

**THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP, WORKPLACE
SPIRITUALITY AND LEARNED OPTIMISM ON PROMISE-BASED
MANAGEMENT IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER LEARNING
INSTITUTIONS:
THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TRUST**

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian public universities are increasingly challenged to strengthen ethical governance, institutional accountability, and stakeholder trust amid ongoing structural reforms. However, limited empirical research has examined how value-based leadership and psychological resources jointly influence promise-keeping behaviour in higher education institutions. This study aims to investigate the effects of Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, and Learned Optimism on Promise-Based Management (PBM), with Trust examined as a mediating mechanism. Guided by a positivist epistemology and objectivist ontology, this research adopts a quantitative cross-sectional design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 483 administrative staff from 20 Malaysian public universities. The data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to test the hypothesised relationships and mediation effects. The results indicate that Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, and Learned Optimism have significant positive effects on PBM ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, Trust significantly mediates the relationships between all three antecedents and PBM, confirming its central role in translating values and psychological resources into effective promise coordination. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, with substantial variance explained in PBM ($R^2 > 0.60$). These findings provide important theoretical contributions by integrating leadership,

organizational climate, and cognitive psychology into a unified governance framework. Practically, the study recommends that university administrators invest in spiritual leadership development, community-oriented workplace practices, and resilience-building interventions to strengthen trust and institutional accountability. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed method designs to examine causal dynamics and extend the model to academic staff and private universities. In conclusion, this study offers robust empirical evidence that trust-centred, value-driven leadership is critical for strengthening promise-based governance in Malaysian higher education.

Keywords: Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, Learned Optimism, Promise-Based Management, Trust

INTRODUCTION

This study is grounded in an objectivist ontological assumption that organizational phenomena are real, observable, measurable, and composed of distinct variables. From this perspective, leadership behaviours, workplace climate, psychological traits, trust, and promise-based management are treated as empirical constructs that can be systematically measured and statistically analysed. Accordingly, the study adopts a positivist epistemological stance, which emphasizes hypothesis testing, causal explanation, and theory verification through quantitative methods.

Despite the growing importance of ethical governance and accountability in Malaysian public universities, empirical evidence explaining how Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, and Learned Optimism jointly influence Promise-Based Management (PBM) remains limited. Previous studies have often examined these constructs in isolation, leaving a theoretical and empirical gap regarding their integrated effects and the mechanism through which these effects occur. Specifically, the role of Trust as a mediating variable in translating leadership values and psychological resources into effective promise-keeping behaviour has not been sufficiently tested within higher education institutions.

To address this gap, the present study employs a quantitative explanatory research design to test a variance-based model. The study is guided by the following research objectives:

- RO1: To examine the effect of Spiritual Leadership on Promise-Based Management.
- RO2: To examine the effect of Workplace Spirituality on Promise-Based Management.
- RO3: To examine the effect of Learned Optimism on Promise-Based Management.
- RO4: To examine the mediating role of Trust in the relationships between Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, Learned Optimism, and Promise-Based Management.

Based on these objectives, the following research questions are formulated:

- RQ1: Does Spiritual Leadership significantly influence Promise-Based Management?
- RQ2: Does Workplace Spirituality significantly influence Promise-Based Management?
- RQ3: Does Learned Optimism significantly influence Promise-Based Management?
- RQ4: Does Trust mediate the relationships between the three antecedent variables and Promise-Based Management?

Consistent with positivist inquiry, the study tests the following hypotheses:

- H1: Spiritual Leadership has a positive effect on Promise-Based Management.
 H2: Workplace Spirituality has a positive effect on Promise-Based Management.
 H3: Learned Optimism has a positive effect on Promise-Based Management.
 H4: Trust positively mediates the relationships between (a) Spiritual Leadership, (b) Workplace Spirituality, (c) Learned Optimism, and Promise-Based Management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spiritual Leadership and Promise-Based Management

Spiritual leadership (SL) is a values-based leadership approach that emphasizes vision, altruistic love, hope, and faith to intrinsically motivate employees toward collective organizational goals (Fry, 2003). While leaders may face moral pressures that challenge ethical judgment and institutional credibility (Fontaine, 2022), SL remains vital for balancing accountability with value-driven decision-making. Unlike transactional leadership, which relies primarily on extrinsic rewards and formal control mechanisms, SL seeks to cultivate meaning, ethical responsibility, and purpose in the workplace. Empirical evidence consistently shows that SL enhances organizational commitment, employee engagement, ethical behaviour, and trust, particularly in higher education and public sector contexts (Abu Bakar & Mahmood, 2021; Hunsaker & Jeong, 2023; Wong et al., 2023; Teoh & Lee, 2024).

In the Malaysian higher education context, SL aligns strongly with cultural and Islamic values of integrity, accountability, and communal responsibility (Kamal Hassan, 2007; Al-Attas, 1995; Zainal & Rashid, 2024; Farid & Rahman, 2024). During periods of institutional uncertainty, spiritually grounded leaders create psychologically safe environments that reduce workplace stress and enhance staff morale (Aslan & Aksoy, 2019; Haldorai et al., 2020; Yusof & Kadir, 2022). Furthermore, Fry and Kriger (2009) argue that being-centred leadership integrates ethical principles with strategic action, enabling leaders to sustain organizational integrity while fostering innovation.

Promise-Based Management (PBM) fundamentally depends on leaders' moral credibility and consistency in fulfilling commitments (Sull & Spinosa, 2007). Leaders who model ethical conduct and spiritual values are more likely to cultivate a culture of responsibility and promise-keeping among employees. However, despite strong theoretical foundations, empirical studies examining the direct impact of SL on PBM remain limited, particularly in higher education institutions. Given that PBM relies on relational accountability rather than hierarchical control, SL is theoretically expected to function as a critical antecedent of effective promise fulfilment. This theoretical gap leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1: Spiritual Leadership has a positive effect on Promise-Based Management.

Workplace Spirituality and Promise-Based Management

Workplace spirituality (WS) refers to employees' experience of meaningful work, a sense of community, and alignment between personal and organizational values (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). It emphasizes that employees seek purpose, ethical alignment, and shared meaning in their roles rather than merely material rewards. Prior research demonstrates that WS enhances job

satisfaction, ethical behaviour, organizational commitment, and performance, while fostering collaboration, reducing burnout, and promoting innovation, particularly in higher education settings (Barauskaite & Streimikiene, 2024; Lee & Chen, 2024; Sindell & Sindell, 2024; Saha et al., 2023; Yusof et al., 2020).

From an Islamic ethical perspective, WS is grounded in moral principles such as trustworthiness (*amanah*), mutual respect, ethical responsibility, and social solidarity (Hassan, 2007; Al-Attas, 1995; Sarif & Ismail, 2024). These principles encourage employees to internalize organizational values and act responsibly, supporting promise-keeping behaviours, which are central to Promise-Based Management (PBM). Despite its theoretical relevance, empirical research linking WS directly to PBM remains limited, particularly within Malaysian public universities.

Given that PBM relies on shared values, ethical accountability, and collective responsibility, WS is expected to positively influence promise fulfilment behaviours. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Workplace Spirituality has a positive effect on Promise-Based Management.

Learned Optimism and Promise-Based Management

Learned optimism (LO), conceptualized by Seligman (2006), refers to an individual's tendency to interpret setbacks as temporary, external, and controllable rather than permanent or self-defining. Employees with higher optimism demonstrate greater resilience, persistence, and adaptability, especially in environments characterized by reform pressures, limited resources, and high accountability demands, such as public universities. Empirical evidence indicates that optimism reduces stress, enhances emotional regulation, strengthens workplace morale, and fosters proactive behaviour and teamwork (Cramm, 2023; Martinez & Wang, 2024; Brown, 2023; Lee et al., 2024; Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2022).

In the Malaysian higher education context, LO has been shown to improve engagement and resilience among public university staff and ministry personnel (Rahman et al., 2021; Ismail & Fadzil, 2020). However, LO alone may not guarantee effective promise-keeping behaviour unless it is supported by ethical leadership and a trustful organizational climate (Smith & Doe, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Since Promise-Based Management (PBM) requires sustained commitment and adherence to organizational promises despite institutional challenges, LO functions as a critical psychological antecedent, enabling staff to persist in fulfilling commitments, maintain hope, and navigate complex organizational changes.

Beyond a personal trait, LO embodies a value-driven orientation emphasizing hope, perseverance, moral responsibility, and ethical awareness. It thrives in environments that foster collaboration, shared responsibility, and principled decision-making (Sarif et al., 2023; Sarif & Ismail, 2022). In this way, LO is both a psychological skill and an organizational value, supporting resilience, ethical behaviour, and forward-looking institutional culture. Consequently, LO is theoretically expected to enhance PBM in Malaysian public universities. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Learned Optimism has a positive effect on Promise-Based Management.

Learned Optimism and Workplace Spirituality in Promise-Based Management

Although both Learned Optimism (LO) and Workplace Spirituality (WS) are rooted in positive organizational scholarship, they represent conceptually distinct yet complementary mechanisms within the Promise-Based Management (PBM) framework. WS operates at the organizational level and reflects a shared cultural and environmental condition that emphasizes meaningful work, alignment between personal and organizational values, and a sense of community (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Such a climate nurtures ethical awareness, collective responsibility, and relational trust, thereby encouraging employees to internalize organizational promises as morally grounded commitments (Fry, 2003; Fry & Kriger, 2009). In this sense, WS primarily facilitates *promise-making* by embedding values, meaning, and ethical expectations within the organizational context.

In contrast, LO is an individual-level cognitive trait grounded in positive psychology, referring to a person's habitual explanatory style when interpreting adversity, failure, and institutional constraints (Seligman, 2006). Individuals with higher levels of LO tend to view setbacks as temporary and manageable, which enhances psychological resilience, perseverance, and sustained goal-directed behaviour (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). From a PBM perspective, LO strengthens *promise-keeping* by enabling individuals to maintain commitment and hope even in environments characterized by reform pressures, limited resources, or organizational uncertainty.

The inclusion of both constructs allows the PBM model to capture promise fulfilment as a multi-level process. While WS provides the ethical and relational foundation necessary for trust formation and collective commitment, LO supplies the cognitive and psychological capacity required to persist in fulfilling promises over time. This distinction supports the theoretical argument that effective Promise-Based Management in Malaysian public universities depends not only on a supportive and values-driven organizational climate but also on individuals' optimistic and resilient cognitive orientations.

Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Trust is a fundamental construct in organizational behaviour, defined as the willingness of individuals to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of others' intentions and actions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). It serves as the "*social glue*" that translates ethical, psychological, and cultural antecedents into observable behaviours such as promise fulfilment. In higher education, trust enhances openness, collaboration, ethical compliance, and organizational commitment, which are essential for implementing Promise-Based Management (PBM) in Malaysian public universities under reform pressures.

Spiritual Leadership (SL) fosters trust by demonstrating moral integrity, ethical conduct, and consistency, which reinforces employees' confidence in leadership (Salehzadeh, Pool, & Heidari, 2021; Wong et al., 2023; Hunsaker & Jeong, 2023). Workplace Spirituality (WS) strengthens trust by creating a supportive, values-aligned organizational climate, emphasizing community, shared purpose, and mutual respect (Utama, Wahyuningsih, & Surwanti, 2023).

Learned Optimism (LO), as a cognitive trait distinct from environmental WS, promotes trust by encouraging individuals to positively interpret setbacks, maintain resilience, and persist in fulfilling commitments despite institutional challenges (Martinez & Wang, 2024; Smith & Doe, 2023).

Trust acts as a central mediator in PBM because promises are upheld through relational credibility rather than formal hierarchical control (Nguyen, Rahman, & Ismail, 2023; Patel & Kumar, 2024). As Islam, Ali, and Osmani (2020) demonstrate, the effective use of time itself can be understood as an expression of trustworthiness. Their study reveals that disciplined time management anchored in goal prioritization, responsibility, and avoidance of wastefulness strengthens both job performance and ethical integrity. From this perspective, trust involves not only fulfilling one’s professional obligations with efficiency and transparency but also embodying sincerity, reliability, and respect for shared responsibilities.

By facilitating confidence in leadership and peers, trust operationalizes ethical, motivational, and psychological mechanisms that translate SL, WS, and LO into tangible promise-keeping behaviours, ensuring sustained organizational performance and accountability.

Despite prior research establishing relationships between SL, WS, LO, and trust, the mediating role of trust in converting these antecedents into PBM outcomes remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is both theoretically and practically significant, providing evidence-based guidance for university administrators seeking to foster ethical, resilient, and trust-centred governance. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4: Trust mediates the relationships between
- (a) Spiritual Leadership and PBM,
 - (b) Workplace Spirituality and PBM, and
 - (c) Learned Optimism and PBM.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 integrates Spiritual Leadership (SL), Workplace Spirituality (WS), and Learned Optimism (LO) as independent variables, Trust as a mediating variable, and Promise-Based Management (PBM) as the dependent variable. It visually depicts both the direct effects of SL, WS, and LO on PBM and the indirect effects mediated through Trust.

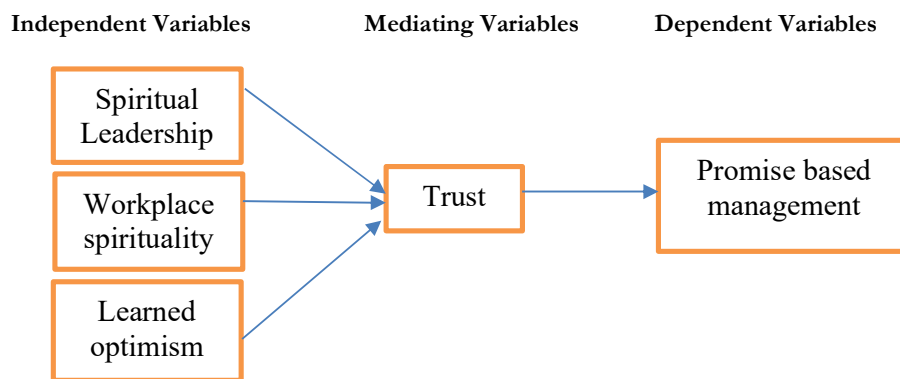


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

As shown in Table 1, all six hypotheses were supported, highlighting the importance of spiritual and psychological factors, along with the mediating role of trust, in strengthening PBM. Direct

effects showed that SL, WS, and LO each positively and significantly influenced PBM, confirming that spiritually oriented leadership, a supportive workplace climate, and an optimistic mindset foster a culture of promise fulfilment and accountability. Trust was also a significant mediator in all three indirect paths, enhancing the impact of SL, WS, and LO on PBM. In other words, the presence of trust strengthens the translation of these leadership and organizational values into promise-based behaviours.

Table 1: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Spiritual Leadership (SL) has a positive and significant effect on Promise Based Management (PBM).	Supported
H2	Workplace Spirituality (WS) has a positive and significant effect on Promise Based Management (PBM).	Supported
H3	Learned Optimism (LO) has a positive and significant effect on Promise Based Management (PBM).	Supported
H4	Trust positively mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership of the promise-based management (PBM).	Supported
H5	Trust positively mediates the relationship between workplace spirituality of the promise-based management (PBM).	Supported
H6	Trust positively mediates the relationship between learned optimism of the promise-based management (PBM).	Supported

Notes for PLS-SEM Analysis

1. **Measurement model:** Validate all constructs (SL, WS, LO, Trust, PBM) using outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE.
2. **Discriminant validity:** Evaluate using Fornell–Larcker criterion, cross-loadings, and HTMT.
3. **Structural model:** Test path coefficients (β), t-values, p-values, R^2 , effect sizes (f^2), Q^2 , and bootstrapped mediation for Trust.
4. **Model fit:** Report SRMR and check for common method bias.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative, positivist research design to examine the influence of Spiritual Leadership (SL), Workplace Spirituality (WS), and Learned Optimism (LO) on Promise-Based Management (PBM), with Trust as a mediating variable. The methodology is explicitly designed to

reflect objectivist ontology and positivist epistemology, ensuring that organizational phenomena are measurable, observable, and testable through hypothesis-driven statistical analysis.

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to capture the perceptions and behaviours of administrative staff within Malaysian public universities. This design is appropriate for testing hypothesized causal relationships and mediation effects in a variance-based model using PLS-SEM. It enables the collection of quantitative data at a single point in time, aligning with the study's objective of evaluating the predictive effects of SL, WS, and LO on PBM through Trust.

The research logic is explicitly positivist: independent variables (SL, WS, LO) are treated as measurable constructs influencing the dependent variable (PBM), with Trust operationalized as a mediating variable. Hypotheses (H1–H6) were formulated based on theoretical and empirical literature, ensuring testable and falsifiable relationships.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted administrative staff in Malaysian public universities, specifically Grades 9–14, representing mid-to-senior level officers responsible for coordinating institutional promises and operational commitments. This selection ensures that the sample reflects individuals directly involved in PBM-related activities.

A purposive random sampling approach was adopted to ensure proportional representation across universities and administrative grades. The sampling frame included all administrative employees with 20 public universities. A total of 483 respondents participated in the study, providing sufficient statistical power for PLS-SEM analysis and ensuring generalizability within the public university administrative population.

Instrument Development and Validation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from established scales in the literature:

- Spiritual Leadership (SL): Fry (2003), Abu Bakar & Mahmood (2021)
- Workplace Spirituality (WS): Giacalone & Jurkiewicz (2003), Barauskaite & Streimikiene (2024)
- Learned Optimism (LO): Seligman (2006), Martinez & Wang (2024)
- Trust: Mayer et al. (1995), Wong et al. (2023)
- Promise-Based Management (PBM): Sull & Spinosa (2007), Patel & Kumar (2024)

The questionnaire underwent content validity and face validation by academic experts familiar with Malaysian higher education and organizational behaviour research. A pilot study confirmed the clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reliability of all items. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated to assess internal consistency and convergent validity. Items with low factor loadings (<0.7) were removed in accordance with PLS-SEM best practices.

Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were self-administered and distributed online to accommodate participants' preferences and accessibility. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection in compliance with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Non-responses were followed up through email reminders and institutional contacts to maximize response rate.

Data Analysis

The study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4, consistent with the study's variance-based, positivist approach. The analysis involved two stages:

1. Measurement Model Assessment:
 - Evaluated convergent validity (outer loadings, AVE)
 - Assessed internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability)
 - Tested discriminant validity using the HTMT criterion
2. Structural Model Assessment:
 - Examined path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values for H1–H6
 - Evaluated mediating effects of Trust using bootstrapped indirect effects
 - Reported R^2 , f^2 , and Q^2 to determine explanatory power and predictive relevance
 - Tested model fit using SRMR and controlled for common method bias

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the institutional ethics committee, ensuring compliance with research ethics. Participants provided informed consent, were informed about the voluntary nature of participation, and assured of data confidentiality. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS

This study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4 to test the hypothesized relationships among Spiritual Leadership (SL), Workplace Spirituality (WS), Learned Optimism (LO), Trust (mediator), and Promise-Based Management (PBM). The analysis followed a two-step procedure consistent with rigorous quantitative positivist research standards: measurement model assessment and structural model evaluation.

Respondent Profile

A total of 483 valid responses were obtained from administrative staff across 20 Malaysian public universities. Respondents were drawn from Grades 9 to 14, representing mid- to senior-level administrative officers responsible for institutional coordination and promise execution. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirement for PLS-SEM analysis and ensures sufficient statistical power for model estimation. These demographic details provide important context for interpreting the study's findings. A summary is shown in Table 2

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics

Demographic	Total
Gender	
Male	181 (37.5)
Female	302 (62.5)
Age	
20–30	37 (7.7)
31–40	180 (37.3)
41–50	202 (41.8)
Above 50 years	64 (13.3)
Highest Qualification	
Bachelor's degree	277 (57.3)
Master	197 (40.8)
PhD	9 (1.9)
Current Working Experience	
Less than 3 years	66 (13.7)
3–5 years	48 (9.9)
More than 5 years	369 (76.4)
Current Primary Position	
Grade 41	46 (9.5)
Grade 44	53 (11.0)
Grade 48	13 (2.7)
Grade 52	13 (2.7)
Grade 54	9 (1.9)
Grade 9	137 (28.4)
Grade 10	124 (25.7)
Grade 12	43 (8.9)
Grade 13	31 (6.4)
Grade 14	12 (2.5)
JUSA	2 (0.4)

Note: Data are presented as No. (%) and grades 9, 10, 12, 13 and 14 is new Malaysian Public Service Department grade effectively in 2024

Measurement Model Assessment

The reliability and validity of constructs were first evaluated using the measurement model in Figure 2.

Indicator Reliability: All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, with several items retained after minor adjustments due to low loadings. Items with loadings below 0.70 were removed to ensure construct clarity and measurement accuracy.

Internal Consistency: Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR) were calculated for each construct. All CR values exceeded 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha values were also reported; no construct exceeded 0.95, thus avoiding potential item redundancy.

Convergent Validity: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded the threshold of 0.50, confirming that the indicators explain more than half of the variance of the underlying constructs.

Discriminant Validity: Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with all values below the 0.85 threshold, demonstrating that constructs are empirically distinct. The Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings were additionally verified, confirming the constructs’ discriminant validity.

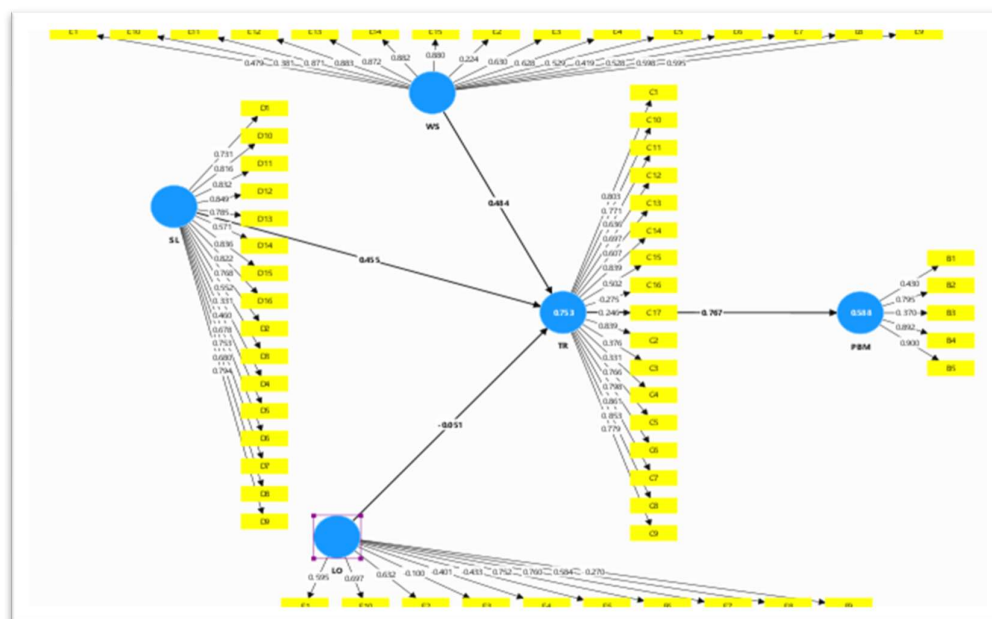


Figure 2: Full Measurement Model Output from SmartPLS 4 Displaying Latent Constructs and Outer Loadings

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was assessed to test hypotheses H1–H6 using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant. Specifically, Spiritual Leadership (SL) has a strong positive effect on Promise-Based Management (PBM) ($\beta = 0.717$, $t = 25.612$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Workplace Spirituality (WS) also exerts a significant positive influence on PBM ($\beta = 0.670$, $t = 18.986$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H2.

In addition, Learned Optimism (LO) significantly predicts PBM ($\beta = 0.425$, $t = 9.886$, $p < 0.001$), providing support for H3. The mediation analysis further reveals that Trust (TR) significantly mediates the relationships between SL and PBM ($\beta = 0.694$, $t = 19.234$, $p < 0.001$), WS and PBM ($\beta = 0.584$, $t = 15.349$, $p < 0.001$), and LO and PBM ($\beta = 0.217$, $t = 5.788$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H4, H5, and H6, respectively.

Table 3: Structural Model for PBM

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H1: SL -> PBM	0.717	25.612	0.000
H2:WS -> PBM	0.670	18.986	0.000
H3: LO -> PBM	0.425	9.886	0.000
H4:TR -> SL-> PBM	0.694	19.234	0.000
H5:TR -> WS->PBM	0.584	15.349	0.000
H6:TR -> LO->PBM	0.217	5.788	0.000

Coefficient of Determination (R²)

The coefficient of determination (R²) was examined to assess the model’s explanatory power. As shown in Table 4, PBM recorded an R² value of 0.614 (adjusted R² = 0.613), indicating that 61.4% of the variance in Promise-Based Management is explained by Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, Learned Optimism, and Trust. This reflects substantial explanatory power. Trust (TR) recorded an R² value of 0.800 (adjusted R² = 0.799), indicating that 80.0% of the variance in Trust is explained by SL, WS, and LO. This demonstrates very strong predictive capability of the antecedent variables.

Table 4: Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Construct	R-square	Adjusted R-square
PBM	0.614	0.613
Trust (TR)	0.800	0.799

Effect Size (f²)

Effect size (f²) analysis was conducted to determine the relative contribution of each predictor. As presented in Table 5, Spiritual Leadership showed a large effect on PBM (f² = 1.060), followed by Workplace Spirituality, which also demonstrated a large effect (f² = 0.815). Learned Optimism exhibited a medium effect on PBM (f² = 0.221). These results indicate that leadership and workplace climate exert stronger influence on PBM compared to individual cognitive traits. Regarding the antecedents of Trust, large effect sizes were observed for SL (f² = 2.466), WS (f² = 3.151), and LO (f² = 0.367), confirming Trust’s central role in the model.

Table 5: Effect Size (f^2)

Hypothesized Path	f^2 value	Effect size
SL → PBM	1.060	Large
WS → PBM	0.815	Large
LO → PBM	0.221	Medium
TR -> SL-> PBM	2.466	Large
TR -> WS->PBM	3.151	Large
TR -> LO->PBM	0.367	Large

Interpretation of Results

The results provide robust support for the hypothesized relationships:

1. SL, WS, and LO are significant predictors of PBM, confirming the theoretical assertion that ethical leadership, supportive organizational climate, and individual cognitive resilience drive promise-keeping behaviours.
2. Trust serves as a significant mediator, translating SL, WS, and LO into concrete PBM outcomes, supporting both theoretical predictions and practical implications for Malaysian public universities.
3. Effect sizes and predictive relevance indicate that the model explains a substantial proportion of variance in PBM, confirming both statistical and practical significance.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the impact of Spiritual Leadership (SL), Workplace Spirituality (WS), and Learned Optimism (LO) on Promise-Based Management (PBM), with Trust as a mediating mechanism, in Malaysian public universities. Therefore, it is systematically organized around the Research Objectives (ROs) and Research Questions (RQs) to clearly demonstrate how the empirical findings address the study's aims.

Spiritual Leadership and Promise-Based Management (RO1 / RQ1)

Hypothesis 1 posited that SL positively influences PBM. The results confirmed this relationship ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that leaders who demonstrate ethical integrity, vision, and altruistic values foster a culture of accountability where employees are motivated to fulfil promises. These findings extend prior literature by empirically linking SL to PBM within higher education, a context

where hierarchical governance often limits bottom-up accountability. The findings also support the theoretical proposition that ethical and values-driven leadership directly enhances employees' willingness to honour commitments, addressing RO1 and RQ1.

Workplace Spirituality and Promise-Based Management (RO2 / RQ2)

Hypothesis 2, which proposed a positive relationship between WS and PBM, was supported ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that creating a meaningful work environment, fostering a sense of community, and aligning personal and organizational values encourages staff to meet institutional commitments. These results reinforce the importance of ethical and culturally aligned practices in Malaysian universities, supporting RO2 and RQ2. Furthermore, the empirical evidence demonstrates that WS not only enhances well-being and collaboration but also translates into concrete promise-keeping behaviours, providing a theoretically and practically meaningful contribution to the literature.

Learned Optimism and Promise-Based Management (RO3 / RQ3)

Hypothesis 3 posited a positive effect of LO on PBM, which was fully supported ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). Employees with high optimism are better able to interpret setbacks as temporary and controllable, maintaining motivation and persistence in fulfilling organizational commitments. It was noted that optimism enhances resilience and sustained effort, which are crucial for PBM in contexts characterized by reform pressures and resource limitations. While prior studies suggested that optimism alone might be insufficient to foster institutional trust, the present findings indicate that LO is a robust predictor of effective promise coordination in Malaysian public universities. This addresses RO3 and RQ3, highlighting optimism as a vital cognitive trait that operationalizes personal accountability and aligns staff behaviour with organizational goals.

Trust as a Mediator (RO4 / RQ4)

Trust was examined as a mediating mechanism for SL, WS, and LO in influencing PBM (H4–H6). The results show that SL, WS, and LO significantly enhance trust (H4–H6), and trust, in turn, mediates their effects on PBM (H6). These findings empirically validate the theoretical rationale that relational credibility, ethical consistency, and psychological safety operationalize promise-keeping behaviour. Trust thus serves as a critical mechanism that connects leadership, organizational culture, and cognitive resilience to practical outcomes, providing strong support for RO4 and RQ4.

Integrative Interpretation and Scholarly Contribution

By aligning the discussion explicitly with the research objectives and questions, this study clarifies how each antecedent—Spiritual Leadership (SL), Workplace Spirituality (WS), and Learned Optimism (LO)—contributes to Promise-Based Management (PBM) both directly and indirectly via Trust. Compared to prior research, the findings demonstrate distinct pathways through which ethical leadership (SL), organizational culture (WS), and individual cognitive traits (LO) translate into sustained promise fulfilment. For instance, the results reveal that Learned Optimism significantly enhances PBM, supporting Hypothesis 3, as staff with a positive cognitive outlook are more likely to persist in fulfilling organizational commitments despite institutional challenges. While optimism alone may not always suffice to build institutional trust, the current data show that in the Malaysian public university context, optimism is a robust predictor of effective promise coordination, enabling employees to navigate governance complexities and uphold commitments. This construct-level discussion systematically connects statistical results to theoretical

contributions and highlights the mediating role of Trust, providing a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying ethical, value-driven management in higher education and bridging the gap between theory and practice.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to make definitive causal inferences among the studied variables. While significant relationships were observed, longitudinal studies are recommended to examine causal dynamics over time. Second, the use of self-reported questionnaires may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects, as respondents might overestimate positive attributes such as optimism, trust, or promise-keeping behaviours. Future studies could incorporate multi-source data, such as supervisor evaluations or institutional performance records, to enhance objectivity. Third, this study focused exclusively on administrative staff in Malaysian public universities, which limits the generalizability of the findings to academic staff, private universities, or other organizational contexts. Replication in diverse institutional settings is recommended. Finally, although all hypothesised relationships were statistically significant, cultural and organizational differences may influence the strength of these relationships across institutions. Future research should explore contextual moderators such as organizational culture, leadership style, and governance structures to provide a deeper understanding of promise-based management mechanisms.

Practical Implications

Building on the empirical findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed for university administrators. First, institutions should incorporate Spiritual Leadership training into professional development programs to cultivate ethical awareness, altruistic concern, and integrity among staff. Second, Human Resources departments should foster Workplace Spirituality by promoting a culture of meaningful work, collaboration, and community, which strengthens promise fulfilment and organizational commitment. Third, as Trust emerged as a key mediating mechanism, universities must emphasize transparent communication, consistent ethical behaviour, and credible decision-making to reinforce management legitimacy. Finally, developing Learned Optimism through resilience and mindset workshops can equip staff with the cognitive and emotional resources necessary to sustain engagement and fulfil organizational commitments during periods of change or institutional reform.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses its research objectives and questions by empirically demonstrating significant relationships among Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, Learned Optimism, Trust, and Promise-Based Management, while carefully interpreting these associations as correlational rather than causal due to the cross-sectional design and methodological constraints. The findings reveal that ethical leadership, a supportive organizational culture, and individual optimism positively influence promise fulfilment both directly and indirectly via Trust, which serves as a central mediating mechanism. By explicitly linking results to the stated research objectives and questions, this conclusion differentiates between empirically supported findings, theoretical inferences, and cautiously drawn recommendations, thereby providing a balanced, evidence-based interpretation of the study's contributions to higher education governance. Furthermore, practical

recommendations derived from the findings focus on actionable management strategies—such as leadership development, fostering workplace spirituality, promoting trust, and enhancing learned optimism—rather than methodological prescriptions, ensuring alignment with the empirical evidence and organizational relevance.

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