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Ethical behaviour, organisational support and employee outcomes in driving public sector organisational performance

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the relationships between ethical behaviour, perceived organisational support (POS) and organisational performance within Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment (FMLE).

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses a positivist philosophy using survey data collected from 127 FMLE employees. Structural equation modelling with partial least squares estimation was used to analyse the data and test the hypotheses.

Findings – The results support the hypotheses, indicating that ethical behaviour and POS positively affect organisational performance. Furthermore, job satisfaction and organisational commitment are confirmed to act as mediating mechanisms in these relationships.

Research limitations/implications – This study extends the application of the Organisational Support Theory to the public sector context, specifically within the FMLE domain. It demonstrates the relevance of this

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theory in understanding the complex interplay between ethical conduct, POS and organisational performance in the public sector.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that by promoting ethical behaviour and fostering a supportive organisational environment, the FMLE can enhance employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment, ultimately contributing to improved organisational performance.

Social implications – Improving the performance of the FMLE through ethical practices and organisational support can lead to better regulation of the labour market, ensure fair labour practices and promote social justice and economic growth in Nigeria.

Originality/value – This study uniquely applies Organisational Support Theory to the Nigerian public sector, specifically the FMLE. It provides valuable insights into how ethical behaviour and POS influence organisational performance in a context that has received comparatively less scholarly attention than the private sector.

Keywords Perceived organisation support, Ethical behaviour, Job satisfaction, Organisational commitment, Organisational Support Theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In today's fast-changing environment, organisations encounter several obstacles that require them to adapt to new and complex ethical standards while ensuring their employees feel supported and valued. The pace of technological advancements, globalisation and shifting societal expectations has made it imperative for organisations to align their operations with ethical principles and foster a supportive workplace culture. This alignment is a moral obligation and a strategic necessity for sustaining long-term success.

Ethics and perceived organisational support (POS) are critical factors influencing organisational performance. Ethics pertains to the moral principles that direct an individual's or group's actions. In an organisational context, ethical behaviour encompasses adherence to laws and regulations, fairness, honesty, integrity and respect for stakeholders (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). The concept of POS encompasses workers' beliefs about how their organisation recognises their efforts and prioritises their wellbeing. (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Employees who feel that their organisation supports them respond with positive attitudes and behaviours.

Ethical behaviour and POS can enhance employee engagement in organisational citizenship behaviours, which are discretionary actions that are not directly a component of an employee's formal job requirements but contribute to the organisation's overall effectiveness. These behaviours include helping colleagues, being flexible with organisational changes and going above and beyond one's duties (Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012). When employees observe their organisation as supportive and ethical, they exhibit these behaviours, fostering a collaborative and productive work environment (Wang, Liu, & Zhang, 2021).

Moreover, ethical behaviour and POS can increase creativity and promote job satisfaction among employees. A supportive organisational environment that upholds ethical standards encourages employees to share innovative ideas and take initiative without fear of unfair treatment or retaliation. This environment also boosts job satisfaction by creating a sense of security and belonging, which are essential for employee wellbeing and motivation (Wang, Liu, & Zhang, 2021).

Ethical leadership has exhibited a positive influence over employee voice and psychological ownership. Employee voice refers to the willingness of employees to speak up with suggestions, concerns or feedback about organisational practices. Psychological ownership is the feeling of employees' possession and responsibility towards their organisation and its outcomes. Leaders who demonstrate ethical behaviour set a positive

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example, encouraging employees to express their views and take ownership of their work (Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012). This, in turn, contributes to organisational citizenship behaviours, as evidenced by Wang, Liu, and Zhang (2021).

Public service performance in Nigeria has been suboptimal, often due to a convergence of factors such as low employee job satisfaction, poor management practices and inadequate wages (Oyedele, 2015). This combination of issues presents significant challenges for the public sector, impacting its overall effectiveness and efficiency. These factors collectively contribute to reduced productivity. Employees' productivity declines when they are dissatisfied and poorly managed (Khan et al., 2023). This reduction in productivity is not only detrimental to the performance of individual employees but also impacts the overall efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. High employee turnover is another consequence, as dissatisfied employees are more likely to leave their positions for better opportunities. This turnover disrupts organisational continuity, increases recruitment and training costs and leads to a loss of institutional knowledge.

In addition, the reputation of public service organisations suffers. When employees are unhappy, and management is ineffective, it can lead to negative public perceptions. Stakeholders, including citizens and other government entities, may lose trust in the ability of public service organisations to perform their duties effectively. This reputational damage can have long-term consequences, making it difficult for public service organisations to attract and retain talent and secure the necessary resources and support. As noted by Ogunode, Salman, and Ayoko (2023) and Oladimeji and Abdulkareem (2023), these issues are prevalent in the Nigerian public sector. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of ethics and POS, many organisations struggle to implement effective strategies to promote these factors. Therefore, ethical behaviour and POS are crucial for nurturing a positive work environment and improving organisational performance. However, translating this recognition into practical, actionable strategies remains a challenge in Nigeria's public sector.

Therefore, this research aims to examine the impact of ethics and POS on organisational performance, with a particular focus on employee job satisfaction, commitment and performance within the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment (FMLE) in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. The FMLE is critical in shaping the Nigerian labour market, ensuring fair labour practices, social justice and economic growth.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, a theoretical review of Organisational Support Theory (OST) is presented, followed by hypothesis development based on a literature review. The paper then outlines the conceptual model and research methodology. Subsequently, the results are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical review: the Organisational Support Theory

This study's theoretical foundation is rooted in the OST, offering a framework to understand the links between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance. Originally conceptualised by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa (1986), OST suggests that employees develop beliefs about how much their organisation values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing. This perception, referred to as POS, significantly influences employee attitudes, behaviours and organisational outcomes.

According to OST, when employees observe substantial organisational support, they feel obligated to assist in reaching organisational objectives and develop deeper emotional commitment (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This concept is grounded in social exchange theory, where employees are motivated to reciprocate the support they receive (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Employees who sense high organisational

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support feel more valued and respected (Tortia et al., 2022a, 2022b), leading to enhanced job performance and reduced turnover intentions.

In the context of the FMLE, OST serves as an appropriate theoretical framework for examining the relationships between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance. Ethical behaviour – comprising compliance with laws, fairness, honesty and stakeholder respect – shapes employees' perceptions of organisational support. When employees view their organisation as ethical, they are more likely to feel valued, which boosts POS (Sharif & Scandura, 2014).

OST posits that increased POS from ethical behaviour leads to favourable employee outcomes, including greater job satisfaction, organisational commitment and performance (Miao et al., 2013). The theory also suggests that employee commitment and job satisfaction mediate the relationship between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Recent empirical evidence supports Ost's relevance in the public sector, highlighting POS as essential for improving employee attitudes, behaviours and performance (Kitterlin-Lynch et al., 2023; Rizvi et al., 2023).

Hypothesis formation

Ethical behaviour and organisational performance

Research demonstrates a strong connection between ethical practices and organisational performance. Studies show that ethical behaviour positively influences employee satisfaction, commitment and overall organisational outcomes. Koh & Boo's (2001) meta-analysis revealed positive correlations between ethical values, organisational commitment and job satisfaction. Organisations promoting ethical values tend to have more committed and satisfied employees, leading to better performance.

Research by Ruiz-Palomino & Martínez-Cañas (2014) found that ethical leadership enhances organisational citizenship behaviours and performance. Leaders who model ethical practices inspire employees to exceed basic job requirements, increasing productivity. Studies on ethical climate – shared perceptions of ethical norms guiding organisational decision-making – show its impact on employee outcomes. Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander (2008) found that strong ethical climates correlate with higher job satisfaction, organisational commitment and lower turnover intentions.

Schwepker & Schultz (2015) demonstrated that positive ethical climates improve sales performance by fostering trust and cooperation among sales personnel in specific functional areas. This shows how ethical behaviour drives performance in specialised business functions. In the public sector, Kim & Brymer (2011) found that ethical leadership enhances government agency performance through increased employee satisfaction, commitment and organisational citizenship behaviours. Public sector leaders who champion ethical practices create environments that boost employee engagement and improve service delivery. These findings consistently show that ethical behaviour contributes to organisational success through enhanced employee attitudes, behaviours and performance outcomes. Organisations investing in ethical practices can expect improved employee commitment, satisfaction and overall performance. Hence:

H1. Ethical behaviour enhances organisational performance.

Perceived organisational support and organisational performance

POS is recognised as a key influence on employee attitudes and behaviours, ultimately affecting organisational performance. POS reflects employees' perceptions of how much the organisation values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing. Research has consistently shown a positive link between POS and various organisational outcomes

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(Jufrizen, Harahap, & Khair, 2023). For instance, a meta-analysis by Rhoades & Eisenberger (2002) revealed that POS is positively correlated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and performance. When employees feel supported by their organisation, they tend to respond with positive attitudes and behaviours, including increased effort, loyalty and engagement in organisational citizenship behaviours.

Studies have further examined how POS enhances organisational performance. Aube, Rousseau, & Morin (2007) found that POS positively impacted employee task performance and citizenship behaviours, with this effect mediated by psychological empowerment. This suggests that when employees feel valued, they gain a greater sense of empowerment, boosting their performance and discretionary contributions.

Similarly, research by Caesens, Stinglhamber, & Marmier (2016) explored POS's effect on innovative work behaviour. Findings indicated that POS positively influenced innovation, with work engagement partially mediating this relationship. Employees who perceive prominent levels of support are more engaged, fostering their motivation to generate and apply new ideas, thus driving organisational success.

POS's significance has also been highlighted in the public sector. Narang & Singh (2012) studied POS and organisational commitment among Indian public sector employees, finding that POS strongly predicted organisational commitment – essential for a stable, motivated workforce in public organisations. Supported employees are more likely to remain committed, improving service quality and organisational performance. In addition, Kurtessis et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis on POS's impact on outcomes like job performance, citizenship behaviours and turnover intentions. The findings confirmed POS's positive effects, emphasising the importance of a supportive work environment in both public and private sectors. Thus:

H2. Perceived organisational support enhances organisational performance.

Ethical behaviour, perceived organisational support and employee outcomes

Research has increasingly focused on the dynamic relationship between ethical behaviour, POS and employee outcomes, exploring how these elements shape employee attitudes, behaviours and, ultimately, organisational success. Numerous studies have highlighted the combined impact of ethical behaviour and POS on positive employee outcomes (Kyei-Frimpong et al., 2024; Sekerka et al., 2014; Georgiadou, Amari, Swalhi, & Hofaidhllaoui, 2024). For instance, Newman, Round, Bhattacharya, & Roy (2017) examined how ethical leadership and POS influence employee creativity, finding that ethical leadership strengthens POS, which, in turn, enhances creativity. Employees who view their organisation as ethical and supportive are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to pursue innovative problem-solving.

Similarly, Sharif & Scandura (2014) explored the effects of ethical leadership and POS on employee outcomes, showing that both factors were positively linked to employee trust, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Their research also indicated that POS mediated the connection between ethical leadership and these outcomes, suggesting that ethical leaders cultivate a supportive work environment, thereby improving employee attitudes and behaviours.

In the public sector, Çavuş & Develi (2017) studied the impact of ethical climate and POS on organisational citizenship behaviours among Turkish public employees. Their findings revealed that both ethical climate and POS were positively associated with citizenship behaviours, with POS mediating the relationship. This underscores the value of ethical

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practices and supportive environments in promoting positive employee actions that contribute to public sector performance.

Furthermore, Miao, Newman, Yu, & Xu (2013) investigated the influence of ethical leadership and POS on job performance and organisational commitment within the Chinese public sector. Their study found that ethical leadership and POS positively correlated with job performance and commitment. These results suggest that public sector organisations that prioritise ethical leadership and provide supportive work environments are more likely to have engaged, committed employees, which ultimately enhances organisational performance. Hence:

H3. Satisfaction mediates the relationship between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance; and

H4. Employee commitment mediates the relationship between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance.

Conceptual model

The conceptual framework for this study as shown in Figure 1 is grounded in the theoretical foundation of the OST, which offers a compelling perspective on the interplay between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance. At the model's core is the proposition that ethical behaviour, characterised by adherence to laws, regulations, fairness, honesty and respect for stakeholders, can directly influence organisational performance (*H1*). This aligns with the notion that when organisations demonstrate a strong ethical stance, they are more likely to foster a positive reputation, build trust with stakeholders and ultimately enhance their overall effectiveness and efficiency. Alongside this direct relationship, the conceptual framework posits that POS plays a crucial role in shaping organisational performance (*H2*). According to OST, when employees perceive high levels of support and care from their organisation, they are more inclined to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviours that contribute to the organisation's success. However, the model further suggests that the relationships between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance are not straightforward. Instead, the framework proposes that two key mediating variables come into play: employee job satisfaction (*H3*) and employee organisational commitment (*H4*). The

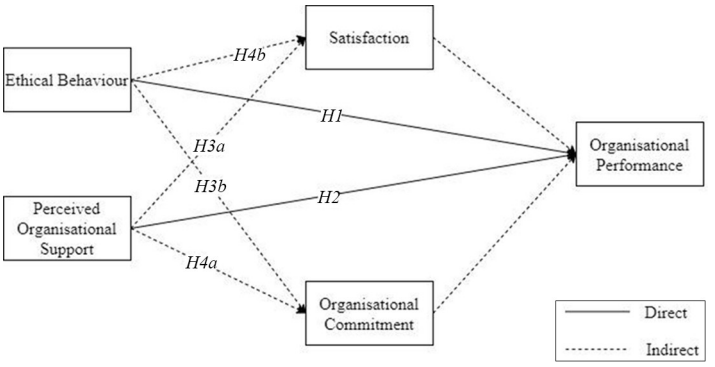

Figure 1. Conceptual model
Source: Authors' own work

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OST argues that ethical behaviour can enhance POS, as employees perceive the organisation's commitment to their wellbeing and contributions. This, in turn, is expected to lead to increased job satisfaction and organisational commitment, as employees feel valued and emotionally connected to the organisation. The mediation hypotheses (*H3* and *H4*) suggest that the positive influence of ethical behaviour and POS on organisational performance is not direct but rather channelled through these important employee-level outcomes. Satisfied and committed employees are more likely to exhibit behaviours and attitudes that foster organisational success, such as higher productivity, lower turnover and greater organisational citizenship.

Methodology

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy, emphasising objectivity and using empirical evidence to test hypotheses. This approach is well-suited for the research objectives, as the study aims to examine the hypothesised structural relationships between ethical behaviour, POS and organisational performance. The study was conducted between September 2023 and February 2024. The research is centred on the FMLE, which serves as the case study for this investigation. The choice of the FMLE is strategic, as it is a sizable organisation with a strong reputation, making it an appropriate reference point for understanding the interplay between the key variables of interest. The findings from this study will benefit the FMLE and contribute to the broader body of knowledge on ethics, POS and organisational performance, particularly in the public sector context. The study focused on the FMLE, which has a total population of 185 employees across various departments, including the Labour Officer, Factory, Co-operative, Trade Testing and Administrative departments. Using Taro Yamane's formula for sample size determination with a purposive sampling technique, an effective sample size of 127 respondents was calculated, which provides a sufficient basis for data collection and analysis.

The primary mode of data collection was a structured questionnaire, which was used to gather information from the respondents. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A covers the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, whereas Section B focuses on eliciting data related to ethical behaviour, POS, organisational performance, job satisfaction and employee commitment. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, the questionnaire was subjected to a thorough validation process. Three experts from the Department of Public Administration of the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, reviewed the instrument to determine its appropriateness and to assess its face and content validity. Similarly, a pilot test of ten respondents was also adopted to ensure reliability. The Cronbach's alpha score of the constructs was over the 0.7 minimum threshold. Necessary corrections were made to enhance the quality of the questionnaire. Common method bias (CMB) test was conducted using Harman's Single Factor analysis. The result showed that the first item had a value of 25.32, and the overall item score was 76.55; therefore, there are no issues with CMB in the data. The data collected for this study were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) with partial least squares (PLS) estimation. SEM-PLS is a powerful multivariate statistical technique that examines complex relationships among latent variables and their observed indicators (Hair et al., 2011).

This study used well-established scales to measure the key variables in the conceptual framework. Ethical behaviour was measured using a ten-item scale adapted from Treviño et al. (1998). The items assessed how employees adhere to laws and regulations, act with honesty and integrity, treat others fairly, respect individual rights and uphold the organisation's ethical values. Also, POS was measured using a five-item scale developed by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa ((1986). The items evaluated the extent to which employees

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perceive that the organisation values their contributions, cares about their wellbeing and is willing to provide assistance when needed. Similarly, job satisfaction was assessed using a four-item scale adapted from Spector's (1997) Job Satisfaction Survey. The items measured employees' satisfaction with the nature of their work, opportunities for growth and development, recognition received and overall job satisfaction. Organisational commitment was measured using a five-item scale based on the work of Meyer et al. (1991). The items evaluated employees' affective commitment, such as their willingness to exert extra effort for the organisation, sense of belonging and pride in being part of the organisation. Moreover, organisational performance was measured through employee self-perceptions, using a validated multi-dimensional scale adapted from previous studies (e.g. Dollinger & Golden, Dollinger & Golden, 1992), which has been adopted in contemporary studies such as Ahmad & Raja (2021) and Alvi, Jabeen, Jawaid, & Kaur (2020).

Results and discussion

According to the demographic information as displayed in Table 1, the sample comprises 77 male (60.6%) and 50 female (39.4%) respondents. The majority of the respondents work as Labour officers (40.9%), followed by those in Trade Testing (26.8%), Administrative roles (19.7%), Factory (8.7%) and Co-operative positions (3.9%). The age distribution shows that most of the respondents (65.4%) are between 21 and 40 years old, with 29.9% being 41 years and above and only 4.7% being less than 21 years old. In terms of length of service, 52.8% of the respondents have less than 20 years of experience, while 47.2% have between 21 and 40 years of experience. There are no respondents with more than 41 years of service.

Measurement model

The measurement model assessment as shown in Table 2 indicates that all the items have factor loadings greater than 0.705, the recommended threshold for retaining items (Hair et al., 2011).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	77	60.6
Female	50	39.4
Department		
Labour officers	52	40.9
Factory	11	8.7
Co-operative	5	3.9
Trade testing	34	26.8
Administrative	25	19.7
Age		
Less than 21 years	6	4.7
21–40 years	83	65.4
41 years and above	38	29.9
Length of service		
Less than 20 years	67	52.8
21–40 years	60	47.2
41 years and above	0	0

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Table 2. Validity and reliability assessment

Construct	Items	Description	Item loadings
Ethical behaviour	EB1	I always adhere to laws and regulations in my work	0.735
CA = 0.807	EB2	I always act with honesty and integrity in my job	0.732
CR = 0.824	EB3	I consistently treat my colleagues and stakeholders fairly	0.756
AVE = 0.551	EB4	I respect the rights and dignity of all individuals in the organisation	0.723
	EB5	I am committed to ethical decision-making in my daily work activities	0.765
	EB6	I always strive to do what is morally right, even when it is difficult	0.760
	EB7	I ensure my actions do not harm the interests of the organisation or its stakeholders	0.743
	EB8	I am transparent and accountable in my work-related actions and decisions	0.741
	EB10	I consistently uphold the ethical values and principles of the organisation	0.726
Perceived organisational support (POS)	POS1	The organisation values my contribution to its wellbeing	0.741
CA = 0.874	POS2	The organisation strongly considers my goals and values	0.723
CR = 0.909	POS3	The organisation shows a great deal of concern for me	0.782
AVE = 0.567	POS4	The organisation is willing to help me when I need a special favour	0.761
	POS5	The organisation cares about my general satisfaction at work	0.719
Job satisfaction	JS1	I am satisfied with the nature of the work I perform	0.738
CA = 0.872	JS2	I am satisfied with the opportunities for personal growth and development in my job	0.734
CR = 0.901	JS3	I am satisfied with the recognition I receive for doing a good job	0.749
AVE = 0.596	JS4	Overall, I am satisfied with my job	0.746
Organisational commitment	OC1	I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected to help this organisation be successful	0.726
CA = 0.879	OC2	I talk up this organisation to my friends as a great organisation to work for	0.723
CR = 0.913	OC3	I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organisation	0.763
AVE = 0.577	OC4	This organisation has a great deal of personal meaning for me	0.739
Organisational performance	OP1	My organisation achieved its set performance targets	0.735
CA = 0.811	OP2	My organisation maintains a high level of goodwill in the labour market	0.738
CR = 0.832	OP3	My organisation has improved its operational efficiency	0.724
AVE = 0.599	OP4	My organisation has improved on fair labour practices	0.727
	OP6	My organisation has successfully adapted to global changes in the labour industry	0.741
	OP7	Overall, my organisation's performance has improved	0.758

Source(s): Author's own work

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The Cronbach's alpha values for all the constructs exceed 0.710, indicating acceptable internal consistency reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The composite reliability (CR) values are all above 0.715, suggesting good composite reliability (Hair et al., 2011). Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater than 0.5, demonstrating adequate convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The HTMT values range from 0.268 to 0.719, with the highest value between Organisational Performance (OP) and Job Satisfaction (SAT) at 0.719. According to the HTMT criterion, discriminant validity is established when the HTMT value is below 0.85 or 0.90, depending on the context. All the HTMT values are well below the 0.85 threshold, suggesting that the constructs demonstrate adequate discriminant validity. The relatively low HTMT values as shown in Table 3 indicate that the constructs in this study are distinct and measure different aspects rather than being too closely related or overlapping. This provides evidence that the measures used capture the unique dimensions of the study.

Structural model

The results of the structural model is shown in Table 4. First, the results supported the hypothesis that Ethical Behaviours (EB) positively affect OP. Specifically, the analysis revealed a significant positive path coefficient ($\beta = 0.172$) with a *t*-value of 2.822, which is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Similarly, the hypothesis that POS positively

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Heterotrait and Monotrait criterion)

Constructs	OC	EB	OP	POS	SAT
OC					
EB	0.331				
OP	0.610	0.583			
POS	0.269	0.319	0.499		
SAT	0.481	0.412	0.668	0.334	

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	β	SD	*t*-value	*p*-values
Direct effect				
H1. EB → OP	0.172	0.061	2.822	0.002
H2. POS → OP	0.188	0.053	4.129	0.000
Indirect effect				
H3a. POS → SAT → OP	0.077	0.026	2.713	0.003
H3b. EB → OC → OP	0.068	0.031	2.521	0.007
H4a. POS → OC → OP	0.040	0.022	1.880	0.026
H4b. EB → SAT → OP	0.119	0.033	3.479	0.000
Total effect				
EB → OP	0.264	0.011	5.134	0.000
POS → OP	0.314	0.043	6.158	0.000
$R^2 = 0.522$				

Note(s): Model fit = RMSEA = 0.043; SRMR = 0.051; χ^2 = 5,344.110; χ^2/df = 2.18; NFI = 0.655
Source(s): Author's own work

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affects OP was also supported. The path coefficient ($\beta = 0.188$) was found to be positive and statistically significant (t-value = 4.129, $p < 0.001$). The analysis also examined the indirect effects of these constructs on organisational performance. The results confirmed the hypothesis that POS positively affects OP through the mediating role of SAT. The indirect effect size was 0.077, with a statistically significant t-value of 2.713 ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the findings supported the hypothesis that EB positively affects OP through the mediating commitment (OC) ($\beta = 0.068$, t-value = 2.521). The study also examined sequential mediation effects, where POS and EB indirectly influence OP through the sequential combination of mediators. The results confirmed that POS positively affects OP via the sequential mediation of OC and SAT (indirect effect size = 0.040, t-value = 1.880, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, EB was found to have a positive indirect effect on OP through the sequential mediation of SAT and OC (indirect effect size = 0.119, t-value = 3.479, $p < 0.001$).

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the relationships between ethical behaviour, POS and the performance of the FMLE. The results provide empirical evidence to support the hypotheses derived from the OST. The findings from this study provide strong empirical support for *H1*, which proposed that ethical behaviour positively influences the performance of the FMLE. This result aligns with the extensive body of literature documenting the positive impact of ethical practices on various organisational outcomes. When organisations demonstrate a strong commitment to upholding ethical principles, such as fairness, honesty and respect for stakeholders, they are more likely to build a positive reputation and foster trust among their employees, customers and the broader community. This, in turn, can enhance the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation.

In the specific context of the FMLE, this finding suggests that promoting ethical behaviour among employees can have a tangible impact on the ministry's performance. By cultivating a culture of integrity and ethical decision-making, the FMLE can potentially contribute to improved service delivery, better compliance with labour regulations and enhanced overall performance. The existing literature provides strong theoretical and empirical support for this relationship. & Researchers such as Koh & Boo (2001) and Ruiz-Palomino & Martínez-Cañas (2014) have consistently demonstrated that organisations that prioritise ethical values and practices tend to experience positive outcomes, including increased organisational commitment, job satisfaction and overall organisational performance.

By prioritising ethical behaviour within the FMLE, the ministry can leverage this key driver to strengthen its reputation, build trust with stakeholders and ultimately enhance its ability to fulfil its critical mandate of regulating the labour market, ensuring fair labour practices and promoting social justice and economic growth in Nigeria. This finding underscores the strategic importance of embedding ethical principles into the core of the FMLE's operations and decision-making processes.

The findings from this study provide robust support for *H2*, which explored the relationship between POS and the performance of the FMLE. The results clearly indicate that POS is positively associated with the overall performance of the ministry, aligning with the core principles of OST. The OST posits that when employees perceive their organisation as valuing their contributions and caring about their wellbeing, they are more likely to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviours that ultimately contribute to the organisation's success (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This concept of reciprocation is a fundamental tenet of the theory, and the current study's findings provide empirical evidence to support this notion in the context of the FMLE.

This finding implies that cultivating a supportive work environment within the FMLE is crucial. When employees feel valued, empowered and cared for by the ministry, they are more likely to exhibit positive behaviours and attitudes that enhance service delivery,

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productivity and overall organisational performance. This insight aligns with the research conducted by Aube et al. (2007), who found that POS was positively associated with improved task performance and organisational citizenship behaviours among employees. The researchers suggested that when employees perceive high levels of organisational support, they experience a greater sense of empowerment, which drives their willingness to go above and beyond their formal job requirements for the organisation's benefit.

In the context of the FMLE, this finding underscores the need for the ministry to prioritise initiatives and policies that foster a supportive work environment. This may include, but is not limited to, effective communication channels, fair and transparent performance management systems, professional development opportunities and recognition programs that demonstrate the ministry's commitment to its employees' wellbeing and success. By cultivating a culture of organisational support within the FMLE, the ministry can harness the positive reciprocal behaviours of its employees, leading to enhanced service delivery, improved productivity and, ultimately, stronger overall organisational performance. This strategic focus on POS can be crucial for the FMLE to enhance its effectiveness and fulfil its critical mandate within the Nigerian labour market.

The findings from this study provide strong support for *H3* and *H4*, which examined the mediating roles of employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment in the relationships between ethical behaviour, POS and the performance of the FMLE. The results confirm that both job satisfaction and organisational commitment act as important mediating mechanisms, as predicted by the OST. This suggests that when employees perceive the FMLE as exhibiting ethical behaviour and providing strong organisational support, these perceptions can enhance their job satisfaction and commitment to the ministry, which in turn contribute to improved organisational performance.

The existing literature, as exemplified by the studies of Al Halbusi et al. (2024) and Miao et al. (2013), has consistently demonstrated the pivotal role of employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment in mediating the relationships between organisational factors, such as ethical behaviour and POS and overall organisational outcomes. When employees feel satisfied with their jobs and firmly commit to the organisation, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated and willing to go the extra mile to contribute to the organisation's success. This heightened level of employee engagement and dedication can lead to tangible improvements in service delivery, productivity and overall organisational performance.

In the context of the FMLE, these findings underscore the importance of fostering a work environment that not only promotes ethical behaviour but also cultivates a strong sense of organisational support. By addressing the ethical and supportive aspects of the ministry's operations, the FMLE can enhance employees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment, subsequently driving improved performance and effectively fulfilling its mandate. This insight suggests that the FMLE should consider implementing comprehensive strategies that address both the ethical and supportive dimensions of the work environment. This may involve developing robust ethical codes of conduct, providing ethical leadership training, implementing fair and transparent performance management systems and offering meaningful employee recognition and development opportunities.

By addressing these critical factors, the FMLE can create a work environment that fosters employee job satisfaction and commitment, ultimately contributing to enhanced organisational performance and delivering high-quality public services to stakeholders. The mediating roles of these employee-level variables highlight the importance of aligning organisational practices with employee needs and wellbeing to achieve optimal organisational outcomes.

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Theoretical implications

The study's theoretical contribution resides in its innovative application of the OST to the public sector context, specifically within the FMLE domain. By doing so, the findings broaden the existing literature by illustrating the relatedness of this theory in comprehending the complex interplay between ethical conduct, POS and organisational performance in the public sector. This area has traditionally garnered comparatively less scholarly attention than the private sector, creating a significant knowledge gap in our understanding of public sector dynamics.

The study's findings underscore the relevance of OST in clarifying how ethical behaviour and employees' perceptions of their organisation's support can significantly influence organisational performance, even in the distinct environment of public sector entities like the FMLE (Tortia et al., 2022a, 2022b). The research demonstrates that despite public sector organisations' unique characteristics and constraints, including their bureaucratic nature, political influences and service-oriented missions, OST remains a valuable framework for understanding employee–organisation relationships and their impact on performance outcomes.

Consequently, this research expands the scope and applicability of OST beyond its traditional private sector focus, enriching our understanding of the dynamics that shape organisational outcomes in the public realm. This theoretical extension provides valuable insights for public sector management and policy development while contributing to the broader academic discourse on organisational behaviour and performance in governmental institutions. The findings suggest that the principles of OST can be effectively adapted and applied to public sector contexts, opening new avenues for research and practical applications in public administration.

Practical implications

Based on the study's findings, several important practical implications exist for the FMLE and similar public sector organisations. The research demonstrates that promoting ethical behaviour and fostering a supportive organisational environment can significantly enhance organisational performance through improved employee job satisfaction and commitment. To implement these findings, the FMLE should prioritise the development of clear ethical guidelines and standards, establish robust ethical training programs and ensure consistent enforcement of ethical practices across all levels of the organisation.

The public sector managers should also focus on creating a supportive work environment by implementing fair performance management systems, providing professional development opportunities and establishing effective communication channels that demonstrate the organisation's commitment to employee wellbeing. In addition, they should invest in leadership development programs that emphasise ethical leadership behaviours and the importance of providing organisational support.

Regular assessment of employee perceptions of organisational support and ethical climate could help identify areas for improvement. These practical steps can lead to increased employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment, resulting in improved service delivery, better regulation of the labour market and enhanced overall organisational performance. The findings suggest that public sector organisations can create a more effective and efficient work environment that benefits both employees and stakeholders by focusing on these key areas.

Limitations and suggestions for future studies

The cross-sectional research design limits the ability to infer causal relationships over time. Future studies could use longitudinal approaches to better understand the dynamic nature of the relationships investigated. In addition, the study was conducted within the specific context of the FMLE in Ilorin, Nigeria, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other public sector organisations or geographic regions. Replicating this study in different

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public sector settings or across multiple organisations could provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of the findings. Similarly, a notable limitation of this study is the reliance on employee self-reports for measuring organisational performance. While employees can provide valuable insights into operational effectiveness and immediate performance outcomes, they may lack access to comprehensive performance data and strategic metrics that would be available to managers and executives. Future research would benefit from triangulating employee perceptions with objective performance data and management assessments to provide a more complete picture of organisational performance.

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