Perceived Organizational Support vs. Ethical Leadership: Which Matters More for Employee Commitment in Private Universities?

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Abstract. Private universities often face challenges in sustaining employee commitment due to limited resources and growing competition among educational institutions. This study aims to ` and compare the influence of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Ethical Leadership on Organizational Commitment among permanent employees, and to assess the moderating role of POS in the relationship between Ethical Leadership and Organizational Commitment. Data were collected from 74 permanent employees of Widya Gama University Malang and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

The findings reveal that Perceived Organizational Support significantly influences Organizational Commitment, while Ethical Leadership has no significant effect. Furthermore, the moderating effect of POS on the relationship between Ethical Leadership and Organizational Commitment was not statistically significant. These results indicate that, within the context of private higher education institutions, employees' commitment is more strongly shaped by tangible organizational support systems than by individual ethical leadership traits.

Keywords: Perceived organizational support, ethical leadership, organizational commitment, private university employees, PLS-SEM, Widyagama University

Introduction

In today's era of intense global competition, private universities are under increasing pressure to improve institutional effectiveness and long-term sustainability. A key factor in achieving these strategic goals lies in maintaining a high level of employee commitment. Employee commitmen treflecting loyalty, emotional attachment, and a sense of responsibility toward the institution is essential for ensuring stability and productivity among academic and administrative staff, who are central to higher education operations (Chakhvashvili & Maisuradze, 2022; Rudi et al., 2024).

Among the many drivers of commitment, ethical leadership and perceived organizational support (POS) have received increasing attention. Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, integrity, and transparency, creates a workplace climate built on trust and moral responsibility. Such leadership behavior not only encourages employees to align with institutional values but also strengthens affective bonds, thereby promoting higher levels of commitment (Olarewaju Adeoye, 2021; Serang et al., 2024). According to Brown & Treviño (2006), ethical leadership fosters a culture where ethical decision-making is promoted, leading to greater trust in leadership and improved employee morale. Moreover, De Hoogh & Den Hartog (2008) argue that ethical leadership is positively related to employees' organizational citizenship behavior, as ethical leaders provide a sense of fairness and respect, which enhances employee commitment. However, previous studies also show mixed results, with some indicating that ethical leadership does not always translate into stronger commitment in all contexts

(Al-Mualm, 2023; Brown et al., 2005; C. F. Meyer, 2009), highlighting the need for more targeted research in private universities.

Perceived organizational support (POS) employees' belief that the organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being has been consistently linked to improved motivation, job satisfaction, and loyalty (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al., 2017). POS fosters a reciprocal relationship where employees feel obligated to contribute positively to institutional goals. In the context of higher education, particularly private universities facing leadership transitions and policy shifts, POS can be a stabilizing factor that sustains commitment despite organizational changes(Rizal et al., 2022; Wulandari & Andriani, 2019). Additionally, POS has been shown to strengthen organizational commitment and reduce turnover intentions (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1991). It plays a critical role in enhancing job satisfaction and fostering organizational citizenship behaviors (Allen et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2016). Although both ethical leadership and POS are known to affect employee commitment, there remains a limited understanding of which factor has a greater influence in private university settings, especially during periods of strategic change. This study addresses this empirical gap by directly comparing the relative impact of ethical leadership and perceived organizational support on employee commitment among administrative staff in private universities, with a specific focus on Universitas Widya Gama Malang.

The objectives of this research are:

1. To obtain empirical evidence on the effect of ethical leadership on employee organizational commitment at Universitas Widya Gama Malang.
2. To obtain empirical evidence on the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee organizational commitment at Universitas Widya Gama Malang.

Methods

This study employs a quantitative approach using an explanatory research design aimed at testing both direct and moderating effects between variables. The primary focus is to analyze the effect of ethical leadership on employee organizational commitment and to examine the moderating role of perceived organizational support (POS) in that relationship. This approach is chosen for its ability to objectively analyze causal relationships through numerical data and statistical analysis, which is widely recognized in organizational behavior research (Baron & Kenny, 1986)

The research subjects consist of permanent staff actively working at Widya Gama University Malang. These employees were selected because of their direct involvement with the university's leadership practices and organizational policies, making them relevant sources for evaluating the effects of ethical leadership and perceived organizational support on their organizational commitment (Sekaran, 2003)The study was conducted at Widya Gama University Malang, located on Jalan Borobudur No. 35, Malang City, East Java, during the period from May to July 2025.

The total population of this study is 74 permanent employees. Due to the manageable size of the population, the study employed a census sampling technique (also known as saturated sampling), whereby all members of the population were included as the sample (Fink, 2013). This method ensures that the entire group is represented and is commonly used in research with small, defined populations.

Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire developed from previously validated theoretical indicators. Ethical leadership was measured using the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) by Brown et al. (2005), which includes indicators such as honesty, fairness, role modeling, communication, and concern. Organizational commitment was assessed using the three-dimensional model developed by J. P. Meyer & Allen (1991), which comprises affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. Meanwhile, perceived organizational support (POS) was measured using indicators adapted from Eisenberger et al. (1986), which include recognition of employee contributions,

concern for well-being, fairness, social support, and involvement in decision-making (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

The following table summarizes the dimensions and indicators used for each construct in this study:

Variable	Dimension / Indicator	Description
Ethical Leadership (Brown et al., 2005)	Honesty	Leader is truthful and transparent in communication.
	Fairness	Leader treats all employees fairly and consistently.
	Role Modeling	Leader sets a good example through responsible actions.
	Communication	Leader communicates ethical standards clearly.
	Concern	Leader shows care for employees' well-being.
Organizational Commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991)	Affective Commitment	Emotional attachment and identification with the organization.
	Continuance Commitment	Perceived cost of leaving the organization.
	Normative Commitment	Sense of moral obligation to remain in the organization.
Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger et al., 1986)	Recognition of Contributions	Organization appreciates employee efforts.
	Well-being Support	Organization cares about employee welfare.
	Fairness	Employees are treated fairly and without bias.
	Social and Emotional Support	Supervisors provide emotional support.
	Involvement in Decision-Making	Employees are involved in relevant organizational decisions.

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the help of SmartPLS software. The analysis began with evaluating the measurement model (outer model) to test convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. This was followed by evaluating the structural model (inner model) to assess the strength of the relationships between variables through path coefficients, R-square values, effect sizes (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). The moderating effect was tested by including the interaction term between ethical leadership and POS in the model. Statistical significance was assessed through bootstrapping procedures, using t-statistics and p-values with a significance level of 5%.

PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for analyzing complex causal models, accommodating moderation effects, and providing robust results even with relatively small sample sizes. Through this method, the study aims to provide empirical evidence on the importance of ethical leadership and perceived organizational support in fostering employee commitment within private university settings.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the key findings from the data analysis conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS. The analysis includes an assessment of measurement reliability and validity, structural path relationships, and overall model fit. PLS-SEM is widely recognized for its ability to handle complex relationships in social sciences, making it particularly suitable for studies in organizational behavior (F. Hair Jr et al., 2014). The method allows for testing both direct and moderating effects, providing a comprehensive view of the relationships between variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

These results are then critically discussed in relation to theoretical frameworks and prior empirical studies, offering a deeper understanding of how Ethical Leadership and Perceived Organizational Support influence Organizational Commitment within the context of private universities. Ethical leadership has been consistently linked to various positive organizational outcomes, including increased trust, employee satisfaction, and commitment (Avolio et al., 2004; Brown & Treviño, 2006). However, the findings of this study align with those of Aryati et al. (2018), which found that in certain

contexts, ethical leadership might not always show a direct effect on employee commitment. On the other hand, Perceived Organizational Support (POS) is strongly associated with organizational commitment, as supported by Eisenberger et al. (1986) who demonstrated that employees are more likely to reciprocate organizational care with increased loyalty and attachment.

This study further explores the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) in the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational commitment, which has been examined in previous research. Serang et al. (2024) conducted a study to examine the impact of ethical leadership on work engagement and knowledge sharing, and its effect on performance and employee commitment. Their findings revealed that ethical leadership had a positive influence on work engagement and knowledge sharing, which in turn enhanced performance and organizational commitment. These results emphasize the importance of ethical leadership in shaping employee attitudes and commitment to the organization. Similarly, Olarewaju Adeoye (2021) explored the impact of ethical leadership on employee commitment and organizational effectiveness in the academic environment, particularly focusing on non-faculty members. The study revealed that ethical leadership significantly affects employee commitment and attitudes towards work, suggesting that ethical leadership is a critical driver of employee commitment and organizational effectiveness in university settings.

However, while some studies suggest that POS could enhance the positive effects of ethical leadership (Shore & Wayne, 1993), the findings here suggest that POS does not significantly moderate this relationship in the private university context, a result consistent with Rhoades & Eisenberger (2002), who also found that POS did not always moderate the relationship between leadership and organizational outcomes. Aryati et al. (2018) found that while ethical leadership had a significant effect on organizational commitment, the mediating role of POS was not always as impactful in all sectors, highlighting contextual factors that may influence the outcomes. Moreover, Sumarjaya & Supartha (2017) and Channarika & Mardy (2024) also emphasized that, while ethical leadership promotes organizational commitment, its effects might be stronger in environments where additional support mechanisms are present. Thus, these studies collectively suggest that while POS plays a significant role in fostering organizational commitment, it does not necessarily moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and commitment in all organizational contexts.

Path Coefficients

Path	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value	Description
Ethical Leadership → Organizational Commitment	0.106	0.763	0.445	Not Significant
Perceived Organizational Support (POS) → Organizational Commitment	0.699	4.191	0.000	Significant
POS × Ethical Leadership → Organizational Commitment	-0.011	0.088	0.930	Not Significant

Only the path from POS to Organizational Commitment is statistically significant. Ethical Leadership does not show a meaningful influence, and the interaction effect (moderation) of POS on the Ethical Leadership–Commitment relationship is also not significant. This highlights that employee perceptions of support from their institution play a more crucial role in building commitment than the ethical qualities of their leaders.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2 and Adjusted R^2)

Dependent Variable	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Organizational Commitment	0.653	0.620

The model explains 65.3% of the variance in Organizational Commitment, indicating strong predictive capability and practical relevance in explaining the commitment construct.

Effect Size (f^2)

Path	f^2	Interpretation
Ethical Leadership → Organizational Commitment	0.010	Small
POS → Organizational Commitment	0.443	Large

POS × Ethical Leadership → Organizational Commitment	0.001	Negligible

Perceived Organizational Support shows a strong effect on commitment, while Ethical Leadership and its interaction term have minimal influence.

Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Ethical Leadership	0.936	0.962	0.681
Organizational Commitment	0.924	0.953	0.625
POS	0.979	0.979	0.719

All constructs meet reliability (α and CR > 0.70) and convergent validity (AVE > 0.50) thresholds, indicating robust measurement.

Discriminant Validity (HTMT & Fornell-Larcker)

    a.   HTMT Ratio

Construct Pair	HTMT Value
Organizational Commitment ↔ Ethical Leadership	0.715
Organizational Commitment ↔ POS	0.823
POS ↔ Ethical Leadership	0.323

    b.   Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	EL	OC	POS
Ethical Leadership	0.825		
Organizational Commitment	0.792	0.790	
POS	0.824	0.784	0.848

Both discriminant validity criteria (HTMT < 0.90 and AVE root > inter-construct correlation) are satisfied, supporting the distinctiveness of each latent variable.

Model Fit

Index	Value	Interpretation
SRMR	0.073	Good Fit
NFI	0.843	Acceptable Fit

The model fit indicators suggest that the structural model fits the observed data well, validating the appropriateness of the proposed relationships.

This study investigated the influence of Ethical Leadership and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) on Organizational Commitment, and whether POS moderates the relationship between leadership and commitment. The results reveal that only POS has a statistically significant and strong impact on organizational commitment. This supports the organizational support theory, which posits that employees are more likely to reciprocate perceived organizational care with higher emotional attachment and loyalty.

Ethical Leadership, while normatively desirable, does not significantly impact commitment in this model. Its weak effect might stem from contextual factors—such as limited interaction between leaders and administrative employees, or cultural dynamics where practical support is prioritized over ethical inspiration. The moderating effect of POS is also statistically insignificant, indicating that POS does not change the influence of ethical leadership on commitment.

From a predictive standpoint, the model is robust, explaining 65.3% of the variance in commitment. POS has the largest effect size ($f^2 = 0.443$), and all constructs are statistically valid and reliable. The model also meets the necessary fit indices, supporting the credibility of the findings.

Overall, the results suggest that organizational support is a more critical driver of employee commitment than ethical leadership, at least in the private university context studied. Practical implications include the need for universities to focus on tangible support mechanisms rather than relying solely on leadership style to boost employee loyalty and retention.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to obtain empirical evidence regarding (1) the effect of ethical leadership on employee organizational commitment at Universitas Widyagama Malang, and (2) the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee commitment.

Based on the PLS-SEM analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

First, no significant effect was found between ethical leadership and organizational commitment. While ethical leadership is theoretically believed to foster employee loyalty and emotional attachment, the findings in this context did not statistically support this assumption. This may be due to limited leader–employee interaction or the presence of stronger organizational factors, such as perceived support.

Second, Perceived Organizational Support did not moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational commitment. In other words, the level of POS—whether high or low—did not change the effect of ethical leadership on employees' commitment.

However, a critical finding from this study is that Perceived Organizational Support has a strong and statistically significant direct effect on organizational commitment. This emphasizes the vital role of organizations in demonstrating care, appreciation, and tangible support toward their employees as a key strategy for fostering long-term commitment.

Therefore, organizations particularly private universities are encouraged to prioritize managerial policies and practices that visibly support employee well-being in order to enhance their loyalty and retention.

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