

The Effect of Sustainable Human Resource Management on the Sustainable Competitive Advantage in the University of Gondar: Serial Mediation Role of Organizational Justice and Wellbeing

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Abstract

Strategic HRM researchers have been increasingly diverted from traditional HRM approach to Sustainable HRM (S-HRM) as a new strategic view to enhance Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) of institutions. But most of studies focused from inside-out or economic-centered while common good sustainable approach initiated from outside-in approach that focuses on the variables such as Well Being (WB) and Organizational Justice (OJ) to achieve ecological, economic and social goals. From integration of social exchange theory, which focuses on the exchange of sustainable HRM practices of organization and perceived social (organizational justice) and individual (wellbeing), and resource-based view, which focus on the stock of wellbeing is a source of sustainable competitive advantage, to show the serial mediation of OJ and Wellbeing between sustainable HRM and SCA. We analyzed the data collected from 276 employees of university of Gondar using jamovi software and partial least square approach of structural equation model as it holds sample size that it's alternative. The finds revealed that the sequential role of justice and well-being between S-HRM to SCA (IE1, $\beta = 0.012$, $p = 0.010$); the effect of S-HRM on SCA mediated solely through OJ (IE2, $\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.001$) the mediating role of WB (IE3, $\beta = 0.039$, $p = 0.009$) between S-HRM and SCA. Accordingly, we recommended that serial mediation of WB and OJ between S-HRM and SCA using SET an RBV theories to solve sustainability goal complex and strategic perspective of HEIs. To enhance competitiveness, HEIs should have better to enhance OJ and WB.

Keywords: human resource; sustainability; organizational justice; competitive advantage

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1. Introduction

As economies shift towards knowledge-based industries, the demand for skilled workers has grown, highlighting the critical role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in attracting, developing, and retaining top talent to secure sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) (Kaufman & Becker, 2022). Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) aligns HR practices with organizational goals to foster innovation and ensure sustained success (Kramar, 2022; Farndale et al., 2021). In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) like the UoG, SHRM is essential for managing academic and administrative complexities while improving faculty productivity, research output, and institutional reputation (Becker et al., 2023). Therefore, this implies to the UoG, which operates in a developing country context with resource constraints and institutional inefficiencies, there is a need to develop a strategic HRM approach that not only responds to immediate academic and administrative goals but also addresses long-term sustainability challenges (Tadesse & Henok, 2021; Zewde & Mulu, 2019).

Although SHRM research largely recognizes the importance of context (Cooke, 2018), the Sustainable HRM (S-HRM) literature has mostly neglected its influence (for an exception, see Aust, Muller-Camen, & Poutsma, 2018). Traditional HRM models, which are often focused primarily on economic performance, are increasingly seen as insufficient for addressing broader sustainability concerns (Ehnert & Harry, 2022; Stankeviciute & Savanevicien, 2021), so that the transition to S-HRM, which balances social, ecological, and economic outcomes, could provide the UoG with a competitive edge, improving both institutional performance and its alignment with global sustainability trends. S-HRM, an extension of strategic HRM, prioritizes the long-term development and regeneration of both human and environmental resources, aligning HR practices with the broader goal of sustainability (Ehnert & Harry, 2022; Stankeviciute & Savanevicien, 2021). As scholars argued that integrating sustainability into HR practices is increasingly viewed as essential for long-term institutional viability or SCA (Stankeviciute & Savanevicien, 2021; Velte, 2022). Hence, this shows S-HRM may have positive effect on sustainable competitive advantage of UoG.

However, academics' views about what S-HRM means are diverse (such as green HRM, socially responsible HRM, and the triple bottom line approach), and their main focus is outside-in that is economic centered view of HRM, so that the effectiveness of S-HRM practices is uncertain and it can be solved through outside-in approach of common good S-HRM via aligning organizational practices with environmental and social sustainability while ensuring economic success (Ehnert et al., 2020). Similarly, the different approaches in the sustainability and HR literature differ in their rationale for sustainability, although they all share a common focus on human capital development and management to generate a positive impact on the three pillars of sustainability—human resources can contribute to the economic dimension by acting as a possible and valuable source of SCA, to the environmental dimension through practices that favor environmental preservation and long-term reduction of negative externalities, and to the social dimension by adopting behaviors oriented towards society's overall development and progress (such as well-being and justice) (Campos-García et al., 2023). Recent research emphasizes the importance of aligning HRM with broader sustainable development goals, as HEIs are pivotal in preparing a responsible workforce that can address social, economic, and environmental challenges (Tibebu, 2023). S-HRM, an extension of SHRMP, focuses on long-term sustainability, balancing social, economic, and environmental needs. This includes socially responsible practices that promote employee well-being and justice, essential for long-term organizational success (Ehnert et al., 2022; Stankeviciute & Savanevicien, 2024) and they are source of sustainable economic goal. Thus, HEIs increasingly recognize the need to embed well-being and justice within their HRM frameworks to remain relevant and effective in a globally connected educational environment (Vu, 2023; Luu & Shen, 2023). Therefore, S-HRM, with the focus of three pillars of sustainability driven practices, has impact on the SCA when it has additional purpose of touching HR outcomes such as wellbeing and organizational justice.

A critical aspect of S-HRM is the emphasis on organizational justice and employee wellbeing, both of which serve as key mediators in achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Vu, 2022; Luu, 2022; Shen & Bensen, 2023). Given the resource constraints at the UoG, the introduction of fair HR practices can mitigate feelings of inequity, reduce turnover intentions, and enhance the overall organizational climate (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 2009), while promoting employee wellbeing can lead to increased employee motivation and engagement, as well as reduced burnout and stress (Harter et al., 2002; Bakker & Demerouti, 2020). Therefore, relationship between S-HRM practices and SCA is not straightforward, with recent studies highlighting the need for mediating factors such as organizational justice and employee wellbeing to fully realize the benefits of S-HRM on the SCA (Lepak & Snell, 2022). Therefore, the mediating role of organizational justice and wellbeing needs extra studies.

Besides, models linking SHRM practices with sustainable development often suggest direct pathways, yet emerging research indicates that relationships are likely more complex, mediated by factors like employee well-being and organizational justice (Lepak et al., 2022; Macke & Genari, 2023; Xu et al., 2024). This shows the serial mediation model, where organizational justice and well-being act as sequential mediators between S-HRM and SCA. This model suggests that organizational justice (which influences fairness perceptions) improves employee well-being, which in turn contributes to enhanced performance and competitive advantage (Hayes, 2013). While the role of organizational justice and well-being in HRM outcomes has been well documented, research on their serial mediation is still emerging (Li et al., 2022). Previous studies have

primarily focused on direct mediation without exploring how these factors work together in a chain to impact organizational outcomes, particularly in the public university context. This can be addressed by explicitly testing the serial mediation model at the UoG, where justice influences well-being, which then influences faculty performance and SCA that can be explained through an integrative theoretical approach combining Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Resource-Based View (RBV), where, SET (Blau, 1960) explains the social exchanges that lead to higher organizational justice and improved wellbeing when university's S-HRM, while RBV (Barney, 1991) emphasizes that these outcomes are strategic resources that contribute to long-term competitive advantage.

Traditionally, Ethiopian HEIs have followed conventional HRM models that prioritize immediate academic and administrative needs over long-term sustainability (Lozano et al., 2022). As noted by scholars, the successful integration of S-HRM at universities like Gondar requires institutional commitment to social responsibility and environmental sustainability alongside economic success (Ehnert et al., 2020). Moreover, a focus on socially responsible HRM and green HRM practices could enhance the University's reputation as a sustainable organization, attracting top talent and external funding while positioning the University as a leader in addressing global challenges such as climate change, corruption, psychological health, poverty, and inequality (Hollensbe et al., 2014). Therefore, this highlights the need for a shift toward S-HRM practices that integrate long-term sustainability such as employee wellbeing and organizational justice, leading to more effective and sustainable organizational outcomes in the case of UoG.

The primary objective of this study is: to examine the impact of SHRM on SCA at the University of Gondar (UoG), the role of wellbeing and organizational justice as mediators in this relationship, and the serial mediation effect of organizational justice on employee wellbeing within the nexus of S-HRM and SCA, integrating SET and RBV to explore these linkages. This study extends the existing literature on the relationship between S-HRM and SCA by incorporating serial mediations, adding complexity to prior research that has mainly addressed separate mediations. In doing so, it fills a significant empirical gap, particularly within the context of Ethiopian HEI. Methodologically, the study advances the application of separate and serial mediation models in Strategic HRM research, while practically providing valuable insights for administrators at UoG on how to enhance SCA in line with both local and global higher education standards, by highlighting how dual mediations can foster a more strategic and sustainable approach to organizational success.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Operational Terms

S-HRM: S-HRM refers to the integration of HR practices with sustainability concept that promote long-term organizational success by addressing the socio-economic and psychological needs of employees, and ecological needs thus fostering their commitment and enhancing the overall competitive edge of institutions, such as universities (Mohiuddin et al., 2022; Jabbour & Santos, 2020).

Psychological Wellbeing: Psychological wellbeing is a holistic measure of an individual's life satisfaction, encompassing cognitive and emotional evaluations. It includes self-acceptance, personal growth, a sense of purpose, quality relationships, environmental mastery, and autonomy, all contributing to a person's overall sense of life fulfillment and mental health (Ryff, 1989; Keyes et al., 2022).

Organizational Justice: Organizational justice pertains to the perception of fairness within an organization, which is categorized into distributive justice (fairness in outcomes), procedural justice (fairness in decision-making processes), and interactional justice (fairness in interpersonal treatment). These perceptions influence employee morale, commitment, and retention (Colquitt et al., 2019; Luu, 2023).

Sustainable Competitive Advantage: SCA is the ability of an organization to consistently outperform its competitors by utilizing resources that are rare, valuable, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable, thus

ensuring long-term success. These resources form the basis for strategic human resource management practices that contribute to a firm's enduring advantage (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 2020).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

SET, as proposed by Blau (1964) and extended by Gouldner (1960), argues that relationships in organizations are based on a reciprocal exchange: when organizations invest in employees, employees are motivated to reciprocate through greater commitment, trust, and performance. This idea is crucial for understanding how S-HRM practices influence organizational justice and employee wellbeing. Specifically, S-HRM practices, which emphasize fairness, respect, and long-term development, promote an exchange that leads employees to perceive the organization as just, which in turn influences their mental and emotional health (Colquitt et al., 2001). Recent studies for instance, Jiang et al. (2019) argue that when employees perceive HR practices as fair and supportive, they experience greater trust and satisfaction, which subsequently boosts organizational justice. In this serial mediation model, S-HRM practices create an exchange relationship where employees perceive their organization as fair, leading to higher levels of organizational justice (Jiang et al., 2013). This in turn improves employee wellbeing, as fairness in the workplace mitigates stress and promotes higher job satisfaction (Zheng et al., 2021). The reciprocal exchange in SET, thus, provides a foundation for employees to contribute to organizational goals, fostering a sustained competitive advantage.

On the other hand, RBV (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) suggests that organizations gain a sustainable competitive advantage by creating and leveraging valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources—including human capital. Employee wellbeing is seen as a strategic resource that directly impacts organizational performance and competitive positioning. High employee wellbeing is associated with increased engagement, creativity, and job satisfaction, which contribute to long-term organizational success (Harter et al., 2002; Bakker & Demerouti, 2020). Empirically, Cohen & Latham (2022) found that organizations that prioritize employee wellbeing, through S-HRM practices, create a productive workforce that delivers long-term innovation and efficiency, key elements of sustainable competitive advantage in sectors like higher education. In line with RBV, employee wellbeing represents a strategic asset—as employees who feel valued and treated fairly are more likely to stay with the organization, contribute ideas, and maintain high levels of performance. Therefore, to study the serial mediation of organizational justice and employee wellbeing between S-HRM practices and sustainable competitive advantage, an integrative theoretical framework that combines SET and RBV is highly appropriate. Figure 1 shows the serial mediation of organizational justice and wellbeing between S-HRM and SCA.

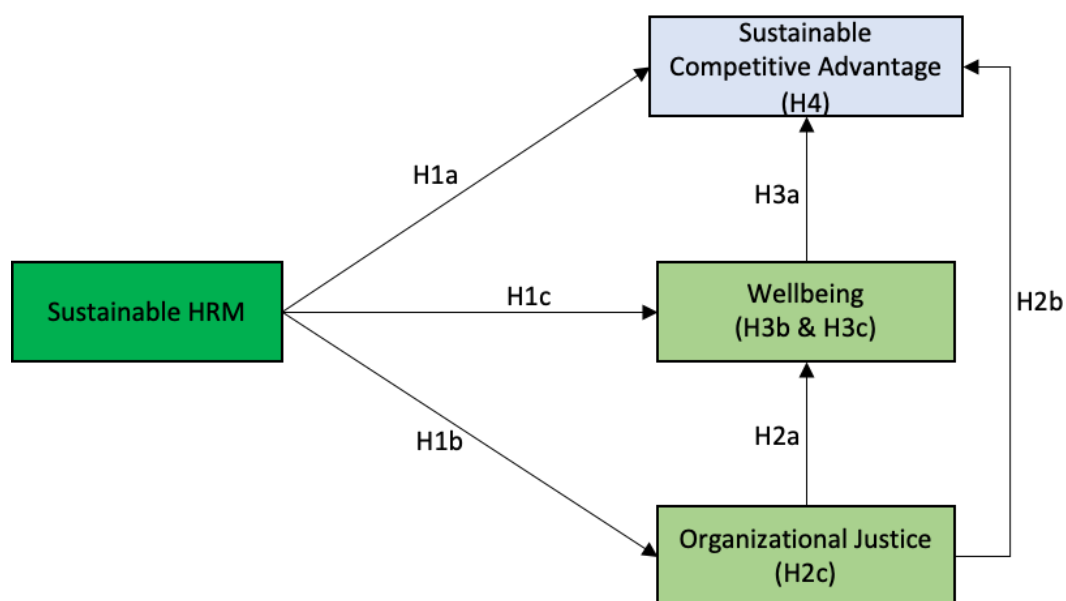


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.

2.3. Hypothesis Development

2.3.1. S-HRM on Organizational Justice, Wellbeing, and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

S-HRM refers to HR practices that not only focus on short-term organizational goals but also emphasize long-term employee development, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. These practices are assumed to improve an organization's competitiveness by fostering a more motivated, skilled, and ethical workforce (Baum, 2015; Jabbour & Santos, 2008). However, some studies suggest that the relationship is more complex and contingent upon contextual factors, such as organizational culture or the alignment of HR practices with strategic goals (Delery & Doty, 1996). For example, a study in a developing country context (such as Ethiopia) may reveal that, despite the adoption of sustainable HR practices, institutional or resource limitations might constrain their ability to create sustainable competitive advantage (Ochieng et al., 2022). A recent study by Hussain et al. (2023) in HEIs in Ethiopia shows that S-HRM practices have a significant effect on organizational performance or competitive advantage. The findings from Tariq & Fiaz (2022) indicate that HRM practices focused on employee development and social responsibility can enhance both individual and organizational performance, though they caution about the potential misalignment between HR practices and institutional goals. Other studies show a positive relationship, arguing that HR practices such as employee engagement, sustainability training, and work-life balance directly contribute to enhancing organizational capability (Renwick et al., 2013). SET posits that when employees get training and development, they will become more competent in their role. Empirical evidences on web-based survey from 293 full-time employees of the UAE's oil-and-gas sector, Almarzooqi, Khan and Khalid (2019) concluded that S-HRM has a significant direct effect on sustainable employee performance and perceived sustainable organizational support. Hence, this implies there is direct and positive effect of S-HRM on the SCA.

Hypothesis 1a: Sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM) practices directly enhance sustainable competitive advantage in the UoG.

Employee wellbeing is central to modern HRM practices, which aim not only at productivity but also at creating a supportive and fulfilling work environment. S-HRM practices, such as flexible work arrangements, health and safety programs, and career development opportunities, are designed to promote both individual and collective wellbeing (Kramar, 2014). However, some conflicting evidence suggests that the relationship between HRM and wellbeing weak and it may be moderated by job characteristics, personal values, and national culture (Shin & Hur, 2022). Similar evidences were seen from empirical studies (Asrat et al., 2022; Bekele et al., 2023). On the other side, wellbeing is increasingly recognized as a key indicator of an organization's ability to retain talent, foster innovation, and improve job satisfaction (Renaud et al., 2022), which implies there is direct effect of HRM on the wellbeing of employees. A growing body of literature links S-HRM with enhanced employee wellbeing. According to SET of Blau (1960), when employees get input in the form of HRM, they will reciprocate through positive attitude such as wellbeing. For example, Baum et al. (2015) argue that HR practices that promote work-life balance and career development lead to better mental health outcomes and greater job satisfaction. Similarly, Fujimoto et al. (2020) found that organizations with S-HRM practices reported higher employee engagement and lower turnover rates. Therefore, these literatures implies that S-HRM has positive impact on the wellbeing.

Hypothesis 1b: S-HRM practices positively influence employee wellbeing at the UoG.

Organizational justice refers to employees' perceptions of fairness in organizational processes, decisions, and interpersonal treatment (Colquitt et al., 2023). It is widely acknowledged that HR practices can influence organizational justice perceptions, especially when those practices are transparent, inclusive, and equitable. S-HRM practices, such as fair recruitment, training opportunities, and equitable compensation systems, are believed to promote justice by treating employees as valuable assets and fostering inclusivity (Colquitt et al., 2001). The link between S-HRM and organizational justice is well-documented. However, there is knowledge conflict. One stream of scholars, some empirical studies suggest that the implementation of HR practices may not always lead to perceptions of justice, especially if employees perceive inconsistencies in their application or experience favoritism (Cropanzano et al., 2007). In the context of the UoG, organizational justice may be

impacted by both S-HRM practices and the unique challenges that Ethiopian institutions face, such as administrative inefficiency and corruption (Bichsel, 2022). Empirical evidence from Ethiopia shows there is the positive and significant S-HRM impact on the perception of organization justice, but weak (Bekele et al., 2023; Zelalem & Muluye, 2024). On the other hand, according to De Lange et al. (2011), S-HRM practices help create a sense of procedural justice, which enhances trust in the organization and improves employee satisfaction. From SET theory, recent studies for instance, Jiang et al. (2019) argue that when employees perceive HR practices as fair and supportive, they experience greater trust and satisfaction, which subsequently boosts organizational justice. Again, from SET, S-HRM practices create an exchange relationship where employees perceive their organization as fair, leading to higher levels of organizational justice (Jiang et al., 2013). Therefore, it is rational to hypothesize the positive effect of S-HRM on the perceived organizational justice in the UoG.

Hypothesis 1c: S-HRM practices positively affect organizational justice at the UoG.

2.3.2. The Effect of Organizational Justice

Organizational justice—comprising distributive, procedural, informational, and interactional justice—has been linked to various organizational outcomes, including performance, trust, and competitiveness (Colquitt et al., 2001). However, the relationship between organizational justice and sustainable competitive advantage has shown mixed results in empirical studies. Zhou et al. (2021) argue that the effect of justice on competitive advantage is conditional upon the alignment of organizational justice with strategic goals and the institutional environment. In the case of Ethiopian HEIs like the UoG, political and resource-based challenges may affect the consistent application of justice, potentially limiting its effect on sustainable competitive advantage (Amanuel et al., 2023). Others also reported similar empirical evidences (Bichsel, 2023; Girma & Tadesse, 2024). In the context of SCA, organizational justice may play a crucial role by fostering trust, enhancing employee motivation, and promoting cooperative behaviors that align with organizational goals (Liao et al., 2022). Fair and transparent practices are believed to reduce turnover, increase employee engagement, and improve organizational cohesion, all of which contribute to long-term competitive advantage (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). Likewise, Bordia et al. (2018) suggest a strong positive link between justice and competitiveness. Hence, we hypothesized that OJ has positive direct effect on the SCA in the UoG.

Hypothesis 2a: Organizational justice positively influences sustainable competitive advantage at the UoG.

The impact of organizational justice on employee wellbeing has been extensively studied in HRM literature, with fairness in decision-making processes and interpersonal treatment emerging as key determinants of employee psychological and physical wellbeing (Greenberg, 2018). Justice perceptions can mitigate stress, improve job satisfaction, and foster a sense of belonging and organizational commitment (Moorman, 1991). However, while organizational justice is generally associated with higher employee wellbeing, some studies highlight the potential for conflict between justice perceptions and actual outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2021; Eisenberger et al., 2002). In academic institutions like the UoG, where stressors such as workload, job insecurity, and bureaucratic inefficiency are prevalent, organizational justice may be particularly important for enhancing employee wellbeing (Yousaf et al., 2022). In a developing country context, such as Ethiopia, there is the possibility that fairness perceptions may not always translate into better wellbeing due to external factors like political instability and limited resources (Ayele et al., 2024). For example, some university employees might place more importance on intrinsic rewards (e.g., academic freedom, research opportunities) rather than the procedural fairness of management processes, which could weaken the relationship between justice and well-being in such settings (Bies & Moag, 1986). Additionally, cultural differences might play a role in how justice is perceived and whether it leads to increased well-being (Rupp et al., 2013). Thus, the link between organizational justice and wellbeing may be more weak than traditionally assumed. Still, empirical evidence shows that there is positive effect of organizational justice on the wellbeing. Recent studies have consistently shown that organizational justice, which includes perceptions of fairness in decision-making, resource allocation, and interpersonal treatment, has a significant impact on employee well-being (Colquitt et al., 2013). Specifically, employees who perceive fairness in their workplace tend to report higher levels of job satisfaction, lower stress levels, and overall better mental health (Greenberg, 2004). Studies in the context of

academic institutions (e.g., universities) have similarly supported this relationship, showing that fair treatment in decision-making processes, workload distribution, and conflict resolution leads to increased well-being among staff (Saks, 2006). A recent study by Girma et al. (2024) in Ethiopian universities found that perceptions of distributive and procedural justice were positively correlated with higher levels of job satisfaction and emotional wellbeing. Similarly, Zelalem & Muluye (2023) found that while organizational justice was associated with greater wellbeing. In line of this, we hypothesized that there is positive impact of organizational justice on the wellbeing in UoG.

Hypothesis 2b: Organizational justice positively influences the well-being of employees at the UoG.

S-HRM practices, which focus on long-term employee development, sustainability, and ethical practices, are increasingly recognized as a key driver of organizational success (Kramar, 2014). However, the impact of S-HRM on sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) is contingent upon the organization's commitment to fairness and justice (Bhatnagar, 2021). Organizational justice can serve as a mediator in this relationship, as it fosters trust, reduces employee turnover, and boosts morale, all of which can enhance the effectiveness of S-HRM practices (Jiang et al., 2013). The integration of organizational justice into the framework of S-HRM practices can enhance the perceived legitimacy of these practices and subsequently contribute to a university's sustainable competitive advantage (Jabbour & Santos, 2008). Thus, organizational justice could act as a mechanism that strengthens the relationship between S-HRM and a competitive advantage by fostering a more committed and high-performing workforce. While the theoretical underpinnings suggest that organizational justice plays a key role in the HRM-performance link, empirical studies have produced mixed results. On the other hand, Chaudhary & Raghav (2021) suggest that the mediating effect of organizational justice is weaker in less developed contexts, where HR practices may be perceived as top-down or superficial. However, still there is empirical evidence for the positive effect of S-HRM on the SCA mediated by organizational justice. A recent study by Tadesse et al. (2024) found that organizational justice significantly mediates the relationship between S-HRM practices and competitive advantage in Ethiopian universities. Similarly, Bichsel (2023) found that organizational justice mediated the relationship between S-HRM and organizational performance. For example, Kang et al. (2022) found that justice perceptions significantly mediate the impact of S-HRM on employee performance, which in turn impacts competitive advantage. Tessema et al. (2023) observed that in some African universities, SHRM practices directly influenced SCA, with justice playing a secondary or negligible role due to poor implementation and external pressures. Tarban and Ariffin (2019) the research found one indirect a strong positive relationship ($\beta = 0.712^{**}$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.339$) between human resource management practices and organisational commitment using organisational justice as mediator. Data form 227 employees in 10 enterprises in China, Wu and Xiao (2014) it indicates that organizational justice mediates the relationship between discretionary HRP and OCB. Kang & Lee (2023) found that justice perceptions amplified the effects of SHRM on innovation and performance in academic institutions, making it a critical mediator. Nasr et al. (2023) demonstrated that procedural and distributive justice are central to achieving long-term competitiveness in HEIs by enhancing organizational adaptability and resilience. Chen et al. (2022) observed that interactional justice promotes collaboration and knowledge-sharing, which are critical for achieving sustainability in competitive contexts. Hence, this empirical evidences show that organizational justice positively mediate the effect of S-HRM on the SCA in the UoG.

Hypothesis 2c: Organizational justice mediates the relationship between sustainable human resource management practices and sustainable competitive advantage in the UoG.

2.3.3. The Effect of Wellbeing

Employee wellbeing, which encompasses psychological, physical, and emotional health, has been linked to various organizational outcomes, including performance, productivity, and overall competitiveness (Danna & Griffin, 1999). However, empirical evidence on the direct relationship between wellbeing and sustainable competitive advantage remains mixed. Some studies find a positive correlation between wellbeing and competitive advantage. For instance, Bakker & Demerouti (2020) argue that employee wellbeing enhances organizational effectiveness, leading to better performance and long-term competitive edge, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors like higher education. Similarly, Cohen & Latham (2022) found that organizations

that prioritize employee wellbeing achieve higher retention rates, increased innovation, and improved performance, all of which contribute to a sustained competitive advantage. On the other hand, some research presents a more cautious view. Brunetto et al. (2019) argue that while wellbeing is important, its direct effect on competitive advantage may be weakened by other factors such as the organizational environment, leadership quality, or market competition. Moreover, Eisenberger et al. (2023) suggest that in certain developing country contexts like Ethiopia, the impact of wellbeing on competitive advantage may be less pronounced due to external challenges such as resource constraints and political instability that undermine organizational effectiveness. A recent study by Asrat et al. (2023) in Ethiopian universities found that employee wellbeing, particularly through work-life balance and health programs, positively affected job satisfaction and retention. However, the link to sustainable competitive advantage was less clear, with resource limitations and institutional constraints weakening the impact. Similarly, Tadesse & Girma (2024) suggested that wellbeing practices at the UoG contributed to short-term organizational performance improvements, but their effect on long-term competitive advantage was constrained by external factors like funding and infrastructure limitations. Contrarily, the resource-based view focuses on the strategic management of resources and capabilities to achieve a competitive advantage (McGahan, 2021). Theory of RBV suggest that higher levels of employee wellbeing can lead to increased motivation, lower absenteeism, higher job satisfaction, and improved organizational loyalty, all of which contribute to sustainable competitive advantage (Harter et al., 2002). Wellbeing plays a key role in ensuring that employees perform at their highest potential, driving innovation and quality in education, which contributes to the sustainable competitive advantage of the institution (Bakker & Demerouti, 2020; Cohen & Latham, 2022). According to Heffernan et al. (2021), the test of a sample of 585 employees across nine organizations in Malaysia shows that the Strategic HRM significantly affects employee perceptions of well-being. Ahmed et al. (2022) examined the role of distributive justice in organizations across developing countries, finding that equitable resource allocation positively influenced employee performance and satisfaction, critical drivers of competitive advantage. Hence, in order to solve this confusion, we hypothesized the optimistic view:

Hypothesis 3a: Employee wellbeing positively influences sustainable competitive advantage at the UoG.

S-HRMs focuses on long-term employee development, ethical practices, and environmental sustainability, which are expected to enhance both employee outcomes and organizational performance (Kramar, 2014). However, there are conflicting views about the strength of this mediating effect. Some studies question the universality of the HRM-wellbeing-performance link, particularly in lower-resource environments. For example, Garrido et al. (2021) argue that in less developed regions, S-HRM practices may have limited impact on wellbeing due to challenges like insufficient resources or misalignment with organizational goals, weakening the mediating role of wellbeing in the HRM-competitive advantage relationship. A recent study by Bichsel & Zewde (2023) in Ethiopian universities found that wellbeing mediated the relationship between S-HRM practices and organizational performance, but this mediation effect was significantly weaker in institutions facing severe budgetary constraints and political challenges. Similarly, Muluye et al. (2024) found that at the UoG, while HRM practices did improve employee wellbeing, the direct contribution to competitive advantage was limited, with wellbeing only partially mediating the relationship. On the other hand, the theory posits that S-HRM practices such as employee development, work-life balance, and participative decision-making lead to enhanced employee wellbeing, which, in turn, can improve organizational performance and contribute to SCA (Renwick et al., 2013). Therefore, several studies support the idea that wellbeing plays a crucial mediating role between S-HRM practices and organizational performance. Jiang et al. (2013) found that S-HRM practices positively influenced employee wellbeing, which in turn enhanced organizational performance. Tariq et al. (2020) provided further evidence, suggesting that S-HRM practices boost wellbeing and motivation, leading to higher levels of productivity and performance, ultimately strengthening competitive advantage. Wright et al. (2023) in their paper on S-HRM and competitive advantage argue that employee well-being plays a key role in mediating the impact of HRM practices on organizational performance and competitive advantage. Harrison & Morrow (2024) found that well-being's mediation effect is stronger when HRM practices focus on personal development and work-life balance, rather than just transactional HR policies. This shows still there is wellbeing mediation between S-HRM impacts on SCA in the case of UoG.

Hypothesis 3b: Employee wellbeing mediates the relationship between S-HRM practices and sustainable competitive advantage at the UoG.

Theoretically, organizational justice enhances employee wellbeing by reducing stress, promoting fairness, and fostering a positive organizational climate, all of which should contribute to better job performance and SCA (Cropanzano et al., 2007). However, conflicting findings suggest that the link between organizational justice and competitive advantage may be more complicated. Some studies find that while organizational justice improves employee wellbeing, its direct impact on competitive advantage is constrained by external factors and become weak (Khan et al., 2022). This is supported by the empirical evidences from Ethiopia (Tariq et al., 2021; Yousaf et al., 2023). Similarly, Tadesse et al. (2024) in Ethiopian universities found that organizational justice significantly impacted employee wellbeing, and wellbeing was a partial mediator in the relationship between justice and organizational performance. However, based on the RBV, wellbeing is a main source of SCA as it is not imitated easily by the competitors. In the context of competitive advantage, a fair and just organizational environment can lead to higher employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention, all of which are necessary for long-term competitiveness (Greenberg, 2009). Studies by De Cremer & Tyler (2022) support this view, demonstrating that organizational justice influences wellbeing, which in turn affects organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity. Such conflict of empirical evidence needs further study, so that we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3c: Employee wellbeing mediates the relationship between organizational justice and sustainable competitive advantage at the UoG

2.3.4. Serial Mediation Effect

The integration of SET and RBV theories as well as empirical evidences supports the idea that organizational justice that impact on wellbeing can sequentially mediate the relationship between HR practices and organizational outcomes. Tariq et al. (2021) found that organizational justice mediated the relationship between HRM practices and employee motivation, which led to better performance. Similarly, Jiang et al. (2013) showed that wellbeing partially mediated the relationship between HR practices and job satisfaction, which contributed to improved organizational outcomes those makes SCA. This consecutive statement implies that based on the serial mediation framework proposed by Hayes (2013), this hypothesis posits that justice (which influences perceptions of fairness) improves well-being, leading to increased employee performance and commitment, thereby creating a sustainable competitive advantage. Studies by Li et al. (2022) and Van de Voorde et al. (2012) support this pathway, suggesting that fairness and well-being are crucial for fostering a competitive edge in resource-constrained institutions. Therefore, according to SET, S-HRM practices enhance fairness perceptions (organizational justice), which then improve employee wellbeing, while wellbeing from RBV, leads to the formation of strategic competitive advantage. In the context of the UoG, S-HRM practices build organizational justice, which directly impacts employee wellbeing—both of which are valuable resources that contribute to long-term competitive advantage (Paauwe et al., 2023; Kramar, 2022; Boselie et al., 2023).

Hypothesis H4: Organizational justice and well-being serially mediate the relationship between S-HRM and sustainable competitive advantage in the UoG.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Setting

The context of a study significantly affects its generalizability (Yin, 2018). At the University of Gondar (UoG), demographic, economic, technological, environmental, and socio-cultural factors shape outcomes and influence the applicability of findings to other institutions (Kassa & Assefa, 2019; Zewde & Mulu, 2019). Geographically, UoG's location in the Amhara region offers regional collaboration opportunities but faces challenges like limited access to technology and advanced HRM training due to distance from national decision-making centers (Bekele, 2020; Tadesse & Henok, 2021). Demographically, the diverse student and

staff population supports inclusive HR practices but also highlights disparities in access to resources, which may affect fairness and HRM effectiveness (Zewde & Mulu, 2019; Mulu, 2020). Economically, UoG benefits from Ethiopia's growth and increased funding but faces financial constraints, especially in the public sector, limiting the implementation of comprehensive HRM programs (Tadesse & Henok, 2021; Kassa & Assefa, 2019). Technologically, while digital tools present opportunities for modernizing HRM, challenges like poor infrastructure and limited internet access hinder full utilization (Alemu & Zeleke, 2020; Tadesse & Henok, 2021). Environmentally, national sustainability policies align with SHRM practices but are constrained by insufficient funding and weak policy enforcement (Sharma & Singhania, 2020). Socio-culturally, collective values and respect for hierarchy support SHRM strategies, though traditional gender roles may limit the participation of women and underrepresented groups (Bante & Amare, 2021; Tadesse & Henok, 2021).

3.2. Research Paradigm, Design and Method

We focused on measurable constructs—HRM practices, organizational justice, employee wellbeing, and competitive advantage—within a positivist research framework to analyze observable phenomena and causal relationships (Bryman & Bell, 2021). A cross-sectional design was used to test theoretical models without requiring costly and time-intensive longitudinal data, enabling the assessment of current variables and their immediate effects on SCA (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020; Hair et al., 2022). Employed data collection is a survey method that is suitable for positivist research, to gather representative and generalizable data from large samples. This approach effectively measures attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to HRM and wellbeing (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Employee responses, collected from November 7 to December 1, 2024, were chosen as the primary data source, as employees directly experience S-HRM practices and their effects on wellbeing and attitudes (Guest, 2022; Paauwe et al., 2023) as well as SCA.

3.3. Measurements

We employed the following four variables. We adopted 25-items of S-HRM under five indicators those were developed by Esen and Özer (2020), using five Likert scale. The consistency of dimensions shows working conditions is 0.83; development, and happiness of employees is 0.94, sustainable employment policies is 0.78; environmental awareness-0.91; flexibility applications is 0.92 and paperless-digital processes is 0.88. The 18-item version of Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) using five scale was employed. The consistency of dimensions indicates that 0.73 of autonomy, 0.76 of environmental mastery, 0.90 of self-acceptance, .79 of personal growth, 0.95 of positive relations with others, and 0.84 of purpose in life. Organizational justice within four dimensions as developed by Colquitt (2001) and verified in Ethiopian HEIs (Assefa, Moges, Tilwani & Shah, 2024) that has 0.91 of procedural justice, 0.81 of distributive justice, 0.73 of interactional justice, and 0.85 of informational justice consistency of items explained. Three items of SCA was adapted from Hamadamin and Atan (2019) and measured using five Likert scale that shows 0.855 items consistency.

3.4. Sampling

We used PLS-SEM in the Jamovi statistical tool to analyze data from 276 employees, selected through multilevel and random sampling, with a 92% response rate from 300 distributed questionnaires (Appendix A). First after getting of permission from the university academic directorate, we employed multilevel sampling by classifying according to HEIs category of Ethiopia: colleges, institutions, and schools. Then, we sampled departments from these categories. At last, from randomly selected departments, we have chosen 3000 academicians. Totally, 283 data was collected. After removing 7 missing data with greater than 15%, we analyzed 276 academicians' respondents. Focusing on employee responses, the SEM model directly links experienced HRM practices by employees with perceived SCA, enabling an examination of how perceptions of justice and wellbeing mediate the relationship between S-HRM practices and competitive advantage (Hair et al., 2021). PLS-SEM is ideal for individual-level data, as it is less restrictive than CB-SEM regarding normality, sample size, and data distribution, making it suitable for testing complex mediation models (Hair et al., 2021; Ringle et al., 2020). A sample size of 150-300 is recommended for PLS-SEM mediation models, and our sample falls within this range.

3.5. Ethical Consideration

To uphold ethical principles, we adhered to international research standards. Employees at UoG were provided with clear information about the study's objectives, their role, and the voluntary nature of participation (Krejcie & Morgan, 2022). Given the sensitive topics of employee wellbeing and perceptions of justice, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured to protect participants' identities (Meyer et al., 2023). Participation was voluntary, with assurances that employees could withdraw at any time without penalty, aligning with research ethics principles of autonomy (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). Ethical transparency was maintained in data collection and analysis, ensuring findings accurately reflected the relationships between S-HRM, organizational justice, employee wellbeing, and sustainable competitive advantage (Paauwe et al., 2023). Results were reported truthfully, based on grounded data, without misrepresentation or bias, and conclusions were drawn responsibly (Saunders et al., 2019; Albrecht et al., 2021).

4. Results

4.1. Description of Profile

Although male lecturers also outnumber females, the gender imbalance is less pronounced, with 67.03% male and 32.97% female. This indicates some level of gender diversity within the lecturer cohort, though it remains skewed. Employees within the range of 18-25 are 9.42%, within the range of 26-35 are 37.68%, whereas those within the age range of 36-45 includes 43.12 and those within the range of 46-55 are 9.06%. The rest 0.72% of employees are within the age range of 56-60. Regarding marital status, a majority of lecturers are married (87.68%), with a notable proportion unmarried (10.87%) and a small percentage divorced (1.45%). In terms of educational qualifications, most lecturers hold Master's degrees (54.35%), and Doctorates (24.64%), whereas 14.86% assistant professor and masters with a small number having Bachelor's degrees (5.83%) or full professors includes 0.36. This high level of education aligns with the requirements for academic positions. Work experience among lecturers is predominantly in the 6-10- and 11-20-years range (43.84%) and (40.98%) respectively with fewer having 2-5 years (6.52%) and greater than 21 years' experience. Moreover, the overall profiles of lecturers are displayed below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic profile of lecturers.

Demographic profile	Scales	Employees lecturers	
		Figure	Percentage
Gender	Male	185	67.03
	Female	91	32.97
Age	18-25	26	9.42
	26-35	104	37.68
	36-45	119	43.12
	46-55	25	9.06
	56-60	2	0.72
Marriage status	Married	242	87.68
	Unmarried	30	10.87
	Divorced	4	1.45
Educational status	BA.	16	5.8
	Masters	150	54.35
	Asst. prof. & masters	41	14.86
	Asst. prof. & Dr.	68	24.64
	Professor	1	0.36
Work experience	2-5	18	6.52
	6-10	121	43.84
	11-20	113	40.94
	Greater than 21	24	8.7

4.2. Preliminary Analysis

Mean and standard deviation: Leys et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of outlier detection in preserving the integrity of data analysis, arguing that effective methods for identifying and handling outliers are crucial for accurate statistical modeling and inference. To identify outliers in our data, we used the criterion of a mean

greater than the standard deviation, which suggests that no significant outliers were present (Johnson, 2023; see Table 2). The Pearson correlation values in Table 2 indicates there is significant correlation between expected in the hypothesis. According to Table 4, there is no multicollinearity because Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations values of all the values are less than 0.85 (Weston & Gore Jr, 2006).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation and sig. (2-tailed), (n-276).

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	S-HRM	Organizational Justice	wellbeing	SCA
S-HRM	3.37	0.46	—			
Organizational Justice	3.19	0.51	0.305**	—		
Wellbeing	3.35	0.74	0.767***	0.835**	—	
SCA	3.64	0.48	0.158***	0.110***	0.324***	—

Note. H_a is positive correlation, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

4.2. Pooled Measurement Model

Before, assessing measurement model, we parceled 25-items of S-HRM under five indicators those were developed by Esen and Özer (2020), including 11-items of working conditions, development, and happiness of employees, 4-items of sustainable employment policies, 3-items of environmental awareness, 4-items of flexibility applications, and 3-items of paperless-digital processes; the 18-item version of Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) under 6 dimensions that comprises 3 items of each measuring six dimensions of psychological wellbeing: autonomy, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, personal growth, positive relations with others, and purpose in life; and lastly, but not least, we parceled 20 items of organizational justice within four dimensions as developed by Colquitt (2001) and verified in Ethiopian HEIs (Assefa, Moges, Tilwani & Shah, 2024) that includes 7-items of procedural justice, four items of distributive justice, 4-items of interactional justice, and 5-items of informational justice and rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Whereas we didn't parcel three dimensions of SCA that was adapted from Hamadamin and Atan (2019).

Nomological Validity: Regarding the goodness-of-fit for pooled measurement model, the χ^2/df ratio is 0.798, which is well below the threshold of 3, as suggested by Hair et al. (2010). The CFI is 1.00 and the TLI is 1.00, both of which exceed the recommended value of .90 (Hair et al., 2010). The RMSEA is .052, which is below the threshold of 0.00, and the SRMR is .047, also below the recommended value of 0.05 (Hair et al., 2010). These indices collectively demonstrate a strong fit of the model to the data.

Table 3. Pooled measurement reliabilities and validity.

First order	Items	Factor loading	Cronbach alpha	AVE	CR	Significance
SCA	SCA1	0.798	0.855	0.857	0.667	Significant
	SCA2	0.841				
	SCA3	0.810				
Wellbeing	AWN	0.642	0.869	0.873	0.541	Significant
	EM	0.834				
	SA	0.881				
	PG	0.770				
	PRO	0.548				
	PL	0.686				
S-HRM	WDH	0.857	0.924	0.924	0.709	Significant
	SEP	0.896				
	EP	0.878				
	FA	0.822				
	PDP	0.756				
OJ	PRJ	0.686	0.799	0.812	0.522	Significant
	DRJ	0.638				
	IJ	0.851				
	IRJ	0.758				

Note: Psychological wellbeing: autonomy (AWN), environmental mastery (EM), self-acceptance (SA), personal growth (PG), positive relations with others (PRO), and purpose in life (PL); S-HRM: working conditions, the development and happiness of employees (WDH), Sustainable employment practices (SEP), environmental awareness (EA), Flexibility application (FA), and paperless-digital process (PDP); organizational justice: procedural justice (PRJ), distributive justice (DRJ), interpersonal justice (IJ), and informational justice (IRJ); sustainable competitive advantage: SCA1, SCA2, SCA3.

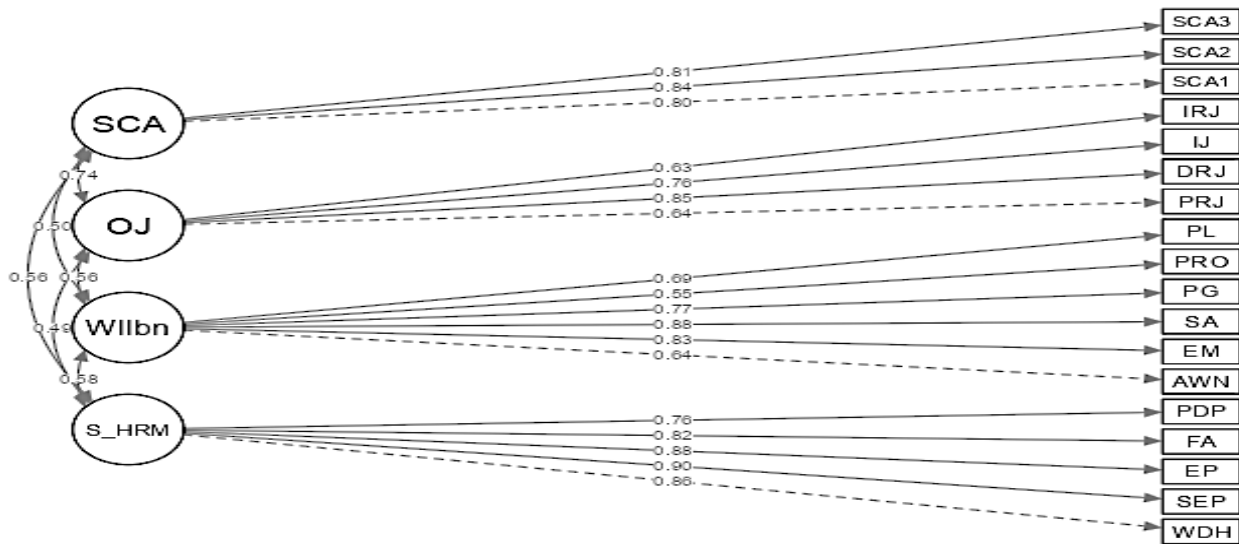


Figure 2. Pooled measurement model path diagrams.

Construct Reliabilities: According to Table 3, we first assessed the internal consistency of constructs using Cronbach's alpha and CR, both exceeding the recommended threshold of .70 (Hair et al., 2017).

Convergent Validity: We assessed convergent validity by evaluating several key criteria. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), for convergent validity to be established, factor loadings should be significant and exceed 0.5 for each item (Hair et al., 2017). Our results, presented in Table 3 and Figure 2, indicate that all these criteria are met: factor loadings are significant, CR values surpass 0.6, and AVE values exceed 0.50, thereby confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017).

Divergent Validity: According to Table 4, the HTMT approach aligns with PLS-SEM has been expanded, we used HTMT that has gained traction as it offers a more accurate assessment of discriminant validity even in non-linear and non-normal data settings (Henseler et al., 2015). We verified using our HTMT of variables is below 0.85 is commonly used, even some studies suggest a slightly more conservative threshold of 0.90 (e.g., Kline, 2016). This confirms that the constructs measure unique aspects of the theoretical framework and are not excessively overlapping (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2021; Brown, 2022).

Table 4. Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations.

	S_HRM	Wellbeing	OJ	SCA
S_HRM	1.000			
Wellbeing	0.610	1.000		
OJ	0.475	0.569	1.000	
SCA	0.568	0.507	0.673	1.000

4.4 Common Method Bias

Since measurement must be in line to its deemed purpose, we assessed and controlled common method bias using both procedural and statistical strategies (Kock et al., 2021). Procedurally, we tried to keep anonymity, because as recent research highlights the importance of anonymity in reducing such biases and improving the accuracy of self-reported data (Hancock et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022). In maintaining respondent confidentiality, we adhered to best practices for addressing common method bias, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of our findings (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2021). We also chose to avoid reverse-worded items, which can often lead to confusion and lower response accuracy (Weijters & Baumgartner, 2012). Instead, we used items with clear polar opposites, which simplifies response interpretation and reduces potential biases (Miller et al., 2021).

Statistically, we employed a combination of techniques—such as correlation matrix analysis and Harman's test as no single method is foolproof (Kock et al., 2021). Firstly, We conducted Harman's single factor test to assess common method bias, our results in show that for S-HRM, the single factor accounts for 28.09% of the

variance; for Organizational justice, it accounts for 35.25%; for wellbeing, it accounts for 18.93%; and for SCA, it accounts for 22.76%, these show they are acceptable values, because the rule of thumb that a single factor should account for less than 50% of the variance to indicate no significant bias (Fuller et al., 2016; Kock et al., 2021). Secondly, Tehseen et al. (2017) suggest using the correlation matrix procedure to assess common method bias, focusing on whether correlations among latent variables exceed 0.90 among can indicate excessive overlap, which may signal common method bias rather than true distinctiveness between constructs. However, our data shows that the correlations are below 0.9 that is acceptable (see Table 2).

4.5. Hypothesis Testing

The model's fit indices, including CFI, TLI, and GFI, all registering at 1.000, alongside an RMSEA of 0.000, suggest a highly accurate fit to the data. These results are consistent with recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999), who proposed that a CFI ≥ 0.95 and an RMSEA ≤ 0.06 indicate excellent model fit. According to table 5 and Figure 3, the direct effects provide significant insights into the role of SHRM and intermediate variables in influencing organizational outcomes. SHRM significantly predicts OJ ($\beta = 0.2054$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that sustainable HR practices enhance perceptions of fairness in the workplace. This finding aligns with Colquitt et al. (2013), who demonstrated the centrality of justice perceptions in fostering organizational effectiveness. Similarly, OJ strongly predicts WB ($\beta = 0.2443$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that fairness within organizational systems contributes positively to employee well-being. These results corroborate Cropanzano and Rupp (2008), who emphasized the restorative and morale-boosting effects of justice in workplace settings. The relationship between WB and SCA is also significant ($\beta = 0.2462$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the importance of employee well-being as a driver of competitive advantage. The resource-based view (Barney, 1991) supports this finding, asserting that well-being enhances human capital, a critical organizational resource.

Table 5. Direct effects.

Direct effects	β	p-value	Significance
Sustainable_HRM \Rightarrow Orgnizational_Justice	0.2054	< .001	Accepted
Sustainable_HRM \Rightarrow Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage	0.0257	0.540	Rejected
Sustainable_HRM \Rightarrow Wellbeings	0.1588	0.003	Accepted
Orgnizational_Justice \Rightarrow Wellbeings	0.2443	< .001	Accepted
Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage \Rightarrow Orgnizational_Justice	0.5753	< .001	Accepted
Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage \Rightarrow Wellbeings	0.2462	< .001	Accepted

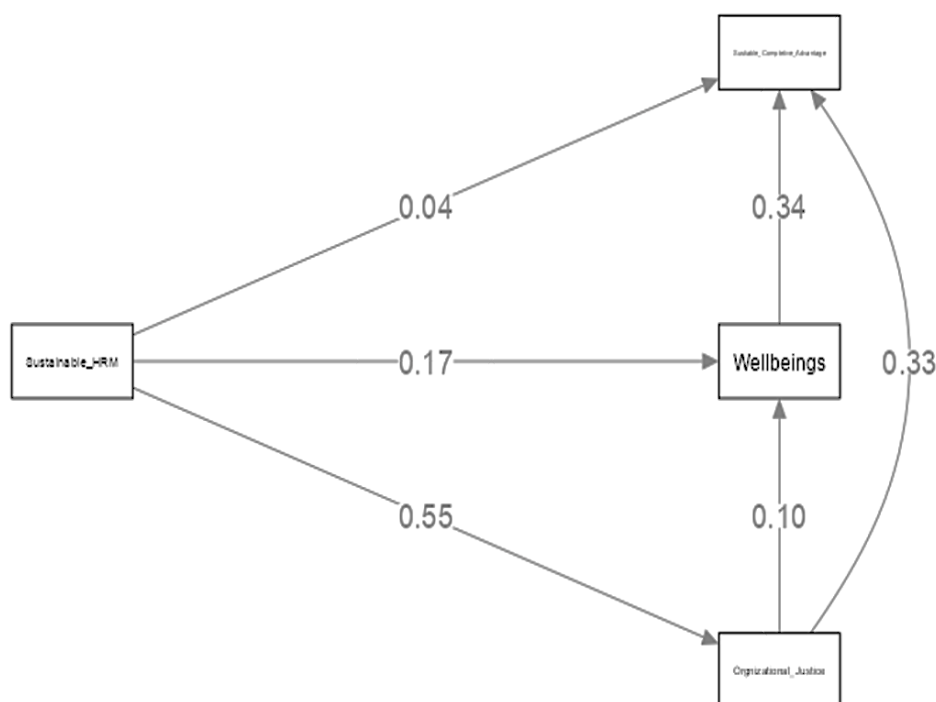


Figure 3. Structural model.

Conversely, the direct effect of SHRM on SCA is not significant ($\beta = 0.0257$, $p = 0.540$), which aligns with configurational and contingency theories (Delery & Doty, 1996), emphasizing that SHRM impacts organizational performance indirectly through mediators. The indirect effects provide further clarity (Table 6). The pathway from SHRM to SCA through OJ and WB (IE1, $\beta = 0.012$, $p = 0.010$) highlights the sequential role of justice and well-being in translating HR practices into sustainable outcomes. Similarly, the effect of SHRM on SCA mediated solely through OJ (IE2, $\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.001$) underscores justice as a primary mechanism linking sustainable HR practices to competitive advantage. The mediating role of WB (IE3, $\beta = 0.039$, $p = 0.009$ and IE3, $\beta = 0.060$, $p=0.001$) confirms the importance of employee well-being in HRM effectiveness. These findings are consistent with Preacher and Hayes (2008), who advocate for multi-step mediation analyses to uncover latent pathways in Strategic HRM.

Table 6. Indirect effects.

Mediation Paths	β	p-value	Significance
Sustainable_HRM \Rightarrow Orgnizational_Justice \Rightarrow Wellbeings \Rightarrow Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage	0.012	0.010	Accepted
Sustainable_HRM \Rightarrow Orgnizational_Justice \Rightarrow Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage	0.118	< .001	Accepted
Sustainable_HRM \Rightarrow Wellbeings \Rightarrow Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage	0.039	0.009	Accepted
Orgnizational_Justice \Rightarrow Wellbeings \Rightarrow Sustiable_Comptetive_Advantage	0.060	< .001	Accepted

5. Discussion, Implications, and Limitations and Recommendations

5.1. Discussion

The findings of the study contribute to the evolving discourse on S-HRM, its mechanisms, and its outcomes. The results demonstrate that SHRM indirectly influences SCA through organizational justice and employee well-being, consistent with theoretical and empirical advancements in strategic HRM and organizational behavior.

The significant relationship between SHRM and organizational justice ($\beta = 0.2054$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that HR practices designed with sustainability principles, such as equity, transparency, and employee inclusion, enhance perceptions of justice in the workplace. S-HRM emphasizes long-term value creation by fostering fair treatment of employees, which aligns with the broader goals of corporate social responsibility. Jiang et al. (2012) underline that justice perceptions are critical for embedding sustainability into HRM, as fairness strengthens trust and cooperation within organizations. Furthermore, Colquitt et al. (2013) argue that OJ mediates the link between organizational practices and employee attitudes, as shown in this study. The study's findings reveal that OJ significantly predicts WB ($\beta = 0.2443$, $p < 0.001$). This underscores the importance of a just organizational environment in promoting employee health, job satisfaction, and emotional stability. Cropanzano and Rupp (2008) emphasized that procedural and distributive justice contribute positively to employee psychological and physical well-being, providing a supportive environment that reduces stress and burnout. Recent work by Roch et al. (2022) also confirms that OJ mitigates negative workplace stressors, fostering a culture of respect and recognition that enhances overall well-being. The significant relationship between WB and SCA ($\beta = 0.2462$, $p < 0.001$) highlights the strategic importance of employee well-being in achieving organizational sustainability. From a resource-based view (RBV) perspective, Barney (1991) emphasizes that employee well-being constitutes a valuable, rare, and inimitable resource, critical for sustaining competitive advantage. Guest (2017) elaborates that well-being programs not only enhance individual performance but also contribute to organizational outcomes such as reduced turnover and higher productivity. The results affirm that well-being is not merely an outcome of good HR practices but a strategic driver of organizational success.

The indirect effects in the study (e.g., SHRM \rightarrow OJ \rightarrow WB \rightarrow SCA) underscore the multi-step pathways through which SHRM impacts SCA. This supports Preacher and Hayes' (2008) recommendation for examining complex mediational processes to understand latent mechanisms. Specifically, the significant mediating effect of OJ and WB highlights the importance of addressing both structural (justice) and individual (well-being) aspects of HR practices. SHRM's impact on competitive advantage is realized indirectly, primarily through fostering perceptions of justice and enhancing employee well-being. Justice-focused HR strategies emerge as crucial, as they not only enhance employee perceptions but also catalyze well-being and competitive

advantage. Moreover, the strong link between well-being and competitive advantage underscores the importance of prioritizing employee health and satisfaction as integral to organizational sustainability (Guest, 2017). This aligns with the configurational approach advocated by Delery and Doty (1996), which posits that HR systems achieve maximum impact when their components are aligned with broader organizational strategies.

The non-significant direct relationship between SHRM and SCA ($\beta = 0.0257$, $p = 0.540$) reinforces the argument that SHRM operates indirectly through intermediary variables such as OJ and WB. This finding is consistent with the contingency perspective, which suggests that the impact of HR practices depends on contextual factors (e.g., organizational culture, leadership styles). As Teece (2018) explains in the dynamic capabilities framework, sustainable outcomes arise from coordinated processes that integrate human capital with organizational systems. Therefore, the study emphasizes the strategic importance of designing HR systems that prioritize justice and well-being. Organizations seeking long-term sustainability should focus on creating equitable HR policies and fostering employee satisfaction, as these factors significantly enhance competitive advantage. These findings resonate with the growing emphasis on sustainability in HRM literature, as discussed by Ren et al. (2022), who argue that the integration of sustainability principles in HRM ensures alignment with organizational goals and societal expectations.

5.2. Implications

5.2.1. Theoretical Implication

SHRM as a Driver of Social Exchange and Resource Development: The study highlights that S-HRM fosters perceptions of justice ($\beta = 0.2054$, $p < 0.001$)—which aligns with SET by emphasizing reciprocal trust and cooperation in organizational relationships—this is source of SCA. Similarly, Gould-Williams and Davies (2005) argue that fair HR practices strengthen employees' trust in their organization, encouraging behaviors like loyalty and increased effort, which are crucial for long-term organizational success. Hence, this implies the perception of S-HRM practices as an input initiate perception of organization justice as a reciprocal exchange of Blau (1964) and Gouldner (1960) argument. Since S-HRM has positive impact on the SCA ($\beta = 0.2443$, $p < 0.001$), this is similarly explained by RBV, by framing S-HRM practices as strategic investments that enhance human capital's value, rarity, and inimitability (Barney, 1991). So that, Jiang et al. (2012) reinforce that S-HRM, grounded in equity and inclusion, creates intangible resources such as a positive organizational climate and enhanced social capital. These attributes are central to the RBV perspective, which views these resources as sources of sustainable competitive advantage.

Organizational Justice as a Mechanism of Exchange and Resource Leveraging: The significant impact of OJ on WB ($\beta = 0.2443$, $p < 0.001$) illustrates how fairness functions as both a relational mechanism (SET) and a strategic resource (RBV). SET posits that when employees perceive justice in organizational processes, they reciprocate through enhanced commitment and performance (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which are source of SCA. In another words, OJ based on the SET, when employees perceived positive OJ, they reciprocate with the SCA. On the other hand, from RBV that extends this argument by recognizing OJ as a non-replicable organizational asset that reinforces trust and cooperation, enhancing overall workforce cohesion and effectiveness (Colquitt et al., 2013). That implies OJ enhances the wellbeing of employees. Furthermore, Roch et al. (2022) highlighted that justice mitigates workplace stressors, creating an environment conducive to employee well-being—a strategic resource for any organization seeking long-term sustainability. Hence, in this empirical research, we refined to further studies that, organizational justice enhances wellbeing either SET or RBV theory.

Employee Well-Being as a Strategic Resource: The finding that WB significantly predicts SCA ($\beta = 0.2462$, $p < 0.001$) underscores its dual role: as a positive outcome of fair exchanges (SET) and a valuable resource for competitive advantage (RBV). Firstly, as we have proposed in the above, SET suggests that when organizations support employee well-being, through fair OJ, they provoke reciprocal behaviors such as higher engagement, wellbeing, and commitment, further solidifying their strategic position. Secondly, Guest (2017) emphasizes that employee well-being is integral to organizational success, contributing to reduced turnover, enhanced

productivity, and innovation—all critical to sustaining competitive advantage. RBV characterizes well-being as a strategic asset because it is not easily imitated or substituted. Barney (1991) describes such attributes as pivotal for maintaining SCA. Consequently, we propose that wellbeing of employees builds SCA in HEIs context.

Non-Significant Direct Effect of SHRM on SCA: The absence of a direct relationship between SHRM and SCA ($\beta = 0.0257$, $p = 0.540$) reinforces the argument that SHRM operates through intermediary mechanisms. This aligns with the contingency perspective in RBV, which posits that organizational outcomes are context-dependent (Teece, 2018). From an SET perspective, it emphasizes that relational dynamics such as justice and well-being are critical for translating HR strategies into meaningful organizational outcomes. Therefore, it supports relational dynamics or contingency of mediators to bridge S-HRM and SCA.

Mediating Role of Justice and Well-Being: The study's indirect effects (e.g., SHRM \rightarrow OJ \rightarrow WB \rightarrow SCA) align with the integrated theories by demonstrating that SHRM's impact on SCA is mediated by relational (justice) and individual (well-being) factors. Preacher and Hayes (2008) recommend examining these mediational pathways to understand the latent mechanisms that transform HR practices into strategic outcomes. Ren et al. (2022) argue that sustainable HR practice function both as mechanisms for fostering relational equity (SET) and as sources of strategic advantage (RBV). Similarly, Gittell et al. (2018) highlight the role of relational coordination—grounded in fairness and well-being—as a unique capability that strengthens organizational performance and competitiveness. Moreover, Rupp et al. (2023) extend the discussion by showing that justice perceptions act as a bridge between HR strategies and individual-level outcomes like well-being, which collectively contribute to organizational-level advantages. The integrated framework of SET and RBV reveals that achieving SCA requires organizations to design HR practices that simultaneously foster relational trust (justice) and enhance individual resources (well-being). This dual focus ensures that HRM systems contribute to long-term organizational sustainability by leveraging both human and social capital as strategic assets. Hence, we propose that serial mediation of SHRM \rightarrow OJ \rightarrow WB \rightarrow SCA through integration of SET and RBV, because while from relational equity as exchange theory, when employees perceive S-HRM positively they reciprocate through positive OJ, this in turn, from RBV, can be emerged as a source of impacting factor for the individual strategic inimitable resource (wellbeing), which is a main source of SCA.

5.2.2. Practical Implication

Based on the study's findings, here are the practical implications for UoG better looking to leverage S-HRM practices for long-term success via;

Designing HR Systems with Justice and wellbeing at the Core: Given the strong link between S-HRM and Organizational Justice (OJ), HR practices must prioritize fairness, equity, transparency, and inclusivity. These principles foster trust, cooperation, and a healthier work environment, aligning with corporate social responsibility and promoting a culture of fairness (Colquitt et al., 2019; Luu, 2023). Similarly, S-HRM practices enhances wellbeing of employs as their focus is from social, economic, ecological point of view.

Enhancing Employee Well-being: As OJ significantly impacts employee WB, organizations should cultivate a just environment that promotes employee health and satisfaction. Policies that reduce stress and increase job satisfaction contribute to improved mental and physical health, reducing burnout and turnover (Colquitt et al., 2019; Luu, 2023).

Investing in Well-being Programs as a Strategic Asset: Employee well-being is a key driver of SCA. Companies should view well-being initiatives as essential strategic assets that enhance performance, reduce turnover, and increase productivity, offering valuable, hard-to-imitate resources (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 2020).

Acknowledging the Indirect Pathways of S-HRM: SHRM's direct impact on SCA is limited, suggesting that HR practices must first influence intermediary factors like OJ and WB. Organizations should focus on these mechanisms to improve SHRM outcomes (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Jabbour & Santos, 2020).

Adopting an Integrated HR Approach: The mediating role of justice and well-being highlights the need for a holistic HR approach that addresses both structural fairness (justice) and individual needs (well-being). Aligning HR practices with organizational strategies maximizes their effectiveness (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

Focusing on Sustainability in HRM Practices: The integration of sustainability into HRM aligns with the SDGs, offering a strategic opportunity to attract talent and enhance organizational performance that will fill well skilled, rather than only knowledgeable lecturers, employees, shortage of HEIs. Sustainable HR practices can reduce environmental impacts, such as waste and energy consumption, improving overall sustainability and SCA (Sarkar et al., 2023; Campos-García et al., 2023; Paillé et al., 2014). This alignment can further enhance employee well-being, organizational justice, and long-term competitive advantage (Di Vaio & Varriale, 2018; Thakur & Mangla, 2019).

5.3. Limitations and Recommendations

The strength of the serial mediation is influenced by external factors. Kaufman et al. (2024) provided empirical evidence showing that well-being does not always act as a direct mediator but may serve as a moderator in certain contexts, where other organizational factors (like leadership or corporate culture) play a significant role in determining competitive advantage. Additionally, Garrido et al. (2021) found that in resource-constrained environments, the impact of well-being on competitive advantage was weaker, even with high organizational justice. This suggests that at UoG, limited resources and institutional support may reduce the effectiveness of the mediation pathway, despite strong organizational justice and well-being. Therefore, we unplugged moderation role of these variables on the mediating factor of wellbeing and/or organizational justices. We have studied using only psychological wellbeing that can't be comprehensive as it neglected subjective and social wellbeing. Hence, we propose to further researchers to include more comprehensive wellbeing measurement. While our focus is on inequality reduction (SDG 10), and SDG 1 (health and well-being), and somewhat about responsible consumption (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13) related issue are itemized in S-HRM practices, HRM can contribute to all 17 SDGs. Campos-García et al. (2023) emphasized HR's role in achieving SDGs, particularly in health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work (SDG 8), infrastructure (SDG 9), inequality reduction (SDG 10), responsible consumption (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), and global partnerships (SDG 17). As a result, we propose to further researchers to integrate these S-HRM dimensions within S-HRM practices or through including other variable/s. We studied using cross-sectional data that limits the causality of variables. Hence, further researcher ought to study using longitudinal data. Furthermore, this study has limitation of causality as it is single level study that can be enhances employing multilevel design by the further researchers. There is emerging multilevel design HRM in HEIs in Ethiopian context by Gogsido, Getahun and Alemu (2024), but there is huge need of multilevel SHRM in HEIs of Ethiopia. Our study is limited in generalizability as it was carried out only in one public university in developing country context. Therefore, to enhance its applicability, more researches should be carried out including private and more sample size in developing and/or developed countries.

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Appendix – Questionnaire

Variable	Codes	Items
Sustainable	SCA1	Our university employees are highly creative and innovative.
Competitive	SCA2	Our university employees are highly involved and flexible to change.
Advantage	SCA3	Our university employees are more concerned with quality and results.
Procedural Justice	PJ1	I have been able to express my views and feelings during those procedures.
	PJ2	I had influence over the outcome arrived at by those procedures.
	PJ3	In our university, procedures have been applied consistently.
	PJ4	In our university, procedures have been implemented free of bias.
	PJ5	In our university, procedures have been implemented based on accurate information.
	PJ6	In our university, I have been able to appeal the outcome arrived at by those procedures.
	PJ7	In our university, procedures have been upheld ethically and morally.
Distributive Justice	DJ1	My outcome reflects the effort I have put into my work.
	DJ2	My outcome is appropriate for the work I have completed.
	DJ3	My outcome reflects what I have contributed to the organization.
	DJ4	My outcome is justified, given my performance.
Interpersonal Justice	IJ1	My head treated me in a polite manner.
	IJ2	My head treated me with dignity.
	IJ3	My head treated me with respect.
	IJ4	My head refrained from improper remarks and comments.
Informational Justice	IFJ1	My head has been candid in their communications with me.
	IFJ2	My head explained the procedures thoroughly.
	IFJ3	My head explained the rationale regarding the procedures reasonably.
	IFJ4	My head communicated details in a timely manner.
	IFJ5	My head seemed to tailor their communications to individual needs.
Self-Acceptance	SA1	I feel that I have a good sense of what I am trying to accomplish in life.
	SA2	I am happy with the kind of person I am.
	SA3	I feel comfortable with who I am, even with my weaknesses.
Personal Growth	PG1	I believe I am constantly learning and growing as a person.
	PG2	I am open to new experiences and challenges in life.
	PG3	I am becoming a better person as I grow older.
Purpose in Life	PL1	I have a clear sense of what my life is about.
	PL2	I feel that my life has a sense of direction.
	PL3	I am passionate about the things I do in life.
Environmental Mastery	EM1	I am able to manage my daily responsibilities with ease.
	EM2	I feel capable of handling my personal problems.
	EM3	I feel confident in managing the challenges that life throws at me.
Autonomy	AW1	I am able to make my own decisions without feeling pressured by others.
	AW2	I feel independent and free to make choices that suit my needs.
	AW3	I am comfortable with standing by my own opinions, even when others disagree.
Positive Relationships with Others	PRO1	I have close, supportive relationships with others.
	PRO2	I am able to be open with others and express my feelings freely.
	PRO3	I feel a strong sense of belonging with the people around me.
Working Conditions, Development,	WCH1	Our university provides sustainability training to employees.
	WCH2	Our university regularly offers in-service training to help employees improve their skills.
	WCH3	Our university provides opportunities for employees to participate in decision-making.

Variable	Codes	Items
and	WCH4	Our university offers opportunities for employees to develop and advance their careers.
Happiness of	WCH5	Our university encourages employees to participate in social responsibility projects.
Employees	WCH6	Our university provides healthy food options in its restaurant.
	WCH7	Our university has designated areas where employees can relax and enjoy their free time.
	WCH8	In our university, the work environment is suitable for physical and psychological comfort.
	WCH9	Our university ensures job security for its employees.
	WCH10	Our university prioritizes the health and quality of life of its employees.
	WCH11	Our university provides activities and benefits to promote employee happiness.
Sustainable	SEP1	Our university values and supports work-life balance for its employees.
Employment	SEP2	Our university offers resources to help employees transition to retirement.
Policies	SEP3	Our university promotes diversity and inclusion.
	SEP4	Our university focuses on recruiting, developing, and retaining talented employees.
Environmental	EA1	Job descriptions at our university include criteria that promote environmental sensitivity.
Awareness	EA2	Our university encourages the use of environmentally friendly transportation methods.
	EA3	Our university considers environmental awareness when hiring employees.
	FA1	Our university offers flexibility in scheduling job interviews according to preferences.
Flexibility	FA2	Our university provides flexible working arrangements, such as part-time or remote work.
Applications	FA3	Employees have access to basic benefits like transportation support.
	FA4	Employees receive additional benefits like health insurance and wellness support.
Paperless-	PDP1	The job application process is fully digitalized and accessible online.
Digital	PDP2	Our university offers teleconferencing for job interviews.
Processes	PDP3	Our university provides access to educational materials through digital platforms.