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RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AS MEDIATOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Responsible Leadership, Academic Performance, Student Engagement, Higher Education Institutions	Responsible leadership has attracted growing academic interest in higher education when universities confronting the growing demands to develop ethical, human-focused & socially responsible academic institutions. Still, there is limited empirical evidence in developing countries especially of Pakistan. This study aimed to examines the role of responsible leadership with respect to students' performance at university level and explores the mediating effect of student engagement in Lahore. The data was gathered with the help of a cross-sectional, quantitative design based on the sample of 412 students from public and private universities. Findings affirm that responsible leadership has a significant impact on academic performance and that student engagement partially mediates the relationship between responsible leadership and academic performance. These results are an extension of Social Identity Theory, which illustrates that the responsible leaders influence the student's identification to the academic institutions, that results in better engagement and grades. The research has theoretical value as it places responsible leadership in the student behavioral context and provides the valuable practical values to the universities in Pakistan that want to improve the academic outcomes by implementing responsible leadership practices.
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INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions in developing economies are facing mounting pressures of aligning their leadership models with importance of enhancing academic excellence as well as encouraging the developments of ethical and student-centric learning experiences (Abbas, Raza & Ali, 2023). As higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan work in problematic sociopolitical and economic

environment, often the leadership determines the academic experience of learners, how they are engaged, motivated and their overall performance (Khan & Jamil, 2022). The role of leadership in creation of academically supportive, morally based & psychologically safe learning environments is becoming more pivotal as pressure on students grows (Islam, Yuka, Amlan & Jasim, 2024). The responsible leadership, a leadership model that is focused on the well-being of stakeholders, ethical behavior, inclusion, and responsibility has become promising alternative in the educational setting that is contingent upon responsible behaviors to ensure success (Maak & Pless, 2006; Pless, Maak & Waldman, 2021).

Although the subject of responsible leadership in the corporate world is well-researched, there is limited research on its effects in academic institutions, specifically among South Asian and Muslim populations (Haque, A., Rehman & Khan, 2024). This disconnect is especially important since HEIs are run in a distinct way; students are their main stakeholders, and their learning, well-being, and engagement directly depend on how academic administrators, heads of department, and faculty leaders behave (Aslam & Lodhi, 2023; Alam & Zafar, 2022). Thus, engagement is an emotional, cognitive, as well as the behavioral investment by students in their studies and a strong predictor of academic performance, students' retention, and academic achievement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In higher education, the responsible leadership has been linked theoretically and empirically to the institutional climate, faculty satisfaction, and university reputation; these organizational outcomes create the contextual conditions that plausibly influence the student motivation and opportunity to engage (Batool, Ibrahim & Adeel, 2024). However, variables that increase students' engagement, particularly ones that relate to the leadership are under-researched in Pakistan. The given research therefore explores:

There are different theoretical supports for the leadership and performance and such well-known theories include social identity theory, which posits that when leaders act responsibly, they make their followers relate themselves with the group, feel important and in turn get involved in greater depths (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). But, empirical confirmation of social identity theory in the context of responsible leadership in Pakistani HEIs is highly lacking. This research addresses this gap by applying social identity theory to understand how responsible academic leaders can create a sense of belonging which will ultimately lead to enhance engagement among students resulting into a better academic performance. The evidence obtained is based on a great sample of the students in Lahore, the academic center of Pakistan, which offers solid information to academic policymakers and university managers. The literature positions student engagement as a well-justified mediator between leadership practices and performance in higher education, while urging methodological rigor, clearer operational distinctions for responsible leadership, and more contextualized studies mainly in under-represented regions & digitalized learning environments before definitive causal claims can be made.

1. Whether responsible leadership has positive effect upon academic performance of university students in Lahore, Pakistan.
2. Whether student engagement mediates this relationship between responsible leadership and academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

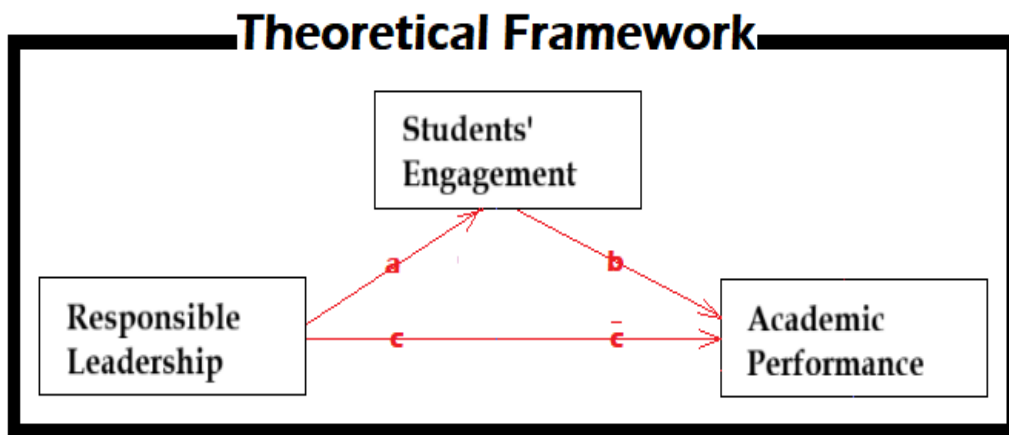
The responsible leadership is a new field of research in the field of leadership as researchers focus more in ethical, sustainable and stakeholder-based types of leadership. The concept of responsible leadership was firstly conceptualized by Maak and Pless (2006) in the form of the relational and ethical leadership style that combines both stakeholder engagement and moral decision-making. In contrast to conventional leadership, that is mainly concerned with the outcomes of performance, responsible leadership upholds the idea of doing what is right, ethically, by considering interests of various stakeholders such as employees, communities, customers, as well as societies (Pless, Maak & Waldman, 2021; Hague, Fernando & Caputi, 2019a). According to the recent findings, responsible leadership is associated with such positive outcomes in organizations as trust, psychological safety, employee well-beings as well as organizational citizenship behaviors (Newman, Miao, Hofman & Zhu, 2015; Stahl & Luque, 2022; Hague, Rehman & Khan, 2024). Nevertheless, the application of responsible leadership in educational contexts is not very widespread as limited studies explored it in diverse contexts.

The leaders in institutions of higher learning are important in influencing the academic, ethical, and social climate. Responsible leadership is in the form of: and in scholarly affairs, ethical decision-making, doing good communication with students, supporting equity and righteousness, promoting psychological, emotional health, promoting ethical academic practice & wisdom, inspiring students to contribute to decision making. The responsible leadership in HEIs has not doing administrative tasks, but influence students' belonging, sense of fairness, and learning behaviours (Aslam & Lodhi, 2023; Abbas, Raza & Ali, 2023). In this connection, social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that individuals categorize themselves into groups, internalize group values as well as act in way that is congruent with group norms and values. One of primary identity sources is leadership, in which leaders who are trustful and just and belong to group develop the group identity, which is internalized by the followers (Steffens, Haslam & Reicher, 2021). As long as students consider their leaders (teachers, program heads, administrators) to be responsible, the university is considered to be a part of them.

This improves emotional attachment, motivation, and readiness to make an additional effort. This increases involvement and performance. Thus, SIT offers a proper prism through which we can figure out way in which responsible leaders influence student behavior and performance (Ribeiro, Yücel & Gomes, 2018). The engagement can be defined as degree of engagement in activities that are related to learning, academic development and institutional participation (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). The engagement can be, cognitive (investment in learning), behavioral (participation, attendance), emotional (belonging, motivation) (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). The work exploring participatory forms of leadership indicates that perceived campus climate and teacher support can amplify the extent to which responsible leadership translates into higher students' engagement and therefore, better academic results (Li, Yang & Akhtar 2022). The academic performance has strong impact upon student engagement (Alam & Zafar, 2022; Iqbal & Khalid, 2023). The styles of leadership such as transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership were found to increase the student engagement (Aslam & Lodhi, 2023).

Nonetheless, the impact of responsible leadership on engagement is not well studied, particularly in Pakistani HEIs (Haider, Akbar, Tehseen, Poulouva & Jaleel, 2022). Student engagement itself has received renewed attention in reviews covering roughly the last decade, with scholars emphasizing its multi-dimensional structure (behavioral, cognitive, affective & social) and its robust association with academic achievement, retention & skill development (Rotgans & Schmidt, 2011). Academic performance is a key indicator of student success, typically measured through GPA, course grades, persistence, and perceived improvement. Prior research identifies several antecedents of academic performance, including: motivation, engagement, teacher support, learning climate and leadership behaviors (Khan & Jamil, 2022). The empirical studies in the broader leadership literature show a recurring pattern in which leader diverse behaviours (transformational, charismatic, distributed, or otherwise prosocial) influence student learning indirectly by shaping levels and quality of student engagement (Jiatong, Wang, Alam, Murad, Gul & Gill, 2022). In this connection, the engaged students tend to achieve better grades, possess stronger learning habits, and demonstrate higher academic success.

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework



Hypothesis Development

- H1: The responsible leaders, based on social identity theory, generate trust & positive environments that prompt students to exert more effort in the academics (Steffens et al., 2021). Students feel important when the leaders are fair and responsible and are more determined to achieve the academic success.
- H2: The psychological safety, open conversations, and supportive relations are all encouraged by responsible leadership (Stahl & Luque, 2022). These characteristics make the students more willing to engage in learning processes and make them more engaged in academic activities in their institutions.
- H3: Being engaged, students spend more time, energy, and emotional resources on studying, which will result in improved academic results (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). These results are thus vital for their academic careers and overwhelmed at their better professional standings as desired by the students.

H4: There is a mediating relationship between responsible leadership and academic performance through student engagement. The students' engagement is important for nurturing the students, attitudes and behaviors and playing facilitating role in linking the leadership and performance in institutions.

The engagement would be boosted by responsible leadership, that in turn would lead toward better academic performance, which is in line with the social identity theory exposition of identity-driven behavior. Empirical advice is echoed in reviews that map responsible leadership outcomes: rigorous mediation tests & context-sensitive measurement are central to moving from theoretical plausibility to robust evidence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is quantitative cross-sectional study. The questionnaire used was structured and was administered to students in higher education institutions of Lahore University in both public and private universities. Convenience sampling was used to collect a total of 412 valid responses. The subjects included undergraduate and graduate students in the different fields (business, social sciences, engineering, IT & education). The demographics includes 56% female, 44% male and age range 18–27. The 62 percent of those of private universities, 38 percent of those of public universities. In this study, all the constructs were measured on basis of previous literature adapted established validated scales. All items were rated on the five-point Likert scale, as the strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

The items of each construct are indicated clearly below. The scale of responsible leadership was a 5-item scale, which was modified based on [Pless, Maak, and Waldman \(2021\)](#). These items reflect the essence dimensions of responsible leadership which include ethical conduct, consideration of stakeholders, impartiality, and moral responsibility. Sample statement is as follow “My academic leader behaves ethically and responsibly.” The scale has found extensive application in the study of leadership, and it has proved to be reliable across many situations ([Haque et al., 2024](#)). The measure of student engagement was a 4-item scale modified to fit [Kahu and Nelson \(2018\)](#). Items examine emotional, behavioral and cognitive involvement with attention on level of effort, participation and involvement of students in their school work. Sample statement is as follow “I am actively engaged in my studies.”

The scale is the most frequent in the research of higher education and has high construct validity ([Alam & Zafar, 2022](#)). The evaluation of academic performance was conducted with the help of a 4-item self-reported scale, development of which was rooted in the previous research works ([Iqbal & Khalid, 2023](#)). These are objects that demonstrate the perceived academic success, progress, and coursework performance among the students. Sample statement is as follow “I am satisfied with my academic performance.” The academic performance measures self-reported are very popular in psychology and educational studies and have a high degree of correlation with real GPA ([Kahu & Nelson, 2018](#)). The rating of all items measured according to the 7-point Likert scale. It was done using structural equation modeling with SmartPLS 4. path test, mediation tests, reliability & validity tests were done.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Table 1 Reliability & Validity

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Responsible Leadership (RL)	RL1	0.792	0.871	0.904	0.657
	RL2	0.843			
	RL3	0.824			
	RL4	0.814			
	RL5	0.801			
Student Engagement (SE)	SE1	0.816	0.883	0.918	0.693
	SE2	0.846			
	SE3	0.873			
	SE4	0.805			
Academic Performance (AP)	AP1	0.812	0.861	0.903	0.651
	AP2	0.834			
	AP3	0.794			
	AP4	0.821			

- ✓ Loadings > 0.70 show strong indicator reliability
- ✓ Cronbach alpha and CR > 0.7 confirm reliability.
- ✓ AVE > 0.50 confirms convergent validity.

Table 2 Structural Model Results (Direct Effects)

Hypothesis	Path	β (PC)	SD	TV	PV	f^2	Decision
H1	RL \rightarrow AP	0.314	0.049	6.41	0.000	0.148	Supported
H2	RL \rightarrow SE	0.457	0.052	8.78	0.000	0.302	Supported
H3	SE \rightarrow AP	0.383	0.047	8.14	0.000	0.176	Supported

Table 2A Structural Model Results (Direct Effects)

RL	SE	AP
Responsible Leadership		
Students' Engagement	0.175	
Academic Performance	0.226	0.224

Effect Size (f^2) Interpretation: 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large

Here, RL \rightarrow SE is medium-large; RL \rightarrow AP and SE \rightarrow AP are medium.

Table 3 Mediation Analysis (Specific Indirect Effect)

Mediation Path	Indirect β	SD	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type
RL \rightarrow SE \rightarrow AP	0.175	0.031	5.64	0.000	Partial Mediation

Interpretation:

Responsible leadership improves academic performance partly *through* enhancing student engagement.

Table 4 Model Fit, R^2 , and Q^2

Construct	R^2	Interpretation	Q^2	Interpretation
SE	0.209	Moderate variance explained	0.121	Medium predictive relevance
AP	0.378	Moderate-high variance explained	0.214	High predictive relevance

Table 5 Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

	RL	SE	AP
RL	~		
SE	0.723	~	
AP	0.611	0.682	~

Interpretation:

All HTMT values $< 0.85 \rightarrow$ discriminant validity established.

Table 6 Model Fit (SRMR)

Fit Index	Value	Threshold
SRMR	0.041	< 0.08 (good fit)

For checking the model fitness, we check the value of SRMR if this value is < 0.08 (Hair et al., 2021) then we say that model is good fit. The value of SRMR < 0.08 this means that model is good fit.

Structural Model

Direct Effects

- ✓ RL \rightarrow AP ($\beta = 0.31, p < .001$): Supported
- ✓ RL \rightarrow SE ($\beta = 0.45, p < .001$): Supported
- ✓ SE \rightarrow AP ($\beta = 0.38, p < .001$): Supported

Mediation

Student engagement partially mediated effect of responsible leadership on academic performance (indirect effect $\beta = 0.17, p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

The main aim of the study was to investigate correlation between responsible leadership, students' engagement and academic performance of university students in Lahore. This paper applied the SIT as the conceptual framework to gain insight into the application of responsible leadership behavior to influence the academic engagements of students and eventually, their academic performance. Thus, the empirical data validate all the hypotheses and expose valuable theoretical and practical implications to the higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in the setting of the developing country like Pakistan.

Responsibility Leadership & Academic Performance

The results of current paper indicate that academic performance directly depends on responsible leadership (RL) with the value of positive significant ($\beta = 0.314; p < .001$). This means that students achieve high academic performances when the leaders of the university, including teachers, heads of departments, and academic leaders, portray responsible behaviors. This is in line with the past research which identifies the importance of responsible leadership in determining positive follower outcomes. As an example, Haque et al. (2024) discovered that the responsible leadership positively correlates with well-being, commitment, and quality of work among the followers in organizational context. The same trends are found in the area of higher education, where motivational and ethical leadership enhances the academic performance and achievements (Aslam & Lodhi, 2023; Khan & Jamil, 2022).

According to the SIT, responsible leaders can create a sense of belonging and identification among the academic environment. When the students understand that their leaders are ethical, fair, and morally sound, they imbibe scholarly norms more profoundly and become more enthusiastic about academic performance (Steffens et al., 2021). Thus, this mental bond boosts their self-confidence, eliminates anxiety, and makes one feel more devoted towards schoolwork. Responsible leadership is even more crucial in the environment of Pakistan, where academics are prone to different threats, including the lack of resources, bureaucratic impediments, and uneven leadership habits (Abbas et al., 2023). When leaders treat students in respectful manner, are fair and of real concern to student welfare; they establish academic success environments. Thus, the positive correlation between RL and academic performance is in accordance with the theoretical predictions, as well as the previous empirical data.

Responsible Leadership & Student Engagement

The researchers observed that responsible leadership is significant predictor of student engagement ($= 0.457$; $p < .001$). This is among the crucial findings as it indicates that leadership behaviors play the significant roles enhancing the level of Student Engagement. The studies confirm that the more effective leadership approaches to adopt in educational institutions are participative, ethical, and relationship-oriented rather than traditional and authority-based ones (Stahl & Luque, 2022). By meaning, responsible leadership is focused on well-being of stakeholders, their moral responsibility, fairness, and open communication. These behavioral tendencies promote a psychologically safe and inclusive learning environment, that prompts students to undergo further involvement in classroom discussion, assignments, and group learning processes (Aslam & Lodhi, 2023). The SIT also gives the conclusion that dynamic responsible leaders significantly enhance the social identity of students with the institution.

This identity creates emotional involvement and pride which encourages the students to be active in the academic activities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Steffens et al. (2021) underline that the identity prototypes are leaders who represent group values and, therefore, students consider such leaders to be the representatives of what the academic community is. This improves the desire of students to conform to the expectations of the institution by engaging them more. Responsible leadership in the Lahore cultural setting can also be used to lessen the psychological barriers between leaders and students since in this cultural context, the students tend to seek teachers and administrators as role models in terms of academic and personal advice. It builds confidence and relationships closeness, which increases interaction. Consequently, the large path coefficient of interdependence between RL and SE demonstrates a respectable relationship that is based on theory as well as realities in the particular context.

Student Engagement, Engagement & Academic Performance

It was discovered that student engagement had a strong positive impact on academic performance (0.383 ; $p < .001$). This is in line with a massive literature that makes engagement one of the most powerful predictors of academic performance. Kahu and Nelson (2018) believe that engagement connects institutional variables with the results of learning; students attending classes, being active, and utilizing cognitive effort demonstrate higher grades. On the same note, Alam and Zafar (2022)

demonstrate that the engagement predicts academic performance in Pakistani higher education institutions. This result supports the fact that engagement is not just an emotional response but a behavioral and cognitive process that has a direct positive effect on learning outcomes. Cognitively involved students employ deep learning techniques, time management, and critical thinking (Iqbal & Khalid, 2023).

Students who are emotionally involved feel attached to institution and they achieve better results in their studies because they are better motivated and more confident. Locally, the current state of Pakistani higher education is linked with low student engagement rates caused by overcrowded classrooms, rote learning, and low focus on participative learning (Abbas et al., 2023). Therefore, determining that the engagement is an effective performance driver is significant in enhancing the teaching and learning practices. Among most significant findings of study is the fact that student engagement is one of partial mediators between responsible leadership and academic performance (0.175; $p = .001$). This implies that responsible leadership has direct and indirect effects on academic performance through the increase in student engagement. The mediation effect is consistent with theoretical predictions based on SIT & leadership-engagement processes that have been proposed in past literature.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the key role played by responsible leadership in determining student engagement and academic performance in higher learning institutions in Lahore. The findings, in line with social identity theory, support that responsible leader create an academic environment that improves the sense of belonging, engagement, and learning outcomes. In their efforts to achieve better quality in universities, responsible leadership offers a potent framework that can help in the reform of the educational culture to enhance student success. This study contributed to theory as it empirically validates RL in HEIs, which is a setting that is not widely studied. The study builds upon SIT by demonstrating influence of responsible leadership on student identity which subsequently influences engagements and performance. It determines interaction as the agent that converts the influence of leadership to enhanced academic results. The results demonstrate evidence based on a Muslim majority in developing nation that can be used in the cross-cultural HRD and leadership literature. The responsible leadership is noted as one of key issues highlighted in study in terms of enhancing quality of higher education in Pakistan. Pakistani students are observed to be anxious, there is little teacher-student interaction & derisory academic support. These gaps can be addressed over responsible leadership that seeks to establish interesting environments in which students feel respected and valued.

Practical Implications

1. The institutions are required to invest in a training scheme to achieve responsible leadership skills of faculty and administrators to encourage academic integrity, justice, openness, and responsibility in institution.
2. The faculty members are required to adopt responsible behaviors as leader as behaviors that include respect, empathy, and communication in students to ensure participative classrooms that promote engagement.

3. The institutions are required to introduce responsible leader training in teacher training. The promotion of leadership standards that are consistent with responsible leadership principles in the higher education.
4. Such a study strengthens the argument that higher educational institution in Lahore and the rest of Pakistan should implement the leadership models that focus on ethical conduct and care and inclusivity.

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