

Speaking up with integrity: how moral ownership connects moral agency and ethical voice

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Abstract

Purpose – This research investigates the psychological factors affecting ethical expression among employees. It focuses on how moral agency influences ethical voice and examines the mediating role of moral ownership in this relationship. The study also assesses the impact of demographic variables on these associations.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed established psychometric methods to assess both validity and reliability, drawing on data collected from a cross-sectional survey of 244 employees across various industry sectors in India. To investigate the mediating role of moral ownership in the relationship between moral agency and ethical voice, the study employed Hayes' PROCESS Model 4.

Findings – The results indicate a positive correlation between moral agency and moral ownership, with moral agency significantly predicting ethical voice. Mediation analysis shows that moral ownership partially mediates this relationship, suggesting that a strong sense of moral responsibility enhances employees' ability to express ethical concerns. Demographic factors did not significantly moderate the model.

Originality/value – The paper enhances ethical voice theory by introducing moral ownership as a link between moral agency and ethical expression. It examines how moral awareness fosters personal responsibility, explaining variations in employees' willingness to voice ethical concerns despite similar moral capacities. The findings highlight the importance of leadership and developmental interventions in fostering moral agency and ownership to improve ethical expression in organizations

Keywords Ethical voice, Moral agency, Moral ownership, Mediation analysis, Organizational ethics, Ethical behaviour

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Organizations globally are witnessing an increase in corporate irresponsibility, including unethical surveillance and fraud (Toms and Lin, 2025; Wang *et al.*, 2024). Research shows that unethical behaviors can be significantly reduced when companies proactively implement regulatory reforms (Manginte, 2024; Kassem, 2022). Employee engagement, particularly through ethical voice where employees articulate concerns about misconduct are critical for early detection and prevention of fraud (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2024). Despite acknowledging the importance of ethical voice, research on factors influencing employees' willingness to express ethical concerns remains limited (Brooks *et al.*, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Ethical voice is affected by contextual factors such as relational dynamics and organisational conditions. Key studies emphasize the roles of psychological safety, ethical climate, and leader-member exchange in encouraging employees to voice ethical issues (Edmondson, 2019; Morrison, 2023; Wang and Yen, 2023). Workplaces that foster psychological safety mitigate interpersonal risks, while strong ethical climates and leader-follower relationships support

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ethical expression (Fast *et al.*, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2017a, b; Brooks *et al.*, 2023). These findings clarify the organizational conditions that promote the expression of ethical concerns.

Current research on ethical voice has improved our understanding of the factors prompting employees to voice concerns, highlighting contextual precursors like ethical leadership, psychological safety, social support, leader-member exchange, and organizational ethical climate (Dua *et al.*, 2023; Wang and Yen, 2023; Morrison, 2023). While these factors correlate with ethical voice, they primarily explain organizational conditions rather than the psychological mechanisms that lead employees to internalize a sense of responsibility for ethical conduct. Moral-psychological research indicates that traits such as moral agency, moral identity, and moral efficacy influence ethical judgments and intentions (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2024). However, a critical question remains: *Despite similar moral awareness, why do some employees hesitate to accept personal responsibility for raising ethical concerns?* Existing theories focus on organizational conditions or individual capabilities but do not sufficiently address the psychological shift needed for moral awareness to translate into a personal obligation to act, leaving the link between moral recognition and ethical voice under-theorized.

To address this theoretical gap, the present study defines moral ownership as a state of personal accountability where individuals internalize their responsibility for ethical matters and act according to their moral judgments. Rather than viewing moral ownership as simply an individual characteristic, this research treats it as a psychological process linking moral agency to ethical voice. By framing moral ownership as an activated accountability mechanism, the study seeks to broaden the scholarship on ethical voice beyond contextual and identity-based factors, offering a process-oriented perspective on employees' varying willingness to express ethical concerns despite similar moral capacities.

Framing relationships within established ethical theories, such as Bandura's social cognitive theory and Gilligan's care ethics, is essential. Moral agency involves an individual's awareness and commitment to moral obligations (Jennings *et al.*, 2015), requiring recognition of ethical dilemmas and prompt responses. Those who identify as moral agents engage instinctively with ethical issues, taking responsibility and focusing on decision-making (Hannah *et al.*, 2011). In this study, moral ownership is defined as a self-imposed responsibility to act when ethical standards are violated, contrasting with moral identity research that looks at inherent traits. Moral ownership highlights accountability, making ethical dilemmas personally relevant, and encourages proactive responses in organizational contexts, aligning with self-regulatory views of moral agency (Bandura, 2014). While psychological ownership relates to feelings of possession (Pierce *et al.*, 2001), moral ownership emphasizes norm enforcement and accountability for moral outcomes. Related concepts like moral identity, courage, and prosocial rule-breaking explore various dimensions of morally motivated behaviors but focus more on identity and risk tolerance than on assuming responsibility (Morrison, 2023; Hannah *et al.*, 2011). Moral identity is how individuals perceive their moral character, while moral obligation reflects their beliefs about their duty-bound actions. Psychological ownership involves feelings of possession, and moral ownership specifically addresses whether individuals see an ethical dilemma as their personal responsibility. Moral courage is the willingness to face the risks of ethical behavior but doesn't explain why people initially view ethical issues as personal. Thus, moral ownership is seen as an activated state of accountability linking moral awareness to ethical action, rather than a fixed trait. Thus, moral ownership is proposed as a distinct, process-oriented framework illustrating how ethical concerns become personally significant and lead to ethical action.

The interplay of moral agency, moral ownership, and ethical voice is informed by Carol Gilligan's Moral Theory of Care, introduced in 1982. This theory critiques justice-focused ethics by emphasizing relational interdependence, empathy, and context, suggesting that moral agency is rooted in care and responsiveness, while ethical voice reflects a commitment to organizational well-being. An example is whistleblowing, which can promote justice while

considering colleagues' welfare, thereby enhancing integrity and trust. Gilligan's theory includes emotional dimensions in ethical voice. Similarly, Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, introduced in 1991, shows how environmental, behavioral, and personal factors affect moral action, highlighting that self-regulatory processes can lead to moral disengagement, hindering ethical behavior. Individuals with higher moral self-efficacy and a sense of moral ownership are more likely to act ethically. The integration of these theoretical frameworks shows that ethical voice cannot be fully understood through moral reasoning alone or through favorable organizational environments. Instead, it emerges when individuals internalize moral awareness as a personal obligation to act. By combining Social Cognitive Theory with the Moral Theory of Care, this study introduces the concept of moral ownership as the key accountability mechanism that converts moral agency into ethical voice. This process-oriented approach enriches the literature on ethical voice by demonstrating how moral awareness translates into actionable behavior, rather than just identifying individual or contextual factors that encourage speaking up.

In summary, this study sets out to accomplish two primary objectives: first, to examine the direct relationship between moral agency and ethical voice, and second, to investigate the mediating role of moral ownership in this relationship. This research advances the scholarship on ethical voice by tackling a theoretical issue that remains unresolved, rather than merely adding another mediating variable. Prior studies on ethical voice have explored the tendencies of individuals to express their concerns through identity-based lenses, as well as the situational factors that influence employees' willingness to communicate these concerns through leadership and organizational climate perspectives. This study defines moral ownership as an activated accountability mechanism, illustrating how moral agency becomes ethical voice. The findings highlight the importance of internalized moral responsibility in transforming moral awareness into ethical expression, contributing to existing literature and setting the stage for future longitudinal and experimental research.

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

2.1 *Moral agency and ethical voice*

The act of raising concerns about unethical practices, often referred to as "ethical voice," is recognized as a crucial component of proactive moral engagement, essential for the ethical operation of organizations (Chen and Trevino, 2022). Individuals who voice their concerns regarding misconduct or champion ethical principles, frequently without formal mechanisms of support or protection, exemplify what it means to have an ethical voice (Huang and Paterson, 2017). Nonetheless, those who take this step may encounter significant risks, such as interpersonal discord, reputational damage, or potential reprisals from organizational leaders, which makes this endeavor inherently risky (Morrison, 2023). Consequently, not all employees who are aware of unethical behaviors choose to speak out. Effectively converting moral awareness into expressed action necessitates a specific psychological framework that melds moral courage with moral recognition.

Moral agency is essential for understanding this psychological framework. According to Bandura (2014) Cognitive Theory of moral thought and action, it refers to an individual's ability to distinguish right from wrong and act according to their moral principles. This concept includes cognitive and emotional processes such as self-reflective monitoring, moral reasoning, and anticipatory self-evaluation (Cervone et al., 2006). Individuals with strong moral agency not only identify ethical dilemmas but also feel motivated to address them, taking responsibility for corrective actions without seeking recognition (Hannah et al., 2011). Brooks et al. (2023) argue that those with a strong moral identity are more likely to express ethical concerns due to increased cognitive dissonance when standards are violated. Similarly, Morrison (2023) highlights that personal moral judgments can drive individuals to challenge established practices, influenced by contextual factors like organizational climate and leadership styles.

Moral agency is vital in reducing moral disengagement, where individuals justify inaction or unethical behavior (Paciello *et al.*, 2023). Those who see themselves as moral agents consider voicing concerns an ethical duty, allowing them to confront fears like social ostracism or repercussions. They find intrinsic fulfillment in upholding ethical principles and are willing to face professional or social challenges to maintain their integrity and that of their organization (Morrison, 2023). Previous research consistently indicates a positive correlation between moral agency and ethical behavior; however, these studies largely establish this connection without thoroughly elucidating the psychological mechanisms that facilitate the translation of moral competence into ethical expression. This gap underscores the need to investigate ethical voice within a more comprehensive, process-oriented framework. As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Moral agency is positively associated with ethical voice.

2.2 Moral agency and moral ownership

Moral agency refers to an individual's ability to recognize and evaluate ethical dilemmas in their professional context, although this awareness does not always lead to action. Moral ownership enhances this concept by emphasizing a strong sense of personal responsibility for maintaining ethical standards (Moore, 2008; Hannah and Avolio, 2010). Those with high moral ownership view ethical issues as personally relevant, turning awareness into proactive engagement. It's important to distinguish moral ownership from related concepts: moral identity involves incorporating moral traits into one's self-concept, while moral obligation relates to duties or societal norms. In contrast, moral ownership is a self-regulatory state where individuals feel personally accountable for ethical breaches. This ownership transforms moral agency from a cognitive skill into active duty, fostering accountability for ethical violations instead of deflecting them. Moral ownership functions as a self-regulatory mechanism that arises from consistent moral engagement and reflection, informed by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Smith *et al.*, 2024).

As individuals exercise their moral agency, they develop accountability for their ethical decisions, enhancing their sense of ownership. Moral ownership connects the aspiration to act (*conation*) with the understanding of ethical principles (*cognition*). Moral agency endows individuals with the ability to discern and assess ethical dilemmas; however, possessing ethical competence does not inherently lead to ethical behavior. Moral ownership encompasses the process of embracing personal responsibility, which allows ethical considerations to be internalized as individual obligations. In this regard, moral ownership serves as a self-regulatory mechanism that converts moral capabilities into a readiness for ethical action, thus facilitating the expression of an ethical voice. Gilligan's Moral Theory of Care emphasizes that moral judgments arise from empathy and concern for others rather than abstract reasoning. Moral ownership is a relational duty reflecting care for colleagues and the ethical integrity of the group, enhancing commitment to ethical principles. In organizations, it is shaped by psychological safety, ethical climate, and leader-member exchange dynamics, influencing employees' willingness to voice ethical concerns (Edmondson, 2019; Morrison, 2023). Supportive environments promote moral ownership, while less supportive ones may lead individuals to express concerns despite risks. This concept differs from moral identity and moral courage, which focus on identity and resilience (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Hannah *et al.*, 2011). Unlike prosocial rule-breaking, which involves intentional norm violations, ethical voice generally occurs through formal channels (Morrison, 2023). By emphasizing responsibility, moral ownership provides a complementary perspective on ethical voice. Existing research has predominantly explored the connection between moral agency and responsible conduct, yet it has offered limited insights into the processes by which responsibility is psychologically internalized as a facet of self-regulation. Consequently, this study investigates moral ownership as the mechanism that facilitates the transformation of

moral agency into personal accountability. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis based on this theoretical convergence:

H2. Moral agency is positively associated with moral ownership.

2.3 Moral ownership and ethical voice

A growing body of evidence underscores the significance of individual moral responsibility in shaping ethical conduct within organizations (Trevino *et al.*, 2014). Moral ownership is crucial for individuals to uphold moral standards, representing an internalized commitment to ethical behavior. Hannah and Avolio (2010) define moral ownership as a self-imposed obligation to act when ethical standards are at risk, benefiting personal interests as well as those of colleagues and the organization. Individuals are more likely to voice ethical concerns and challenge unethical behavior when they feel they have control over their moral integrity (Huang and Paterson, 2017; Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, raising ethical concerns often involves significant risks, including social isolation, negative reactions from superiors, and potential limitations on career progression (Morrison, 2023). Only those endowed with a profound sense of moral ownership and a deep responsibility for ethical outcomes are inclined to voice their concerns in the face of such challenges. For these individuals, addressing unethical behavior transcends mere choice; it becomes a moral imperative deeply connected to their ethical self-concept.

Gilligan's (1982) theory of moral development links morality to empathy, responsibility, and awareness of others' needs, emphasizing relational ethics (Jennings *et al.*, 2015). This differs from justice-oriented ethics focused on laws. Woodbine and Taylor (2006) and Brooks *et al.* (2023) explore moral ownership, which involves a commitment to the moral welfare of peers and organizations, turning passive observers into engaged moral agents. Moral ownership is crucial for voicing ethical concerns and motivating individuals to take moral risks for societal benefit (Hannah *et al.*, 2011; Chaudhary *et al.*, 2024). Unlike adherence to external standards, it arises from intrinsic values and accountability (Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Individuals with high moral ownership are more likely to act ethically without external support (Avey *et al.*, 2012). Lee *et al.* (2017a, b) highlight that a strong sense of moral duty to one's group enhances the ability to express moral concerns, underscoring the importance of moral ownership in transitioning from ethical awareness to vocal expression. Despite the increasing body of evidence indicating that contextual factors promote ethical communication, there has been relatively limited focus on how employees come to perceive their own responsibility in addressing ethical issues. Consequently, exploring the concept of moral ownership offers a valuable psychological perspective to enhance our understanding of ethical voice, supplementing the insights gained from contextual influences. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3. Moral ownership is positively associated with ethical voice.

2.4 The mediating role of moral ownership

The ability to engage in moral agency provides individuals with the capacity to identify, contemplate, and assess ethical challenges; however, this moral awareness does not always lead to the articulation of ethical concerns (Bandura, 2014). Previous studies indicate that individuals who possess ethical competence may nevertheless remain silent, particularly when ethical issues are perceived as ambiguous, uncertain, or beyond their personal responsibility. This discrepancy underscores the need for a process-oriented explanation of how moral awareness is translated into ethical voice. The present study defines moral ownership as the instigation of personal responsibility, whereby moral agency is expressed through an ethical articulation. Moral agency involves recognizing ethical concerns, while moral ownership entails assuming responsibility to address them, thus promoting ethical expression. It acts as a

bridge between moral recognition and ethical action, showing how individuals take responsibility for ethical standards and view dilemmas as requiring personal intervention (Ogunfowora *et al.*, 2021). This internalized accountability transforms moral agency from mere cognitive ability into a readiness for ethical behavior, explaining how moral awareness leads to ethical action. Therefore, moral ownership is a self-regulatory process that fosters the enactment of moral agency in various contexts.

The concept of moral ownership, as a process-oriented construct, aligns with Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory of moral thought and action, which emphasizes that moral behaviour is guided by self-regulatory processes involving internalized norms and self-evaluation rather than moral cognition alone (Bandura, 2014). While this theory establishes a foundation for understanding moral self-regulation, it does not clarify how moral awareness translates into a personal responsibility to act. Most research on ethical voice emphasizes contextual factors like ethical leadership and climate, but neglects how employees assume responsibility for ethical issues. This study aims to address this gap by framing moral ownership as the self-regulatory mechanism that transforms moral awareness into ethical voice. Empirical evidence supports the view that moral agency predicts ethical voice through moral ownership (Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Chaudhary *et al.* (2024) found that moral ownership mediates the link between value-oriented moral traits and ethical behavior. The Moral Theory of Care posits that moral ownership arises from a responsibility toward others and the ethical community (Gilligan, 1982; Huang *et al.*, 2025). Together, these perspectives indicate that moral ownership translates moral agency into ethical expression. Prior studies have linked moral agency, moral ownership, and ethical conduct, yet research on how moral awareness converts to behavioral action is limited. Exploring moral ownership as a mediating factor enhances understanding of this psychological transition. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Moral ownership mediates the relationship between moral agency and ethical voice.

This study presents an integrative framework designed to clarify the interrelationships between the notions of moral agency, moral ownership, and ethical voice. It builds upon a rich corpus of literature that has thoroughly explored these topics. The theoretical framework supporting this investigation is illustrated in Figure 1.

3. Research method

3.1 Sample selection and data collection

The study involved management professionals in India, using a structured self-report questionnaire to gather data on internal perceptions and self-regulatory processes that are not visible to outsiders. The online survey, conducted through Google Forms, was distributed via email and social media, resulting in 244 completed forms from over 500 invitees, yielding a response rate under 50%. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, eliminating personal identification to reduce evaluation apprehension and social desirability bias. Informed consent was obtained in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration (1964). Of the participants, 64.8% (158) were female, 34.4% (84) were male, and 0.8% (2) chose not to disclose their gender. The majority were younger adults, with 80.3% aged 20 to 25 and 10.2% aged 25 to 30. Regarding

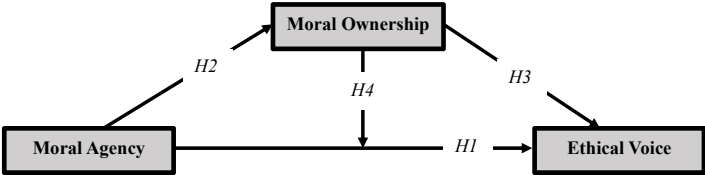


Figure 1. Theoretical framework Source: Authors’ own

income, 11.9% reported less than 0.5 million INR annually, 32.4% earned between 0.5 and 1 million INR, 18.4% made between 1 and 1.5 million INR, and the rest exceeded 1.5 million INR. Educationally, 40.6% had a bachelor's degree, while 58.6% held a postgraduate degree. For further details, see [Table 1](#).

3.2 The questionnaire structure

The questionnaire was divided into three distinct sections. The initial section outlined the study's objectives and secured informed consent from participants. The second section focused on gathering demographic data, including variables such as gender, age group, annual income, and educational attainment. The final section consisted of various scales related to the constructs under examination. The Moral Agency Scale, adapted from [Sekerka et al. \(2009\)](#), included three items, one of which was, "*Others can rely on me to exemplify moral behaviour.*" The Cronbach's alpha (α) for this scale in the current study was calculated to be 0.724. The Ethical Voice construct was assessed using a scale developed by [Zheng et al. \(2022\)](#), which comprised four items, with "*telling a colleague who is doing something unsafe to stop*" serving as an illustrative example. The recorded Cronbach's alpha (α) for this scale was 0.763. Lastly, Moral Ownership was measured through a three-item scale adapted from [Hannah et al. \(2011\)](#), featuring the item, "*I will not accept unethical behaviour from anyone in my organization*" as a representative example. The Cronbach's alpha (α) for this construct was reported as 0.726 in the present research. For further details, please refer to [Table 2](#) below.

3.3 Control variables

Research suggests that demographic factors have a significant influence on respondents' perceptions of psychological constructs. In this study, the participants' age categories were defined as follows: 0 = 20–25 years, 1 = 25–30 years, 2 = 30–35 years, and 3 = 35–40 years. Additionally, gender was categorized as 0 = female, 1 = male, and 2 = prefer not to disclose. Education levels were classified into four groups: 1 = high school and below, 2 = college, 3 = bachelor's degree, and 4 = master's degree and above. Finally, family income was segmented into four brackets: 0 = below 0.5 million INR, 1 = 0.5 to 1 million INR, 2 = 1 to 1.5 million INR, and 3 = above 1.5 million INR. These demographic variables were incorporated as control variables in the analytical model, as illustrated in [Table 3](#), which delineates the associations between these control variables and other study variables.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents ($N = 244$)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	158	64.8
	Male	84	34.4
	Prefer not to disclose	2	0.8
Age (years)	20–25	196	80.3
	25–30	25	10.2
	Above 30	23	9.5
Annual Income (INR)	Less than 0.5 million	29	11.9
	0.5–10. million	79	32.4
	1.0–1.5 million	45	18.4
	Above 1.5 million	91	37.3
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's degree	99	40.6
	Postgraduate degree	143	58.6
	Others/not reported	2	0.8

Source(s): Authors' findings

Table 2. Instrument details along with reliability findings

Scale	Item details	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Adapted from
Moral Agency (MA)	- Others can rely on me to exemplify moral behaviour - I am determined to do the right thing - Engaging in principled action is an ongoing pursuit for me	0.724	Sekerka et al. (2009)
Ethical Voice (EV)	- I am prepared to talk to co-workers who fail to behave ethically - I would tell a co-worker who is doing something unethical to stop - I encourage my co-workers to act with integrity - I speak up in our company to stop others from behaving with a lack of integrity	0.763	Zheng et al. (2022)
Moral Ownership (MO)	- I will not accept unethical behaviour from anyone in my organization - I will assume responsibility to take action when I see an unethical act - I will take charge to address ethical issues when I know someone has done something wrong	0.726	Hannah et al. (2011)

Source(s): Authors' findings

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation among variables

Sl. No.	Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Gender	0.37	0.53	1						
2	Age	0.39	0.94	0.295**	1					
3	Family Income	1.81	1.07	0.029	0.114	1				
4	Education	0.60	0.50	0.014	0.015	-0.032	1			
5	Ethical Voice (EV)	5.14	1.01	0.030	0.230**	0.007	-0.004	1		
6	Moral Ownership (MO)	5.07	1.04	0.035	0.305**	0.010	0.006	0.738**	1	
7	Moral Agency (MA)	5.68	0.86	-0.036	0.156*	0.070	-0.026	0.616**	0.565	1

Note(s): **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) and *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source(s): Authors' findings

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

The means (M), standard deviations (SD), and correlation coefficients (r) for the examined variables and control variables are displayed in [Table 3](#). The analysis revealed several noteworthy findings, particularly a significant correlation between ethical voice (EV) and moral ownership (MO) with an effect size of $r = 0.738$ ($p < 0.01$). Additionally, a substantial correlation was identified between EV and moral agency (MA), represented by $r = 0.616$ ($p < 0.01$). The results of the correlation analysis indicate a significant positive relationship between moral ownership (MO) and moral agency (MA), with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.565$ and a p -value less than 0.01. This finding implies that greater levels of moral agency are linked to enhanced perceptions of moral ownership. Furthermore, certain control variables, such as age, exhibited significant positive correlations with EV ($r = 0.230$, $p < 0.01$),

MO ($r = 0.305, p < 0.01$), and MA ($r = 0.156, p < 0.05$). Conversely, other control variables did not show significant relationships with the primary variables of interest. The authors employed the descriptive statistical findings to facilitate further testing of the proposed model within the scope of the study.

4.2 Hypothesis tests

The initially assessed [Hypothesis 1 \(H1\)](#) included gender, age, family income, and education as control variables. Moral agency (MA) was the independent variable, while ethical voice (EV) was the dependent variable. The regression analysis showed a significant positive relationship between MA and EV ($\beta = 0.707, p < 0.001$), supporting [H1](#). Age emerged as a key predictor of ethical voice, indicating that an individual's career stage influences ethical expression processes. Specifically, moral ownership and confidence to voice concerns may differ between early-career employees and those with more experience. For [Hypothesis 2 \(H2\)](#), a similar approach was used with moral ownership (MO) as the dependent variable. The findings indicate a positive and significant effect of MA on MO ($\beta = 0.642, p < 0.001$), thus validating [H2](#). Age was again identified as a significant predictor of moral ownership ($\beta = 0.252, p < 0.001$). Finally, [Hypothesis 3 \(H3\)](#) was tested using linear regression with MO as the independent variable and EV as the dependent variable, while retaining all other control variables. The results reaffirmed a substantial positive effect of MO on EV ($\beta = 0.721, p < 0.001$), providing support for [H3](#).

In addition, the mediating role of moral ownership within the relationship between moral agency and ethical voice was analyzed using the bootstrapping method as implemented in PROCESS by [Hayes \(2022\)](#), specifically Model 4 (bootstrapping set at 5,000 iterations; [Bolin, 2014](#)). The findings, as presented in [Table 4](#), reveal that the indirect effect of moral agency (MA) on ethical voice (EV) via moral ownership (MO) was calculated to be 0.382, with 95% confidence intervals that excluded zero (LLCI = 0.2768, ULCI = 0.5021). These results indicate a statistically significant association of moral ownership within the dynamics of moral agency and ethical voice, thereby lending support to the suggested mediation model while refraining from making definitive assertions regarding causal relationships.

4.3 Discriminant validity

[Table 4](#) illustrates the evaluation of discriminant validity according to the Fornell - Larcker criterion, while [Table 5](#) details the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio analysis. As outlined by [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#), discriminant validity is affirmed when the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct surpasses its correlations with other constructs within the model. The data presented in [Table 6](#) reveal that the diagonal elements,

Table 4. Indicating total effect, direct and indirect effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Total effect of X on Y					
0.7280	0.0598	12.1697	0.0000	0.6101	0.8458
Direct effect of X on Y					
0.3459	0.0581	5.9559	0.0000	0.2315	0.4604
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y					
Effect		BootSE		BootLLCI	BootULCI
MO	0.3820	0.0566		0.2786	0.5005

Source(s): Authors' findings

Table 5. Discriminant validity (*HTMT Ratios*)

Construct pair	HTMT
Ethical Voice (EV) – Moral Ownership (MO)	0.84
Ethical Voice (EV) – Moral Agency (MA)	0.71
Moral Ownership (MO) – Moral Agency (MA)	0.68
Source(s): Authors’ findings	

Table 6. Discriminant validity (*Using Fornell-Larcker Criterion*)

Constructs	Ethical voice (EV)	Moral ownership (MO)	Moral agency (MA)
Ethical Voice (EV)	0.78		
Moral Ownership (MO)	0.738	0.76	
Moral Agency (MA)	0.616	0.565	0.81
Source(s): Authors’ findings			

representing the square roots of AVE for moral agency, moral ownership, and ethical voice, exceed the corresponding inter-construct correlations. This outcome suggests that each construct effectively captures a unique segment of variance that is distinct from the others.

To rigorously assess discriminant validity and address limitations of the Fornell - Larcker criterion, the HTMT ratio was analyzed. All HTMT values were below the 0.85 threshold, indicating sufficient discriminant validity among the constructs. This confirms that moral agency, moral ownership, and ethical voice are distinct empirically, with no significant construct overlap. Overall, the results from both criteria provide strong evidence of discriminant validity, supporting the measurement model for subsequent hypothesis testing and mediation analysis.

5. Discussion

This study examines the roles of moral agency (MA) and moral ownership (MO) in influencing ethical voice (EV) within organizations. It also investigates how moral ownership mediates the relationship between moral agency and ethical voice. The findings provide strong empirical support for all three direct relationships (H1, H2, and H3) and indicate a partial mediating effect (H4) of moral ownership, offering valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of voice behaviors in professional contexts.

5.1 Moral agency and ethical voice: an enactment of moral thought in action

In accordance with Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action, which posits that moral behavior arises from the intricate interactions among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 2014), our study shows that moral agency significantly predicts ethical voice (H1). The robustness of this relationship ($\beta = 0.707, p < 0.001$) suggests that individuals who perceive themselves as autonomous moral agents are more likely to express ethical concerns, challenge unjust behaviors, and uphold normative standards within their organizational environments. This perspective resonates with Bandura’s assertion that moral actions are not solely the result of fixed ethical principles but are also influenced by the exercise of agency, which encompasses intentionality, foresight, self-regulation, and reflective thought. Thus, moral agency serves as both a motivational and cognitive framework, enabling employees to translate their ethical contemplations into concrete actions, even when faced with potential risks or opposition from their organizations.

5.2 Moral agency and moral ownership: internalization of moral responsibility

The significant influence of moral agency on moral ownership (H3) reinforces Bandura's theoretical framework by emphasizing the internalization of moral responsibility. Individuals who possess a heightened sense of moral agency are more likely to experience a psychological commitment to their ethical behaviors ($\beta = 0.642, p < 0.001$), suggesting a deeper integration of moral values into their personal identity. In this context, moral ownership serves as the link between cognition and behavior, representing a deeply held belief in one's obligation to maintain ethical standards. This finding is consistent with Gilligan's (1982) Ethic of Care, which posits that moral development is fundamentally rooted in the recognition of our obligations to others. The transition from agency to ownership reflects a shift from purely abstract moral reasoning to a more profound understanding of relational accountability. Consequently, employees are driven to act not only by an awareness of what is morally correct but also by a deep-seated sense of responsibility for the repercussions of ethical violations on their colleagues' well-being within the organization.

5.3 Moral ownership and ethical voice: the ethics of responsibility

The significant and affirmative correlation between moral ownership and ethical voice ($\beta = 0.721, p < 0.001$; H3) underscores the notion that ethical expression is fundamentally rooted in a profound sense of personal responsibility. This result can be analysed through the frameworks established by both Bandura and Gilligan. From a social cognitive perspective, these findings support the view that an enhanced sense of personal accountability promotes the practice of ethical behavior, particularly when bolstered by a moral self-regulatory framework. In terms of the Moral Theory of Care, the notion of moral ownership emphasizes an ethic of responsibility rather than an ethic of justice. Employees who possess a strong sense of moral ownership are driven not merely by organizational policies but by their relational duties to others, including colleagues, stakeholders, and clients. This commitment to relationships motivates them to voice their concerns and advocate for the development of an ethical organizational culture. At the core of care ethics is the belief that moral behavior is profoundly influenced by emotional engagement and contextual awareness, challenging the idea that ethical conduct can be understood solely through abstract principles and rational reasoning.

5.4 Mediation of moral ownership: a pathway of moral activation

The observed partial mediation (H4) of the relationship between moral agency (MA) and ethical voice (EV) through moral ownership (indirect effect = 0.382, 95% CI [0.2768, 0.5021]) is of substantial theoretical significance. The results indicate that moral agency is associated with ethical voice; however, this relationship weakens when individuals do not perceive personal responsibility for the moral consequences of their actions. It is important to note that the cross-sectional design does not permit definitive causal inferences. The findings support Bandura's triadic reciprocity and expand Social Cognitive Theory by illustrating that moral agency alone doesn't ensure the expression of ethical voice. Instead, activating ethical responsibility through moral ownership is crucial. This positions moral ownership as a key self-regulatory mechanism linking ethical competence to ethical action, offering a process-oriented view of ethical voice. The identified partial mediation indicates that ethical competence may not be enough to encourage ethical voice; employees are more likely to voice concerns when their moral awareness is paired with a strong sense of personal responsibility, highlighting the importance of activated accountability. However, moral ownership is not the only factor; contextual elements like ethical leadership, organizational ethical climate, and psychological safety also significantly influence employees' willingness to speak up.

The sample, primarily consisting of early-career professionals, requires careful consideration of career-stage dynamics in the identified relationships. Younger employees may exhibit higher moral sensitivity, but their developing sense of moral ownership and ability to voice ethical concerns can be hindered by inexperience, lower positional power, and

heightened risk perception. This context influences the study's relationships. Moreover, the partial mediation highlights the direct impact of moral agency on ethical voice. This suggests that agency and ownership are complementary yet distinct mechanisms in moral enactment. Thus, this research presents a nuanced model of ethical behavior, where the interplay between action capacity (*agency*) and moral accountability perception (*ownership*) enhances the expression of ethical voice.

5.5 The role of control variables: age as a moralizing factor

Age significantly influences moral agency, ownership, and ethical expression, reflecting the developmental nature of moral functioning. As individuals progress through different life stages, they encounter ethical dilemmas that promote reflective reasoning and strengthen intrinsic values. Bandura's social cognitive theory highlights the development of moral self-regulation shaped by personal experiences and social contexts, while Gilligan's ethic of care posits that maturity enhances empathy and relational awareness, thereby increasing moral responsibilities. Overall, age plays a crucial role in the evolution of moral cognition and ethical engagement.

6. Implications of the study

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes theoretically by identifying moral ownership as a crucial self-regulatory mechanism linking moral cognition to moral action. This work further enhances the scholarship on ethical voice by redirecting focus from primarily contextual factors, such as ethical leadership, ethical climate, and psychological safety, to the internal psychological processes that facilitate the transformation of moral awareness into ethical expression. Based on Social Cognitive Theory, the findings suggest that having moral agency alone is insufficient for ethical voice without an internalized sense of accountability for moral outcomes. Additionally, by integrating insights from the Moral Theory of Care, this research reconceptualizes moral ownership as relational responsibility, thereby enhancing the discussion on ethical voice beyond traditional identity- or compliance-based frameworks.

The findings indicate that moral reasoning alone does not ensure ethical behavior. Instead, self-regulation based on a sense of ownership aids the shift from moral cognition to action. This extends Bandura (2014) Social Cognitive Theory by showing how internalized responsibility enhances moral agency in organizations, highlighting the mediating role of moral ownership within the framework. The findings highlight that moral ownership serves as a self-regulatory mechanism that transforms moral cognition into behavioral accountability. This provides a process-oriented understanding of the concept of ethical voice. This study enhances the field of ethical voice research by systematically incorporating moral-psychological mechanisms alongside well-established contextual and relational frameworks. This approach aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of speaking-up behavior within organizational settings. The current research frames moral ownership as a psychological state that is activated rather than a fixed moral attribute. This differentiation elucidates its function as the mechanism enabling employees to convert their moral awareness into an ethical expression.

Research findings indicate that psychological ownership promotes moral and ethical considerations, supporting recent studies on the complexity of voice-related decisions (Brooks et al., 2023; Morrison, 2023). These results enrich the literature on ethical voice and leadership by demonstrating that the desire to speak up ethically is mainly influenced by intrinsic psychological factors rather than solely by leaders' actions. The results suggest that contextual factors alone do not adequately account for ethical voice unless employees embrace ethical

responsibility by cultivating a sense of moral ownership. This procedural perspective contributes to the existing ethical voice literature by elucidating the mechanism through which moral reasoning is converted into ethical behavior. Collectively, these findings enhance our theoretical comprehension of how the interplay of moral agency, identity dynamics, and moral self-regulation culminates in the expression of ethical voice within modern organizational contexts.

6.2 Practical implications

This research offers valuable insights for policymakers and leaders looking to enhance ethical conduct and governance. It finds that ethical voice thrives when employees feel personal accountability for ethical outcomes, highlighting the importance of fostering moral ownership instead of solely relying on formal reporting systems. Leadership strategies that encourage responsibility, such as modeling moral behavior, engaging in participative decision-making, and using values-driven communication, are particularly effective, as they underscore the collective responsibility of addressing ethical issues. Additionally, ethics training should go beyond raising awareness to include scenario-based activities, reflective dialogue, and accountability interventions, which are crucial for improving moral efficacy and reducing moral disengagement, ultimately empowering employees to express ethical concerns proactively.

Consequently, the recommendations presented are derived from the empirical findings of the current study, which indicate that moral ownership serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between moral agency and ethical voice. This implies that organizational interventions may achieve greater effectiveness when they extend beyond merely enhancing employees' moral awareness, and instead intentionally foster an internalized sense of personal responsibility for confronting ethical issues. Such an approach would facilitate the conversion of ethical awareness into vocal expressions of ethical considerations. Organizations can cultivate strong ethical cultures to reduce managerial defensiveness and promote open ethical dialogue. Implementing effective internal controls and governance frameworks signals a commitment to ethics, ensuring employees feel heard and protected. Leaders should grasp the moral implications of encouraging employee voice and provide supportive feedback to enhance ethical capabilities. Integrating moral ownership into leadership development, cultural initiatives, and ethics training can boost accountability and reduce unethical behavior.

7. Conclusion

This research contributes to the field of ethical voice scholarship by elucidating the process through which moral awareness is converted into ethical behavior, facilitated by the intrinsic activation of a sense of responsibility. The study highlights the role of moral-psychological processes in influencing employees' willingness to voice concerns, beyond individual traits or context. It finds a positive correlation between moral agency and ethical voice, indicating that those who recognize moral dilemmas are more likely to express concerns. By identifying moral ownership as a key mechanism, the study resolves inconsistencies in how moral agency translates into ethical voice, demonstrating that ethical awareness alone is insufficient; individuals are more likely to voice ethical concerns when they perceive dilemmas as personal responsibilities with significant moral implications. The findings suggest that the main driver of ethical voice goes beyond moral awareness and includes an internal sense of responsibility. Moral ownership is viewed as a psychological state that enables individuals to express ethical concerns, explaining the differences in their willingness to voice these issues despite having similar moral capacities. By emphasizing this internal accountability mechanism, the study effectively bridges the gap between moral cognition and ethical behavior.

The results largely support established moral–psychological theories without fundamentally challenging them, providing evidence that lays the groundwork for future research on causal mechanisms, contextual limitations, and temporal dynamics using more rigorous methods. Promoting an ethical voice, therefore, necessitates attention to the organizational environment, moral competencies, and employees’ perceptions of responsibility. However, this study has several methodological limitations. The reliance on a cross-sectional, self-report survey constrains the establishment of causal relationships and introduces potential issues such as common method variance and social desirability bias. Additionally, the predominantly younger participant pool may influence perceptions of moral agency and ethical voice, given that research indicates age-related differences in risk perception and speaking-up behavior. Additionally, it is likely that younger employees encounter unique voice dynamics due to their comparatively limited experience within the organization, diminished positional authority, and distinct attitudes toward workplace risk. These factors may have contributed to the variations in the strength of the relationships identified among the study’s variables. Therefore, the identified relationships should be viewed as associative rather than causal, influenced by sample characteristics. The findings are primarily applicable to early-career employees, so caution is needed when generalizing to more experienced or senior workforces, where moral ownership may be shaped by prolonged organizational socialization and role authority. The current study does not address whether the proposed relationships vary among different professional roles, organizational levels, or industry sectors. Given that ethical voice may be shaped by characteristics specific to various occupations and sectors, caution is warranted when extrapolating the findings to diverse professional contexts. Moreover, this study predominantly concentrated on individual-level moral and psychological mechanisms, deliberately excluding organizational contextual factors such as ethical leadership, ethical climate, or psychological safety, all of which could affect employees’ propensity to voice ethical concerns. As a result, the findings should be understood within the limitations of the individual-level framework proposed. Future research is encouraged to explore the proposed model across a wider array of occupational groups and industry sectors to enhance the robustness and contextual relevance of the findings.

Subsequent research could build upon the current investigation by employing multi-level and longitudinal methodologies that consider organizational-level variables, such as ethical climate and leadership style, which influence speaking-up behaviors. The utilization of multisource data may further enhance the construct validity and mitigate potential measurement biases. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies could provide valuable insights into the consistency of the relationships among moral agency, moral ownership, and ethical voice across diverse sociocultural frameworks. Additionally, exploring how organizational boundary conditions and digital or virtual work settings impact the translation of moral agency into ethical expression presents a promising avenue for future inquiry.

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