the findings to the broader population of tour operator employees in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, because organizational, supervisory, and team identifiers were not available, potential clustering among respondents could not be assessed. If multiple respondents worked under the same leader or within the same team, their responses may have been correlated, potentially affecting the precision of the estimated relationships and associated statistical inferences. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted at the individual level, without assuming that psychological safety represents a shared team climate. Future research should employ more systematic sampling procedures, collect organizational and team identifiers, and consider cluster-adjusted or multilevel analytical approaches where appropriate.

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