The Impact of Green Human Resource Management on Employee Sustainable Behaviour: Explaining the Sustainability Implementation Gap

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Abstract: Organizations increasingly adopt Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) to translate environmental strategy into employee action, yet formal adoption of green practices does not reliably produce sustainable behaviour on the ground. This implementation gap is theoretically underspecified: GHRM is known to shape employees' green psychological climate, and that climate is known to predict green behaviour, but why the translation from perception to action is inconsistent across studies remains unexplained. This paper develops an integrated theoretical model to close that gap. Drawing on signaling theory to explain how GHRM practices are interpreted as credible cues, and climate-as-social-process theory to explain how such cues become a climate that does, or does not, convert into action, the paper proposes Leadership Authenticity as the missing leadership-level boundary condition, with Green Psychological Climate as the mediating mechanism between GHRM and Employee Sustainable Behaviour. Four hypotheses and a refined conceptual framework are developed, directly confronting closely related recent studies that test structurally similar leadership-moderator logic with different constructs. The model reframes the field's central question from whether GHRM produces sustainable behaviour to how, and under what leadership condition, it does so, offering practitioners a credibility-based diagnostic for why green policies fail to translate into action.

Keywords: Green Human Resource Management; Green Psychological Climate; Employee Sustainable Behaviour; Leadership Authenticity; Sustainability Implementation Gap

1. Introduction

Organizations cannot meet their environmental commitments without their employees: carbon targets, waste-reduction programmes, and circular-economy initiatives are ultimately executed, or quietly ignored, through discretionary employee choices. This is why employee sustainable behavior has gained prominence in the sustainability literature, and why Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) — recruitment, training, appraisal, and reward systems aligned with environmental objectives — has become a strategic HRM priority. The rationale is empirically grounded since companies that train, evaluate, and reward their staff based on their environmental performance exhibit environmentally responsible behavior, and a decade of research has associated GHRM with green psychological climate among employees.

However, what still needs to be explained is why this connection is inconsistent: effect sizes vary, partial mediation, and GHRM's ability to both generate commitment that will contribute to sustainable behavior and to make people exhausted and therefore prevent such behavior [1]. An official adoption of Green HRM practices does not guarantee sustainable behavior of employees, despite the fact that this practice influences employees' perception of company's priorities. The existing literature sheds light on how formal procedures get meaningful to workers through signaling and climate creation; however, no insight is provided on what triggers a green psychological climate from being inert to becoming an action. This research paper claims that the key resides in leadership authenticity since it is the leaders' actions to which employees refer when figuring out the meaning of policy. Thus, Green Psychological Climate

becomes a working hypothesis for employees that gets either confirmed or disconfirmed based on leaders' actions.

This paper asks: how do GHRM practices turn into Employee Sustainable Behavior, and what type of leadership affects this process? It integrates the GHRM, green psychological climate, employee sustainable behavior, and authentic leadership literatures. Its contribution is threefold: reframing the field's central question from whether GHRM works to how and under what leadership condition it works; specifying the mechanism and boundary condition jointly responsible for the implementation gap; and doing so by directly confronting closely related recent studies rather than working around them.

2. Related Work

2.1 Green Human Resource Management

Green Human Resource Management aligns recruitment, training, performance appraisal, and reward systems with an organization's environmental objectives [2]. Early research focused on organizational-level outcomes, leaving the psychological processes affecting employees unexamined until Dumont et al. [3] and Norton et al. [4] independently proposed that GHRM operates on behaviour indirectly, through employees' green psychological climate — replicated since across hospitality, healthcare, and manufacturing samples.

What remains unresolved is why this chain is unreliable in strength and, in at least one case, direction: Yuan et al.'s [1] two-study investigation shows GHRM can simultaneously build environmental commitment, which supports green behaviour, and cause emotional exhaustion, which suppresses it. GHRM studies also almost universally measure employees' perceptions of green practices as a stand-in for the practices themselves, collapsing strategic HRM's fundamental distinction between intended, actually implemented, and employee-perceived HR practices, where gaps between these levels — not policy's mere existence — shape behaviour [5]. Van Waeyenberg and Semeijn's [6] finding that GHRM's effect depends on perceived HR sincerity is indirect evidence of exactly this missing distinction.

2.2 Employee Sustainable Behaviour

The dominant construct here is narrower than “employee sustainable behaviour” suggests: employee green behaviour, defined as discretionary and required actions that contribute to, or detract from, environmental sustainability [7], operationalized by Boiral and Paillé [8] as organizational citizenship behaviour for the environment and consolidated by Katz et al.'s [9] meta-analysis as the field's validated dependent variable. This matters for construct precision: “employee sustainable behaviour,” where explicitly defined, is broader — Bhattacharya et al. [10] include both pro-environmental and pro-social actions, while green-behaviour measures capture only the environmental half. This paper therefore defines Employee Sustainable Behaviour as the environmental dimension of sustainability behaviour — workplace actions that conserve resources, reduce waste, and support environmental objectives, encompassing in-role and extra-role forms [7] and operationalized via organizational citizenship behaviour for the environment [8]. Antecedents cluster into organizational factors (GHRM, supervisory support) and individual/psychological factors (values, identity, moral obligation), with little integration between the two — one reason the field has been slow to ask what determines whether a climate perception is actually acted upon.

2.3 Green Psychological Climate

Green psychological climate's lineage runs through organizational climate theory, which conceptualizes climate as employees' cognitive appraisal of what practices signify for their own goals [11], [12]. Dumont et al. [3] and Norton et al. [4] imported this logic into the environmental domain, defining green psychological climate as employees' perception that the organization values and supports environmentally responsible behaviour; both found this climate mediates between green practices and

green behaviour, replicated consistently since. What this research has not imported is central to its own parent theory: climate perceptions are calibrated against proximal leaders' behaviour, who confirm or disconfirm what policy claims to mean [13], [14]. Green-climate research has instead treated climate as a direct, unconditional predictor, with moderators clustering around individual differences rather than the leadership-referent mechanism its own parent theory identifies as central.

2.4 Leadership Authenticity

Authentic leadership theory specifies leadership as self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective [15], built around consistency between a leader's values, statements, and actions — though Gardner et al. [16] flag measurement heterogeneity and discriminant validity as unresolved, substantiated by Banks et al.'s [17] finding of substantial overlap with transformational leadership. Two closely related studies sharpen this concern: Li et al. [18] test a model structurally identical to this one, with the green-climate–behaviour link strengthened by spiritual leadership, and Song et al. [19] show leader behavioural integrity — word–deed alignment [20] — strengthens the environmental self-identity–behaviour relationship. Both raise the question of whether authenticity does distinctive work or merely relabels word–deed consistency. This paper's position: authenticity's self-awareness, balanced processing, and moral perspective address a question consistency cannot — whether the leader genuinely values environmental protection, precisely the sincerity doubt that attends sustainability claims.

2.5 Research Gap

Taken together, GHRM practices are associated with a stronger green psychological climate; that climate predicts green behaviour and partially mediates GHRM's outcomes; and leadership-level constructs — spiritual leadership [18] and behavioural integrity [19] — already moderate comparable links. None of this is in dispute. What remains unresolved is narrower: GHRM research has never connected its mediating mechanism to strategic HRM's own implementation-failure framework [5]; the dominant account of unreliability is resource-based [1], not credibility-based, and ignores that employees' scrutiny of sincerity shapes whether green signals are believed at all [6]. And authentic leadership specifically — encompassing self-awareness and balanced processing beyond relational transparency — has not been tested as a climate-to-behaviour moderator, nor distinguished from behavioural integrity and spiritual leadership on construct-specific grounds.

Assembling signaling theory, climate-as-social-process theory, strategic HRM's implementation-gap framework, and authentic leadership theory into one explanation has not been done before and is this paper's central move. Although Green HRM is generally associated with favourable sustainability outcomes, existing research does not sufficiently explain why it may fail to translate into actual sustainable behaviour. A stronger explanation requires both the psychological mechanism through which employees interpret green practices — Green Psychological Climate — and the leadership condition determining whether perceptions translate into behaviour — Leadership Authenticity.

Table 1

Comparison of This Work with the Closest Related Studies

Study	Tests GPC as mediator	Leadership-level moderator	Addresses sincerity / credibility mechanism
Yuan et al. [1] (2024)	No (dual pathway)	No	No (resource-based)
Van Waeyenberg & Semeijn [6] (2025)	No	No	Yes (HR sincerity)
Li et al. [18] (2023)	Yes	Yes — Spiritual leadership	No

Song et al. [19] (2023)	No (self-identity, not GPC)	Yes — Behavioural integrity	Partial (word–deed)
This work	Yes	Yes — Leadership Authenticity	Yes

3. Key Contribution

This paper's first contribution is to reframe the field's central question. A decade of research has asked whether Green HRM produces sustainable behaviour, answering yes on average, while leaving the more consequential question — how, and under what conditions — largely unaddressed. Specifying both the psychological mechanism and the leadership boundary condition jointly moves the field from an average-effect question to a conditional-effect one. Second, the paper positions Green Psychological Climate as the translation mechanism connecting GHRM to employee behaviour, offering a credibility-based account of the implementation gap distinct from existing resource-based explanations [1] and consistent with, but going beyond, evidence that sincerity attributions already shape GHRM's effectiveness at the policy level [6].

Third, the paper positions Leadership Authenticity as a theoretically justified boundary condition on the climate–behaviour relationship, engaging directly with its closest empirical relatives — Li et al.'s [18] spiritual leadership and Song et al.'s [19] behavioural integrity — and specifying why authenticity's multidimensional content does distinctive theoretical work. Together, these contributions connect strategic HRM's implementation-gap theory to the green-HRM literature and extend climate-as-social-process theory into the environmental domain.

4. Method, Experiments and Results

This is a theoretical/conceptual contribution rather than an empirical study: the "method" is the theory-building approach used to derive the model, and the "results" are the resulting hypotheses and conceptual framework, offered here for subsequent empirical testing.

4.1 Theoretical Foundation

This paper adopts organizational climate theory's climate-as-social-process extension as its primary lens, complemented by signaling theory. Signaling theory holds that under information asymmetry, costly, consistent, visible organizational actions function as signals employees must interpret [21], explaining why GHRM practices form a green psychological climate. Climate theory's foundational claim — that climate is employees' cognitive appraisal of what practices signify for their own goals [11], [12] — gives green psychological climate its theoretical home; its social-process extension [13], [14] supplies the model's second link: climate perceptions remain provisional until validated by proximal leaders' behaviour, consistent with the broader principle that employees learn what is genuinely valued by observing credible referents rather than reading policy alone [22]. This is why a leadership-level boundary condition belongs on the climate-to-behaviour path, and why Leadership Authenticity — built around consistency between values, words, and actions — performs this validating function. Signaling theory explains signal formation; climate-as-social-process theory explains signal translation, connecting signal interpretation to strategic HRM's implementation-gap framework [5].

4.2 Hypotheses Development and Conceptual Framework

H1: Employees revise beliefs about organizational priorities based on costly, visible, consistent actions rather than cheap talk. Formal GHRM practices — green training, environmental criteria in appraisal and reward, involvement channels — are costly and visible in this sense, and predict green psychological climate across hospitality, healthcare, and manufacturing samples [3], [4], though

evidence remains largely cross-sectional and single-source. **H1: Green Human Resource Management is positively associated with employees' Green Psychological Climate.**

H2: A strong green psychological climate functions as a normative and motivational cue increasing corresponding behaviour — among the most consistently replicated relationships in this literature, though mediation is typically partial, the empirical signature of the implementation gap rather than a reason to doubt the relationship. **H2: Green Psychological Climate is positively associated with Employee Sustainable Behaviour.**

H3: If GHRM operates as a signal that must be interpreted before shaping behaviour, green psychological climate should carry forward part — but, given partial mediation and Yuan et al.'s [1] dual-pathway finding, not necessarily all — of that relationship. **H3: Green Psychological Climate mediates the relationship between Green Human Resource Management and Employee Sustainable Behaviour, such that GHRM's effect operates partly, but not necessarily fully, through Green Psychological Climate.**

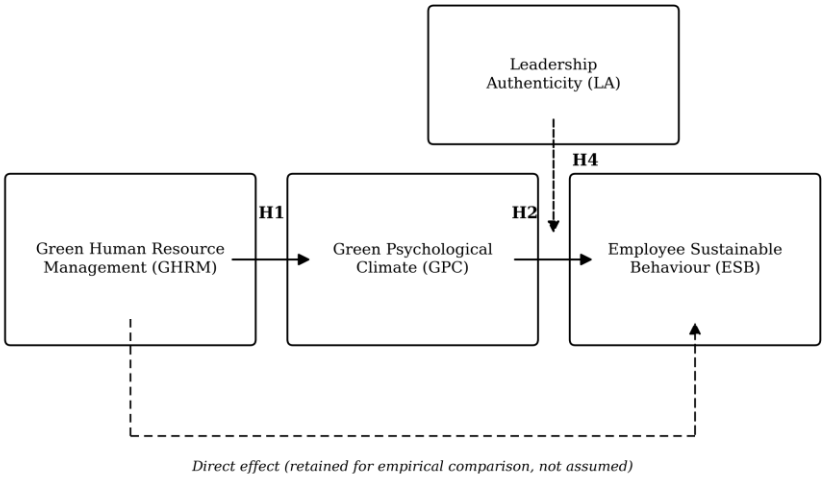
H4: A green psychological climate remains provisional until validated by proximal leader behaviour, especially where organizational sincerity is chronically contested. Leadership Authenticity's dimensions jointly give employees grounds to treat their climate perception as credible rather than unconfirmed rhetoric. Direct evidence does not yet exist, though closely analogous findings — spiritual leadership [18] and behavioural integrity [19] moderating comparable links — support the mechanism's plausibility. **H4: Leadership Authenticity moderates the relationship between Green Psychological Climate and Employee Sustainable Behaviour, such that this relationship is stronger when Leadership Authenticity is high.**

Because mediation is consistently partial, a direct GHRM→Employee Sustainable Behaviour path is retained for empirical comparison rather than assumed away: the size of any residual direct effect is itself evidence about how completely this account explains the implementation gap.

Figure 1 presents the resulting framework: GHRM→GPC (H1)→ESB (H2), with GPC mediating GHRM→ESB (H3), a retained direct path, and Leadership Authenticity moderating GPC→ESB specifically (H4).

Figure 1

Proposed Conceptual Framework



H3: Green Psychological Climate mediates the GHRM → Employee Sustainable Behaviour relationship

5. Limitations and Future Research

This is a theoretical, pre-empirical model. Its central claim — that authenticity resolves sincerity doubt and strengthens the climate–behaviour link — requires empirical testing against transformational leadership and behavioural integrity given their overlap [17]. Scoping Employee Sustainable Behaviour to its environmental dimension [10] excludes the broader pro-social dimension, and the single-moderator focus leaves open whether authenticity also operates upstream on GHRM→GPC. Future research should test the model with time-lagged, and multi-source designs.

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