AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON ETHICAL OPTIMISM AND ITS ROLE IN WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This study explored the role of ethical optimism in fostering work engagement among managers in the Sri Lankan context. Despite the acknowledged significance of ethics and optimism in promoting positive organizational outcomes, the concept of ethical optimism, which is rooted in ethical behavior, remains underexplored in existing research. To address this gap, the present study aims to explore how ethical optimism contributes to managers' work engagement in the Sri Lankan context. It adopts an interpretivist approach and employs a qualitative methodology in which data are collected from 39 managers using a structured datasheet. The thematic analysis of the data revealed four primary themes that reflect the means through which ethical optimism enhances work engagement: responsible work, peace and happiness, self-discipline, and motivation. Ethical optimism is perceived as a source of positive relationships, happiness, respect and loyalty, and career success at the workplace, despite short-term challenges. Additionally, antecedents of ethical optimism were life experiences, social interactions, social influence, religion and culture, and personal values. These findings suggest that ethical optimism can be a powerful driver of work engagement, offering valuable insights into developing strategies to inspire employees to align with organizational goals and enhance their work engagement levels.

Keywords: Ethical optimism, work engagement, optimism, positive organizational behaviour

Introduction

Optimism is typically associated with the expectation that future events or circumstances will have positive outcomes (Carver et al., 2017; Kadlac, 2017; Pettit, 2004; Wilson & VanderWeele, 2024; Avvenuti et al., 2016) and has gained scholarly attention in many disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, economics, politics, and medicine (Nagasawa, 2024). Ethical optimism reflects the belief that ethical behavior will lead to success within an organization, amalgamating ethical behavior and an optimistic outlook within an organizational context, predicated on the notion that individuals who adhere to ethical standards are more likely to enjoy professional advancement and positive career outcomes (Kincaid et al., 2008). This concept is particularly important in the context of organizations as one of the key considerations in the assessment of ethical aspects (Kowal & Klebaniuk, 2021). It is widely accepted that an ethical environment fosters positive organizational behavior (Aryati et al., 2018; Febriansyah et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2023; Hough et al., 2020; Sookdawoor & Grobler, 2022) through various means such as trust (Hough et al., 2020), positive employee conduct, and perceived performance (Sookdawoor & Grobler, 2022). Furthermore, the role of positive psychology, specifically psychological capital, which carries optimism as an integral part, has also been acknowledged as a means of enhancing positive organizational outcomes (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Employee engagement is considered an important reflection of positive organizational outcomes (Kahn, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001). Employee engagement is explained as an employee's cognitive, emotional, and physical states (Kahn, 1990) that result in emotional connection and involvement in their job (Bakker et al., 2011; Mazzetti et al., 2023), characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, 2012). Kuok and Taormina (2017) defined work engagement as intentional involvement with or attachment to tasks, objectives, or organizational activities cognitively, emotionally, and physically, that is, having positive thoughts about improving one's effectiveness, feeling positive emotions about executing the tasks, and voluntarily utilizing one's energy and effort to achieve those tasks. Employees with higher engagement harness their physical, cognitive, and emotional capacities (Kahn 1990) in all intellectual, social, and affective realms (Soane et al., 2012) with vigor, dedication, absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002), pleasure, and a sense of motivation (Maslach et al, 2001) to serve work requirements.

The impact of optimism on work engagement has been subject to a vast array of scholarly discussions in many different contexts (Geers et al., 2009; McAfee et al., 2019; Dean & Wilson, 2022; Nieto-Carracedo et al., 2021). Optimism has been identified as a factor that directly influences engagement (Malinowski & Lim, 2015) as well as a mediating factor (Chiyangwa & Muponya, 2024) and moderating factors (Salminen et al., 2014) that shape the relationship between work engagement and other variables. Ethics on engagement has also been widely recognized (Hough et al., 2015; Mitonga-Monga, & Cilliers, 2015) which is also reflected in the impact of ethical leadership (Ashfaq et al., 2021; Gwamanda & Mahembe, 2023) and ethical climate (Yener et al., 2012; Shafnaz,

2019). As an amalgamation of ethical aspects and an optimistic outlook within an organizational context, ethical optimism appears to have a significantly positive impact on organizational behavior.

However, despite the proven significance of ethics and optimism in enhancing engagement as a positive organizational outcome, the specific aspect of ethical optimism – optimism grounded in ethics – has not been sufficiently addressed in existing research, leaving a lack of evidence to substantiate the grounds on which the ethical aspects of optimism lead to work engagement. Hence, the mechanisms through which ethical optimism contributes to work engagement remain unexplored. The significance of understanding the role of optimism in work engagement has been highlighted (Nieto-Carracedo et al., 2022; Fabgyuan et al., 2023) where more tailored research is necessary in Asian contexts to explore employee engagement with distinct cultural features in different countries (Bharti & Rangnekar, 2019; Chen et al., 2024). To address this void, the present study aims to explore how ethical optimism contributes to managers' work engagement in the Sri Lankan context by answering three specific research questions: i) What is the level of managers' ethical optimism and (ii) What are the antecedents and outcomes of ethical optimism as perceived by managers? and iii) how ethical optimism shapes behavior. This study used an interpretivist approach and employed a qualitative methodology to accomplish this aim. A better understanding of the role of ethical optimism in work engagement provides the foundation for identifying potential strategies to produce more positive outcomes through ethical optimism in organizations. For instance, work engagement is fostered by ethical leaders (Adnan et al., 2022; Junaidi, 2023, Islam et al., 2023), ethical climate (Mitonga-Monga, 2018; Durmazpinar & Fatih, 2024) where optimism, as a personal resource, significantly predicts work engagement (Salmimem et al., 2014). Thus, a deep understanding of how ethical optimism leads managers towards more engagement in their work would help develop appropriate strategies to inspire employees to commit to organizational goals and enhance their engagement levels.

Literature Review

Ethical Optimism

Ethical optimism refers to a belief in the potential for self-improvement and the overall betterment of humanity rooted in the idea that ultimate reality is governed by good forces, although a clear definition of this concept is not readily available (Brown, 1998). It encompasses the expectation that acting ethically leads to success, instilling hope, positivity, and resilience among employees, ultimately enhancing firm performance and creating an ethical corporate culture (Alshorman & Melhem, 2023). In an organizational context, ethical optimism embodies a sense of hopefulness regarding ethical standards and practices within an organization or profession (Shah & Deshpande, 2022). According to Clark and Winegard (2019), ethical optimism is rooted in unconscious, intuitive moral intuitions that influence moral judgments beyond conscious awareness, allowing for moral virtue and progress, despite the need for rational justification. There is hardly any consensus on the unique definition of optimism (Wilson & Vanderweele, 2024). The term 'optimism' is derived from the Latin term optimum, which means 'best' (Nagasawa, 2024). However, it is commonly agreed that optimism is a belief state that encompasses expectations or expectancies of better positive future events, states of affairs, or a disposition of hope (Avvenuti et al., 2016; Carver et al., 2010; Kadlac, 2015; Pettit, 2004; Weinstein, 1980; Day, 1969).

Optimism is often considered from a psychological perspective. Dispositional optimism encompasses the generalized tendency to expect positive outcomes as a personality trait (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Carver et al., 2010; Conversano et al., 2010). Peterson and Seligman (1984) view optimism from an attributional perspective, in which individuals have distinct and certain positive attitudes toward the events they encounter. Peterson (2010) distinguished little optimism: the specific expectations about positive outcomes from big optimism, the general state of vigor, and resilience for positive outcomes. Optimism has been subject to school discussions on the basis of its realistic and unrealistic nature. According to Bartolotti (2108), optimism emerges from two broader grounds: positive illusions that associate beliefs about oneself, the world, and the future, made positive by small, systematic distortions (Taylor, 1989), both of which indicate a form of irrationality associated with optimism, reflecting its epistemically deficient nature. Shepperd et al. (2017) identify two forms of unrealistic optimism: absolute and comparative, where individuals maintain expectations about positive future events based on objective likelihood and relative to others, respectively. However, rational optimism, which links logical reasoning and evidence to optimistic beliefs, also exists. Rational optimism is associated with expectations of positive outcomes based on rational analysis and realistic probabilities rather than wishful thinking or unfounded positivity (Oltean et al., 2019). Wilson and Vanderweele (2024) identified four forms of optimism that can be linked to rational optimism: resourced optimism (positive expectations about future events grounded in one's own resources), agentive optimism (positive expectations about a future event based on one's own actions or commitment to exert considerable effort towards bringing about a positive outcome), groundless optimism (positive expectations about the future held without epistemic grounds), and perspectival optimism (a state where attentional focus is given to the positive or good aspects of any intentional object).

Generalized expectations of positive outcomes have been explored from a unique perspective. For instance, Hoch and Halilton (1997) and Ela (2022) investigate legal optimism, and Danaher (2022) and Rostain (2019) examine techno optimism. Academic optimism (Hoy et al., 2006; Gurol & Kerimgil, 2010), therapeutic optimism (Jensen, 2011; Horng & Grady, 2003), and social optimism (Muncy & Iyer, 2022; Schweizer & Schneider, 1997) are other areas to which general optimism has been mounted. This backdrop further substantiates the integration of a general positive outlook within the ethical domain, thereby fostering the concept of ethical optimism.

Accordingly, ethical optimism can also be viewed as a disposition (Scheier & Carver, 1985) where believing positive outcomes for being ethical is a personality trait as well as a cognitive process through which individuals make sense of positive outcomes (Perterson & Seligman, 1987; Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). Moreover, ethical optimism may emerge as a specific expectation for favorable outcomes through ethical conduct, or as a general state of vigor and resilience for the positive outcomes of ethical conduct (Peterson, 2010). However, ethical optimism may also be either rational or irrational (Wilson & Vanderweele, 2024) based on rational analysis and realistic probabilities employed in developing expectations. The present study takes a dispositional approach, considering ethical optimism as a personality trait reflecting the general state of vigor and resilience for positive outcomes of ethical conduct.

Antecedents and Outcomes of Ethical Optimism

Ethical optimism is shaped by a complex interplay of environmental, professional, and personal factors. Environmental variables have a significant influence on shaping both ethical and unethical behaviors (Trevino et al., 1998). The ethical climate of an organization has been identified as an important determinant of ethical optimism. A conducive ethical environment is suggested to foster an optimistic outlook on ethical behavior (Mnisri & Wasieleski, 2020). Further, task uncertainty, monitoring, and the presence of ethical training (Kincaid et al., 2008; Deshpande et al., 2021), management actions, and the observation of successful individuals within an organization (Kincaid et al., 2008) are also identified as factors that determine ethical optimism. Resilience and attachment to organizations have also been identified as factors that contribute to optimism (Smith, 2010; Sahai & Bhowmik, 2018). At the individual level, ethical optimism is nourished by moral identity, which is shaped by demographic variables, personality traits, and organizational contexts such as leadership style and ethical climate (Xu et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). However, when cognitive error judgements like egocentrism, representativeness of the other- comparison, and availability of negative instances lead to unrealistic optimism (Higgings, Amand, and Poole, 1997).

Optimism is a belief or general expectancy that favorable things will happen in the future and is associated with a broad range of positive consequences (Carver et al., 2010; Segerstrom, 2007). Ethical optimism has significant psychological, physiological, and behavioral implications. Accordingly, enhanced well-being (Newmann, 2021), stress-coping capabilities, engagement, and persistence in challenging situations (Nes et al., 2011), health benefits (Newmann, 2021), and stress resilience (Scheier & Carver, 1992; Nes, 2016) have been identified as positive outcomes of optimism. Importantly, optimism has been linked to higher positive emotions and adaptive responses, acting as a powerful predictor of positive emotions even in chronic stressful conditions (Leslie-Miller et al., 2021). It has been identified as an active coping tool for stress that generates better psychological well-being (Aspinwall and Brunhart, 1996). Ethical optimism also leads to enhanced engagement, in which individuals with higher dispositional optimism exhibit more favorable attitudes, greater willingness to act (Hough et al., 2020) and higher individual performance (Choi & Che, 2016). Furthermore, optimism empowers individuals to confront discrimination, as optimistic individuals are more likely to take active steps against perceived injustices driven by their expectations of positive outcomes (Sechrist, 2010). However, it has been argued that not all forms of optimism are beneficial (Schneider, 2001), as optimistic beliefs may lead to both success and failure (Bortolotti, 2018). Optimism may produce unproductive results when it is unrealistic (Scheier & Carver, 1993) or influenced by string optimistic bias (Kincaid, 2008). Optimism sometimes leads to disappointment and is negatively associated with physical health and the immune system when stressors are perceived as difficult, complex, persistent, and uncontrollable, and positively associated when stressors are perceived as easy, temporary, controllable, and brief (Segerstrom, 2005). Conversely, rational optimism provides practical implications for psychological well-being and has positive effects on decision-making in economic contexts (Diez & Palmero, 2018) and psychological health (Oltean et al., 2018).

Work Engagement

Work engagement refers to the intentional involvement of employees with or attachment to tasks, objectives, or organizational activities, cognitively, emotionally, and physically. (Kahn, 1990; Kuok & Taormina, 2017). It is often characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (van Roekel et al., 2024). Employees with higher

engagement tend to voluntarily utilize their energy and effort to achieve tasks with positive thoughts and emotions. They are energetic, dedicated, and often completely immersed in their work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010) with emotions of vitality, devotion, and absorption (Katou et al., 2021). A wide range of studies has been conducted to identify various factors associated with work engagement, including its antecedents and outcomes. Work engagement is said to be influenced by situational factors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) such as social support from colleagues, task significance, autonomy, and leadership (Christian et al., 2011), and individual factors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) such as higher emotional stability, extraversion, conscientiousness (van Roekel et al., 2024), self-efficacy, and optimism (Mäkikangas et al., 2013). However, according to Kahn (1990), work engagement is a multidimensional concept that has not been rigorously precised (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and thus remains fairly vague without a specific definition (Thomas, 2009). Many structured tools, such as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2012) and Job Engagement Scale (May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010) are commonly used to assess job engagement in organizations. Van Roekel et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of studying the concept of work engagement through qualitative research beyond traditional structured inquiries to generate more fresh insights, where socio-psychological origins of the concept still remain vailed despite the steady growth of knowledge in work engagement throughout time.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Connection between Ethical Optimism and Work Engagement

The relationship between ethical optimism and work engagement is underpinned by several theoretical frameworks that highlight the role of positive expectations in influencing individual behavior and conduct. The theoretical grounds that explain the role of ethical optimism in work engagement can be related to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001). According to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989) self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations guide individual behaviors, whereby individuals are motivated to engage when they believe that their actions will lead to desired outcomes. Ethical optimism enhances the general expectancy of positive outcomes for ethical conduct, thus leading managers to effectively engage in their work. For instance, Pandey et al. (2008) found that public sector employees with a positive outlook toward ethical governance were more motivated to engage in ethical decision making because of their confidence in the fairness of the system. The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) also explains the role of positive expectations towards the consequences of behavior. When individuals expect valuable outcomes in return for ethical behavior, they are more motivated to engage in such ethical behavior, where ethical optimism is utilized as a cognitive lens that increases the perceived attractiveness of the rewards linked to ethical actions. In this context, the role of ethical optimism in shaping behavior can be linked to psychological mechanisms that intertwine cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Optimism, in a broader sense, has been subjected to many discussions on its role in shaping individual behavior. For instance, Bortolotti (2018) suggested that the establishment of positive expectations may result in the realization of objectives by enhancing the sense of competence and ability to accomplish goals. Moreover, the influence of optimism on shaping behavior has been explained in relation to mindsets (Dardick & Tuckwiller, 2019), attitudes, moral reasoning, moral virtue, and moral intuition (Ferguson et al., 2024). However, the attention paid to extending this understanding to ethical optimism is hardly evident and thus requires more school attempts to fill the gap.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist approach utilizing a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how ethical optimism leads to work engagement among managers. This study focused on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives within their professional contexts, making an interpretivist paradigm suitable for capturing the nuanced relationship between ethical optimism and work engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While guided by the theoretical backgrounds of social cognitive theory and expectancy – value models of motivation, the present study primarily focuses on empirical data exploration to discover the patterns (Jebb et al., 2017). The sample consisted of a group of managers selected from an MBA class at Sri Lankan State University and provided their familiarity and prior understanding of the relevant concepts (Pugna, et al., 2019; Zaar et al., 2020). Key informants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: fluency in English, professional work experience, and willingness to complete the data sheet. The sample comprises 39 managers, including 14 general operational level managers, 08 finance managers, 04 owner managers, 04 human resource managers, 04 sales managers, and 05 operations managers from banking, engineering, construction, transportation, non-governmental, and public administration sector organizations. The age of the study participants ranged from 28 to 52 years.

Data were collected using a data sheet designed to gather detailed qualitative responses, avoiding social desirability bias (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007) in an interview by offering a standardized and neutral environment for participants to share their views. The data sheet included four open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' views on ethical optimism and its impact on their work engagement as specified in the research

questions. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. This was done to ensure informed consent, which is a critical ethical consideration for qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The time taken by the study participants to complete the data sheet ranged from 20 to 35 min. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary data analysis method to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings. This involved a systematic process of coding and categorizing the data to identify emerging themes related to ethical optimism and work engagement. The initial phase of the analysis involved familiarization with the data, where the researcher repeatedly read the participants' responses to gain an in-depth understanding of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The subsequent stages included generating initial codes, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

Results and Discussion

The use of thematic analysis allowed for the identification of key themes in four major domains: ethical optimism, the means through which ethical optimism influences work engagement, and antecedents and outcomes of ethical optimism. Each domain was carefully scrutinized to identify codes and categories to draw themes.

Ethical Optimism of the Managers

Interestingly, most managers expressed high levels of ethical optimism. Many agree that ethical conduct results in positive outcomes. As expressed by one key informant (operations manager, female, 42 years of age), *I strongly believe that the noble acts surely bring the best result. I have experienced it many times in my life'*. Another participant (a finance manager, 38 years of age) stated,' *Being ethical is the best investment I can do for my future. I know I will be rewarded one day.*" Few participants elaborated on ethical optimism, further highlighting their inclination to be actively involved in yielding better results through ethical expectations. For instance, a human resource manager (male, 40 years of age) explained that strengthening the systems and processes to generate positive outcomes on ethical grounds is a collective responsibility. He went on to explain, "*Just believing something good will happen when we behave ethically is not enough. We should make it happen.*" Some expressed their ethical optimism from a different perspective, highlighting their denial of unethical conduct or achievements through unethical means. One study participant (Finance Manager, male, 33 years of age) mentioned that losing ethical conduct is more valid than victory through unethical means, as such an achievement would not last long. Another participant, who is a finance manager (male, 46 years of age), commented that *If I do anything unethical, I won't be able to own any success or happiness at the end*". However, only a very few participants expressed doubts about whether ethical conduct can lead to positive outcomes in the contemporary context, while accepting that ethical behaviors are associated with positive outcomes. The study participants demonstrated long-lasting ethical optimism, which involved anticipating favorable outcomes as a result of their ethical actions over an extended period. An operations manager (male, 43 years old) elaborated the following: "*Ethical behaviour always attracts good outcomes even though I cannot exactly say when it happens. I know for sure ethical behaviour will be rewarded either in this life or in a future life as shown in Karma concept.*"

Role of Ethical Optimism in Work Engagement

The study participants' expressions of how their expectations of ethical conduct associated with positive outcomes made them more engaged were captured with 15 codes that were subsequently grouped into four main themes: responsible work, peace and happiness, self-discipline, and motivation.

Responsible Work

Responsible work, that is, performing duties in a sensible and comprehensive manner, was one of the key means through which ethical optimism encouraged the study participants to effectively engage in their work. This theme emerged as a combination of four codes labeled as utilizing the capacities to the fullest, not wasting time and resources, responsibility, perfection, and open communication. The expressions provided by the study participants offer a detailed view of how ethical optimism drives them towards work engagement through responsible work. They believe that integrity and effort will eventually be rewarded, whether within the organization or in their broader career, and personal life. For instance, one participant (area manager, male, 46 years old) mentioned "*I always want to be honest in my every task. I always try to give my best to whatever the task I am signed. I utilize all my capacities to complete the task successfully, as I believe doing good would reward me one day, within this organization, in my career or may be in my personal life.*" As a result of ethical optimism, participants were encouraged to be punctual and to ensure efficient use of time and other resources. As mentioned by a sales manager (male, 30 years of age), "*I try to maintain my behaviour at workplace ethical, I report to work on time, and do not waste time or any other resources at workplace. I know that I won't be able to enjoy long-lasting success if I do not work in that way.*". This statement clearly shows the opinion of participants that by

consistently practicing these responsible work habits, they contribute to developing an ethical work culture while engaging deeply in their jobs. The following statement made by a study participant who is a Human Resource Executive (female, 29 years of age) highlights that ethical optimism is an important reason behind the sense of responsibility and accountability of the study participants.

"I believe that ethical deeds would result favorable gains one day. It reminds myself that I should be responsible in whatever I do. So I take things serious in my work, treat others kindly, and provide a quality service, while also guiding my subordinates and juniors to be responsible and accountable."

Commitment to completing tasks with precision and care reflects another aspect of responsible work. As explained by an accountant heading the Finance Division (male, 38 years of age), *I always plan my work properly, perform it carefully, and often do the follow-up to ensure whether the task has been completed without any mistake or error. It enables me to give best to complete the tasks perfectly and ensures proper completion of the job. Leaving things incomplete or providing poor service at workplace are irresponsible and cannot be accepted as ethical conduct. If I work irresponsibly, I will receive nothing at the end of the day."* Study participants mentioned that ethical optimism helps them maintain peace of mind and happiness, extend cooperation with others, and avoid conflicts, where the respective codes were thematized to denote both inner and outer peace and happiness.

Peace and Happiness

Peace in mind was highlighted by the study participants as an important means through which ethical optimism leads to work engagement. As mentioned by one study participant, *"I believe that ethical conduct would result in positive results. Therefore, I always do my work peacefully. I do not bother about quick success earned through unethical means, because I know only the noble behaviours would bring lasting success. So, I concentrate on what service is required from me and leave rest aside."* This indicates that participants' belief in the long-term rewards of ethical behavior seems to allow them to work peacefully without the stress of chasing quick unethical gains. It was seen that ethical optimism brings peace in mind as well as happiness to individuals, as it strengthens their minds with resilience against injustice and unfair practices. The following expression made by a Human Resource executive (female, 29 years of age) clearly reflects how an optimistic outlook enables them to maintain high levels of work engagement by focusing on intrinsic satisfaction derived from ethical conduct rather than being discouraged by temporary setbacks or unfair situations. *"With my firm belief on the association of ethical behaviours and positive results I know my own good behaviours will reward me one day. So, working ethically make me happy. It prevents me from worrying about injustice and unfair things. I know injustice and unfair acts can dominate only for a shorter time"*. From another perspective, participants' ethical optimism has created grounds for cooperation, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration. Their ethical approach fostered a sense of community and mutual respect, contributing to overall workplace harmony and satisfaction. Furthermore, ethical optimism has become a tool to avoid conflicts and maintain a positive outlook despite the challenging situation that occurs at work.

This has been clearly elaborated by a sales manager (male, 28 years old) in following words. *"It is easy for me to leave things behind and move forward with my positive expectations of positive results for ethical conduct, especially in unfair and hurting experiences. I know I do not need to worry about them and whatever the good acts done by me will be rewarded one day"*. Another study participant (An operations manager, Male, 41 years of age) went on saying that *"I believe one day ethical acts will be rewarded by the nature. It helps me to avoid conflicts and feel satisfied about the present"*. Hence, participants who believed in the long-term rewards of ethical behavior were able to maintain a peaceful, happy, and positive mindset, even in the face of adversity or unfairness. This ethical optimism not only helps them avoid conflicts and negativity but also encourages them to engage fully with their work, knowing that their efforts will be rewarded in the future. Additionally, their willingness to collaborate, support others, and maintain a respectful work environment further contributes to positive and engaging workplace culture.

Self-discipline

Another main theme that emerged from the views of the study participants was self-discipline, which reflects self-control, self-consciousness, and adherence to rules backed by ethical optimism. Many participants explicitly mentioned that they obey the rules and regulations of the workplace and follow the given procedures without manipulation as they do not believe in unethical performance. Beyond external regulatory mechanisms, some have their own policies and standards of ethical behavior. As elaborated by a human resource manager (male, 46 years of age), *"I always try to follow the rules and to cultivate good habits. And also, I am so keen on self-control and maintaining self-standards. If I do not control myself, 1how can I assure my behaviour would be ethical? I often wish for positive outcomes and therefore I ensure my self-control. It enables me to engage more with the tasks assigned to me'*. This indicates that individuals' beliefs in ethical conduct as a path to positive outcomes strengthen their commitment to self-discipline. As a key aspect of self-discipline, self-control provides them with the ability

to manage emotions, helping them remain engaged and productive, while suppressing negative feelings. For instance, a finance manager (female, 28 years old) added that he often tries to manage his feelings of anger and stress by thinking about future rewards. Internal motivation to adhere to ethical standards ensures that individuals remain focused and committed, thereby enhancing their overall work engagement. As elaborated by one study participant (a general manager of an SME, (female, 29 years of age) "I always think twice before doing something, whether it is ethical or not. It keeps me focused, so I rarely make mistakes or postpone things unnecessarily".

Motivation

Finally, through confidence, motivation to work, and positive thinking inspired by ethical optimism, motivation was identified as another means by which work engagement was enhanced on the grounds of ethical optimism. Some participants directly mentioned that positive expectations of future rewards of present ethical conduct motivates them to maintain their ethical standards and survive in unethical environments, especially when commitment and engagement are not well recognized. They mentioned that they were encouraged to maintain positive thinking and mindset when they believed in positive results from ethical conduct. As explained by a operations manager (male, 35 years of age) "*Whatever happens around me, my firm optimistic thinking of the outcomes of ethical conduct helps me to stay positive. It in turn helps me to stay enthusiastic and do my work properly, without wasting time for worrying or criticizing things*". Another aspect that fosters motivation on the grounds of ethical optimism is the confidence and moral courage that enables the participants to act ethically even when faced with opposition or conformity. As explained by a Finance Manager who is an accountant (male, 40 years of age), "*My belief that good deeds would return rewards increases my confidence, and it helps me to stand straight against mismanagements and wrongful decisions at the workplace. Even when the majority agrees with the wrong decisions or keep silence I can stand out of the crowd because I am confident about the results of ethical behaviour*".

As revealed in this study, ethical optimism plays a crucial role in fostering work engagement among employees through the practice of responsible work, peace and happiness, self-discipline, and motivation. This was illuminated by the participants' descriptions of how their positive expectations of ethical behavior drive them to perform their duties responsibly with diligence, integrity, and precision. This is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that optimism is linked to greater work engagement through enhanced personal resourcefulness and resilience (Nes et al., 2010; Nes et al., 2005). This can be further justified on the grounds of positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002), which posits that positive psychological capacities such as optimism can significantly enhance employee performance and well-being. Concerns about punctuality and efficient resource use indicate the development of an ethical work culture, as suggested by Hough et al. (2020), where the sense of responsibility is a key component of work engagement as it motivates employees to invest effort and attention in their tasks, as seen in the work of Majeed et al. (2021) and Nes (2016). In addition to fostering responsible work, ethical optimism has been found to contribute to inner and outer peace and happiness. This finding supports the notion that positive psychological states, such as optimism, can buffer the effects of stress and promote well-being, which in turn enhances work engagement (Gordon and Mendes, 2021; Sahai and Bhowmik, 2018). In addition to responsible work, the analysis reveals two other critical themes through which ethical optimism influences work engagement: self-discipline and motivation. This is consistent with previous studies that suggest self-discipline as a crucial factor in fostering workplace engagement, as it enables individuals to regulate their emotions and behaviors in line with organizational values (Schaubroeck et al., 2012). It has also been contended that individuals with strong self-control are better able to align their actions with their ethical beliefs, leading to higher levels of engagement and productivity (Tangney et al., 2004). According to the findings, ethical optimism acts as a buffer against negative emotions, promoting sustained engagement even in challenging circumstances (Eisenberg et al. 2000) and enabling proper anger and stress management. Optimistic thinking as a positive psychological force helps individuals remain enthusiastic and focus on work, fostering a sense of hope and purpose, thereby significantly enhancing employee engagement (Snyder, 2002). Moral courage (Hannah et al., 2011) strengthens individuals' resolve to act in accordance with their values and stand against unethical decisions, promoting ethical behavior, and sustained engagement. The expectancy theory of motivation (Vroom, 1964) suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that they believe will lead to desired outcomes, justifying the motivation given by ethical optimism.

Grounds of Ethical Optimism

A thematic analysis of managers' responses to the determinants of their ethical optimism reveals a rich tapestry of influences that shape this essential trait in their professional and personal lives. Based on the data, five main themes–life experiences, social interactions, social influence, religion and culture, and personal values–were identified from the 15 codes. Life Experiences have emerged as a foundational theme underscoring the significant role of *previous failures*, *past incidents*, and *observations of others' experiences* in shaping ethical optimism.

Managers frequently cited their *life experiences* as critical learning moments that refined their ethical compasses and instilled resilient optimism. Both positive and negative experiences provided valuable lessons that influenced their current outlook and decision-making process. The theme of Closer Social Interactions highlights the impact of interpersonal relationships and social contexts on the development of ethical optimism. Managers pointed to *social interactions* and the *conduct of others*, particularly those who exemplify ethical behavior, as crucial determinants. *Ethical people and their conduct*, as observed in *previous jobs and workplace experiences*, serve as powerful models that reinforce the importance of maintaining an ethical and optimistic stance. These interactions shaped their values and provided a framework to navigate complex social and professional situations. Broader Society extends the influence of ethical optimism beyond immediate social circles to include formative environments such as *school*, *family background*, and *friends*. Managers acknowledged the role of *superiors and colleagues* in their professional development, noting that these broader societal influences laid the groundwork for their ethical outlooks. The values and norms instilled by these environments provided a moral foundation that supported their optimistic approach to life and work. The theme of Religion and Culture captures the deep-seated influence of *religious teachings* and *cultural values* on ethical optimism. Managers frequently referred to *religion* as a guiding force that instilled principles of integrity, compassion, and hope. It is interesting to note that the participants' concerns about ethical optimism were deeply rooted in the philosophical tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly their shared beliefs in karma and reincarnation, where many of them have referred to these Buddhist or Hindu religious and philosophical concepts based on the principles of cause and effect. Similarly, *cultural values* shaped by their community and heritage reinforced ethical behaviors and an optimistic worldview, aligning their personal and professional conduct with these deeply ingrained beliefs. Lastly, Personal Values and Beliefs were identified as core determinants of ethical optimism. Managers have highlighted that their *personal values*, shaped by a combination of the aforementioned factors, serve as the bedrock of their ethical decisions and optimistic outlooks. These internalized beliefs act as compasses, guiding their actions and attitudes in both challenging and routine circumstances.

The determinants of ethical optimism among managers are multifaceted, involving a complex interplay of personal experiences, social interactions, broader societal influences, and deeply held personal and cultural values. These findings not only contribute to the understanding of ethical optimism in management but also suggest practical implications for fostering this trait through targeted interventions in education, leadership development, and organizational culture. These findings align with broader literature, which suggests that personal experiences, particularly those involving ethical dilemmas or challenges, play a crucial role in refining an individual's moral framework and fostering resilience (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). Furthermore, the ability to learn from these experiences and apply those lessons in future situations is indicative of a growth mindset, which has been linked to both optimism and ethical decision making (Dweck, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2024). Closer social interactions represent environmental influence in shaping individual behavior, as highlighted in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) where broader societal influence reflects the role of socialization in shaping ethical beliefs and behaviors (Rest et al., 1999). Religion and culture play key roles in shaping moral values and ethical behavior (Vitell et al., 1993). The influence of karma as a motivating factor in Buddhist and Hindu philosophies aligns with the broader literature on ethical behavior, which suggests that individuals who adhere to belief systems that emphasize moral causes and effects are more likely to engage in consistent ethical practices (Singh & Verma, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2012). Deeply held personal values are considered central to ethical behavior in leadership roles (Brown & Treviño, 2006)

Outcomes of Ethical Optimism

The analysis of study participants' general experiences of ethical optimism indicated multifaceted benefits ranging from building strong supportive relationships to achieving professional success and maintaining personal happiness. Positive Relationships emerged as a prominent theme, characterized by the formation of *good friends* and the development of *long-term friendships*. Managers emphasized the role of ethical optimism in fostering *support from others*, suggesting that an optimistic and ethical approach in interactions cultivates strong, enduring bonds. These relationships not only provide emotional support but also contribute to a collaborative and trustful work environment. The second theme, happiness, underscores the personal well-being associated with ethical optimism. Managers reported experiencing a *happy personal life* and a *happy family life*, attributing this to the peace of mind and *low stress* levels that come with ethical living and maintaining an optimistic outlook. The sense of *satisfaction* and the perception of having *less problems to worry about* contribute to an overall state of contentment, where ethical optimism acts as a buffer against life's challenges, promoting a tranquil state of being. The respect and Loyalty of Others is another critical theme that reflects social capital gained through ethical optimism. Managers noted that they earned the *trust of others*, which bolstered their *reputation* and garnered *loyalty*. This theme suggests that ethical behavior, combined with optimism, enhances how managers are perceived by peers and subordinates, leading to deeper respect and steadfast loyalty within their professional circles. Lastly, the theme of Career Success encapsulates the professional benefits of ethical optimism. Managers

highlighted that this trait provided them with the *strength to face challenges* and confidence in achieving *targets*. They also play a crucial role in *securing opportunities* and *job security*. Ethical optimism was associated with *self-confidence*, free from the need for *false impressions*, which allowed managers to reach the *heights of their career ladder*. This theme illustrates how ethical optimism not only supports personal integrity but also drives tangible career advancement. Further, it was interesting to note that apart from the above-mentioned positive impacts, participants also mentioned that there are situations in which they experience challenges and difficulties in the short run due to the pressures of unethical individuals and unfavorable circumstances. However, they highlighted that in the long run, maintaining an ethical and optimistic approach is associated with broad-ranging benefits in both personal and organizational domains. This positive outlook not only enhances individual well-being but also fosters a work environment characterized by trust, respect, and loyalty, ultimately contributing to long-term career success.

Positive relationships, happiness, respect, loyalty to others, and career success emerged as outcomes of ethical optimism. Ethical optimism provides a foundation for maintaining supportive and collaborative relationships through emotional support and teamwork (Forman, 2010; West et al., 2009). The contribution of optimism and ethical values in enhancing overall happiness and well-being has been strongly justified (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Kumar & Dhiman, 2020) where ethical optimism acts as a psychological buffer that protects individuals from stress and enhances their ability to navigate life adversities, thereby promoting a tranquil state of being (Fredrickson, 2001). Ethical optimism not only enhances how individuals are perceived but also fosters a work environment characterized by mutual respect and loyalty, which are essential for long-term organizational success (Covey, 2006). Ethical behavior has been linked to long-term career success in previous research, as it fosters trust and reduces the need for impression management (Kacmar et al., 2012). Interestingly, the analysis also revealed that despite the long-term benefits, participants acknowledged experiencing short-term challenges due to pressure from unethical individuals and unfavorable circumstances. This aligns with the perspective that ethical behavior, although challenging at times, ultimately leads to sustainable success and satisfaction (Brown et al., 2005).

Conclusions

As shown by this study's findings, ethical optimism significantly enhances work engagement among managers through several key mechanisms. In summary, thematic analysis revealed that ethical optimism among managers is deeply influenced by a combination of life experiences, closer social interactions, broader societal influences, religion and culture, and personal values and beliefs, where they generally experience positive relationships, happiness, respect, loyalty, and career success. These determinants collectively shape a strong ethical framework and foster an optimistic outlook, which is crucial for navigating the complexities of leadership and management. Specifically, ethical optimism encourages work engagement through responsible work, peace, happiness, self-discipline, and motivation. These findings contribute to the understanding of how ethical optimism fosters a resilient, motivated, and disciplined workforce while fostering an ethical culture within organizations and encouraging employees to align their behaviors with their ethical beliefs. The high degree of ethical optimism observed in the study participants led to responsible work practices, in which duties were performed in a comprehensive and sensible manner. This was achieved through the full utilization of capacities, efficient use of time and resources, a sense of responsibility, pursuit of perfection, and open communication. These practices foster a work environment conducive to engagement as managers feel more connected to their tasks and committed to achieving high standards. Furthermore, ethical optimism contributed to both inner and outer peace and happiness, which was reflected in the participants' ability to maintain a peaceful mindset, extend cooperation with others, and avoid conflicts. This inner tranquility and external harmony not only enhanced personal well-being but also positively influenced the work atmosphere, encouraging greater collaboration and reducing friction within teams. Self-discipline emerged as another significant theme, in which ethical optimism reinforced self-control, self-consciousness, and adherence to rules.

As suggested by this study, ethical optimism not only enhances individual work engagement but also contributes to the overall ethical climate of the organization, promoting long-term organizational success. Finally, the study highlighted that ethical optimism bolstered confidence, motivation, and positive thinking, all of which are crucial for sustained work engagement. Managers who were ethically optimistic were more motivated to work, driven by a positive outlook and a strong belief in their ability to achieve their goals. This motivational boost, grounded in ethical optimism, is instrumental in keeping the participants engaged, productive, and committed to their roles. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that ethical optimism is a powerful driver of work engagement, influencing managers to act responsibly, maintain peace and happiness, exercise self-discipline, and remain motivated. These findings underscore the importance of fostering ethical optimism within organizational cultures to enhance overall work engagement and productivity by reinforcing the link between ethical behavior and work engagement (Febriansyah et al., 2023; Kincaid et al., 2008). Future research could further explore the role of organizational

support in reinforcing the positive effects of ethical optimism on work engagement. This study provides a broader basis for extending theoretical explanations to cover ethical optimism beyond the general construct of optimism. Additionally, investigating the potential moderating effects of organizational culture and leadership on the relationship between ethical optimism and work engagement could provide deeper insights into how these factors interact to influence employee behavior and performance.

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