

# Greenwashing in workplace: The influencing mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment and the moderating role of ethical work climate

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## Abstract

Although green strategies are advocated, not all organizations follow the environmentally friendly rules as they claim. The term of greenwashing is applied to organizations that exaggerate their efforts in protecting the environment and provide misleading information about the greenness of their service. Employees may undertake unethical pro-organizational behaviors (e.g., greenwashing), when they are equipped with less environmentally friendly products. This investigation explores the mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment affecting greenwashing behavior in the hospitality context. We use a mixed-method approach and conduct two studies by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Findings suggest that psychological contract fulfillment increases the level of greenwashing behavior, with moral disengagement playing a mediating role. Further, an ethical climate moderates the relation between psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement; specifically, when employees work in a team with a high-level ethical climate, the positive relation between psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement is weakened. This research deepens the existing insight into the mechanism of influencing service workers' greenwashing behaviors.

## Keywords

ethical work climate, greenwashing, moral disengagement, psychological contract fulfillment

## Introduction

There has been a growing trend within organizations to produce environmentally friendly products (Wang & Yuan, 2020). Studies show that customers prefer products perceived as socially responsible and display higher willingness-to-pay on eco-products (Nimri et al., 2020). Although with a stereotype of greenness tag, the greenhouse effect and potential pollutions by tourism and the hospitality industry (Pang et al., 2013), and its feature of being energy and water-intensive (Han et al., 2018), are increasingly noticed. The derived sewage, along with solid waste, air pollution, and energy emissions, is considered a serious environmental threat (Chan et al., 2009). "Green consciousness" is emphasized in the operation, because of the public's concerns about environmental protection in the hospitality industry (Yi et al., 2018).

Many green marketing strategies, although proposed, are not realistically undertaken. Practitioners often exaggerate their efforts in environmental protection or just claim to be environmentally friendly without implementing any green strategies (Weisstein et al., 2014). Such a practice is known as greenwashing. Research on service workers' greenwashing behavior in the hospitality industry is still rare, although it has been found that workers may adopt greenwashing behaviors when they are equipped with products that are not environmentally friendly (Guler & Yukselen, 2010), such as those making misleading claims about using environmentally friendly materials (Pizam, 2009). Employees who experience psychological contract fulfillment have been found to have an increase in perceived obligations to their employers, and, in extreme cases, employees may seek to repay their employers by engaging in

pro-organizational behavior (Fleischman et al., 2019). The work climate at the team level may also influence employee performance as team norms and persuasive environmental stimuli could have an impact on individual behavior (Mohammed & Angell, 2003). Because front-line employees are directly supervised by team leaders, their behavior should be discussed in the team context.

To address the gaps in the research, we developed a theoretical model linking psychological contract fulfillment to the greenwashing behavior of service workers. We use mixed methods by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in the hospitality context to examine the model. The main reasons for using a mixed approach are twofold: First, greenwashing is still a relatively new topic in hospitality research, with few relevant achievements—at present, there is a lack of qualitative research to explore greenwashing behavior. Second, the mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment affecting greenwashing behavior is complicated. A mixed-method approach not only examines the links between concepts using quantitative methods but, through the use of qualitative research, can also examine the real-world thoughts of hotel employees on greenwashing behaviors. We followed the steps of conducting a scholarly mixed methods study developed by Creswell (2013) and conducted online structured interviews to verify the accuracy of the research results. Structured interviews are used as a supplementary source to better understand the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment, moral disengagement, and greenwashing.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, previous research paid little attention to service workers' greenwashing behavior, although this practice has become common in the hospitality industry. This study is among the earliest attempts to analyze the social and psychological processes of engagement in unethical, pro-organizational behaviors (e.g., greenwashing behaviors). Second, service workers' attitudes towards ecological behaviors can be reshaped by the environment (Chan et al., 2017). We introduce the contextually-driven predictor of psychological contract fulfillment that affects greenwashing behaviors, which is rarely mentioned in hospitality research. Third, we use a mixed-method approach to better understand the influencing mechanism of how psychological contract fulfillment affects greenwashing behaviors.

## **Literature and Hypotheses**

### ***Greenwashing in Management***

Current research on greenwashing behaviors is mainly about corporate strategy and marketing. Cherry (2013) pointed out that since greenwashing involves deception and hypocrisy, the actual harm caused by greenwashing would be stronger;

thus, greenwashing may be one of the most serious challenges to realizing social responsibility in organizations. Rahman et al. (2015) suggested that greenwashing behavior arouses the suspicion of consumers, which in turn generates a negative impact on their willingness to participate in revisit intention.

Among the few studies discussing greenwashing behaviors from the perspective of employees, greenwashing is shown to negatively impact green behavior, wherein employees' value orientation is placed at stake (Tahir et al., 2020). This paper focuses on the greenwashing behavior of service workers and explores the mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment affecting greenwashing behavior based on the following three aspects:

First, fulfillment by employers can be associated with increased conscientiousness in employee obligations to offer something in return (Huang et al., 2017). If managements link greenwashing with the collective interest, service workers may engage in greenwashing to repay employers during the delivery of services, and in so doing, show less concern for the interest of the public or customers.

Second, service workers' moral identity is an important factor (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2021) as it plays a regulating role in moral judgment and behavior (Reed et al., 2007). People with strong moral identities tend to have stronger moral principles and thus are less likely to be detached from themselves when evaluating moral behavior (Shu et al., 2011). Moral identity constitutes an important identity-related psychological mechanism that inhibits moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008), which is conducive to buffering the influence of moral disengagement (Gino et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2016). According to moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1986), psychological contract fulfillment can activate the moral disengagement process, which states that showing less concern for the public interest is not viewed as immoral, allowing service workers to cognitively reframe their behavior as a justifiable form of retribution towards employers (He & Harris, 2014; Huang et al., 2017). Hence, we propose that the moral disengagement mechanism is the psychological pathway through which psychological contract fulfillment can translate into an increase in greenwashing behavior.

Third, the ethical work climate at the team level can largely affect individuals' ethical or unethical behaviors. A low-level ethical work climate is more likely to strengthen the activation process on moral disengagement since such situations are usually a signal that engaging in moral disengagement is acceptable, thereby boosting the greenwashing behaviors of service workers. However, previous studies have largely ignored the possible moderating effect of the ethical work climate when discussing individuals' greenwashing behaviors.

## ***Psychological Contract Fulfillment and Greenwashing***

Employees' greenwashing behaviors reflect their contextual performance which can be defined as pro-organizational behavior and is positively related to organizational performance (Rahman et al., 2015). Since contextual performance is different from daily routine, it depends heavily on individuals' psychological motivations (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002). Psychological contract fulfillment has been found to be related to employees' involvement in unethical but pro-organizational behaviors (Ni & Li, 2017). Here, a psychological contract is an employment exchange relationship, which refers to an agreement on mutual obligations between employees and organizations (Rousseau, 1990). Being one of the key components of psychological contract, job participation describes the psychological state of employees in organizations (Turnley et al., 2003), which usually includes participation in decision-making, management, supervision, and revenue. When the psychological contract is fulfilled, employees are more likely to protect the profits of their organization and are thus more likely to be involved in pro-organizational behaviors, even if unethical (e.g., destroying incriminating documents to maintain the organization's reputation or delivering false images to the public; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Indirect evidence showed that the affective organizational commitment derived from the fulfillment of the psychological contract was positively correlated with unethical pro-organizational behaviors such as greenwashing (Matherne & Litchfield, 2012). The highly psychologically entitled employees would be more likely to undertake unethical behavior, especially in cases of organizational identification (Wang et al., 2021). In general, psychological contract fulfillment motivates employees to pursue employers' goals at the cost of sacrificing moral rules and the interests of other stakeholders (Umphress et al., 2010). Furthermore, based on the principle of reciprocity, employees can adjust their unethical behavior to show their work performance in a more positive light (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Therefore, when employees realize their psychological contracts, they tend to commit moral violations and engage in unethical behavior such as greenwashing.

In the hospitality context, relevant research has proposed that psychological contract fulfillment is associated with employees' behavior (Wu & Chen, 2015). When service workers' psychological contracts are fulfilled, they tend to have more loyalty to their employer and are more likely to become involved in greenwashing behavior. Going beyond previous studies that have discussed the unethical behavior of employees caused by psychological contract fulfillment, we also establish the linkage between the psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing behaviors of service workers and propose:

H1 Psychological contract fulfillment will have a positive relationship with the greenwashing behavior of service workers.

## ***The Mediating Effect of Moral Disengagement***

Moral disengagement theory suggests that psychological contract fulfillment relates to the moral disengagement process, which can be the mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment affecting greenwashing behavior in the hospitality context. Individuals regulate their behavior according to internal standards to avoid doing something wrong (Li et al., 2020); however, this process of self-regulation can be overridden by moral disengagement, whereby individuals are freed from moral self-restraint when considering or performing immoral activities (Bandura et al., 2001). Based on the studies of Bandura (1986; 2002), the cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement include the following aspects: (1) moral defense, euphemism, and favorable comparison, which means individuals would reconstruct the immoral process and thus enhance the moral receptivity; (2) displacement of responsibility, responsibility diffusion, and consequence distortion, meaning individuals would misconstrue or minimize the negative outcomes of unethical behaviors; and (3) dehumanization and attribution, referring to the process of moral disengagement by degrading the victim's immoral behavior. Based on moral disengagement theory, when employees engage in unethical behavior, they might view such behavior as necessary to defend other things they care about, or might believe these actions are not serious because their companions also take part in such unethical behavior. When other team members also engage in such behavior, they might consider their behavior to be contributing only a small part, and may not feel the need to take responsibility for the destructive behavior of the team.

We propose that psychological contract fulfillment allows service workers to undergo moral disengagement more easily, which brings about a boost of pro-organizational behavior in turn. Service workers who are highly fulfilled by the psychological contract are less likely to feel guilt when they perceive that they have an obligation to create value for others (Blau, 1964; Huang et al., 2017). Huang et al. (2017) argued that low psychological contract fulfillment (e.g., job insecurity) sparks employees' deviant behavior through the mechanism of moral disengagement. Although the process of self-regulation could impede employees' consideration of customers' interests, the fulfillment of psychological contracts may activate the moral disengagement mechanism, whereby they are free from any sense of guilt when contemplating such greenwashing behavior. Instead, they are likely to perceive that they should not be blamed for any loss of customer interest due to their inappropriate behavior. Psychological contract fulfillment enhances the moral disengagement of employees (Huang et al., 2017) and positively

relates to employees' unethical behaviors (Wang et al., 2021). On this basis, we further establish the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment, moral disengagement, and greenwashing behavior. We hypothesize that employees whose psychological contracts are fulfilled are more likely to succumb to moral disengagement when providing services, which contributes to their greenwashing behavior.

H2 Moral disengagement will mediate the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and the greenwashing behavior of service workers.

### *The Moderating Role of the Ethical Work Climate*

The ethical work climate refers to the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures linked to ethical content (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Greenwashing, as an unethical pro-organizational behavior, is correlated to the ethical climate within the workgroup. We propose that the team-level ethical work climate plays a crucial role in employee performance. Individuals are nested within teams or workgroups (Mathieu et al., 2007) and teams are one of the main levels of analysis when studying organizational issues (Ashkanasy et al., 2000). The team-level climate, serving as a more proximal environment, generates a more direct effect on employees' behavior. Brass et al. (1998) have proposed that with the increase of network scale, groups are more likely to be divided into sub-groups; as a result, it is difficult for large groups to maintain universal ethical standards among small groups. Hence, the ethical work climate at the team level is more inclined to form a unified norm for employees compared to the organizational level, especially when employees encounter unethical issues (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021). On this basis, we consider the moderating effect of the ethical work climate at the team level.

A team with a high-level ethical work climate means that its members collectively accept responsibility for the welfare of others and have collective virtues, such as self-control, which is associated with consistently engaging in ethical acts, despite other imperatives (Macklin et al., 2014). Within such a team, employees experiencing psychological contract fulfillment tend to morally disengage to repay their employer; however, they perceive that they are expected to live up to moral commitments from observing how ethical situations have been handled by other team members (Macklin et al., 2014). Consequently, they restrain their tendency toward moral disengagement. In contrast, the overall sense of moral responsibility or obligations may be weakened in a low-level ethical work climate. Team members may discontinue implementing the correct course of ethical action as appropriate (Arnaud, 2010; Macklin et al., 2014). Employees working within such a team may learn from others and perceive that they are permitted to relax moral requirements; as a result,

they have more opportunities to experience intensive deactivation of the self-regulation process (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 2002). Thus, given the circumstances, it is easier to morally disengage for those suffering from psychological contract fulfillment. In other words, this would amplify the level to which psychological contract fulfillment translates into moral disengagement. Hence, we propose

H3 Ethical work climate will moderate the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement such that the positive relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement is weaker when the ethical work climate is high (vs. low).

Previous studies have paid less attention to employees' greenwashing behavior with multi-level analysis. Since there are various teams in an organization, the ethical climate of each team is bound to be different (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021). Thus, we investigate the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing behavior at different levels. At the individual level, we discuss the mediation effect of moral disengagement on the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing behavior. At the team level, we introduce the ethical work climate into the model to further study the moderating effect of the ethical climate within a team on the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment, moral disengagement, and greenwashing behavior. To be specific, when the ethical work climate is low level, the psychological contract fulfillment evokes the cognitive process of moral disengagement much more easily, boosting the development of high-level greenwashing behavior in employees. Conversely, when employees stay on teams that have a high-level ethical work climate, the activation process of moral disengagement by psychological contract fulfillment may be hindered, which will avoid greenwashing behaviors of employees to some extent. In other words, the indirect relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing behavior through moral disengagement is expected to be conditioned by the ethical work climate. Hence, we put forward

H4 The indirect relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing behavior through moral disengagement will be moderated by the ethical work climate such that the indirect relationship is weaker when the ethical work climate is high (vs. low).

## **Study I—Quantitative Analysis**

### *Method*

**Sample and procedure.** Study 1 was conducted using a questionnaire survey. Participants were frontline employees from



25 hotels in Yunnan Province, China. The questionnaires were sent to supervisors first; those who agreed to participate in the investigation ( $N = 136$ ) distributed the questionnaires to 1475 frontline employees. A supervisor and their immediate subordinates (i.e., frontline employees) constituted a team to complete work duties. The questionnaires were filled out during their working hours and collected on-site as soon as they were completed. In the process of collecting questionnaires, anonymous questionnaires were used and respondents were informed that all questionnaires were only used for research and would not reveal any personal information. During the survey, both researchers and employees wore a face mask to comply with COVID-19 regulations, which may also have enhanced the perceived anonymity, and made employees feel freer to fill in the questionnaires, thus contributing to avoiding potential social desirability bias.

We conducted the survey through a time-lagged design, and the data were collected over three periods to reduce common method bias. For Period 1, measures of psychological contract fulfillment and ethical work climate were completed by frontline employees. Demographic information was also provided. For Period 2, the measure of moral disengagement was completed by frontline employees. For Period 3, the measure of greenwashing was completed by frontline employees. Ultimately we had 803 valid questionnaires (valid response rate = 54.24%) and estimated the hypothesized multi-level relationships by using Mplus 7.0. Among the valid respondents, 67.87% of respondents were female, and 58.41% of respondents had organization tenure of no more than 1 year (12 months). Of these, 84.18% had middle school/technical secondary school education or below, 43.34% worked in a team with smaller than five people, and 43.34% had a monthly income ranging from USD 450-520.

**Measure.** We measured all the constructs in the conceptual model based on relevant studies. The items were translated from English to Chinese through the back-translation process. The specific process is that one of the authors translates the English scale into Chinese, and the other author translates the Chinese into English again, and then they compare the translated English scale with the original English scale, and the two authors discuss and revise it together, and reach an agreement in the end. The final measurement scale was conducted in Chinese form. The measures of selected variables are listed as follows:

**Psychological contract fulfillment.** This was measured by a five-item scale developed by Wanous, et al. (1997). The questions mainly focus on the daily job, career development, working atmosphere, job specification, rewards, and so on. Respondents rated the answers from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this scale was 0.91.

**Moral disengagement.** This was measured by an eight-item scale adapted from Moore et al. (2012). The items were employed to describe the work climate. For instance, "Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it" and "Taking something without the coworker's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it" (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.92$ .

**Greenwashing.** This was measured by a three-item scale used by Ong et al. (2018). The representative item is shown as "I help my organization to sell itself as socially responsible although it has a poor social and environmental performance" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

**Ethical work climate.** This was measured by a six-item scale developed by Arnaud (2010). It is applied to evaluate self-control norms and responsibility during the ethical process (e.g., "People here have the confidence to make the right choice when trapped in a moral dilemma," "No matter how many times people here are irritated, they will always be held accountable for what they do." 1 = mostly false, 5 = completely true). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

**Control variables.** The demographic information might influence service workers' greenwashing behaviors. Based on previous studies, we selected gender, wage, educational level, and organizational tenure as control variables. Specifically, as suggested by Kennedy et al. (2017), women's stronger moral identity inhibits unethical behavior compared to men's. Grosch et al. (2020) have confirmed that wages affect unethical behavior, and unethical organizational behavior is generally higher among low-income people. Ning et al. (2017) have pointed out that educational level affects employees' unethical behavior as well. Moreover, Richardson et al. (2009) have emphasized that organizational tenure is an important factor that determines whether individuals engage in (un)ethical behaviors.

**Confirmatory factor analysis.** We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to test the convergence validity and discriminative validity. The results show that the standard factor loadings of indicators were significant and all above 0.60, showing that each indicator corresponded well with the latent variables, and the convergence validity of the constructs met the acceptable standards (e.g., Yuan et al., 2018a). On this basis, we further tested the measurement models of selected factors. The results are listed in Table 1 (Panel A). The values of RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI in the baseline four-factor model are 0.06, 0.03, 0.94, and 0.93, respectively, showing a good fit with the model. We also tested the three-factor model, in which psychological contract fulfillment and ethical work climate at the first

**Table I.** Descriptive Statistics of the Model.

Panel A: Comparison of Measurement Models								
Model	Description	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
The baseline four-factor model	PCF, MD, EWC, GW	864.96	203		.06	.03	.94	.93
The three-factor model	PCF and EWC were combined into one factor	3248.41	207	2383.45**	.14	.14	.73	.70
The one-factor model	PCF, MD, EWC, and GW were combined into one factor	7691.65	212	6826.69**	.21	.22	.34	.28

Panel B: Means, Standard Deviation (*SD*), and Bivariate Correlations Among Variables

Variable	Individual Level		Team Level							
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.42	0.49	—							
2. Pay	2.61	0.84	-.01	—						
3. Education	1.22	0.55	-.17**	-.01	—					
4. Tenure (month)	15.21	12.88	.03	.01	-.29**	—				
5. Psychological contract fulfillment	4.40	1.04	.06	.05	-.02	.06	(.91)			
6. Moral disengagement	4.93	0.78	-.02	-.03	.03	-.02	.22**	(.92)		
7. Greenwashing	4.50	0.69	-.05	-.04	-.04	.02	.11**	.14**	(.90)	
8. Ethical work climate	3.17							-.23**	-.03	(.89)

Note. In Panel A, PCF = psychological contract fulfillment; MD = moral disengagement; EWC = ethical work climate; GW = greenwashing; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized residual mean root; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = non-normed fit index (NNFI).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , and the significance levels reflect the two-tailed test. In Panel B,  $n = 803$  for individual-level variables;  $n = 136$  for team-level variables. Gender is coded as 1 for male and 0 for female. Internal consistency coefficients, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  are reported in the parentheses on the diagonal.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  and the significance levels reflect the two-tailed test. We are requested to keep two decimal places according to the journal guidelines.

stage were combined into one factor. As shown in Table 1 (Panel A), the fitting degree of this three-factor model was not good enough, with RMSEA = 0.14, SRMR = 0.14, CFI = 0.73, and TLI = 0.70. Furthermore, we applied the one-factor model by combining all the constructs (i.e., psychological contract fulfillment, ethical work climate, moral disengagement, and greenwashing) into one factor. The fit of this model is also much lower than the baseline model. According to the comparison of measurement models, we believe that the constructs in our study have good discriminant validity.

**Aggregation tests.** Since the ethical work climate is a team-level variable, we further conducted the data aggregation (Palacios-Marqué et al., 2016). In line with the usual practice of constructing a team-level variable (e.g., Li & Yuan, 2017), team members' scores for ethical work climate are averaged to the team level, resulting in a single score for each team. The aggregation test results show a consistency index with the group (median  $r_{wg(j)}$  = 0.93, ranging from .88 to .99), indicating that members of the same team share a common view of ethical work; additionally, the values of intraclass correlations (ICC(1) = 0.16, ICC(2) = 0.53) are also acceptable and the results of one-way ANOVA ( $F(135, 667) = 2.11, p < .01$ ) are significant, indicating that variations of the perceived ethical work climate exist among different teams. Thus, it is reasonable to aggregate the ethical work climate to the team level using individual scores.

## Findings of Study 1

We employed Mplus (Version 7.0) and SPSS (Version 16.0) to estimate the cross-level moderated mediation model. Table 1 (Panel B) shows the descriptive statistics of selected variables and bivariate correlations between variables. It shows that psychological contract fulfillment is positively correlated with moral disengagement and greenwashing ( $r = 0.22$  and  $0.11, p < .01$ , respectively) and moral disengagement is positively correlated with greenwashing ( $r = 0.14, p < .01$ ).

Table 2 (Panels A and B) present results of the hierarchical multiple regressions. We first tested the effect of psychological contract fulfillment on moral disengagement, and the interaction between psychological contract fulfillment and ethical work climate on moral disengagement. We then examined the effects of psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement on greenwashing. According to the results in Table 2 (Panel B), psychological contract fulfillment has a significantly positive impact on greenwashing and the coefficients are both significant at a 5% level in Steps 2 and 3, which verifies H1. Moreover, psychological contract fulfillment is positively related to moral disengagement in Table 2 (Panel A;  $b = 0.17, p < .01$  in Step 2) and moral disengagement is shown to be positively correlated with greenwashing in Table 2 (Panel B;  $b = 0.11, p < .01$  in Step 3).

Meanwhile, we implement 20,000 Monte Carlo simulations by parametric bootstrap method, and the results manifest that psychological contract fulfillment's indirect effect on greenwashing through moral disengagement was significant (indirect effect = 0.02, 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI<sup>1</sup> [0.005, 0.033]). Therefore, H2 is supported.

We further tested the cross-level interactions between psychological contract fulfillment and ethical work climate. The results in Table 2 (Panel A) demonstrate the negative moderating effect of the ethical work climate on the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement ( $b = -0.13, p < .05$  in Step 3). Moreover, we examined the effects of ethical work climate at different levels. The findings listed in Table 2 (Panel C) suggest that, when ethical work climate is at a high level, the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and moral disengagement is weakened. Thus, the ethical work climate is playing a moderating role, and H3 is supported. Table 2 (Panel C) also shows the indirect relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing through moral disengagement at different levels of ethical work climate. The results indicate that the indirect effect on greenwashing through moral disengagement is significantly weaker with a high-level (+1 *SD*) ethical work climate (*Coef.* = 0.01) than with a low-level (-1 *SD*) ethical work climate (*Coef.* = 0.02). Hence, the indirect relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing behavior through moral disengagement is moderated by the ethical work climate, and H4 is verified.

## Study 2—Qualitative Analysis

We developed an interview outline with understandable words (i.e., translate professional academic research words into daily language that interviewees easily understand) addressing the selected variables in the model, and interviewed employees to figure out the various relationships using the qualitative method. Study 2 displays the process of the qualitative analysis. Through a semi-structured method, we interviewed service workers in the hospitality sector and applied thematic analysis.

### Participants

We conducted both online and offline interviews. The online interviews were conducted through WeChat voice phone. The offline interviews were conducted face-to-face and out of the workplace, and both researchers and interviewees wore face masks during the interview to comply with epidemic prevention stipulations, which may also have strengthened perceived anonymity, making participants feel freer to say what they wanted to say, and this helped to relieve potential concern about social desirability bias. This study interviewed 18 employees in the hospitality industry, covering the housekeeping department, food and beverage department,

**Table 2.** Regression Results

Variable	Panel A: Dependent Variable: Moral Disengagement (X→M)		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Individual-level variables			
Gender	.01(.06)	-.04(.06)	-.03(.06)
Pay	-.02(.04)	-.04(.04)	-.04(.04)
Education	.01(.07)	.02(.07)	.02(.07)
Tenure	-.00(.00)	-.00(.00)	-.00(.00)
Psychological contract fulfillment		.17** (.02)	.17** (.02)
Team-level variables			
Ethical work climate			.37(.27)
Cross-level interactions			
Psychological contract fulfillment × ethical work climate			-.13*(.06)

Variable	Panel B: Dependent Variable: Greenwashing (X→M→Y)		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender	.08(.06)	.09(.06)	.08(.06)
Pay	.03(.04)	.04(.04)	.03(.04)
Education	.06(.05)	.06(.05)	.06(.05)
Tenure	.00(.00)	.00(.00)	.00(.00)
Psychological contract fulfillment		.07* (.03)	.09*(.03)
Moral disengagement			.11**(.04)

Variable	Panel C: The Mediation Effect of Moral Disengagement					
	P <sub>MX</sub>		P <sub>YM</sub>		Indirect Effect. P <sub>MX</sub> P <sub>YM</sub>	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Zero ethical work climate	.17**	.02	.11**	.04	.02	[.01, .03]
High ethical work climate (+1 SD)	.11**	.03	.11**	.04	.01	[.002, .02]
Low ethical work climate (-1 SD)	.22**	.03	.11**	.04	.02	[.01, .04]
High- and low-level difference z	-.10*	.05	-.00	.00	-.01	[-.02, -.002]

Note. In Panels A and B,  $n = 803$ . Values are unstandardized regression coefficients; standard error estimates are in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  and the significance levels reflect the two-tailed test.

In Panel C,  $n = 803$ . Values are unstandardized regression coefficients.  $P_{MX}$  is the path from psychological contract fulfillment to moral disengagement;  $P_{YM}$  is the path from moral disengagement to greenwashing; 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI estimates are in brackets; if the CI does not include 0, the indirect relationship is significant (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  and the significance levels reflect the two-tailed test. We are requested to keep two decimal places according to the journal guidelines.

front office department, security department, human resources department, and others (see supplementary file).

## Procedure

This study used a semi-structured interview schedule. Representative questions included: “How satisfied are you with the benefits and welfare?” “What kind of greenwashing behavior exists in the place you work for?” “What do you think of the hotel's greenwashing behavior?” “Have you ever done greenwashing behavior? What do you think about that?” and so on. The interview comprised seven main questions, each with two or three sub-questions. During the interview, it was difficult for the service workers to talk about their greenwashing behaviors in the hotel. Hence, the researchers need to euphemistically ask questions to make

the interviewees comfortable with telling the truth. After 16 interviews, the data generated had reached saturation, and nothing new was generated. To ensure robustness, we added another two interviewees to test the saturation of qualitative materials.

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the interview data. Thematic analysis mainly includes the following six steps: (1) become familiar with the transcript of the interview; (2) generate the initial code (in this stage, according to the requirements of open coding, the original transcribed text is sorted out sentence by sentence, the original representative statements are extracted, and free coding is established); (3) determine the basic theme (group related proprietary codes into basic topics); (4) check the topic (examine data and nodes and group them into specific topics); (5) define and name the topic; (6) write analysis content.



The reliability test was carried out using a critical analysis method (which tests the degree of reliability by comparing the degree of mutual agreement between different judges). When the mutual agreement ratio of different researchers on the topic exceeds 80%, the evaluation result is considered acceptable. In this study, two researchers first extracted the topic from the interview data in turn and then compared the degree of mutual agreement to test the reliability. Results showed that the reliability of subject extraction is more than 80%, indicating that subject extraction has good reliability and validity.

## Results

After the analysis, we found that all interviewees mentioned greenwashing. Some 16 said that it was acceptable for them to undertake greenwashing for the benefit of hotel, and only 2 said that they would not violate their moral code under any circumstance. We completed an in-depth analysis of the interview content of the remaining 16 interviewees and obtained the results outlined below.

We classified the extracted themes into three categories (seven themes): (1) payment and welfare; (2) promotion and growth opportunities; and (3) belongingness, displacement of responsibility, moral justification, advantageous comparison, and ethical climate (Table 3).

Based on the interviews, the themes in the psychological contract fulfillment category (payment and welfare, promotion and growth opportunities, and belongingness) have a significant impact on the greenwashing behavior. Employees may form a strong sense of responsibility and obligation—and work harder and take the initiative to safeguard the interests of the organization—when they feel that the contractual commitment between them and the organization has been fulfilled (e.g., payment and benefits meet expectations). When they realize that the greenwashing is beneficial to the organization, they are more likely to undertake it. As one interviewee said,

I was given good benefits, including five social insurance and a housing accumulation fund, vacation, and other employee benefits, as well as a year-end bonus. I'm quite satisfied with my current package. I am an employee of the hotel, I work here, it is part of my job to maintain the image of the hotel. Our hotel advocates green and environmental protection, but, as you know, there will always be various situations in daily management. Sometimes, I will do something, for example, claim the use of renewable materials, but sometimes we have to use less environmentally friendly materials to save costs. (W3)

Promotion and growth opportunities also have a crucial impact on the greenwashing behavior of service workers. When employees realize that a promotion or personal development opportunities will become available to them by

undertaking behaviors conducive to the organization, these behaviors are then considered an important way to improve their career by gaining the appreciation of their managers, leading to a higher position.

Another interviewee said, “We all start from the grass-roots level, which is very hard. Generally, the promotion is a marathon and we have to let the leaders see what you have done and what you have contributed to the hotel. It could be a promotion, or you never get it.” (W9). When asked if they had ever done greenwashing, for this reason, an interviewee responded,

It's hard to say. Sometimes I can't help it. In order to get promoted, I would also tell customers that this is a green organization for the sake of the hotel, and we follow environmental protection standards and use environmentally friendly and energy-saving products, but in fact, sometimes we don't really do it. (W9)

When service workers have a sense of belonging to the organization, their loyalty is significantly heightened, and they are more likely to perform greenwashing behaviors. As employees belong to “a community of shared future,” greenwashing behavior is a common and acceptable undertaking for the interest of organization. A respondent said,

I have been working in this hotel for 8 years, which is also my first job. I have a strong attachment to here, and I am familiar with all aspects of it. I really feel I belong to here. Of course, to be honest, I do some greenwashing. (W17)

Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and the unethical, pro-organizational behavior of service workers. The results indicate that displacement of responsibility, moral justification, and advantageous comparison can mediate the greenwashing behavior of service workers. In terms of displacement of responsibility, employees shirk their responsibilities and attribute their actions to others after committing greenwashing behavior. For example, service workers will downplay their greenwashing behavior to customers, doubting, based on their actions, that these customers are really environmentalists. For example, when a service worker told a guest that the water recycling system is used and that part of the electricity is supplied by solar equipment (which is not actually used), the staff member did not feel that they were unethical, but that the guest deserved it. One interviewer explained,

They are just formal environmentalists, but they don't behave in a green way themselves. I often see some guests littering. For example, when I was cleaning up my room yesterday, I often saw rooms in a mess after check out. I don't think it's a big deal if I tell them that the water we use here is discharged after sewage treatment. (W18)

Moral justification is also reflected in this interview. Service workers defend their behavior by changing their interpretation or evaluation of greenwashing behavior. Many employees believe that their greenwashing behavior is

**Table 3.** Thematic Analysis.

Theme	Category	Description	Freq.
Payment and welfare	Psychological contract fulfillment	When service workers' pay and welfare meet expectations, they are more likely to engage in greenwashing behavior.	13/16
Promotion and growth opportunities		The more promotion and growth opportunities a hotel offers, the more likely it is that hotel employees will engage in greenwashing behavior.	11/16
Belongingness		Once service workers develop a sense of belonging to the hotel, they are more likely to engage in greenwashing.	8/16
Displacement of responsibility	Moral disengagement	Service workers attribute their greenwashing behavior to customers' impolite or unethical behavior.	12/16
Moral justification		Service workers believe that their greenwashing behavior is to seek benefits for the hotel and thus reduce their own moral condemnation.	9/16
Advantageous comparison	Ethical work climate	The service workers believe that their greenwashing behavior did not cause great harm.	10/16
High sense of morality and ethics		The higher the ethical level of the internal working environment, the less greenwashing behavior of the staff.	14/16

protecting the profits or maintaining the image and reputation of the organization. Another interviewee explained his greenwashing behavior by stating,

It is hard to tell what's right, from the heart. I don't think I do anything wrong. The fundamental purpose of [the] hotel is making profit, and this is understandable. But, you know, a comprehensive green hotel costs a lot, and the hotel should at least survive in the competition, and we have to consider doing something appearing green. (W11)

In addition, advantageous comparison also affects the green-bleaching behavior of service workers. Service workers compare the greenwashing behavior with other harmful things and then show that the greenwashing behavior does not result in great harm. Some employees said that their greenwashing behavior did not have fatal consequences, and, compared with some food safety problems in the catering industry, or other criminal incidents, the harm of greenwashing behavior is minimal, to the point that it can be ignored.

An ethical work climate also showed a moderating effect in the interviews. When we asked about the ethical climate of their hotel, hotel workers who rated it high were less likely to practice greenwashing than those who rated it low. Therefore, we have reason to believe that the hotel can give its employees a high sense of moral responsibility by creating a moral atmosphere, thus reducing greenwashing behavior. Although some interviewees expressed it in an obscure way, it could still be seen, from the conversation, that an ethical work climate significantly influenced their greenwashing behavior. As one interviewee said,

We are told to treat guests with integrity and tell the truth. When the guests ask us whether we use recyclable materials and [a] water recycling system, I will tell the truth, as the hotel requires

us to be honest and I work in accordance with the rules and regulations. You often work with your colleagues, and cheating on customers will be looked down upon by them. (W14)

Accordingly, the research hypotheses are also confirmed in Study 2.

## Discussion and Conclusions

### Discussion

Our study investigates the mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment affecting greenwashing behavior in the hospitality context. The quantitative studies suggest that the experience of psychological contract fulfillment makes workers more likely to undertake moral disengagement in service provisions, which, in turn, increases the level of greenwashing. Thus, moral disengagement plays a mediating role in the relationship between psychological contract and greenwashing behavior; moreover, service workers were found to use the psychological mechanism of moral disengagement to lessen their immorality concerning greenwashing behavior after fulfilling their psychological contract. In addition, such a mediation process is weakened for employees who work on a team with a high-level ethical climate. Hence, there is a moderated mediation mechanism between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing; further, a high level of ethical climate within the hotel reduces the chance of service workers engaging in greenwashing behavior. Qualitative research further discusses the mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment affecting greenwashing behavior in detail. Specifically, payment and welfare, promotion and growth opportunities, and belongingness in the psychological contract category have significant impacts on the greenwashing behavior of hotel

employees. The category of moral disengagement, including displacement of responsibility, moral justification, and advantageous comparison, has shown mediating effects. The findings of the qualitative analysis are important supplements to the quantitative analysis, and expand the application of mixed methods in greenwashing behavior research.

Both quantitative and qualitative studies suggest that employees are more likely to become involved in greenwashing when the psychological contract is fulfilled, which is consistent with previous studies (Matherne & Litchfield, 2012). Moreover, we introduced the mediating mechanism of moral disengagement to explain the impact of psychological contracts on greenwashing behavior. Although some studies have suggested that people engage in unethical behaviors, mainly through the application of moral disengagement strategies or rationalizing bad behavior at work (Barsky, 2011), similar research on service workers' moral disengagement is rarely addressed in the hospitality context. Results have found that service workers used the psychological mechanism of moral disengagement to relieve their immorality of engaging in greenwashing behavior after their psychological contract was fulfilled, a finding that has advanced current hospitality research. Prior studies have also shown that people's career behavior is susceptible to ambient environments (Yuan & Li, 2020). Our study also analyzed the moderating effect of the moral climate in the work environment. Chen et al. (2019) indicated that organizational ethical climate plays a moderating role in the relationship between moral disengagement and information security policy violation intention. Other studies also point out that the higher the organizational moral climate, the less likely it is to have the moral disengagement of reward-based negative word-of-mouth (Ning & Zhao, 2017). Our study focused on the interactive process within groups and investigated the ethical work climate at the team level. The findings suggest that a greater ethical climate in a team reduces the chance of service workers engaging in greenwashing behavior, which advances the existing research from the perspective of the team level.

### *Theoretical and Practical Implications*

Our study focuses on greenwashing behavior, which is less of a concern in tourism and hospitality research at present. In general, this study considers the process of the ethical work climate and moral disengagement, and deepens the understanding of the mechanism whereby psychological contract fulfillment affects greenwashing behavior in the reception environment, providing new evidence for current theoretical and empirical research. Specifically, this study enriches research in several ways. First, we analyzed the influencing mechanism of psychological contract fulfillment on service workers' greenwashing behavior. Findings suggest that employees' social and psychological processes of engagement in unethical, pro-organizational behaviors can be reshaped by the environment. Previous studies have

talked about the relation between psychological contract fulfillment and the pro-organizational unethical behaviors (e.g., greenwashing; Matherne & Litchfield, 2012; Wang et al., 2021), without discussing inner psychological process and the impact of team-level stimuli where employees work. This study describes the psychological process of service workers in greenwashing, and found that an ethical work climate has a certain regulating effect within the mechanism, which enriches the moral analysis of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Second, we introduced the mediating mechanism of moral disengagement to better understand the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and employees' greenwashing behaviors. Results are consistent with previous studies showing that psychological contract performance can enhance employees' moral disengagement (Huang et al., 2017), and positively correlates with employees' unethical behaviors (Wang et al., 2021). Based on moral disengagement theory, the moral process of greenwashing behavior is explained, which enriches investigations of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Third, our research further investigated the moderating effect of the ethical work climate at the team-level. The results show that a team with a higher ethical work climate reduces the greenwashing behavior of employees, revealing that employees' greenwashing behavior changes with the ethical work climate. It is worth mentioning that previous studies have mainly focused on employees' pro-organizational immoral behavior at either the individual level or the organizational level (Ni & Li, 2017; Cabana & Kaptein, 2021), whereas our study pays attention to the interactive process of employees' greenwashing behavior at the team level, which enriches the perspective of previous studies and is also an important supplement to the theoretical framework of unethical behavior.

This study also provides insight into environmentally friendly and sustainable management. On the one hand, greenwashing is common in the hospitality industry. Managements should abide by business ethics, provide real environmentally friendly products, and turn their organizations towards real greenness. Green management should be put into practice, rather than restricted to being a marketing concept. In this way, organizations can elevate the technical level of their operations (Yuan et al., 2018b), which can facilitate a green strategy. Moreover, organizations should update their facilities in strict accordance with greenness ethics. Such efforts can build a credible image.

On the other hand, while meeting the psychological contract of service workers, managers should pay attention to the cultivation of employees' moral sense and establish strict regulations. Meanwhile, we suggest managers enhance and encourage knowledge sharing about greenness among staff. Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that the creation of an ethical work atmosphere is essential to reduce greenwashing, as employees' ethical behavior is strongly influenced by team stimuli. Thus, organizations should develop relatively strict ethical standards of service along with reward

and punishment mechanisms, uphold the concept of honest management, create a higher ethical work climate, and take steps to strengthen personal and social norms.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, we have not focused on all types of hotels which may have different business models and generate different greenwashing. Compared with B&Bs and budget hotels, the staff management of star hotels is more systematic and stereotyped. Therefore, we need to conduct comparative studies with subdivided samples in the future to obtain more comprehensive results. Second, our study only focuses on individual-level outcome variables and uses the ethical work climate at the team level to investigate a cross-level model. A limitation is that we have not explored team-level outcome variables meanwhile. We constituted the score on a team level with the average score of ethical work climate rated by each team member, while acknowledging that the weight of individual scoring can be smaller (or greater) in larger (or smaller) teams as well. Future studies that explore team-level outcome variables could generate weighted scores and control the size of each team. The ethical work climate at the organizational level may also influence employees' greenwashing behavior; thus, a multi-level analysis including both teams and organizations could be explored in the future. Third, although we have tried to lower potential social desirability bias when investigating the issue of moral disengagement and greenwashing (e.g., wearing face masks, taking measures to strengthen perceived anonymity, and thus trying to get respondents to feel freer to share their opinions during the survey), we could not ensure that such bias was completely excluded, and there is no standard procedure to deal with it presently. Furthermore, greenwashing behavior is complex, and we could not address all potential determinants, such as personal working experience (Detert et al., 2008), ethical predispositions (Reynolds, 2006), values, and beliefs (Tang & Chiu, 2003) in a single study, and these should be discussed in future investigations.

### Conclusion

This paper investigated the greenwashing behavior of service workers in the hospitality context. It demonstrates that the experience of psychological contract fulfillment makes workers more likely to undertake moral disengagement, which, in turn, increases the level of greenwashing. Thus, moral disengagement plays a mediating role, whereby service workers relieve their immorality concerning greenwashing behavior when their psychological contract is fulfilled. In addition, the ethical work climate at the team level plays a moderating role in the relationships between psychological contract fulfillment and greenwashing, and a high-level ethical climate within the hotel reduces the chance of service workers engaging in greenwashing. These findings expand relevant research

from the perspective of service workers and offer crucial practical implications for green management.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Note

1. The significance of indirect relationship is determined by 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval estimates: if the confidence interval does not include 0, the indirect relationship is significant (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

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