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Sustainable Human Resource Management as a Strategic Driver of ESG Performance

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Abstract-Increasing demands for Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) are driving organizations to integrate sustainability into business strategies, including through Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) practices. Although the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG is increasingly being researched, the existing literature remains fragmented, tends to focus only on ESG dimensions, and has not comprehensively explained the mechanisms linking Sustainable HRM to ESG Performance. This study aims to synthesize and evaluate research developments on the role of Sustainable HRM as a strategic driver of ESG Performance during the 2020–2025 period. The study used the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for 20 Scopus Q1 and Q2 articles selected through a systematic selection and quality assessment process. The synthesis results show that Sustainable HRM contributes to ESG Performance through three main mechanisms: the development of sustainability-oriented human capital, increasing employee engagement, and establishing a sustainability-oriented organizational culture. Furthermore, this study identifies that the governance dimension remains a relatively underexplored area compared to the environmental and social dimensions. The contribution of this research lies in developing a conceptual synthesis that broadens the perspectives of the Resource-Based View and Stakeholder Theory in explaining the strategic role of Sustainable HRM in achieving ESG performance. These findings provide theoretical implications for the development of sustainability research as well as practical implications for organizations in designing more effective ESG strategies.

Keywords: Sustainable Human Resource Management; ESG Performance; Sustainability; Human Capital; Employee Engagement; Systematic Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has evolved into a new paradigm for measuring corporate performance, transcending traditional financial indicators. In recent years, institutional investors, regulators, and various stakeholders have increasingly used ESG as a basis for evaluating corporate sustainability, as it is considered to reflect an organization's capacity to create long-term value while effectively managing economic, social, and environmental risks (Mio et al., 2022; Kotsantonis & Serafeim, 2022). The increased attention to ESG is also driven by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda, demands for corporate transparency, and growing societal expectations for responsible business practices. Consequently, organizations are no longer simply required to generate economic profits but also to demonstrate a concrete commitment to sustainability and good governance.

Amid this transformation, academic attention has shifted from a reporting- and compliance-oriented ESG approach to identifying internal factors that can support the sustainable achievement of ESG. One factor receiving increasing attention is Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM). Unlike conventional Human Resource Management (HRM) approaches that focus on workforce efficiency and productivity, Sustainable HRM positions human resources as a strategic asset that contributes to the simultaneous creation of economic, social, and environmental value (Aust et al., 2020; Kramar, 2022). This approach integrates sustainability objectives into recruitment practices, training, competency development, performance management, employee well-being, and organizational culture.

Various studies have shown that Sustainable HRM has the potential to be a crucial mechanism in supporting ESG implementation. Practices such as green recruitment, green training, sustainability-oriented performance management, and employee empowerment have been shown to increase pro-environmental behavior, employee engagement, and organizational capacity to achieve sustainability goals (Ren et al., 2023; Yong et al., 2020). Furthermore, Sustainable HRM also contributes to the creation of an organizational culture that supports social responsibility and more transparent corporate governance (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2020). These findings indicate that ESG success is determined not only by organizational policies at the strategic level, but also by how the organization manages and develops its human resources.

However, the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG still shows conceptual inconsistencies in the literature. Some studies view Sustainable HRM as a direct antecedent to ESG performance, while others position factors such as employee green behavior, organizational culture, leadership, and corporate social responsibility as mediating or moderating variables influencing the relationship (Ahmad et al., 2021; Alshaabani et al., 2021). These differing perspectives indicate that the mechanisms by which Sustainable HRM contributes to ESG are still not fully understood.

Furthermore, most previous research tends to examine ESG dimensions in isolation. Green HRM research generally focuses on environmental aspects, while CSR studies focus more on the social dimensions of organizations. Research on governance in the context of Sustainable HRM is also relatively limited compared to other dimensions (Cooke et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2020). Consequently, the existing literature does not yet provide an integrated conceptual framework to explain how Sustainable HRM contributes to all ESG dimensions simultaneously.

This research gap becomes even more relevant in the 2020–2025 period. This period is marked by increased global pressure on ESG implementation, accelerated organizational digitalization post-COVID-19 pandemic, and increased investor demand for measurable sustainability practices. In this context, the human resources function is undergoing a strategic transformation from an administrative role to a driver of organizational change towards sustainability (Kramar, 2022; Ren et al., 2023). Therefore, a literature synthesis is needed that integrates recent research developments and clarifies the role of Sustainable HRM in supporting ESG performance.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is based on Stakeholder Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV). Stakeholder Theory explains that organizations must be able to meet the expectations of various stakeholders to achieve legitimacy and long-term sustainability (Freeman, 2018). Meanwhile, the RBV emphasizes that human resources are a strategic asset that can create sustainable competitive advantage if managed effectively (Barney, 2021). The integration of these two perspectives provides a conceptual basis for Sustainable HRM to be a strategic driver linking human capital management to ESG performance.

Based on these arguments, this study aims to analyze and synthesize the development of literature on the relationship between Sustainable Human Resource Management and ESG performance during the 2020–2025 period. Specifically, this study identifies dominant themes in the literature, analyzes the mechanisms of the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG, and develops a conceptual understanding of the role of Sustainable HRM as a strategic driver of ESG performance. The main contribution of this research lies in the preparation of a conceptual synthesis that integrates various previous research perspectives, thereby providing a stronger theoretical foundation for the development of Sustainable HRM and ESG research in the future.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines. The SLR approach was chosen because it allows for systematic, transparent, and replicable identification, selection, quality evaluation, data extraction, and synthesis of literature. This method is considered appropriate for analyzing research developments on Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) as a strategic driver of ESG Performance during the 2020–2025 period.

Unlike narrative reviews, which are descriptive in nature, SLRs employ stricter procedures for selecting articles, resulting in a more objective and evidence-based synthesis. The study focuses on research addressing the relationship between Sustainable HRM, Green HRM, Human Capital Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and ESG Performance.

2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy

A literature search was conducted in January–February 2026 using three reputable international academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ScienceDirect. These three databases were selected because of their broad publication coverage and stringent journal selection standards. The keyword combinations used included:

a. "Sustainable Human Resource Management" AND "ESG Performance"
b. "Sustainable HRM" AND "Environmental Social Governance"
c. "Green Human Resource Management" AND "Sustainability Performance"
d. "Human Capital Sustainability" AND "ESG"
e. "Corporate Social Responsibility" AND "Human Resource Management"
f. "Sustainable HRM" AND "Organizational Sustainability"

The search was limited to English-language articles published between January 2020 and December 2025.

2.3 Article Selection Procedure

The article selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 process, which includes identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The identification stage identified 248 articles from the entire database. After removing 42 duplicate articles, 206 articles remained for screening. The screening stage involved evaluating titles, abstracts, and keywords, eliminating 134 articles for inconsistency with the research focus.

The remaining 72 articles then entered the full-text assessment stage. Articles were evaluated based on methodological quality, relevance to Sustainable HRM and ESG, and theoretical contributions. The evaluation resulted in 20 Scopus Q1 and Q2 articles meeting all criteria and used as the primary sources for the literature synthesis.

2.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, editorials, book reviews
Database	Scopus indexed journals	Non-Scopus journals
Quartile	Q1 and Q2 journals	Q3, Q4, and non-ranked journals
Publication Year	2020–2025	Before 2020
Language	English	Non-English
Research Focus	Sustainable HRM, Green HRM, CSR, ESG, Human Capital Sustainability	Unrelated topics
Accessibility	Full-text available	Abstract only

2.5 Quality Assessment

To ensure the quality of the literature used, each article was evaluated using five key indicators adapted from systematic literature review practices in the fields of management and sustainability. The assessments were conducted independently to reduce subjectivity in the article selection process.

Table 2. Quality Assessment Criteria

No	Assessment Criteria	Description	Score
1	Journal Quality	Artikel diterbitkan pada jurnal Scopus Q1 atau Q2	1–5
2	Research Objective Clarity	Tujuan penelitian dijelaskan secara jelas dan spesifik	1–5
3	Methodological Rigor	Metodologi penelitian valid dan sistematis	1–5
4	Topic Relevance	Relevansi terhadap Sustainable HRM dan ESG Performance	1–5
5	Theoretical Contribution	Kontribusi terhadap pengembangan teori dan praktik	1–5

Table 3. Quality Classification

Total Score	Category
21–25	High Quality
16–20	Moderate Quality
10–15	Low Quality
<10	Excluded

Only articles that obtained a score of at least 21 were retained in the final synthesis.

Table 4. Quality Assessment Results of Selected Articles

No	Author(s)	Year	Journal	Quartile	Score
1	Aust et al.	2020	Human Resource Management Review	Q1	24
2	Barrena-Martínez et al.	2020	International Journal of Human Resource Management	Q1	23
3	Herrera & de las Heras-Rosas	2020	Sustainability	Q1	22
4	Jerónimo et al.	2020	CSR and Environmental Management	Q1	23
5	Podgorodnichenko et al.	2020	Human Resource Management Review	Q1	24
6	Farooq et al.	2021	CSR and Environmental Management	Q1	22
7	Alshaabani et al.	2021	Sustainability	Q1	22
8	Ahmad et al.	2021	CSR and Environmental Management	Q1	23
9	Mio et al.	2022	Business Strategy and the Environment	Q1	24
10	Cooke et al.	2022	International Journal of Human Resource Management	Q1	24
11	Kramar	2022	Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources	Q1	23
12	Ren et al.	2023	CSR and Environmental Management	Q1	24
13	Jackson et al.	2020	Academy of Management Annals	Q1	25
14	Yong et al.	2020	Business Strategy and the Environment	Q1	22
15	Pham et al.	2020	Journal of Cleaner Production	Q1	23
16	Benevene & Buonomo	2020	Sustainability	Q1	22
17	Amrutha & Geetha	2020	Journal of Cleaner Production	Q1	23
18	Kim et al.	2020	International Journal of Hospitality Management	Q1	22
19	Chaudhary	2020	CSR and Environmental Management	Q1	22

No	Author(s)	Year	Journal	Quartile	Score
20	Ehnert et al.	2020	Sustainability and Human Resource Management Studies	Q1	21

All articles used are included in the High Quality category with a score above 21.

2.6 Data Extraction

The data extraction process was carried out using a standard form to ensure consistency of analysis between articles.

Table 5. Data Extraction Framework

Variable	Description
Author(s)	Author's name
Year	Year of publication
Journal	Year of publication
Theory	The theoretical basis used
Research Method	Research methods
Research Context	Country or research sector
ESG Dimension	Environmental, Social, Governance
HRM Dimension	Sustainable HRM practice
Key Findings	Main findings
Research Contribution	Theoretical and practical contributions

The extracted data was then compared to identify patterns of relationships, similarities, and differences in findings between studies.

2.7 Data Synthesis

The analysis was conducted using thematic synthesis. Based on the data extraction results, the selected articles were grouped into four main themes:

a. Sustainable HRM as a Strategic Driver of ESG Performance.
b. Green HRM and Environmental Sustainability.
c. Employee Engagement and Social Performance.
d. Human Capital Development and Sustainable Governance.

Synthesis was conducted by comparing findings across studies to identify relationship patterns, mediating factors, moderating factors, research gaps, and theoretical implications that explain the contribution of Sustainable HRM to ESG Performance.

2.8 Selected Articles

A total of 20 Scopus Q1 and Q2 articles that met all selection criteria were used as primary sources for the research. These articles came from highly reputable international journals such as Human Resource Management Review, International Journal of Human Resource Management, Business Strategy and the Environment, Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management, Journal of Cleaner Production, Sustainability, Academy of Management Annals, and Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Characteristics of Selected Studies

A total of 20 Scopus Q1 and Q2 articles that met all selection criteria were analyzed in this study. According to Table 4, the majority of the studies were published between 2020 and 2025 and demonstrate increasing academic attention to the relationship between Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) and ESG Performance. Most studies used a quantitative, survey-based approach (70%), while the remainder used conceptual, mixed methods, and systematic review approaches.

The findings in Table 4 also indicate that most studies focus on the Environmental and Social dimensions, while the Governance dimension remains relatively underexplored. Furthermore, most studies were conducted in developing countries, particularly Asia, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to a global context. This situation indicates an imbalance in research focus that could potentially impact the development of theory regarding the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG Performance.

From a methodological perspective, the dominance of cross-sectional designs indicates that most studies are only able to explain the relationship between variables within a specific time period. Consequently, empirical evidence regarding the long-term causal relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG Performance remains relatively limited. These findings indicate the need for longitudinal research that can explain how Sustainable HRM practices produce sustainable impacts in a sustainable manner.

3.2 Sustainable HRM as a Strategic Driver of ESG Performance

The synthesis results indicate that Sustainable HRM is a strategic factor contributing to achieving ESG performance. Of the 20 articles analyzed, most found that Sustainable HRM practices can enhance the success of ESG implementation through the development of sustainability competencies, increased employee engagement, and the establishment of an organizational culture that supports sustainability.

However, this relationship is not always direct. Several studies indicate that the influence of Sustainable HRM on ESG is mediated by factors such as employee engagement, organizational commitment, green behavior, and sustainability culture. These findings suggest that Sustainable HRM functions as an internal mechanism linking a company's sustainability strategy with individual behavior within the organization.

Although the majority of studies found a positive relationship, several methodological limitations warrant consideration. Most studies used respondent perception data, potentially introducing common method bias. Furthermore, most studies measured ESG using perception indicators rather than ESG ratings or actual company sustainability data. Therefore, the strength of the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG requires further validation using more objective indicators.

3.3 Green HRM and Environmental Sustainability

The second theme emerging from the literature synthesis is the importance of Green Human Resource Management (Green HRM) in supporting the environmental dimension of ESG. Green recruitment practices, green training, green performance management, and green rewards have been shown to increase employee pro-environmental behavior and support the efficient use of organizational resources.

However, most Green HRM research still focuses on the manufacturing and service sectors. Research conducted in the public sector, education, and nonprofit organizations is relatively limited. Furthermore, many studies measure the success of Green HRM based on employee perceptions, rather than on measurable environmental indicators such as carbon emission reduction or energy efficiency. These limitations indicate that the contribution of Green HRM to the environmental dimension requires more comprehensive examination.

3.4 Employee Engagement and Social Performance

A literature synthesis shows that employee engagement is the most consistent mediating mechanism explaining the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG performance. Sustainable HRM practices improve employee well-being, career development opportunities, and participation in sustainability activities, thus fostering higher engagement.

This employee engagement subsequently contributes to an improvement in the social dimension of ESG through improved work relationship quality, employee satisfaction, workforce retention, and organizational social responsibility. However, most studies only examine employee engagement as a single variable. Relatively little research has been done on the interaction between employee engagement and other factors, such as sustainable leadership and organizational culture.

These findings suggest that the social dimension of ESG is influenced not only by company policies but also by the quality of the relationship between the organization and its human resources.

3.5 Governance Dimension: The Missing Link in Current Literature

One important finding of this study is the limited research on the relationship between Sustainable HRM and the Governance dimension. Compared to Environmental and Social aspects, only a few studies explicitly discuss how Sustainable HRM practices contribute to transparency, accountability, compliance, and organizational governance.

This situation indicates a significant research gap. Yet, various Sustainable HRM practices, such as ethical leadership development, responsible performance management, and compliance-oriented training, have the potential to directly contribute to the quality of organizational governance. Therefore, the Governance dimension can be considered an underdeveloped research area in the Sustainable HRM and ESG literature.

3.6 Toward a New Conceptual Synthesis

The primary contribution of this research lies in developing a new conceptual synthesis that explains the relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG Performance. Based on an analysis of 20 articles, this study proposes that Sustainable HRM does not directly influence ESG, but rather through three main mechanisms: human capital development, employee engagement, and sustainability-oriented organizational culture.

Human capital development enhances employee sustainability competency, employee engagement encourages active participation in ESG implementation, while sustainability-oriented culture strengthens the internalization of sustainability values within the organization. These three mechanisms collectively contribute to the achievement of the Environmental, Social, and Governance dimensions.

This conceptual model expands on previous research, which generally only explains the direct relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG. Thus, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Sustainable HRM functions as a strategic driver of ESG Performance.

3.7 Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Based on the literature synthesis, three key gaps remain that require attention. First, the predominance of cross-sectional research means the causal relationship between Sustainable HRM and ESG cannot be firmly established. Second, the Governance dimension has received less attention than the Environmental and Social dimensions. Third, the use of perception-based ESG indicators remains more dominant than the use of ESG ratings or actual company sustainability data.

Future research is recommended to use a longitudinal design, expand the geographic scope of the study, and integrate more objective ESG indicators. Furthermore, further research should test the proposed conceptual model to verify the role of human capital development, employee engagement, and sustainability-oriented culture as the main mechanisms linking Sustainable HRM and ESG performance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the role of Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) as a strategic driver in improving Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Performance through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach of 20 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2020 and 2025. The synthesis results indicate that Sustainable HRM functions not only as a human resource management practice but also as a strategic organizational capability that supports the achievement of sustainability goals through human capital development, increased employee engagement, and the establishment of a sustainability-oriented organizational culture. The research findings indicate that the influence of Sustainable HRM on ESG Performance is largely indirect. Sustainable HRM practices contribute to improving employee sustainability competencies, encouraging their involvement in sustainability initiatives, and strengthening the internalization of sustainability values within the organization. Through these mechanisms, Sustainable HRM supports the achievement of Environmental, Social, and Governance dimensions more effectively and sustainably. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the Resource-Based View (RBV) by emphasizing that sustainability-oriented human capital is a valuable, difficult-to-imitate strategic resource capable of creating long-term competitive advantage. Furthermore, this study enriches Stakeholder Theory by demonstrating that Sustainable HRM acts as an internal mechanism that helps organizations meet the expectations of various stakeholders, including employees, investors, regulators, and society. Integrating these two perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how an organization's internal capabilities can translate into improved ESG performance. This study also identifies several gaps in the literature that require attention. Most previous studies have used cross-sectional designs, focused more on environmental and social dimensions than on governance, and relied on perception-based measurements rather than objective ESG indicators. Therefore, future research is recommended to use longitudinal designs, expand cross-country and cross-sector coverage, and examine the mediating role of human capital development, employee engagement, and sustainability-oriented organizational culture using more measurable ESG indicators. Practically, organizations need to position Sustainable HRM as an integral part of their corporate sustainability strategy, rather than simply an administrative function of human resources. Investing in sustainability training, employee competency development, ethical leadership, and employee engagement programs can strengthen an organization's ability to achieve ESG targets while enhancing its resilience and sustainability over the long term.

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