



## Ethical Leadership and Employee Turnover Intention in the Private Education Sector: The Mediating Role of Organizational Identification

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### Abstract:

This study investigates the influence of ethical leadership on employee turnover intention, with a specific emphasis on the mediating role of organizational identification. Ethical leadership has become an essential facet of effective management, particularly in sectors characterized by high employee mobility, such as private education. Drawing on social identity theory and employing a quantitative research design, the study surveyed 200 teachers and support staff employed in private schools across the Sindh region, specifically in the cities of Sukkur and Khairpur, Pakistan. Data were gathered using structured questionnaires and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through SmartPLS. The analysis reveals a statistically significant and negative relationship between ethical leadership and employee turnover intention, indicating that employees who perceive their leaders as ethical are less inclined to leave their organizations. A positive relationship was also established between ethical leadership and organizational identification, suggesting that ethical leadership fosters a stronger sense of belonging and identification among employees. However, the hypothesized mediating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between ethical leadership and turnover intention was not statistically supported. These findings provide valuable insights into leadership dynamics in the educational sector and emphasize the importance of ethical leadership in reducing turnover rates. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations for school administrators and policymakers, along with suggestions for future research to explore additional mediating or moderating variables.

**Keywords:** Ethical Leadership, Turnover Intention, Organizational Identification, Private Schools, Social Identity Theory, Pakistan

### Introduction

Leadership is a critical determinant of employee behavior and organizational success. Over the past few decades, ethical leadership has emerged as a significant research area, reflecting growing concerns about ethics and integrity in organizational settings. Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, communication, reinforcement, and decision-making grounded in fairness and integrity (Brown et al., 2005). The increasing interest in ethical leadership stems from its potential to cultivate trust, commitment, and ethical behavior among employees. Particularly in sectors like education, where employees are role models for students and communities, the role of ethical leadership becomes indispensable. Employee turnover is a persistent challenge in the private education sector of Pakistan. High rates of employee turnover disrupt school operations, affect the continuity of instruction, and incur significant financial costs in terms of recruitment and

training. Despite its significance, limited empirical research has examined how ethical leadership affects turnover intentions in this sector. Moreover, organizational identification the degree to which employees define themselves in terms of their organizational membership has not been adequately explored as a psychological mechanism that might explain how ethical leadership influences turnover intentions. Talented individuals preparing to leave, particularly in today's intensely competitive and dynamic workplace, pose a threat to an organization's efficacy. Consequently, to put the proper remedial measures in place, managers need to recognize the early signs of employee leaving trends. To fully understand the motive behind turnover, employee approaches and supervision behaviors need to be considered as antecedents (Suifan et al., 2020; DeConinck, 2014). The literature has spoken sufficiently about turnover intention and certain leadership attitudes, even though observed studies on the affiliation of ethical leadership with turnover intention have not been examined thoroughly. Organizational identification has not received much attention because of ethical leadership. People may deliberately classify themselves with various social classes or groupings, such as family, gender, faith, recreational clubs, and communal societies, to maintain a confident public identity (Sani, 2012). Through their demonstration of the use of group identification in the context of organizations, Ashforth and Mael popularized the term "organizational identification" in 1989. We take up their idea and define organizational identification as a sense of self-assignment in an educational context. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the direct effects of ethical leadership on turnover intention and organizational identification, as well as the mediating role of organizational identification. Drawing on social identity theory, we posit that ethical leadership enhances organizational identification, which in turn reduces turnover intention. Understanding these dynamics is vital for developing leadership strategies that promote employee retention and organizational stability in private schools.

### **Research Questions**

The research aims to find answers to the following research questions.

- Is there any impact of ethical leadership on employee turnover intention?
- Is there any impact of ethical leadership on organizational identification?
- Is there any impact of organizational identification on employee turnover intention?
- Does organizational identification mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee turnover intention?

### **Study Objectives**

The basic objective of this research is to evaluate the effect of ethical leadership on employees' turnover intention and the mediating effect of organizational identification.

1. To examine the impact of ethical leadership on organizational identification.
2. To examine the impact of ethical leadership on employee turnover intention.
3. To examine the impact of organizational identification on employee turnover intention.
4. To examine whether organizational identification mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee turnover intention.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Ethical Leadership**

Ethical leadership is a multidimensional construct encompassing honesty, fairness, accountability, and concern for others. Mihelc et al. (2010) define ethical leadership as both a moral person and a moral manager. As moral persons, ethical leaders exhibit virtues such as integrity, humility, and

empathy. As moral managers, they promote ethical standards through clear communication, fair policies, and consistent behavior. Empirical studies have shown that ethical leadership enhances employee trust (Groves et al., 2011), job satisfaction (Benevene et al., 2018), and organizational commitment (Mayer et al., 2012). In educational institutions, ethical leadership is crucial for creating a positive school climate and modeling the values that students and teachers are expected to uphold. Furthermore, moral influence plays a role in ethical leadership since leaders proactively promote moral behavior in their subordinates. Groves et al. (2011) stress the significance of a leader's impact on the moral choices and actions of their followers. To promote an ethical culture within the company, ethical leaders employ a variety of tactics, including communicating ethical standards and praising ethical behavior. Beyond personal characteristics and actions, ethical leadership also considers the larger organizational environment. According to Schaubroeck et al. (2012), moral leaders create and maintain moral norms inside the workplace culture in addition to upholding moral standards themselves. This organizational aspect entails setting up procedures and frameworks that encourage moral conduct and decision-making at every level of the hierarchy. As role models for their subordinates, leaders in an organization set the standard for moral behaviour (Brown et al., 2014). Leaders establish a moral compass for their team members by acting with honesty, integrity, and fairness frequently. In decision-making processes, when leaders must navigate difficult choices that affect stakeholders, this ethical guidance is especially important. A high-trust organizational culture is facilitated by ethical leadership (Ershaghi, 2005). Employees are more inclined to trust organizational procedures, rules, and one another when they believe that their leaders are moral and ethical. Building trust is the cornerstone of productive cooperation and teamwork, which are critical components in accomplishing organizational objectives. Furthermore, moral leadership increases engagement and commitment from staff members (Godbless, 2021). Employees' attitudes about organizational values may change when they perceive their leaders to be sincere about moral behavior and social responsibility. Increased job satisfaction and lower turnover are the results of this alignment, which creates a feeling of community and shared purpose.

### **Employee Turnover Intention**

Turnover intention is a precursor to actual turnover and refers to an employee's conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Factors influencing turnover intention include job dissatisfaction, lack of career growth, poor leadership, organizational politics, and stress (Belete, 2018). In the education sector, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, inadequate salaries, lack of job security, and limited professional development opportunities further exacerbate turnover intentions. Studies have identified leadership style as a significant predictor of turnover intention, with ethical leadership emerging as a protective factor (Shafique et al., 2018). Employees may consider quitting if they are unhappy with aspects of their jobs, including pay, responsibilities, or opportunities for professional development (Scott et al., 2016). Furthermore, a negative relationship is observed between turnover intention and organizational commitment, which measures employees' attachment to their company (Jano et al., 2019). Turnover intention is greatly impacted by management and leadership styles (Sulamuthu et al., 2018). For instance, a lack of moral leadership can lower job satisfaction and trust, which increases the likelihood of turnover. Furthermore, the culture of the company and the caliber of relationships among coworkers affect workers' loyalty and, in turn, their propensity to quit (Abd-El-Salam, 2023).

## **Organizational Identification**

Organizational identification is defined as the psychological attachment of employees to their organization, where individuals perceive a sense of oneness with their workplace (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that people derive a part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, including organizations. High organizational identification has been linked to favorable outcomes such as enhanced job performance, increased organizational citizenship behavior, and reduced turnover intention (Pham et al., 2020). Leaders play a crucial role in fostering organizational identification by embodying organizational values and creating an inclusive and supportive work environment. It is commonly believed that workers develop a psychological connection with their place of employment. Several studies have offered thorough explanations of this idea. Mael et al. (1989) stated that “the sense of unity or belongingness to an organization, where the person identifies themselves in terms of the institution, they are a part of,” constitutes organizational identification. They develop social identities through their contacts with others and their communication skills, which help with group evaluation and the creation of a sense of belonging (Ashforth et al., 2008). This sense of unity may help people identify with corporate goals, which inspires them to improve both their own and the company's performance (Qi et al., 2014). Individuals who are connected to their organization could call it their organizational identity. Positive outcomes for the organization and its people can result from strong organizational identification. Organizational identification also motivates individuals to exert additional effort to accomplish the goals of the business. These benefits have been linked to higher job satisfaction, commitment, motivation, performance, and decreased intentions to leave the company (Van Dick et al., 2018). Previous studies also discussed how employees' professional outcomes are historically influenced by their company identity (Brammer et al., 2015). These claims, however, may not be accurate. Although these claims may be untrue or oversimplified, the company's efforts to improve workplace culture and employee care demonstrate to its employees that they are being valued and taken care of by their employer, which is a crucial component of corporate identity. We believe that providing workers with a sense of meaning in their work and a connection to the organization's principles will inspire them to take part in initiatives that advance the establishment. According to a study, employees have more opportunities to interact with their employers and coworkers when they work in a good environment (Ebede et al., 2020).

## **Hypothesis Development**

### **Employee Turnover Intention and Ethical Leadership**

Leaders who model and uphold moral principles and behavior are seen to be exhibiting ethical leadership in schools. According to recent research, ethical leadership has a beneficial effect on employees' intentions to leave educational institutions (Wang et al., 2018). According to Shafique et al. (2018), team members exhibit favorable attitudes and behaviors about their work when leaders model ethical leadership conduct, which reduces the likelihood that they will resign and join another company. Promoting positive employee behaviors and reducing and rerouting unfavorable attitudes and behaviors, such as the desire to drop out of school, requires ethical leadership (Lin et al., 2017). According to Beneven et al. (2018), ethical leadership has a beneficial impact on job satisfaction, which in turn reduces the intention of employee turnover. The decision to stay with a firm relates to ethical leadership. Employee work satisfaction and attrition are positively correlated when school leaders exhibit moral behavior and ideals (Li et al., 2021). To gain a deeper understanding of this tactic, consider the self-concept theory, which posits that workers motivated by their leaders' strong ethical standards are less likely to be interested in leaving the company (Lin et al., 2017). Instead, employees are far more likely to consider quitting

their job and seeking another one if they believe their supervisor is dishonest, haughty, and morally bankrupt (Brown et al., 2010). As a result, leaders must constantly reinforce attitudes toward moral leadership.

**H1:** Ethical Leadership and turnover intention of employees are negatively correlated.

### **Ethical Leadership and Organizational Identification of Employees**

The impact of identity on employees' attitudes and interactions with coworkers and other group members has drawn more attention from academics in recent years. (Gu et al., 2015). Association is the trait of a person's character that arises directly from their affiliation with a group or organization. Employees who match their values and ambitions with the mission and goals of the company adjust their self-perceptions and beliefs to reflect these changes (Javed, 2020). The social identity hypothesis suggests that people are naturally motivated to work toward the welfare of the group when they have a sense of unity or belonging to a specific societal class, such as an entity or a community. (Ding et al., 2017). The social identity theory of management's proponent, Hogg (2001), asserts that "the essence of leadership is to create an agenda, define identity, and motivate individuals to achieve collective goals." Moral leaders who are gregarious, assertive, and creative will presumably help their team members build stronger relationships with their employers and colleagues (Walumbwa et al., 2008). The field of literary association is very expansive (Berg, 2004). This study shows that people who identify more with their organizations are more productive and beneficial to them. One must carefully handle their followers with justice, fairness, and honesty in order to lead ethically. Respect and consideration for their opinions are vital (Mayer et al., 2012). By doing this, a follower's confidence and sense of importance can grow. This is a result of the good behavior and higher moral standards upheld by these leaders. It has been proposed, considering the discussion above, that moral leadership will strengthen employees' bonds with the educational system. Accordingly, the study postulates a favorable correlation between corporate identity and ethical leadership.

**H2:** Ethical leadership is positively correlated with organizational identification.

### **Organizational Identification and Employee Turnover Intention**

There is a significant impact of organizational identification on people's views about their jobs and coworkers in the context of social identity formation. (Abbate et al., 2013). Another advantage of organizational identification is that it influences people to work harder for the group and the achievement of the organization's goals (Brown, 2017). Furthermore, a previous study indicates that an employee's job outcomes are influenced by their historical corporate identification (Brammer et al., 2014). Since it costs them money, turnover is a significant issue for many firms, particularly in roles where employees are given the opportunity for training and higher education (Kim, 2017). Several studies have indicated that employee turnover intention is influenced by organizational identification. (Javed, 2020). Employee views of themselves and the norms, values, and objectives of the organizations are regarded as somewhat aligned. Given that organizational identity is an emotional compact and a strong sense of respect for society, workers who have a greater organizational identity ought to have lower turnover rates. It is crucial to stress that identification includes more than just employees' opinions about their employers, even though the connection between identity and worker turnover has previously been discussed. Considering that it strengthens workers' feelings of self (Javed et al., 2020; Van Dick et al., 2004). The intention to resign is harmed by organizational identity. Employees are more likely to embrace company values when they coincide with their own. They will try to boost their effectiveness and prosperity. It is

reasonable to presume that they do not want to stop. Agkunduz et al. (2017) suggest that if a company's values conflict with an individual's, it may be beneficial to explore alternative work opportunities. Identification is thought to be a crucial component of employee retention and the firm's long-term performance.

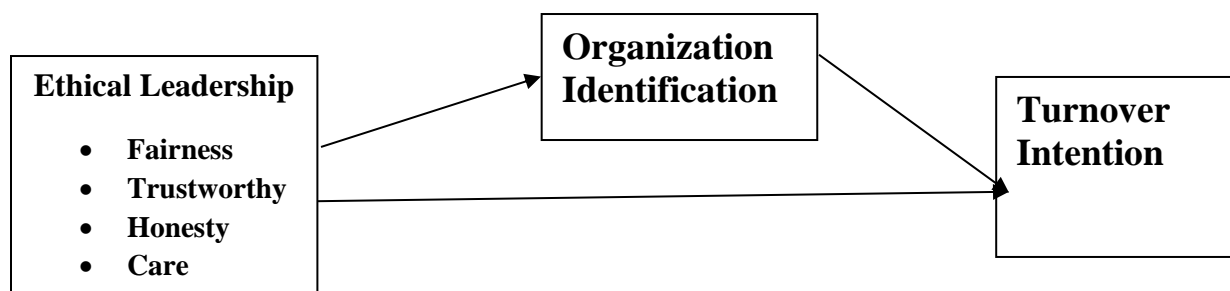
**H3:** Organization identification and Employee turnover intention are negatively correlated.

### **The mediating role of organization identification between EL and TI**

According to Fallatah et al. (2017), an individual's self-concept is closely tied to an organization, so the stronger their connection with it, the more likely they are to want to remain there. When people leave a company that is often doing what they want to accomplish, they will lose their sense of self (Edwards et al., 2009). Additionally, it suggests that a sense of corporate identity encourages workers to support the objectives of the business and discourages them from quitting school. The leadership style of managers influences Employee turnover intentions, according to a comprehensive empirical study conducted in several Western and Eastern countries. This may operate as a mediating factor or directly affect the relationship between turnover intentions and ethical leadership. American academics have demonstrated a direct, harmful, and unintended association between organizational identity and turnover intention. (DeConinck, 2015). The organization facet that garnered consideration is the moderating influence of organizational identity between moral leadership and other worker job outcomes, like the correlation between moral workplace culture and workers' intentions to leave the organization (Walumbwa et al., 2011). The relationship between ethical leadership and intention to leave the company was mediated by employees' organizational identification (Javed et al., 2020; DeConinck, 2014). Since turnover intention is a dependent variable and ethical leadership is an independent variable, it is expected that organizational identity will mediate between the two in this study.

**H4:** Organization identification acts as a mediating factor between ethical leadership and turnover intention.

### **Research Model**



**Figure 1: Research Model**

### **Method**

#### **Research Design and Sample**

This research adopted a cross-sectional quantitative design to explore the relationships among ethical leadership, organizational identification, and turnover intention. The target population included teachers and support staff working in private schools located in Khairpur and Sukkur,

Pakistan. A simple random sampling technique was used to ensure the generalizability of findings. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed both physically and online, yielding 200 valid responses.

### Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire comprised three validated scales. Ethical leadership was measured using 10 items developed by Brown et al. (2005). Organizational identification was assessed through a 5-item scale by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Turnover intention was measured using 3 items from Konovsky and Cropanzano (1991). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability and validity of these scales were confirmed in prior studies and revalidated for the current sample.

### Data Analysis Strategy

The data were analyzed using SmartPLS software. The analysis consisted of two stages: (1)

Construct	Items	Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
Ethical Leadership	EL1	0.640	0.895	0.914	0.515
	EL2	0.717			
	EL3	0.765			
	EL4	0.631			
	EL5	0.734			
	EL6	0.674			
	EL7	0.773			
	EL8	0.723			
	EL9	0.751			
	EL10	0.755			
Organizational Identification	OI1	0.855	0.868	0.905	0.655
	OI2	0.831			
	OI3	0.740			
	OI4	0.772			
	OI5	0.843			
Turnover Intention	TI1	0.761	0.767	0.865	0.683
	TI2	0.911			
	TI3	0.799			

measurement model evaluation to assess reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity; and (2) structural model assessment using bootstrapping to test hypotheses. Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to evaluate internal consistency and convergent validity. Discriminant validity was tested using the HTMT criterion.

## Results

### Measurement Model Evaluation

The constructs demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7 for all variables. Composite reliability values ranged between 0.865 and 0.914, indicating high internal consistency. AVE values exceeded the threshold of 0.5, confirming convergent validity. HTMT ratios were below 0.85 for all variable pairs, establishing discriminant validity.

**Table 1 Reliability and Validity**

The discriminant validity of the data was assessed through the HTMT ratio. The outcomes specify that all values met the threshold of 0.85 as per the suggestions of (Kline, R.B., 2023).

Table 2 Discriminant Validity			
Variables	EP	OLC	TL
EL	0.718	0.696	-0.532
OI	0.696	0.810	0.696
TI	-0.532	-0.430	0.826

## Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

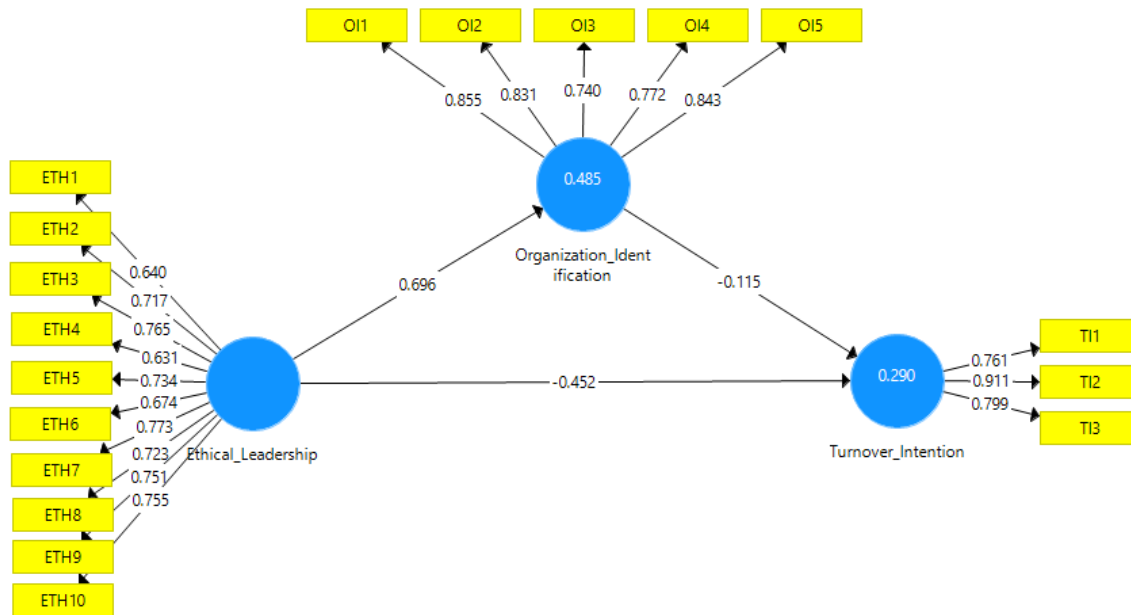


Figure 2 Measurement Model

Table 3 Hypothesis Testing				
Structural Paths	$\beta$ Values	T statistics	P values	Decision
H1: EL $\rightarrow$ TI	-0.452	5.071	0.000	Supported
H2: EL $\rightarrow$ OI	0.696	14.957	0.000	Supported
H3: OI $\rightarrow$ TI	-0.115	1.228	0.219	Supported

The fourth hypothesis of the study was to assess the mediating effect of organization identification in the relationship between ethical leadership and turnover intention. The results show that there is an indirect, insignificant impact of ethical leadership on turnover intention through organization identification ( $B = -0.080$ ,  $t = 1.196$ ,  $p = 0.232$ ). Therefore, H4 was not supported.

Table 4 Mediating effect					
Hypothesis	$\beta$ Indirect Effect	T statistics	P values	Confidence Interval (5-95%)	Decision
H4: EL $\rightarrow$ OI $\rightarrow$ TI	-0.080	1.196	0.232	(-0.210; 0.044)	Not Supported

The results from the structural model revealed the following: - H1: Ethical leadership has a significant negative effect on turnover intention ( $B = -0.452$ ,  $t = 5.071$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Supported. - H2: Ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on organizational identification ( $B = 0.696$ ,  $t = 14.957$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Supported. - H3: Organizational identification has a negative but statistically insignificant effect on turnover intention ( $B = -0.115$ ,  $t = 1.228$ ,  $p = .219$ ). Not supported. - H4:



The mediating role of organizational identification between ethical leadership and turnover intention was not supported ( $B = -0.080$ ,  $t = 1.196$ ,  $p = .232$ ). The four hypotheses were tested through statistical tests using Smart PLS software. The outcomes show that there is a significant and negative effect of ethical management on worker turnover intention ( $B=-0.452$ ,  $t=5.071$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), there is a significant and positive impact of ethical leadership on organization identification ( $B=0.696$ ,  $t=14.957$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) and an insignificant impact of organization identification on employees' turnover intention ( $B=-0.115$ ,  $t=1.228$ ,  $p=0.219$ ). Subsequently, there is no mediating effect of organization identification in the association between ethical leadership and employee turnover intention ( $B=-0.080$ ,  $t=1.196$ ,  $p=0.232$ ). Hence, hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 were supported, and H4 were not supported.

## **Discussion**

The findings support the hypothesis that ethical leadership significantly reduces employee turnover intention. This aligns with previous studies indicating that ethical leaders build trust and satisfaction, which in turn decrease the desire to leave (Majeed et al., 2018). Furthermore, the positive relationship between ethical leadership and organizational identification reaffirms the importance of leader behavior in shaping employee attitudes. However, contrary to expectations, organizational identification did not mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and turnover intention. This might be due to contextual factors, such as cultural norms or the specific challenges of the private education sector in Pakistan.

## **Practical implications**

School administrators should invest in leadership development programs that emphasize ethical conduct. Ethical leadership not only contributes to employee well-being but also improves organizational commitment and stability. While organizational identification is important, it may not fully explain the effects of leadership on turnover intention, suggesting that future studies should examine alternative mediators such as job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, or psychological safety.

## **Limitations and Future Direction**

Although the study has great importance, there are still some limitations.

Firstly, this study was limited to the private schools of Sukkur and Khairpur and generalizing the results in other contexts/sectors can be risky (Suifan, 2020). Hence, future research in manufacturing, healthcare, banking sectors, and other contexts is recommended so that the results can be generalized (Majeed, 2018). Secondly, the nature of the data collection was cross-sectional. Therefore, conducting a longitudinal study in the future is recommended to support more substantial implications, as cross-sectional data limit the capability of attaining causal implications (Lin et al., 2017). Lastly, this study was limited to ethical leadership, and future research on other styles like transformational leadership, transactional leadership, charismatic leadership, and spiritual leadership are recommended for reducing the turnover intention of employees.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the literature by examining the role of ethical leadership in reducing turnover intention and promoting organizational identification in the private education sector of Pakistan. The results confirm the beneficial effects of ethical leadership and highlight its relevance in retaining employees. Although organizational identification did not mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and turnover intention, it remains a valuable construct for understanding employee attachment to the organization. Policymakers and educational leaders are

encouraged to promote ethical leadership as a strategy to improve employee retention and organizational performance.

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