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Unveiling the Path to Sustainability: Role of Sustainable Leadership, Job Crafting, and Leaders' Gender

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Abstract

Grounded in self-determination theory, the current study explores the intervening role of job crafting in the relationship of sustainable leadership practices with sustainable performance. Additionally, it investigates the controlling impact of employee gender on the relationship between sustainable leadership practices and employees' job crafting, drawing on the principles of expectancy theory. Data were collected from 269 SME employees in China, achieving a response rate of 53.80%. The results provide quantitative evidence supporting the indirect effect of sustainable leadership practices on firms' sustainable performance via employees' job crafting. Furthermore, the conclusions reveal that the effect of sustainable leadership on employees' job crafting is stronger among female employees compared to their male counterparts. As far as we know, this work is among the first to integrate sustainable leadership practices, job crafting, gender, and sustainable performance within a unified theoretical framework.

Keywords: Cross-sectional, Expectancy theory, Gender, Job crafting, Leadership, PLS-SEM, Self-determination, Sustainability.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development emphasizes fulfilling “the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [1]. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are viewed as highly responsible for fostering sustainability [2, 3]. Sustainable performance concerns the balancing of social, economic, and environmental performance [4, 5]. SMEs play a pivotal role in shaping the future generation of practitioners, academicians, policymakers, decision-makers, and leaders in the sustainability arena, surpassing all other societal sectors in this regard. Through their moral obligation to embed sustainability objectives within their programs, SMEs employ a significant multiplier effect in publicizing sustainable development principles [6, 7].

However, literature has highlighted a notable lack of advancement among these institutes in realizing sustainability ideas, a situation often attributed to the attitudes and behaviors of institutional leadership [8]. As Filho et al. [9] assert, “a structural change is needed to [...] ensure educational institutions make sustainability an intrinsic value in their mission statement” (p.

859). Achieving sustainable development necessitates transformative shifts across various organizational domains, including leadership and innovation [2, 3]. In the context of higher education, particularly within Chinese institutions, escalating pressures related to globalization, academic competition, and institutional accountability demand leadership that not only drives performance but also nurtures a sustainable work environment conducive to long-term success [9]. While the literature distinguishes various forms of leadership, the emerging paradigm of sustainable leadership (SL) is particularly pertinent in this context [10]. The objective of SL is to guide organizations to sustainability by realizing socially responsible behaviors [11-13]. SL aligns with concepts such as reflexive and participative [14], responsible management [15], ethical governance [16], transformational headship [17, 18], value-based leadership [19], and shared leadership [20].

As Chinese SMEs continue to evolve and confront emerging challenges [21], sustainable leadership holds the potential to cultivate an environment in which employees are empowered to engage in job crafting an approach that allows employees to redesign their roles in alignment with their personal values and professional goals [22]. In the context of Chinese higher education, where faculty are increasingly pressured by demands for high teaching quality, research output, and work-life balance [3, 23], sustainable leadership can provide the necessary resources, autonomy, and motivation to foster job crafting. Job crafting enables faculty to modify their job tasks, relationships, and perceptions, thereby enhancing job satisfaction, engagement, and performance [24]. The self-determination theory [25] offers a robust framework for understanding how leadership practices that enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness can catalyze proactive work behaviors such as job crafting. Job crafting, a process wherein employees actively reshape their job roles to better align with their strengths and interests, has been linked to increased job satisfaction, performance, and positive organizational outcomes [26]. In higher education, sustainable performance encompasses long-term institutional success, the quality of teaching and research, and the well-being of faculty and staff, all of which are influenced by employee motivation and behavior [27]. Faculty who engage in job crafting are more likely to be motivated, innovative, and committed to enhancing their teaching and research Chen et al. [28]. In the demanding environment of Chinese higher education, job crafting allows employees to balance the competing demands of teaching, research, and administrative duties in ways that align with both personal and professional goals [29, 30]. Accordingly, based on the principles of self-determination theory, it is hypothesized that sustainable leadership practices foster an environment where faculty feel empowered to engage in job crafting, ultimately enhancing their performance and contributing to institutional sustainability.

However, the impact of sustainable leadership on job crafting may not be consistent across all employees. Drawing on Vroom, et al. [31] expectancy theory, this study further explores how gender moderates the relationship between sustainable leadership and employees' engagement in job crafting. Gendered differences in motivational drivers, as well as the ways in which leadership behaviors are perceived and reciprocated [32], suggest that male and female employees may respond differently to sustainable leadership practices [33, 34]. Women, for example, may place a higher value on leadership behaviors that emphasize supportive relationships and work-life balance, while men may be more motivated by task-oriented outcomes and career advancement opportunities [35]. By investigating this moderating effect, the study aims to elucidate the dynamic role of gender in shaping job crafting behaviors and its subsequent implications for sustainable performance. In this complex context, this research examines the role of sustainable leadership in influencing job crafting behaviors and, ultimately, sustainable performance in SMEs, with a particular focus on how gender moderates these relationships.

By integrating sustainable leadership practices, employees' job crafting, gender and sustainable performance in the Chinese higher education context, this work aims to offer numerous contributions to the literature. First, this study contributes to self-determination theory [36] by assessing the intervening role of employees' job crafting on the sustainable leadership practices relationship with sustainable performance. Second, the current research work contributes to expectancy theory by exploring the conditional role of employees' gender on the relationship between sustainable leadership and job crafting [31]. Third, the current study aims to respond the call and fulfill the research gap [3, 5] by investigating the interplay between sustainable leadership, job crafting, employees' gender and organizational sustainability in the higher education arena.

1.1. Sustainable Leadership and Job Crafting

By fostering ethic-based decision making, employee well-being, and long-term development, sustainable leaders promote an empowering and supportive work environment for all stakeholders [3, 37]. In the Chinese business, where the both management and employees face high pressure related to performance, productivity, and work-life balance, sustainable leaders emerge as a critical resource which offer motivation and autonomy needed to engage in job crafting activities. Through job crafting, employees redesign their roles in order to align with their personal motives and professional goals, driving their job engagement, satisfaction and performance at work [24]. On the same line, previous studies concluded with the positive impact of sustainable leadership practices on employees job engagement [38]. On the other side, engagement has substantial weight to keep employees motivated and committed in academic arena as well [39, 40]. By getting support from sustainable leaders, teachers and administrative staff exhibit high inclination toward engagement in proactive behaviors, e.g., job crafting, to increase their job satisfaction and work performance. Under job crafting, employees make an attempt to adapt their job activities, working relationships, and perceptions about their job in relation to their personal needs and aspirations.

The extant literature has also concluded with strong influence of leaders, who offer organizational support to employees, on the organizational sustainability [41], job-crafting oriented work environment. In the scenario, where university teachers always struggle with the accomplishment of high quality research, effective teaching and efficient administrative tasks [42] sustainable leadership practices appear as a source of relieve by providing the flexibility needed to alter their job roles in relation with their teaching, research activities and work-life balance [3].

The past studies have also claimed that sustainable leaders promote a healthy work-life balance by offering work autonomy, flexibility, and individual development [43-45]. Amid the highly competitive work environment in Chinese SMEs,

sustainable leadership that prioritizes work-life balance can enable employees to engage in job crafting, allowing them to shape their roles in a way that fosters a healthier equilibrium between professional duties and personal well-being [23, 46]. In addition, sense of autonomy and job control are positively drive by employees job crafting [47]. Sustainable leaders often grant employees greater autonomy, allowing them the flexibility to modify their roles [48]. This autonomy serves as a crucial factor in job crafting, enhancing the likelihood that employees will actively engage in it Slemp et al. [49]. Sustainable leaders empower employees by encouraging them to align their roles with their interests and values [50]. This empowerment directly fosters job crafting behaviors such as task, relational, and cognitive crafting, where employees adjust tasks, interactions, and perceptions of their roles to enhance their job experiences [51]. Studies indicate that sustainable leadership styles are linked to intrinsic motivation, which is a key driver of job crafting [44]. Employees motivated by sustainable leadership are more likely to engage in proactive job design that enhances their work-life balance and satisfaction [52]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H_1: Sustainable leadership significantly and positively influences employees' job crafting.

1.2. Job Crafting and Sustainable Performance

Job crafting refers to the process by which employees shape, modify, and redefine their work roles to better align with their personal strengths, interests, and career goals [22]. In the context of higher education, job crafting can lead to improved engagement, job satisfaction, and performance, which are essential to sustaining institutional goals in the competitive and ever-evolving landscape of Chinese academia. Sustainable performance in higher education encompasses long-term institutional success, the quality of teaching and research, and the overall well-being of faculty and staff, which are all influenced by the actions and motivation of employees [27]. In the context of SMEs, previous studies have claimed that job crafting among employees drives their motivation, commitment, and innovation towards their research and teaching activities [28]. In the presence of job crafting practices, employees experience high alignment between their professional requirements and personal interests and strengths, which indicates their job satisfaction and quality of academic performance [53]. In Chinese SMEs, where employees face pressure in the context of innovation learning practices and academic excellence, job crafting is the only source that could create a high-quality and dynamic learning environment to offer sustainability [54]. In addition, employees' job crafting is significantly related to their engagement at work which is viewed as highly crucial to sustainable performance [22].

In the highly competitive higher education sector of China, It is the only employees' job crafting which allows them to align their job demands such as teaching, research and administrative duties, along with their personal and professional needs [29, 30]. Resultantly, employees experience well-being at work, which is critical to their sustainability and long-term survival of their organizations [55]. Previous studies have already established the fact that work-related factors such as organizational support and job satisfaction foster organizational sustainability [56, 57]. In the presence of work environment, where job demands are high and institutional focus is highly uncertain, Job crafting facilitates employees to adapt to changing circumstances, contributing to their and organizational long-term sustainability [58, 59]. Therefore, in view of the above discussion, the following hypothesis is developed;

H_2: Job crafting significantly and positively influences sustainable performance.

1.3. Mediating Role of Job Crafting

Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [25], which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation, this study posits that sustainable leaders, who emphasize long-term development, ethical conduct, and employee well-being, are likely to fulfill employees' basic psychological needs [60]. This fulfillment enhances employees' autonomy and competence [61], leading to job crafting behaviors, proactive changes in the way employees design their tasks, relationships, and cognitive approaches to their roles. As employees engage in job crafting, they are more likely to experience higher levels of job satisfaction [62], work engagement [63], and overall performance [64] which in turn leads to sustainable performance in the institution.

Recent studies suggest that leadership styles that prioritize employee autonomy [48, 49] and well-being [47] are highly effective in promoting job crafting. Sustainable leaders typically offer more autonomy to employees, giving them the freedom to make changes to their roles [60]. This autonomy is a key element of job crafting and increases the likelihood of employees engaging in it. Slemp et al. [49] (aligned with sustainable leadership) significantly enhance employees' engagement in job crafting, especially in environments that foster supportive relationships and opportunities for personal growth. In the context of Chinese SMEs, where institutional pressures for research output, teaching excellence, and work-life balance are prominent [24], sustainable leadership can provide the resources and psychological support necessary for employees to engage in job crafting. By proactively adjusting their roles to fit their strengths and professional aspirations [65], employees contribute to both individual and institutional performance outcomes. Therefore, it is quite obvious to anticipate the indirect impact of sustainable leadership on sustainable performance through job crafting based on self-determination theory which emphasize that environments supportive of autonomy and competence (key components of sustainable leadership) naturally lead to behaviors that benefit both the individual (through job satisfaction and engagement) and the organization (through improved performance) [66, 67]. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited;

H_3: Job crafting significantly mediates the relationship between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance.

1.4. Moderating Role of Employees' Gender

Sustainable leadership practices often focus on empowerment, autonomy, and personal development. Women, who may face more barriers to leadership positions and career advancement due to societal biases [33, 34], might be more responsive

to sustainable leadership practices that emphasize fairness, support, and the creation of inclusive work environments. As a result, sustainable leadership may have a stronger impact on female employees' job crafting behaviors, as they seek to reshape their roles in alignment with their personal values and goals. Gender roles and expectations can shape how employees perceive their work and engage with their jobs [32]. Women are often more likely to engage in relational job crafting (adjusting interpersonal interactions) to build supportive networks, while men may be more likely to focus on task-oriented crafting (altering tasks or duties) [35]. Sustainable leadership practices, which encourage both task and relational crafting, may be more influential for women who seek to optimize their work experience in response to gendered workplace challenges, such as balancing career with family responsibilities or addressing gender stereotypes [68].

Female employees may be more inclined to engage in job crafting as a strategy to cope with workplace challenges, such as gender bias or work-life conflict [69, 70]. Sustainable leadership, which provides a supportive, ethical, and inclusive work environment, may provide the necessary resources and motivation for women to engage in proactive job crafting. In contrast, male employees may experience less of a need to adapt their roles as they might face fewer barriers in the workplace [71]. Empowerment and autonomy are key drivers of job crafting [72]. Women, who may traditionally have less access to decision-making power and autonomy in some organizational contexts [73], may particularly benefit from sustainable leadership practices that foster a culture of autonomy. This support can prompt female employees to engage more actively in job crafting, compared to male employees who may already experience greater autonomy. Therefore, it is quite obvious to anticipate that sustainable leadership practices will have a stronger positive effect on job crafting for female employees than male employees. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed;

H_4: There is a higher impact of sustainable leadership on job crafting for female employees as compared to male one.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Context, Sample Data Collection

This study targets SMEs in China as the population of interest. However, due to limitations in time, budget, and networking, it was not possible to collect data from all SMEs across the country. Therefore, a cluster sampling method was utilized, categorizing SMEs into clusters based on geographical regions. Data collection was focused on institutions in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing, and Shanghai, selected through simple random sampling. The sample comprised managerial staff from SMEs in these cities.

To ensure the survey instrument was accessible to the target respondents, it was translated into Mandarin using a triple translation process. In the current study, two language faculty members, who work at Beijing Foreign Studies University, and four academic professionals from different SMEs in China offered assistance to ensure the content validity of the translated survey. Before distributing the survey, it was reviewed by an expert panel of four faculty members and two academic researchers, who have sustainable development as their core research interests, from prominent management colleges in China. Their feedback helped refine the questionnaire, improving its clarity and content validity.

A pilot study with 30 participants from SMEs, who did not take part in hypotheses testing part, was conducted to evaluate the constructs' reliability. Based on the pilot results, adjustments were made to boost the survey's reliability and validity. Subsequently, the survey was distributed via Google Forms, which was accomplished with the local faculty member's cooperation in the selected cities.

Following the criteria such as statistical power (0.80), effect size (0.15), and two predictors, we run the G*Power tool to find minimum sample required in current study, which was mandated as 107 [74]. Considering an average response rate of 35.5% in business studies, Iqbal et al. [48] shared five hundred survey forms among local teachers in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen to secure the required number of responses. A total of 269 valid responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 53.80%. This sample size was sufficient for multivariate analysis in current work. Descriptive and frequency analyses were performed using SPSS software.

Regarding demographics, 53.88% of respondents were male, and 46.12% were female. The most dominant age cluster (48.29%) was between 37 and 44 years old, with 11-15 years of professional experience. Among the study participants, 55.22% belong to Beijing and Shanghai, while 44.78% were from Guangzhou, with the latter group comprising 90 individuals.

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire in the present research work has five portions: Sustainable leadership, job crafting, sustainable performance, respondents' gender, and demographic information. We employed a five-point Likert scale, which extends from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), as recommended by Robinson [75], who noted that higher-category Likert scales can negatively affect data quality due to acquiescence bias and processing overload [75]. We selected the five-point scale to enhance response quality and mitigate these challenges, which are commonly associated with Likert scales in social science research [76].

Participants rated sustainable leadership practices of their supervisors on the basis of a 15-item scale, established by McCann and Sweet [77], which has proven to be highly reliable in previous research [10]. An example item from this scale is: "Your organizational leadership acts in a sustainable, ethically responsible manner."

Job crafting was assessed through a 15-item measure that captures behaviors in three key areas: increasing structural job resources (e.g., "I try to learn new things at work"), increasing social job resources (e.g., "I ask others for feedback on my work performance"), and increasing challenging job demands (e.g., "If there are new developments, I am one of the first to learn about them and try them out") [78].

To measure sustainable performance in SMEs, this study adopted a 15-item scale of sustainable performance from Iqbal and Ahmad [10], where economic, social and environmental performance are its three lower-order dimensions. In the context of Chinese manufacturing firms, Xuecheng et al. [4] have also employed this scale and reported its high reliability [4]. Respondents' gender was treated as a categorical variable, with males coded as 1 and females as 2.

2.3. Analytical Strategy

This study employs an explanatory approach, featuring a research framework that includes an intervening and contingent effect along with a direct relationship, making it inherently intricate. In such cases, the partial least squares structural equation modeling, which is also called variance-based structural equation modeling, is regarded as more suitable and yields supplementary robust and reliable fallouts than covariance-based SEM [79, 80]. Accordingly, the current work utilized the PLS-SEM approach. This approach is about two main components: evaluating the measurement and path (structural) model.

3. Findings

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

The organizations under investigation demonstrate a moderate commitment to key areas such as sustainable leadership (M = 3.732), job crafting (M = 3.833), and sustainable performance (M = 3.913), signifying a reasonable level of administrative efficiency and competence in these domains. However, the presence of social performance within the context of sustainable performance was notably low (M = 2.010), indicating a critical need to foster an environment where social-oriented ideas and activities are actively cultivated, developed, and implemented with a focus on sustainability. There is an urgent necessity to prioritize long-term strategic objectives, particularly in the SMEs of China.

Furthermore, economic performance in Chinese SMEs is also observed to be at a relatively low level (M = 2.818), underscoring the need to enhance and promote advanced business activities in response to the evolving global challenges and emerging issues. This highlights the imperative for business executives to drive economic and business activities as central components of sustainable development in SMEs.

3.2. Data Screening

Prior to formal hypotheses testing, extant studies recommend screening the dataset to ensure its's integrity. This process involves examining key elements such as missing values, outliers, normality, group differences (e.g., t-tests), and potential common method variance. In this study, all survey questions were mandatory, ensuring the dataset contained no missing values. A Z-score analysis confirmed the absence of outliers, as all scores fell within the acceptable range, with none exceeding 3.29 [81].

To address concerns about common method bias, a procedural approach was employed by using distinct measurement scales for continuous constructs, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. [82]. Additionally, we also run Harman's one-factor test to detect any unusual variance in dataset. The results indicated; 30.02% of the total variance is caused by a single factor, which is lower than 50%, confirming the common method bias as a non-issue in the present research work.

We assessed the normal distribution in the dataset by analyzing the kurtosis and skewness values [83]. Normally distributed data typically have these indicator values in the range of +3 and -3 [84]. The skewness values for sustainable leadership (0.110), job crafting (0.434), sustainable performance (0.680), economic performance (0.492), social performance (0.134), and environmental performance (-0.157) all fell within the acceptable range. Similarly, their kurtosis values were also within ±3, confirming univariate normality in the dataset. However, Mardia's multivariate skewness ($\beta = 17.527$, $\rho < 0.05$) and kurtosis ($\beta = 94.610$, $\rho < 0.05$) tests revealed significant results, indicating the absence of multivariate normality [85].

3.3. Measurement Model Analysis

Before analyzing the structural model, it is essential to evaluate the measurement model to confirm the reliability and validity of the constructs being examined. This involves assessing indicator reliability, construct reliability, and validity, particularly for reflective constructs [83]. In this study, sustainable leadership, job crafting, social performance, environmental performance, and economic performance are modeled as reflective in nature.

Indicator reliability requires that items have loadings greater than 0.50 to be considered acceptable [86] while items with loadings below 0.40 are typically excluded. As a result, three items from sustainable leadership and one item from job crafting, social, economic and environmental performance were removed due to loadings below 0.40. After these adjustments, all remaining items in the measurement model showed loadings above 0.50 (Table 1), confirming acceptable indicator reliability. We assessed the constructs' reliability based on Cronbach's alpha score and composite reliability value, which are regarded as the lower and upper bounds, respectively. Values exceeding 0.60 for both measures are deemed acceptable in explanatory research, Hair Jr, et al. [83]. Table 1 exhibits that Cronbach's alpha score and composite reliability value for all continuous variables—sustainable leadership, job crafting, and the first-order dimensions of sustainable performance—met these thresholds, confirming internal consistency reliability.

Convergent validity was assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE), where values above 0.50 and construct reliability greater than 0.60 are considered adequate [83]. The AVE values for sustainable leadership, job crafting, and the first-order dimensions of sustainable performance (economic performance, environmental performance, and social performance) exceeded 0.50, with factor loadings above 0.60 (see Table 1), demonstrating sufficient convergent validity. We examined the discriminant validity of continuous variables on the basis of the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which mandates the square root of each construct's AVE value to be higher than its inter-constructs correlations score [79]. The results confirmed

that sustainable leadership, job crafting, and the sustainable performance dimensions satisfied this criterion, indicating adequate discriminant validity.

As lower order dimensions of sustainable performance possess an equal number of measurement items, a repeated indicator approach, deemed suitable than two-stage or hybrid methods, was employed [87]. Mode A was used for the reflective constructs, while Mode B was applied to the formative construct [79]. Pursuing the recommendations of Ringle et al. [80], the repeated indicator approach with Mode B and an inner path weighting scheme was used to assess the sustainable performance. Reliability values for the second-order construct were not reported because formative indicators do not directly reflect the latent variable [88]. However, the first-order reflective constructs of sustainable performance demonstrated acceptable indicator loadings, reliability, and validity as well.

Indicator weights, their significance, and multicollinearity were also examined. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values were used to assess multicollinearity, with values above 5.0 indicating potential issues [83]. In this study, all VIF values for the predictors were below 5.0, confirming the absence of multicollinearity. These findings validate the measurement model, establishing a robust foundation for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 1.
Loadings, reliability and validity.

Reflective construct	Items	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Sustainable leadership	SusL1	0.634	0.862	0.930	0.530
	SusL2	0.726			
	SusL3	0.777			
	SusL4	0.626			
	SusL5	0.649			
	SusL6	0.799			
	SusL7	0.810			
	SusL8	0.657			
	SusL9	0.766			
	SusL10	0.682			
	SusL11	0.723			
	SusL12	0.847			
Job crafting	JC1	0.699	0.892	0.940	0.533
	JC2	0.795			
	JC3	0.675			
	JC4	0.693			
	JC5	0.761			
	JC6	0.688			
	JC7	0.707			
	JC8	0.643			
	JC9	0.683			
	JC10	0.777			
	JC11	0.832			
	JC12	0.798			
	JC13	0.678			
	JC14	0.767			
Economic performance	ECP1	0.681	0.791	0.864	0.614
	ECP2	0.788			
	ECP3	0.838			
	ECP4	0.819			
Social performance	SOP1	0.815	0.855	0.902	0.697
	SOP2	0.810			
	SOP3	0.887			
	SOP4	0.825			
Environmental performance	ENP1	0.930	0.797	0.866	0.620
	ENP2	0.937			
	ENP3	0.900			
	ENP4	0.862			
Formative construct	Lower order dimensions	Outer weights	t-value	VIF	Mean
Sustainable performance	Economic performance	0.259	31.704	3.063	2.818
	Social performance	0.256	26.356	4.303	3.907
	Environmental performance	0.371	6.183	3.240	3.844

3.4. Structural Model Analysis

The path analysis revealed that sustainable leadership has a significant positive effect on employees' job crafting ($\beta = 0.239$, $\rho < 0.05$), and job crafting, in turn, significantly influences sustainable performance ($\beta = 0.298$, $\rho < 0.05$). Thus, both hypotheses H1 and H2 are supported in this study. Additionally, the combined path coefficient from sustainable leadership to job crafting (0.239) and from job crafting to sustainable performance (0.298) is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.071$, $\rho < 0.05$) (Table 2). This indicates that job crafting serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance. As a result, hypothesis H3 is also confirmed within this context.

Table 2.
Hypothesis testing.

Hypotheses	β	S.D	T-value	P-value	LLCI	ULCI
Sustainable leadership -> job crafting	0.239	0.060	3.983	0.000	0.121	0.357
Job crafting -> sustainable performance	0.298	0.040	7.450	0.000	0.220	0.376
Sustainable leadership> job crafting -> sustainable performance	0.071	0.035	2.029	0.043	0.002	0.140
Sustainable leadership*employees' gender>Job crafting	0.217	0.042	5.167	0.000	0.135	0.299

Hypothesis H4 posits that employees' gender significantly moderates the impact of sustainable leadership on job crafting. The interaction term (Sustainable leadership * employees' gender) significantly affects job crafting ($\beta = 0.217, \rho < 0.05$). The current empirical evidence provides evidence that the effect of sustainable leadership on job crafting is higher in the presence of female employees as compared to male ones. Therefore, it is confirmed that employees' gender works as a conditional factor in the "sustainable leadership-job crafting" relationship. Hence, hypothesis H4 is also accepted in this study.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm a significant positive impact of sustainable leadership (SL) on employees' job crafting behaviors, aligning with and extending previous research on the relationship between leadership styles and job crafting [3, 89, 90]. Our results indicate that SL significantly influences job crafting, particularly in terms of seeking resources, challenges, and reducing job demands. This positive relationship is consistent with earlier studies that highlight the role of transformational and sustainable leadership in motivating employees to engage in proactive behaviors such as job crafting [91]. For example, transformational leaders, who share certain attributes such as vision and employee well-being with sustainable leadership practices, were found positively influencing employees' orientation towards job crafting [78]. Transformational leadership practices inspire employees to take initiative, embrace innovation, and pursue opportunities for growth, which are fundamental components of job crafting. On the same line, leaders who emphasize on values-driven and supportive work culture, ignite proactive behavior, including job crafting among employees [92]. Furthermore, current empirical evidence is consistent with that offered by Bakker and Demerouti [90], where leadership styles characterized by providing autonomy, support, and resources were found positively affecting job crafting behaviors. Our study aligns with the findings of Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej [3], who examined sustainable leadership within SMEs [3]. Consistent with their research, our results indicate that when leaders prioritize sustainability, ethical practices, and long-term goals, employees are more inclined to engage in job crafting, enhancing both their well-being and organizational performance.

The results of this study demonstrate a significant positive impact of employees' job crafting on sustainable performance (SP). This result is consistent with prior research that emphasizes the role of job crafting in enhancing organizational performance, particularly in terms of long-term sustainability. Tims et al. [78] found that job crafting positively influences employees' work engagement, which in turn contributes to improved job performance. Additionally, the study by Wrzesniewski and Dutton [26] highlighted that job crafting allows employees to redefine the scope of their work, enhancing their overall productivity and aligning personal goals with organizational missions, thus driving performance outcomes. Job crafting leads to better individual job performance by increasing employees' engagement and motivation [90]. In the context of sustainable performance, this is particularly important, as sustainable organizations rely on employees' commitment to long-term goals, efficiency, and resource optimization. Employees who engage in job crafting tend to have greater control over their work processes, which can result in more efficient and innovative approaches that contribute to the sustainable performance of the organization. This aligns with our finding that job crafting behaviors directly influence sustainable performance, particularly in terms of operational efficiency, innovation, and leadership development within the organization. Moreover, this study corroborates the findings of Liao et al. [89], who examined job crafting in the context of sustainability and found that employees' proactive behavior significantly contributes to organizational sustainability by fostering innovation and improving operational practices.

The findings of this study confirm the significant mediating role of employees' job crafting in the relationship between sustainable leadership (SL) and sustainable performance (SP), extending previous research on the interplay between leadership, employee behavior, and organizational outcomes. Previous studies have emphasized the critical role of leadership in shaping employees' behaviors and outcomes [93-95]. Sustainable leadership, defined by its long-term vision, ethical focus, and commitment to sustainability, has been shown to positively influence organizational performance [5, 48]. For example, Doppelt [94] and Muenjohn and McMurray [96] highlighted that leaders who prioritize sustainability create a work environment that fosters proactive employee behaviors, such as job crafting, which, in turn, contributes to organizational performance. Tims et al. [78] identified job crafting as an important mediator between leadership and performance outcomes. Leadership styles that support autonomy, provide resources, and encourage growth enable employees to craft their jobs in ways that enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and performance. This aligns with our study, which found that sustainable leadership positively influences job crafting behaviors, and through these behaviors, leads to improved sustainable performance outcomes in areas such as operations, innovation, and planning and administration. In addition, Afsar et al. [95] demonstrated that leaders who emphasize sustainability and ethical practices foster an environment that allows employees to engage in behaviors such as job crafting, which directly enhances organizational performance.

The current study's findings, which reveal that gender significantly moderates the relationship between sustainable leadership and job crafting, build upon and extend previous research on leadership, gender dynamics, and proactive work behaviors. This outcome aligns with studies on gender-based motivational differences, particularly within the framework of expectancy theory [31]. Earlier research has highlighted that female employees often place greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships and work-life balance rather than extrinsic factors like career progression and task performance [97]. As such, sustainable leadership, which emphasizes autonomy, relatedness, and competence (key tenets of self-determination theory), is likely to have a greater impact on female employees' propensity to engage in job crafting behaviors. In contrast, male employees may be more motivated by extrinsic factors such as career advancement and task-related achievements [98], which are commonly emphasized in traditional leadership styles centered on performance and productivity. This might explain why sustainable leadership practices, which focus on long-term social responsibility and overall well-being, may not have the same immediate influence on male employees' job crafting behaviors as they do on female employees. The present study's findings echo the conclusions of Waldman and Balven [17] and Pearce et al. [20], who suggested that the leadership styles most effective in fostering employee engagement and organizational success differ based on gendered motivational drivers [17].

5. Limitations and Research Directions

The current study possesses numerous limitations, which offer horizons for future research opportunities. First, the research focused exclusively on SMEs in China, challenging conventional one-size-fits-all leadership models and highlighting the need for more nuanced, gender-sensitive leadership approaches to enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and performance in diverse organizational settings. Cultural and contextual factors unique to China may have influenced the findings. In order to assess cross-cultural applicability and adaptability, there is a need to examine the validity of the proposed framework in the Western or developed countries context.

Second, the application of a cross-sectional data collection approach hinders the full ability to explore the causal impact in the relationships examined. Therefore, scholars could employ a longitudinal approach in future studies to offer a deeper insight into the causal links on the integrated relationships of sustainable leadership practices, employees' job crafting, employees' gender, and firms' sustainable performance.

Third, the utilization of a non-probabilistic sampling approach could have caused biases which ultimately resulted in lower generalizability of current evidence. Therefore, it is recommended to adopt a probabilistic sampling approach, collect a large sample of data, and integrate data from numerous sources to ensure the soundness and reliability of the empirical results.

Fourth, by exploring the conditional role of employees' gender, the present study stresses the substantial importance of designing relevant leadership strategies to fulfill the different needs of employees in the SMEs. Anyhow, future studies are recommended to investigate the potential mechanisms underlying gender differences in relation to sustainable leadership practices. Furthermore, research should also explore the relevance of such evidence across different cultural and organizational backgrounds to enrich the insights on gender dynamics in the context of leadership effectiveness.

In conclusion, we assessed the indirect impact of sustainable leadership practices on sustainable performance through employees' job crafting, where it was evaluated as a unidimensional construct within Chinese SMEs. In the future, studies are recommended to investigate such mechanisms of different categories of job crafting, such as promotion-focused versus prevention-focused job crafting [99] or approach-oriented versus avoidance-oriented job crafting [100], by using a comparative approach, which would strengthen the understanding of their impact on sustainable performance outcomes and enhance awareness of employee behaviors in response to sustainable leadership practices.

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