Understanding Public Sector Employees' Ethical Engagement in the Digital Era: Evidence from China

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Purpose: This research investigates how Chinese public sector employees perceive and approach administrative ethics in the digital age. The study aims to understand how attitudes, organizational culture, and perceived organizational support influence satisfaction with ethical practices, emphasizing the mediating role of behavioral intention.

Design/Method/Approach: This study employed a quantitative research design, collecting data through convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. The study measured attitudes toward administrative ethics, organizational culture, perceived support, behavioral intention, and satisfaction. Data from 420 participants were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS.

Findings: The results reveal that positive attitudes, a supportive organizational culture, and high perceived support significantly enhance behavioral intentions, which mediate their impact on satisfaction with ethical practices.

Theoretical Implications: This study integrates behavioral intention into the framework of administrative ethics, highlighting its mediating role in linking organizational support to satisfaction.

Practical Implications: Organizations should promote positive attitudes, cultivate supportive cultures, and enhance perceived support to strengthen ethical behavior and improve satisfaction with ethics.

Originality/Value: By focusing on behavioral intention in the digital age, this research offers a fresh perspective on fostering satisfaction with ethical practices in public administration.

Research Limitations/Future Research: Future studies could explore additional factors, such as technological influences or leadership styles, and examine variations across different sectors and regions.

Paper Type: Empirical

Keywords: Administrative Ethics, Behavioral Intention, Organizational Culture, Perceived Organizational Support, Digital Age.

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Розуміння етичної відповідальності працівників державного сектору в цифрову епоху: досвід Китаю

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Мета роботи: Це дослідження вивчає, як китайські працівники державного сектору сприймають та підходять до адміністративної етики в цифрову епоху. Дослідження має на меті зрозуміти, як ставлення, організаційна культура та сприйняття організаційної підтримки впливають на задоволеність етичними практиками, наголошуючи на посередницькій ролі поведінкових намірів.

Дизайн / Метод / Підхід дослідження: У цьому дослідженні було застосовано кількісний дизайн дослідження, збір даних здійснювався за допомогою вибіркового методу та методу «снігової кулі». Дослідження вимірювало ставлення до адміністративної етики, організаційної культури, сприйняття підтримки, поведінкові наміри та задоволеність. Дані 420 учасників були проаналізовані за допомогою SPSS та AMOS.

Результати дослідження: Результати показують, що позитивне ставлення, сприятлива організаційна культура та високий рівень підтримки значно посилюють поведінкові наміри, які опосередковують їхній вплив на задоволеність етичними практиками.

Теоретична цінність дослідження: Це дослідження інтегрує поведінкові наміри в рамки адміністративної етики, підкреслюючи їхню посередницьку роль у зв'язку між організаційною підтримкою та задоволеністю.

Практична цінність дослідження: Організації повинні сприяти формуванню позитивного ставлення, розвивати культуру підтримки та посилювати сприйняття підтримки, щоб зміцнити етичну поведінку та підвищити задоволеність етикою.

Оригінальність / Цінність дослідження: Зосереджуючись на поведінкових намірах у цифрову епоху, це дослідження пропонує свіжий погляд на підвищення задоволеності етичними практиками в державному управлінні.

Обмеження дослідження / Майбутні дослідження: Майбутні дослідження можуть вивчити додаткові фактори, такі як технологічні впливи або стилі керівництва, а також дослідити варіації в різних секторах і регіонах.

Тип статті: Емпіричний

Ключові слова: адміністративна етика, поведінкові наміри, організаційна культура, сприйняття організаційної підтримки, цифрова епоха.

1. Introduction

T he advent of the digital age has brought about profound and wide-ranging changes in all aspects of society, and the mode of operation of public administration is no exception (*Habermas, 2022*). Along with the continuous progress of digital technology, its impact on the ethical environment within public sector organizations has become more and more significant (*Ashok et al., 2022*). The convergence of digital tools such as artificial intelligence and big data has created both new ethical challenges and rare opportunities (*Obschonka & Audretsch, 2020*), making it crucial to reconsider and strengthen administrative ethics in this dynamically changing environment (*Dunleavy & Margetts, 2023*).

Despite the growing importance of public sector administrative ethics in the digital era, there is still a certain gap in current research. Most of the past studies have focused on the theoretical level (*Clarke, 2020; Haug et al., 2024; Henman, 2020*), and there are relatively few empirical studies on the specific perceptions and attitudes of public sector employees towards administrative ethics in the digital era in their practical work. Moreover, when examining the factors affecting the ethical behavior of public sector employees, the interaction of organizational culture, perceived organizational support, and satisfaction with ethical practices are rarely considered (*Qing et al., 2020*). At the same time, in-depth research on the specific context of China's public sector is also lacking, making it difficult to adequately reflect the unique ethical situation and the needs of China's public sector in the face of digital transformation (*Pittaway & Montazemi, 2020*).

Public sector employees play a central role in maintaining the integrity and accountability of public organizations, and these techniques have a significant impact on their ethical decision-making and behavior (*Asif & Rathore, 2021; Sajari et al., 2023*). Public sector employees, who are at the frontline of implementing and following ethics in public sector administration, have perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that are significant to the ethical standards of governance (*Qing et al., 2020*). Therefore, clarifying public sector employees' views on administrative ethics in the context of the digital age and how these perceptions influence their behavioral intentions is essential to ensure that ethical standards keep pace with technological developments (*Ahn & Chen, 2022*).

This study focuses on exploring the ethical engagement of public sector employees in Chongqing, China, with an emphasis on how their attitudes, organizational culture, perceived organizational support, and satisfaction with ethical practices shape their intentions to engage in ethical governance. While the research is conducted in Chongqing, the findings are expected to have broader implications for understanding public sector ethics across different regions in China and potentially other developing economies facing similar digital transformation challenges. It is important to explore these variables from the perspective of the theory of planned behavior. This can help fill in the gaps of current research at the empirical level and provide a practical basis for a deeper understanding of public sector employees' perceptions and behaviors of administrative ethics in the digital age. At the same time, the study can provide policy makers and public sector managers with precise decision-making references, so that they can better grasp the key elements affecting ethical behavior and thus formulate more targeted strategies to promote the public sector to adapt to the ethical challenges in the digital era (*Wilson & van der Velden, 2022*). Ultimately, the overall ethical level of public management will be improved, and public trust and satisfaction with the public sector will be enhanced (*Abdulkareem & Mohd Ramli, 2022*).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Chinese public sector employees in Chongqing toward administrative ethics in the digital era and to clarify the impact of these factors on their behavioral intentions. While

focusing on Chongqing as a representative case, the study's findings may offer valuable insights for other urban centers experiencing similar digital transformation processes. Particularly, this study aims to investigate the following questions: How do Chinese public sector employees perceive administrative ethics in the digital age? What is the relationship between employees' attitudes toward administrative ethics and their intention to participate in ethical governance? How does organizational culture play a role in the ethical behavior of public sector employees in the digital age? How does perceived organizational support play a role in shaping employees' ethical intentions? How satisfied are public sector employees with current administrative ethical practices and how does this satisfaction affect their ethical engagement? In addressing the above questions, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the impact of digital transformation on administrative ethics in the public sector and to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing ethical standards in governance that may be applicable across various administrative contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Theory of Planned Behavior

T he Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), proposed by *Ajzen (1991)*, provides us with a framework for understanding the decision-making process of individual behavior, which is centered on three key elements: attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control over behavior. This study cleverly applies and extends this theory to explore the complex motivations for ethical behavior of public sector employees in the context of the digital age.

In the context of digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI) and big data technologies have fundamentally altered the landscape of ethical decision-making in the public sector. AI systems, through their automated decision-making capabilities, introduce new ethical considerations around transparency, accountability, and fairness in public service delivery (*Kulal et al., 2024*). For instance, when AI algorithms are used in resource allocation or citizen service prioritization, public sector employees must navigate complex ethical decisions about system oversight, bias mitigation, and human intervention. Similarly, big data analytics, while enhancing operational efficiency, raises critical ethical concerns about data privacy, consent, and responsible data usage. Public sector employees must now consider not only traditional ethical frameworks but also emerging ethical challenges related to data collection, storage, and analysis (*Chang, 2021*). These technologies have expanded the scope of TPB's behavioral control element, as employees must now demonstrate competency in managing both traditional ethical considerations and technology-specific ethical challenges. Furthermore, the integration of these technologies has transformed subjective norms within organizations, creating new expectations around digital literacy, data governance, and algorithmic accountability that influence employees' ethical behavior intentions.

This study identifies the centrality of behavioral intention in the TPB framework, which refers to the intention and plans of public sector employees to adopt ethical behaviors in the context of the digital age. This intention is jointly influenced by the three previous variables: positive ethical attitudes, positive organizational cultural pressures, and adequate organizational support will enhance employees' intentions to behave ethically; otherwise, they may weaken their intentions.

2.2 Research Hypotheses

T his study pays special attention to employees' attitudes toward administrative ethics, a variable that not only reflects public sector employees' overall views and evaluations of ethical norms and their practices in their daily work, but also reveals their personal ethical attitudes and their tendency to follow

or violate ethical norms (*Hossain et al., 2020*). At the same time, this study recognizes that organizational culture, as an important embodiment of subjective norms, has a profound impact on employees' ethical behavior intentions by shaping common values, beliefs, and behavioral norms (*Lu et al., 2020*). In this culture, employees are more likely to internalize and follow the ethical expectations of the organization (*Kuenzi et al., 2020*).

In addition, this study also emphasizes the role of perceived organizational support in the decision-making process of ethical behavior and regards it as an important indicator of perceived behavior control. The organizational support and resource availability that employees feel when implementing ethical behavior, including institutional guarantees, training opportunities, reward mechanisms, and management's emphasis and encouragement on ethical behavior, together form the basis of their confidence in carrying out ethical behavior (*Zagenczyk et al., 2021*). This perceived support not only enhances employees' sense of identity and responsibility for ethical behavior (*Eva et al., 2020*), but also provides them with the actual conditions and motivation to practice ethical behavior (*Zagenczyk et al., 2021*).

To understand the impact of digital transformation more fully on ethical behaviors in the public sector, the study also introduces employee satisfaction with current ethical practices as a dependent variable. This variable examines the extent to which employees approve of the existing ethical practice environment and how this satisfaction further influences their ethical behavior intentions and actual actions (*Aftab et al., 2023; Qing et al., 2020*). By analyzing this variable, this study can more accurately grasp the expectations and needs of employees for ethical practices under the background of digital transformation (*Selimović et al., 2021*), and provide targeted suggestions for optimizing organizational culture construction and improving the level of ethical management (*Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020*). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Public sector employees' positive attitudes towards administrative ethics in the digital era are positively associated with their intention to engage in ethical behavior.

H2: A supportive organizational culture, which reflects the subjective norms within the organization, is positively associated with public sector employees' intention to engage in ethical behavior.

H3: Higher levels of perceived organizational support are positively associated with public sector employees' intention to engage in ethical behavior.

H4: Public sector employees' intention to engage in ethical behavior positively influences their satisfaction with current administrative ethics practices.

H5: Perceived organizational support is positively associated with public sector employees' satisfaction with current administrative ethics practices.

H6: The intention to engage in ethical behavior mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and satisfaction with current administrative ethics practices.
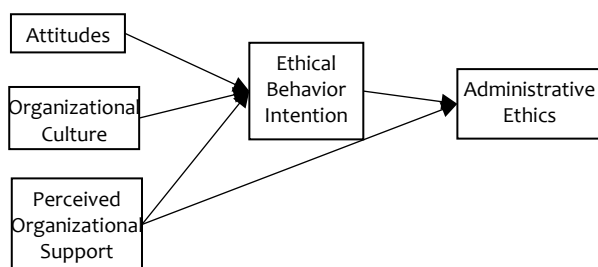
The research model is presented in *Fig. 1*.

Figure 1: Research model

Source: Research Data, 2024

3. Research Methods

3.1 Participants

I n this study, a quantitative method was used to investigate the participation intention and satisfaction of public sector employees in administrative ethics in Chongqing, China. This study used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling to collect a diverse sample to ensure broad representation of employees across government departments (*Raifman et al., 2022*). The sample size was determined using the Yamane formula, which recommends a sample size of approximately 385 employees from an estimated 10,000 employees (*Yamane, 1967*). This study distributed 500 questionnaires and collected a total of 420 complete questionnaires, with a questionnaire response rate of 84%.

To minimize potential self-reporting biases, several methodological safeguards were implemented. First, the questionnaire design incorporated reverse-coded items and attention check questions to identify careless responding patterns and maintain response quality (*Chauliac et al., 2023*). Second, participants were assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality, reducing social desirability bias in their responses about ethical behavior (*Kwak et al., 2021*). Third, to address common method bias, temporal separation was implemented by collecting predictor and criterion variables at different time points within the survey, with a brief intervening task between sections (*Cooper et al., 2020*). The cover letter explicitly emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and that honest responses would be most valuable for improving organizational ethical practices, helping to minimize evaluation apprehension and self-presentation biases (*Kooijmans et al., 2022*).

Tab. 1 illustrates that the sample consisted of 420 participants, with the majority aged 30–39 years (40%, n = 168), followed by 40–49 years (30.2%, n = 127), 20–29 years (25.5%, n = 107), and over 50 years (4.3%, n = 18). The gender distribution was balanced, with 49.8% males (n = 209) and 50.2% females (n = 211). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (63.8%, n = 268), while 21.9% (n = 92) had a college education or lower, and 14.3% (n = 60) held a master's degree or above. Regarding career stages, 43.8% (n = 184) had 6–10 years of work experience, 24% (n = 101) had 3–6 years, 19% (n = 80) had 1–3 years, and 13.1% (n = 55) had over 10 years.

Table 1. Participant's information

Age	Number	Percentage
20-29 years old	107	25.5
30-39 years old	168	40
40-49 years old	127	30.2
> 50 years old	18	4.3
Gender		
Male	209	49.8
Female	211	50.2
Education		
College or lower	92	21.9
Bachelor's degree	268	63.8
Master's degree or above	60	14.3
Career stages		
1-3 years	80	19.0
3-6 years	101	24.0
6-10 years	184	43.8
> 10 years	55	13.1

Source: Research Data, 2024

3.2 Measurement

T he Attitudes Towards Administrative Ethics questionnaire, adapted for this study, is designed to evaluate public sector employees' perspectives on administrative ethics in the

digital era (*Si et al., 2020*). This tool consists of 4 items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The internal consistency of this scale in the current study, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, is 0.814, indicating high reliability.

The Organizational Culture questionnaire measures employees' perceptions of their workplace's cultural emphasis on ethics (*Azeem et al., 2021*). It includes 5 items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Very Low, 4 = Very High). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in this study is 0.917, reflecting strong internal consistency.

The Perceived Organizational Support scale evaluates employees' perceptions of the resources and training provided by their organization to support ethical behavior (*Zagenczyk et al., 2021*). It contains 6 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.917, demonstrating excellent reliability.

The Intention to Engage in Ethical Behavior questionnaire assesses employees' intentions to participate actively in ethical practices (*Si et al., 2020*). It features 3 items, with responses given on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Not at All Likely, 6 = Extremely Likely). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.796, indicating strong internal consistency.

Satisfaction with Current Administrative Ethics Practices scale gauges employees' satisfaction with the effectiveness of the existing ethical practices in their organization (*Qing et al., 2020*). This scale includes 6 items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.837, reflecting good reliability.

The data collection period for this study was April to May 2024. The survey was distributed online through the questionnaire website and shared on various social media platforms. To ensure participants fully understood the purpose of the study, the questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and encouraging honest responses (*Sammut et al., 2021*). Since the original questionnaire was prepared in English and the participants were all Chinese, careful translation work was carried out. The researchers invited two professional linguists to translate the questionnaire into Chinese. In order to maintain consistency and accuracy, the researchers have adopted a back-translation method to ensure that the Chinese version faithfully reflects the original English content (*Klotz et al., 2023*).

3.3 Data Analysis

This study used SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 software for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated in SPSS to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants. In addition, correlation analysis, reliability and validity assessments were also conducted using SPSS. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were conducted using AMOS to validate the factor structure of the constructs and to test the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships between variables. In addition, mediation analyses were conducted using AMOS to explore the mediating effect of intentions to engage in ethical behavior on the relationship between perceived organizational support and satisfaction with current administrative ethical practices.

4. Results

4.1 Correlation

The Pearson correlation results reveal several noteworthy relationships between key variables related to administrative ethics in the public sector. Attitudes toward administrative ethics show strong positive correlations with both organizational culture (*r*=0.346) and perceived organizational support (*r*=0.355), indicating that the more positive the attitude toward ethics, the more supportive the organizational culture and the higher the level of perceived support. Furthermore, these positive attitudes are significantly correlated with higher intention to behave ethically (*r*=0.323) and slightly positively correlated with satisfaction with ethical practices (*r*=0.281). Organizational culture itself shows strong positive correlations with perceived organizational support (*r*=0.331), intention to behave ethically (*r*=0.36), and satisfaction with ethical practices (*r*=0.352). Furthermore, perceived organizational support is positively correlated with intention to behave ethically (*r*=0.374) and satisfaction with ethical practices (*r*=0.337). Finally, intention to behave ethically was positively correlated with satisfaction with ethical practice (*r*=0.287). Together, these correlations suggest that positive attitudes toward ethics, supportive organizational culture, and perceived organizational support are all significantly associated with higher intention to behave ethically and higher satisfaction with ethical practice (*Tab. 2*).

4.2 Reliability and Validity

Tab. 3 lists the factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values of the measurement model. In *Tab. 2*, all factor loadings are above the recommended critical value of 0.60 (*Hair et al., 2010*), indicating that each item has a close relationship with its underlying construct and makes a meaningful contribution to the measurement of the construct. Composite reliability (CR) measures the internal consistency of the construct, and CR values of 0.70 or higher are generally considered acceptable (*Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020*). As shown in *Tab. 2*, all CR values exceed this critical value, indicating that the construct has high reliability and the measurement model provides consistent results in the observed variables. The recommended value of average variance extracted (AVE) is 0.50 or above (*Cheung et al., 2024*). The AVE values in Table 2 are all above this level, indicating that each construct has sufficient convergent validity. Overall, the values in *Tab. 3* prove that the measurement model has high reliability and validity.

4.3 Structural equation model analysis

The fit of the measurement model and the structural model was evaluated using various fit indices, as shown in Table 4. The fit of the model was satisfactory, and the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) all met acceptable standards, indicating that the hypothesized model accurately reflects the relationship between the variables (*Cheung et al., 2024*).

Table 2. Correlation between variables

	ATT	OC	POS	BIT	SF	Mean	SD
Attitudes (ATT)	1					3.585	0.813
Organizational Culture (OC)	.346***	1				3.737	0.937
Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	.355***	.331***	1			3.719	0.903
Ethical Behavior Intention (BIT)	.323***	.360***	.374***	1		3.565	0.844
Administrative Ethics Satisfaction (SF)	.281***	.352***	.337***	.287***	1	3.956	0.953

Note: ***p<0.001.

Source: Research Data, 2024

Table 3. Factor Loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the Measurement Model

Constructs	Items	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Attitudes	ATT1	0.701	0.814	0.524
	ATT2	0.779		
	ATT3	0.702		
	ATT4	0.710		
Organizational culture	OC1	0.814	0.917	0.689
	OC2	0.841		
	OC3	0.838		
	OC4	0.820		
	OC5	0.837		
Perceived organizational support	POS1	0.795	0.917	0.649
	POS2	0.821		
	POS3	0.821		
	POS4	0.798		
	POS5	0.817		
	POS6	0.781		
Intentions for ethical behavior	BIT1	0.802	0.795	0.564
	BIT2	0.712		
	BIT3	0.737		
Satisfaction	SF1	0.752	0.838	0.633
	SF2	0.821		
	SF3	0.812		

Note: Factor loading is the standardized regression weights value. CR= Composite Reliability value. AVE= Average Variance Extracted value.

Source: Research data, 2024

Table 4. Model fit indices of path analysis

	X^2/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	IFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Value	2.018	0.921	0.900	0.928	0.963	0.962	0.956	0.049
Standard	<5	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.05

Source: Research data, 2024

Hypothesis 1 suggested that public sector employees' favorable attitudes toward administrative ethics in the digital era would have a beneficial effect on their intention to engage in ethical behavior. The results revealed a significant and positive association between positive attitudes toward administrative ethics and the intention to act ethically (β = 0.191***), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that a supportive organizational culture, reflecting the subjective norms within the organization, would encourage public sector employees to engage in ethical behavior. The results demonstrated a notable positive link between organizational culture and employees' intention to engage in ethical behavior (β = 0.260***), confirming Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 posited that higher levels of perceived organizational support would have a positive influence on public sector employees' intention to behave ethically. The findings indicated a significant positive connection between perceived organizational support and the intention to engage in ethical behavior (β = 0.265***), verifying Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 suggested that public sector employees' intention to act ethically would enhance their satisfaction with current administrative ethics practices. The results indicated a substantial positive effect of ethical behavior intention on satisfaction with administrative ethics practices (β = 0.261***), supporting Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 5 proposed that perceived organizational support would be positively correlated with public sector employees' satisfaction with current administrative ethics practices. The analysis revealed a significant and favorable association between perceived organizational support and satisfaction (β = 0.271***), validating Hypothesis 5. The findings of all statistical hypothesis tests are depicted in Figure 2.

In summary, the path analysis affirms all five hypotheses, indicating that organizational culture, perceived support, and ethical

behavior intention are crucial factors in promoting ethical actions and improving satisfaction with administrative ethics practices within the public sector.

The research results are presented in *Fig. 2*.

In assessing the mediation effect in this study, a bootstrap analysis using AMOS 24.0 was used with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval. The results of the mediation analysis indicate that perceived organizational support has a significant indirect effect on satisfaction with current administrative ethics practices. The indirect effect was found to be 0.067, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.031 to 0.131, and the effect was statistically significant (p = 0.000). This suggests that perceived organizational support positively influences satisfaction with administrative ethics practices through the mediating role of other variables (*Tab. 5*).

5. Discussion and Implication

5.1 Discussion

In this study, all research hypotheses were supported, providing significant insights into the dynamics of administrative ethics among public sector employees in the digital era.

First, this study confirms that public sector employees' positive attitudes toward administrative ethics are positively correlated with their intention to behave ethically, reflecting strong consistency with the Theory of Planned Behavior (*Ajzen, 1991*). This finding reinforces the notion that employees who hold favorable views of administrative ethics are more likely to demonstrate ethical intentions in their behavior. The correlation between attitudes and intentions highlights the critical role of fostering positive ethical values among employees (*Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021*). Prior research has consistently shown that
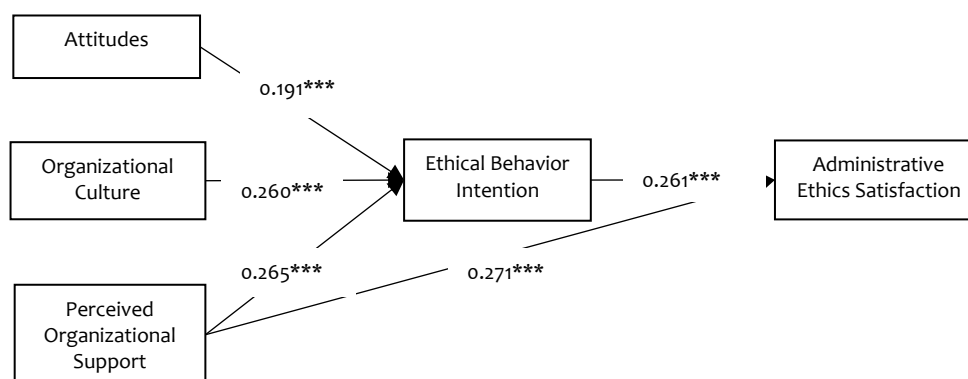
Figure 2: Research results

Note: ***p<0.001.

Source: Research Data, 2024

Table 5. Mediation effect

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	Type of Effect	Beta	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Sig
Perceived organizational support	Satisfaction with Current Administrative Ethics Practices	Indirect Effect	0.067	0.031	0.131	0.000

Source: Research data, 2024

individuals are more motivated to act in accordance with ethical norms when they perceive them as valuable and consistent with their personal values (*Arieli et al., 2020*). Furthermore, this relationship highlights the importance of taking proactive steps to shape and reinforce ethical attitudes within organizations. Targeted training programs and ethical leadership can significantly influence employees' perceptions and attitudes toward ethics, thereby increasing their commitment to ethical behavior (*Al Halbusi et al., 2021*).

Second, the confirmation that supportive organizational culture is positively associated with public sector employees' intention to behave ethically highlights the critical role of organizational culture in shaping ethical behavior. This conclusion is consistent with a large body of research that shows that organizational culture profoundly influences employee behavior by defining workplace norms, values, and expectations (*Akpa et al., 2021*). A culture that prioritizes ethical behavior and explicitly supports ethical standards tends to create an environment where employees feel compelled and empowered to act ethically (*Marquardt et al., 2021*). Supportive culture not only sets clear ethical guidelines but also fosters shared values and a sense of collective responsibility among employees (*Lee, 2019*). Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of actively fostering and maintaining a culture that embodies ethical principles. Organizations with a strong ethical culture often have practices such as regular ethics training, transparent communication about ethical standards, and leadership that models ethical behavior (*Kancharla & Dadhich, 2021*). Organizations that demonstrate a consistent commitment to ethical practices and provide clear, supportive structures are more likely to motivate employees to align their behavior with those ethical standards (*Al Halbusi et al., 2021*).

Third, higher levels of perceived organizational support were positively associated with public sector employees' ethical behavior intentions. This finding is consistent with existing research that shows that perceived organizational support can significantly influence employees' motivation and ability to behave ethically (*Zagenczyk et al., 2021*). When employees feel that their

organization provides adequate resources and support, they are more likely to be confident in their ability to adhere to ethical standards. This confidence is critical because employees are better able to make ethical decisions when they have the necessary tools and knowledge (*Zagenczyk et al., 2021*). Comprehensive ethics training programs and clear guidelines can greatly enhance employees' understanding of ethical expectations and their ability to act in accordance with standards (*Lee, 2019*). In addition, if employees believe that their ethical efforts are recognized and valued by the organization, they are more likely to maintain and strengthen ethical behavior (*Rabl et al., 2020*). This support not only creates a positive ethical climate but also enhances employees' intrinsic motivation to engage in ethical behavior because they know that their behavior is consistent with organizational values and is recognized by the organization.

Additionally, public sector employees' intention to behave ethically positively influences their satisfaction with current administrative ethical practices. This finding suggests that when employees are motivated to behave ethically, they are more likely to view existing ethical practices within the organization positively. When employees actively engage in ethical behavior, they contribute to the overall effectiveness and credibility of the organization's ethical framework (*Sarwar et al., 2020*). This active engagement tends to make employees' ethical values more consistent with the organization's ethical practices, thereby increasing their satisfaction with these practices (*Al Halbusi et al., 2021*). When the organization's ethical practices are consistent with their own ethical beliefs and expectations, employees who strive to adhere to ethical standards are likely to experience greater satisfaction (*Kuenzi et al., 2020*). In addition, the satisfaction with ethical practices that results from a commitment to ethical behavior has a reinforcing effect. When employees see positive outcomes from their ethical behavior, such as increased organizational integrity, improved decision-making processes, and enhanced reputation, they are likely to feel more satisfied with the organization's ethical climate (*Yazdanshenas & Mirzaei, 2023*).

The confirmation that perceived organizational support is positively associated with public sector employees' satisfaction with current administrative ethical practices highlights the important role that organizational support plays in influencing employees' evaluations of ethical practices. Employees who perceive their organization as supporting their ethical efforts, including providing adequate resources, training opportunities, and positive reinforcement, are more likely to perceive the organization's ethical practices as effective and satisfactory. Employees who perceive organizational support are more likely to be satisfied with all aspects of their work environment, including ethical practices (*Eisenberger et al., 2020*). When employees see that the organization provides strong support for ethical behavior, they are more likely to believe that the organization's ethical practices are authentic and effective, and this confidence contributes to increased satisfaction with the ethical environment (*Al Halbusi et al., 2021*). Furthermore, employees who perceive that their organization supports their ethical efforts are more likely to feel valued and appreciated, which in turn increases their satisfaction with the organization's ethical practices (*Rabl et al., 2020*).

Finally, the mediation role of the intention to engage in ethical behavior in the relationship between perceived organizational support and satisfaction with ethical practices was confirmed. This indicates that the impact of perceived organizational support on satisfaction with ethical practices is partially explained through employees' intention to engage in ethical behavior. This mediation effect highlights the complex interplay between organizational support and ethical behavior and its subsequent impact on ethical satisfaction (*Ghasempour Ganji et al., 2021*).

While this study's findings demonstrate strong relationships between organizational support, ethical intentions, and satisfaction in the current context, the generalizability of these relationships may vary across different cultural and political environments. In cultures with varying degrees of power distance or different approaches to hierarchy, the impact of organizational support on ethical behavior might manifest differently (*Rockstuhl et al., 2020*). Similarly, in political systems with different levels of bureaucratic autonomy or public sector accountability, the relationship between organizational culture and ethical behavior intentions could show varying strengths. Collectivist societies might show stronger correlations between organizational support and ethical behavior due to greater emphasis on group harmony and organizational loyalty, while individualistic societies might demonstrate stronger links between personal attitudes and ethical intentions. Furthermore, the effectiveness of ethical training programs and support systems may need significant adaptation to account for local governance structures, cultural values, and political norms. The implementation of ethical practices might require different approaches in centralized versus decentralized administrative systems, or in contexts with different levels of transparency and public scrutiny.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

F irst, this research not only deepens the understanding of public sector employees' ethical behavioral intentions and their influencing factors by systematically applying and validating the framework of the TPB theory, but also provides new empirical support for the application of the TPB theory in the field of public management. This research process demonstrates how the theoretical framework can be integrated with specific practice contexts, and empirical research can be used to test and enrich the theory, providing strong evidence for the development and refinement of the theory.

Second, this study reveals the complex psychological mechanisms underlying ethical behavior formation in public sector organizations. The findings demonstrate how individual psychological factors, including cognitive evaluations, emotional responses, and personal value systems, interact with organizational behavioral elements to shape ethical decision-making. Employees' moral identity development, cognitive moral development stages, and emotional intelligence are shown to contribute significantly to the interpretation and internalization of ethical norms. The research particularly highlights how psychological safety and organizational identification act as crucial mediating factors between organizational support and ethical behavior intentions, offering a more nuanced understanding of the psychological pathways through which organizational initiatives influence ethical conduct.

Moreover, the study illuminates the dynamic interplay between organizational behavior theories and ethical norm formation. The findings indicate that organizational learning processes, social exchange relationships, and collective sensemaking mechanisms play key roles in the development and maintenance of ethical standards. Through social learning theory and social information processing perspectives, the research shows how employees observe, interpret, and model ethical behaviors within their organizational context. Ethical norms emerge not merely as top-down directives but through complex social interactions, peer influence processes, and the development of shared mental models within organizational groups. Concepts such as organizational climate strength, team psychological safety, and relational coordination are identified as influential factors shaping the consistency and effectiveness of ethical norm adoption across different organizational levels and units.

In addition, this study demonstrates the importance and value of interdisciplinary research. This study constructs a comprehensive analytical framework for explaining and predicting the ethical behavioral intentions of public sector employees by combining theories and methods from several disciplines, including psychology, organizational behavior, and public administration. This interdisciplinary approach not only promotes communication and integration between disciplines but also provides academic research with a more comprehensive and in-depth perspective for understanding individual and organizational behavior.

Finally, this study also emphasizes the importance of empirical research in academic research. The study tested the research hypotheses and drew reliable conclusions by collecting and analyzing a large amount of empirical data. This empirical-based research method not only improves the scientific and credibility of the study but also provides methods and paths that can be used in subsequent research.

5.2.1 Practical Implications

F inally, this study also emphasizes the importance of empirical research in academic research. The study tested the research hypotheses and drew reliable conclusions by collecting and analyzing a large amount of empirical data. This empirical-based research method not only improves the scientific and credibility of the study but also provides methods and paths that can be used in subsequent research.

This study has important practical implications for public sector organizations in the context of the digital age. First, it highlights the urgent need to enhance employees' ethical awareness. Given the many challenges brought about by digital transformation, public sector organizations should increase their investment in ethics training programs and workshops, with a particular focus on ethical behavior closely related to digital governance (*Schiff et al., 2020*). By actively cultivating employees' positive attitudes towards administrative ethics, the public sector can more effectively cope with the complexity of governance in the digital age and ensure the fairness and efficiency of public services.

Second, this study emphasizes the centrality of organizational culture in shaping ethical behavior. Public sector organizations should strive to create a cultural atmosphere based on ethical norms and values and deeply root these principles in daily operations through leadership, ethical assessments, and clear

guidelines (*Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2020*). Building a strong ethical culture can not only set an example of ethical behavior within the organization but also inspire employees' intrinsic motivation to consciously abide by ethical standards.

Third, this study reveals the importance of adequate employee support in promoting ethical behavior. Public sector organizations should ensure that employees have access to the necessary resources, training, and institutional support when practicing ethical behavior. Public sector organizations should continue to carry out ethics education, develop clear policy frameworks, and establish effective reporting and handling mechanisms for unethical behavior, to provide employees with a safe and transparent working environment and encourage them to actively practice ethical standards. As digital transformation continues to deepen, public sector organizations also need to actively respond to specific ethical challenges such as data privacy protection, artificial intelligence governance, and transparency (*Saura et al., 2022*). Developing forward-looking policies and frameworks to effectively manage these emerging issues is key to ensuring that organizational practices are consistent with the ethical requirements of the digital age.

In addition, this study also pointed out that employees' satisfaction with current ethical practices has an important impact on their behavioural choices. Therefore, public sector organizations should establish a regular evaluation mechanism to gain a deep understanding of employees' satisfaction with the ethical environment and actively seek employee feedback in order to timely adjust and optimize ethical policies and practices to ensure that employees always adhere to the ethical bottom line at work.

Finally, in view of the specific context of Chinese public sector employees, this study emphasizes the importance of adapting ethical initiatives to local conditions. When designing and implementing ethical policies, full consideration should be given to local cultural traditions, values, and governance structures to ensure that ethical policies are in line with international ethical standards and in line with local actual conditions, thereby improving the effectiveness and pertinence of ethical policies and promoting more ethical and responsible public management (*Robinson, 2020*).

5.3 Limitations

Although this study provides a valuable insight into the ethical practices of public sector employees in the digital age, its limitations should not be overlooked. First, this study focuses on the specific context of public sector employees in Chongqing, China, and the uniqueness of this context means that the findings may be limited in their generalizability to other regions or countries with very different cultural, political, and organizational contexts. Future research should aim to duplicate this study in diverse settings to assess the generalizability and broad applicability of its findings.

Second, the data collection in this study relied heavily on self-reports, which may be subject to social expectations bias, resulting in a tendency for respondents to provide answers that fit social expectations rather than the real situation (*Jürgens et al., 2020*). To mitigate this limitation, future studies should explore diversified methodologies, such as combining observational studies, behavioural experiments, or employing more objective measurement tools to validate and supplement self-reported data, in order to improve the accuracy and reliability of the study. Second, a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative shadowing techniques with quantitative metrics could provide richer insights into actual ethical behavior patterns. Additionally, third-party evaluations from supervisors, colleagues, and service recipients could be incorporated to triangulate self-reported data with external observations.

Further, the cross-sectional design of this study only captured the relationship of variables at a single point in time, which limited the in-depth understanding of the causal relationship between variables. Therefore, it is particularly important to conduct a longitudinal study, which can reveal the interactions and dynamic evolution of these variables in a more detailed way by tracking the trajectory of attitudes, organizational culture, and ethical behaviors over time.

Finally, the rapid development of digital technologies has brought about a myriad of ethical challenges (*Gkeredakis et al., 2021*). Although this study has touched upon some of the ethical issues related to digital technology, it has not yet fully covered the complex and dynamic relationship between digital innovation and ethical behavior. Future research should follow the pace of technological development and explore in depth how public sector organizations can effectively respond to new ethical issues brought about by the introduction of new technologies, as well as how to maintain and enhance the adherence to and practice of ethical standards in the face of technological development.

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that public sector employees' positive attitudes toward administrative ethics, supportive organizational culture, and perceived organizational support significantly influence their ethical behavioral intentions. These factors, along with employee satisfaction with current ethical practices, interact to shape ethical behavior. The findings enhance the application of TPB theory in public administration and offer practical insights for policymakers and managers to promote ethical behavior by optimizing culture, support systems, and ethical practices.

7. Ethics Statement

This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the College of State Governance, Southwest University. The principles of the Helsinki Convention were also followed to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process.

8. Funding

This study received no specific financial support.

9. Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributions of Authors

Bian X. – main author, responsible for Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Wang B. – corresponding author, responsible for Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Project administration.

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