

Strategic HRM practices, learning orientation and learning competence: study from retail industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the effect of strategic human resource management (SHRM) practices on two learning outcomes, learning orientation and learning competence, which past research has seldom examined in the UAE context. SHRM practices consisted of four factors, namely, talent acquisition, learning and development, performance appraisal and developmental pay.

Design/methodology/approach – Primary data was collected from 285 employees from retail outlets operating in Dubai. Partial least squares regression analysis using the tool, SmartPLS, was used to empirically validate the measurement model and test the structural model.

Findings – Findings reveal that SHRM practices talent acquisition, learning and development and developmental pay have a positive association with learning orientation, and learning and development and performance appraisal have a positive association with learning competence of employees. The path coefficient and total effects signify that learning orientation acts as a conduit to pass on the effect of the SHRM practices to learning competence.

Research limitations/implications – The sample considered for the study was from the retail industry. Furthermore, to generalize the findings of this research, cross-national studies should be conducted across various sectors and organizations.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research study is the first of its kind in retail firms in Dubai (UAE) to empirically test the association of SHRM practices with learning outcomes. Retail outlets can implement SHRM practices to improve learning orientation and learning competence in a highly dynamic operating environment such as retail industry.

Keywords Strategic HRM, Learning competence, Learning orientation, Retail industry

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

Human resource (HR) is one of the vital elements required for the success of a business. Snell, Shadur, & Wright (2000) describes employees' knowledge, skills and abilities as one of the most unique and renewable resources in an organization, and a catalyst for strategic

capability. Moreover, the current business context which is constantly in flux, places high value on employee innovation and learning (Kim, Vaiman, & Sanders, 2022). HR practices play a crucial role in developing the HR in the organization. HR practices such as training and career development expands the employee's competence (Potnuru, Sahoo, & Parle, 2021); pay and benefits are focused on employee motivation (Rynes, Gerhart, & Minette, 2004) and employee recognition programs and positive employee relations provide a foundation for shaping employee attitude (Gadomska-Lila & Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2021).

Given this context, Pellegrini, Rizzi, & Frey (2018) have found that the impact of HR practices on learning outcomes has rarely been investigated in the retail sector. Retailing is a highly outcome-oriented sector, where jobs are frequently assessed by daily, weekly, monthly and yearly sales targets (Shim, Lusch, & O'Brien, 2002). Turcsik (1999) has highlighted HR as a crucial factor that affects the outcome of the retail sector. Being a fast-paced industry, managers must make quick decisions and the results of these decisions are known immediately (Shim *et al.*, 2002). To make decisions effectively in such an environment, individuals should have a learning orientation to update their knowledge, skills and competence frequently. Thite (2004) stated that the organizations should focus on cultivating the competency of "learning to learn" as a strategic weapon, to leverage employee knowledge and perform better than the competitors.

Learning orientation is a measure of employees' commitment to enhance their competencies by seeking and acquiring new knowledge and skills (VandeWalle, 2001). Awasthy & Gupta (2011) found that learning orientation practices are important for the manufacturing and service sectors. Specifically, in the retailing sector, employees who possess high learning orientation display persistence during the face of obstacles and discover new solutions (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Rigolizzo, 2019). Given this context, we use the resource-based view theory to study how the strategic HRM practices facilitate employees to actively participate in the organizational learning process. We examine two research questions:

RQ1. To what extent does strategic human resource management (SHRM) practices in retail firms contribute to learning orientation?

RQ2. To what extent does learning orientation amongst individuals in the organization facilitate the relationship between SHRM and learning competence?

Thus, this paper purports to explore the impact of SHRM practices on two specific learning outcomes - learning orientation and learning competence. This paper is an answer to a call for more research on examining how SHRM practices impact learning orientation in organizations (Baker, Mukherjee, & Perin, 2022).

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we present the theoretical background for the study, subsequently we present the literature on SHRM, learning organization and learning competence. Next, we describe the relationship between SHRM and learning outcomes. Further the sample selection, instruments adapted and analysis used to examine the data are discussed. The study concludes with a detailed discussion on empirical results, followed by managerial implications and limitations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Resource-based view theory

According to resource-based view theory by Barney (1991), organizations develop competitive advantage by creating a workforce with deep tacit knowledge of products, customers and processes. Several studies (Pfeffer, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Wright, Gardner, &

Moynihan, 2003; Mitchell, Obeidat, & Bray, 2013; Collins, 2021) highlighted the significance of managing HR and improving human capability for obtaining competitive advantage. Wright *et al.* (2003) noted that in order to attain competitive advantage through HR, organization must pay careful attention to the practices of HR management that best leverage these assets. Intense competitive pressures and globalization of business (Raub, Alvarez, & Khanna, 2006) has led the retail industry to focus on SHRM dimensions and its association with learning outcomes. Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao (2002) highlighted that a strong learning orientation is essential for the contemporary organization to attain competitive edge and suggested that the future studies should focus on exploring the determinants of learning orientation.

In accordance with the resource-based view theory, Huselid (1995) emphasized that to develop competitive advantage, there should be a significant relationship between individual performance and organization's productivity. There exists a lacuna of research studies examining the association between dimensions of SHRM and important individual outcomes (Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019; Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2021). Therefore, the current research aims to explore the empirical linkages between the SHRM practices (talent acquisition, learning and development, performance appraisal and developmental pay), and learning orientation and learning competence at the individual level. While previous studies focused on the impact of SHRM activities on organizational performance (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2021), this study intends to explore the relationship between SHRM and learning outcomes.

2.2 Strategic HR management

The goal of SHRM is to achieve a fit between organizational strategy and HR management strategy to attain superior organizational performance. SHRM emphasizes the role that HR management activities play while attaining organizational performance, such as employee turnover, productivity and financial performance (Butler, Ferris, & Napier, 1991; Delery & Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Richard & Johnson, 2001). The current focus on SHRM remains vital to an organization's strategic processes, and views SHRM practices as a key resource to enhancing learning. SHRM activities should emphasize on creating superior human capital knowledge, skills and experience which contribute to the firm's economic value and competitive positioning (Snell & Dean, 1992).

Shaw, Park, & Kim (2013) found that more directed investment in SHRM activities will result in sustained competitive advantage. Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler (1997), defined strategic HR practices as those that create a "unique pool of human capital". Guest (1997) noted that SHRM practices usually include four HR activities, namely, selection, training and development, rewards and career growth opportunities. Specific HRM activities such as selection practices, training practices and compensation makes the HR, valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable resource for organizations to reach its strategic goals (Kim & Lee, 2012; Shaw *et al.*, 2013).

2.3 Strategic HR management practices

Huselid *et al.* (1997) classified HR practices based on its nature as either strategic or technical. Strategic HR practices focus on aligning employee development with organization's business needs. HR management practices increase employee's knowledge, skill and ability (Arthur, 1994; Katou & Budhwar, 2012)), empower employees and increase employee motivation (Becker & Huselid, 1998). Performance appraisal, performance-related pay, skill-based pay and group-based pay enhance the employees' motivation and organizational performance (Guthrie, 2001). This in turn leads to increased job satisfaction,

reduced employee turnover, increased productivity and overall improvement in organizational performance (Becker & Gerhart, 1996).

There is a wide array of evidence on the significant association between strategic HR practices and productivity (Guthrie, 2001) and subsequently, financial performance (Huselid, 1995; Mitchell *et al.*, 2013; Kim, Watkins, & Lu, 2017). Ghlichlee & Goodarzi (2022) highlighted that strategic HR practices have a significant positive effect on enhancing the employees intellectual capital. Shim *et al.* (2002) found that retail organizations must focus on recruiting and retaining employees with strong growth and achievement values. HR management practices, namely, performance appraisal, training and development and compensation are considered as the most effective HR practices in the retail industry (Huang, Chiu, & Lu, 2013; Tay, 2011; Puri, 2013). Moreover, performance appraisal and compensation enhance employee engagement (Tay, 2011), training and development enhances employees' attitude on acquiring higher knowledge, skills and abilities and job productivity (Tangthong, 2014).

2.4 Learning organization

Learning organization is defined as “an organisation that facilitates the learning among members, and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals” (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1991, pg. 1). Senge (1990) highlighted that employees in learning organizations will continuously develop their capability to learn new things and expand their pattern of thinking. Learning organization accentuates on adaptation to continuous change, learning and development (Swieringa & Wierdsma, 1992; Watkins & Kim, 2018).

2.4.1 Learning orientation. Learning orientation is defined as a basic attitude towards learning (Real, Roldán, & Leal, 2014). DiBella, Nevis, & Gould (1996) describe learning orientation as the occurrence of learning and the nature of what is learnt in an organization. Learning orientation indicates an individual's inspiration to enhance their competencies through exploration of, commitment in, training of new skills and knowledge (VandeWalle, 2001). Dweck (2000) described learning orientation as a means for, and perseverance to, enhance one's competence. Learning orientation is an internal conviction which stimulates an individual to improve their competence (Chughtai & Buckley, 2011; Dweck, 2000; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999). Similarly, Billett (2004) and Osagie, Wesselink, Runhaar, & Mulder (2018) described learning orientation as a personal factor. Individuals with strong learning orientation possess more self-mastery on their work over a time with the accumulation of in-depth knowledge and experience (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009). The learning-oriented employees exhibit better competence to learn new knowledge and perceive knowledge to be most valuable and treasured (Jha & Bhattachryya, 2013).

Employees with higher learning orientation turn out to be an asset for the organization during challenging times as they respond to obstacles by seeking out new skills and focusing on accomplishing their tasks (Yuan, Feng, Lai, & Collins, 2018). They measure their success in terms of learning, rather than performance, and value experiences that foster development (De Rue & Wellman, 2009). Higher learning orientation also inspires employees to learn from their on-the-job experiences (De Rue & Wellman, 2009), and increases their tendency to be creative in the face of challenging job demands (Chow & Gong, 2019). Such employees will be invaluable to organizations operating in highly volatile industries such as retail. Limited research into the area of learning orientation in the retail space indicates that learning orientation facilitates knowledge sharing (Ro, Yoo, Koo, & Song, 2021), and improves job performance (Hamzah, Othman, & Hassan, 2020). Hamzah *et al.* (2020) noted that employees with higher learning orientation respond to market changes faster and that they disseminate market change information among their colleagues as well.

2.4.2 Learning competence. Mandl & Krause (2005) described competence as a multifaceted phenomenon. The authors have highlighted that effective competence development will result in enhanced organizational effectiveness. With the prevailing high-tech business process scenarios, the managers should warrant that the employees are with adequate competence to use the new technologies at the workplace. Schulz and Roßnagel (2010) described learning competence as a process which encompasses the following steps: identifying an individual's specific learning needs, setting learning goals, selecting effective learning strategies and evaluating learning progress towards learning goal attainment.

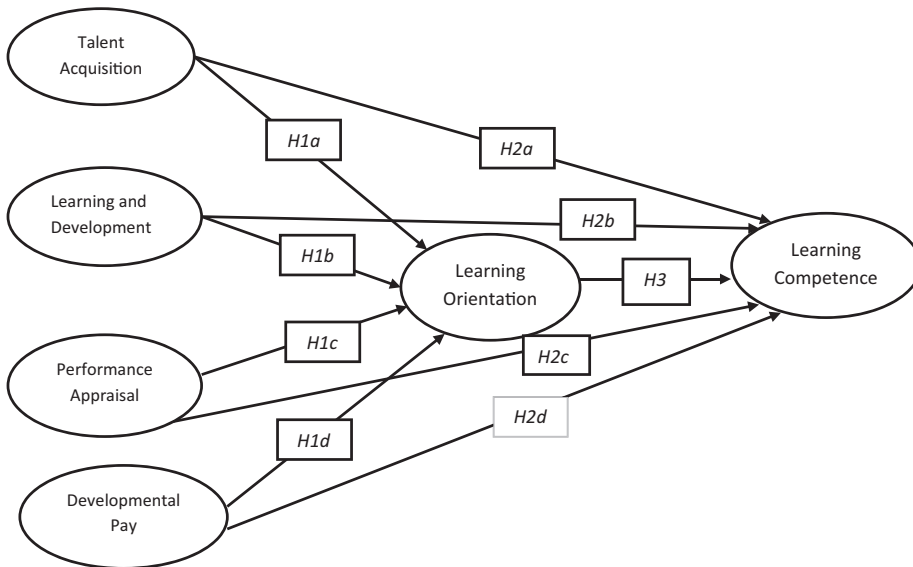
2.5 Strategic HR management practices and learning outcomes

Human capital is proposed as one of the key resources on which companies build competitive advantage (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Boxall, 1996). Human capital is enhanced through the organizational learning process (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). In addition to attracting, training, retaining and motivating the existing individuals, the SHRM practices should enhance and provide a good learning culture where free transfer of knowledge takes place in the work environment (ArunPrasad, 2015). Firm-specific HRM practices such as encouraging employee readiness and pursuing democratic managerial style effectively leverage knowledge assets (human capital) into unique capabilities (Tzortzaki & Mihiotis, 2014).

Gardiner, Leat, & Sadler-Smith (2001) reinforced that well-knitted HR practices strengthen the learning outcomes. Research across different industries has emphasized that HR practices play a dominant role in stimulating the employee learning orientation and enhancing the positive attitude towards learning (Gutierrez-Gutierrez, Barrales-Molina, & Kaynak, 2018; Jaw & Liu, 2003). Specifically, selection and competency-based appraisals are found to be directly associated with organizational learning capability (López-Cabrales, Real, & Valle, 2011). Developmental pay emphasizes that employee compensation should be determined based on the employees needs and aspirations to learn and adapt new knowledge and technologies required for the business (Thite, 2004). Griego, Geroy, & Wright (2000) found that rewards and recognition offered to employees as a stimulus for learning organization. Griego *et al.* (2000) noted that training practices enables better learning – skills, know-how and attitude and which in turn further enhances the overall job performance. Rewards and recognition of employees must reinforce and encourage learning at individual and organization level (Griego *et al.*, 2000).

Given the evidence from literature review, we propose that SHRM practices will have an association with the learning outcomes – learning orientation and learning competence. Therefore, we propose that when a firm gives importance to SHRM practices, and ensures that the practices are carried out in the organization, more employees will develop a learning orientation and learning competence. Based on this rationale and previous research, we hypothesize the following. Figure 1 gives a picture of the hypotheses proposed:

- H1. Strategic HRM practice dimensions: talent acquisition (H1a), learning and development (H1b), performance appraisal (H1c) and developmental pay (H1d) will have a positive direct association with learning orientation.
- H2. Strategic HRM practice dimensions: talent acquisition (H2a), learning and development (H2b), performance appraisal (H2c) and developmental pay (H2d) will have a positive direct association with learning competence.
- H3. Learning orientation will have a positive association with learning competence.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1.
Framework depicting
proposed direct
relationships

H4. Learning orientation will have a significant mediating effect on the relationship between Strategic HRM practice dimensions: talent acquisition (*H4a*), learning and development (*H4b*), performance appraisal (*H4c*) and developmental pay (*H4d*) and learning competence.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sample design and data collection

Primary data for statistical analysis was collected through a self-reported questionnaire. The questions in the survey were sourced from validated questionnaires. To ensure the reliability of the survey content, a pretest was conducted with senior leaders of three different retail firms. The questionnaire was given to subject matter experts and to academicians to check for content and face validity. Based on the feedback, required amendments were incorporated in the final questionnaire.

Nine companies that were representative of the organizations in the retail industry in this region, and where formal HRM activities had been institutionalized, were contacted. Permission was sought from the senior management of the companies to contact employees. The target sample was supervisors and managers employed in these retail organizations, who were engaged in people management. An explanatory email was sent to the identified employees soliciting their interest and assuring them of the anonymity of their responses. The links to the questionnaire were provided in the email itself. This mail was circulated to 320 employees across the nine retail organizations, along with the stated objective of the study. A total of 285 filled-in responses were collected and used for further analysis ($n = 285$), resulting in an 89% response rate.

In the sample both the genders are relatively equally represented. A majority of the sample respondents were aged between 35 and 50 years and were employed in the current organization for more than 8 years. To counter the problem of common method bias associated with cross-sectional data, we used two procedural remedies proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2003). First, we assured the respondents that there were no right or wrong answers, and that their answers would be anonymous. Second, we counterbalanced the question order of the independent and dependent variables in the questionnaire. Using SmartPLS 3.0, the structural equation modeling (SEM) using partial least squares (PLS) was performed. The measurement and structural model were computed to test the hypothesized relationships. PLS-SEM is recommended, as it can handle multiple independent variables while providing more predictive accuracy (Cramer, 1993; Henseler, 2010).

3.2 Instruments

Strategic HRM practices: A tool to measure SHRM practices was constructed based on literature review (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1991; Pfeffer, 1994; Harel & Tzafrir, 1999; ArunPrasad & Kamalanabhan, 2010) and feedback through a structured interview with senior HR practitioners. According to HRM and strategic HRM literature (Delery & Doty, 1996; Harel & Tzafrir, 1999; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Gill & Meyer, 2011; Al-Adwan, Al-Adwan, & Smedley, 2013), there are numerous measures of HRM practices that were used to observe the impact on learning culture, learning orientation and learning competence. In the current study, the tool developed by ArunPrasad and Kamalanabhan (2011) was adopted to measure the strategic HRM measures. The items representing these constructs were modified based on the context, and as a result the constructs are contextualized as talent acquisition, learning and development, performance appraisal and development pay. Participants indicated their response for each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Sample items include: "My ability to work in teams was not examined in the selection process" (talent acquisition); "I am given training in job related (formal) communications to communicate with peers/supervisors" (learning & development); "I am given training to develop trust and openness with team members" (learning & development); "My ability to coach and support others is considered for performance appraisal" (performance appraisal); "The feedback of the performance appraisal process does not help me in my career preferences" (performance appraisal); "I receive group incentives based on my team's performance as a whole" (developmental pay); "I am not given educational opportunities to improve in my career" (developmental pay).

Learning orientation and learning competence: Griego et al. (2000) used the learning organization profile developed by Marquardt (1996) to determine the predictors of learning organization, the same has been adopted in this study. Marquardt's (1996) scale on learning organization profile comprises learning dynamics, people empowerment, organization transformation, knowledge management and technology application. After testing the psychometric properties of the scale and the factor loading, 14 items were retained and named as learning orientation and learning competence measured on a Likert's five-point scale.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1 Evaluation of measurement model

SEM using PLS was used in this study. The latent variables were measured by several observed indicators called manifest variables (Esposito Vinzi, Chin, Henseler, & Wang, 2010).

Based on the study of [Ringle, Sarstedt, & Straub \(2012\)](#), this study used PLS-SEM to test the conceptual framework. The use of PLS-SEM is justified in this situation as the key objective of the study is to examine the association between independent and dependent constructs ([Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011](#)). This study used SmartPLS to estimate the measurement model and structural model simultaneously ([Ringle et al., 2012](#)). [Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser \(2014\)](#) provides an in-depth introduction and methodical way to use the PLS-SEM in three steps, namely, model specification, measurement model evaluation and structural model evaluation.

4.2 Model specification

Based on the identified constructs from the literature review, the constructs are connected using the path model which logically connects the exogenous and endogenous constructs. In this study talent acquisition, learning and development, performance appraisal and developmental pay are exogenous constructs, learning orientation acts as exogenous and endogenous construct, and finally learning competence is the endogenous construct. All the constructs in this study are multi-item scales with reflective measures.

4.3 Measurement model evaluation

The second step in evaluating reflective indicators is the validity assessment which focuses on convergent and discriminant validity ([Hair et al., 2011 & 2014](#)). Composite reliability for all the reflective items was measured and most were found to be above the threshold value of 0.70 ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). In this study, some of the reflective indicators are between the values 0.4 and 0.7 and were retained because of the contribution to overall content validity ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). The observed AVE of the latent variables are greater than 0.5, which signifies that the variables explain more than half of its indicators' variance, and met threshold requirements ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). The reliability results are given in [Table 1](#). To measure the discriminant validity, the [Fornell & Larcker \(1981\)](#) criterion which states that the construct shares more variance with its indicators than with any other construct, was checked. The square root of AVE of each construct, given in the parentheses in [Table 2](#), is greater than its correlations with other latent constructs. This supports the discriminant validity of the measures ([Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995](#)).

4.4 Structural model evaluation

The structural equation in the model is measured with an evaluation of the R^2 fit index. The following are the rules of thumb for analyzing the statistics of the PLS structural model: R^2

Constructs and measures	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (ρ_c)	Communality (AVE)
Developmental pay	0.84	0.87	0.55
Learning and development	0.87	0.87	0.55
Performance appraisal	0.90	0.89	0.65
Talent acquisition	0.72	0.86	0.77
Learning orientation	0.80	0.88	0.52
Learning competence	0.90	0.89	0.61

Source: Authors' own work

Table 1.
Measurement model
evaluation

values of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 are described as substantial, moderate and weak, respectively (Chin, 1998). In our model, the factors of SHRM explain approximately 51% of the variance in learning orientation, and SHRM factors together with learning orientation explains 67% variance in learning competence indicating that our model has moderate to substantial structural fit. The results are reported in Table 3.

The model's capability to predict each endogenous latent construct's indicators was computed using the predominant measure of predictive relevance Stone–Geisser's Q^2 (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974). The Q^2 value was obtained by using the blindfolding procedure, a sample reuse technique that omits every d th data point and uses the resulting estimates to predict the omitted part (Hair *et al.*, 2011). The results are reported in Table 4. In bootstrapping procedure (Davison & Hinkley, 1997; Efron & Tibshirani, 1993) repeated random sampling with replacement from the original sample is created to generate a bootstrap sample, to obtain standard errors for hypothesis testing. Cross-validated communality (H^2) and cross-validated redundancy (F^2) are the measures of Q^2 . H^2 measures help in determining the capacity of a model to predict the manifest variables directly from the latent variables, whereas F^2 measures the capacity of the path model to predict the endogenous manifested variables by cross validation (Bhakra, *et al.*, 2012). In this model, the observed H^2 and F^2 values ranging from 0 to 0.5 were positive and above the threshold value (greater than zero), which signifies that latent constructs exhibit predictive relevance. The results are reported in Table 5.

As an outcome of the PLS model, estimates are provided for the path coefficients, which represent the hypothesized relationships linking the constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2014) and are reported in table 6. The relationship between learning and development practice and learning orientation ($\beta = 0.30$, $t = 3.17$), developmental pay practice and learning orientation ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 3.65$), learning and development practice and learning competence ($\beta = 0.40$, $t = 4.30$), learning orientation and learning competence ($\beta = 0.44$, $t = 5.47$) were significant at 0.01 level. The relationship between talent acquisition and learning orientation ($\beta = 0.23$

Table 2.
Measurement model
evaluation:
correlation and
square root of AVE

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Developmental pay	(0.74)					
2. Learning and development	0.58	(0.74)				
3. Performance appraisal	0.66	0.65	(0.80)			
4. Talent acquisition	0.36	0.46	0.46	(0.88)		
5. Learning orientation	0.58	0.62	0.63	0.53	(0.72)	
6. Learning competence	0.48	0.72	0.65	0.49	0.73	(0.78)

Note: Values in diagonal (within the parentheses) are the square root of the variance
Source: Authors' own work

Table 3.
Structural model
evaluation

Measures	Variance explained	Sample		<i>T</i> statistics	
		Mean (M)	Standard error (STERR)	(O/STERR)	<i>p</i> values
Learning Orientation	0.51	0.53	0.06	8.99	0.00
Learning competence	0.67	0.68	0.05	14.49	0.00

Source: Authors' own work

$t = 2.50$), and performance appraisal and learning competence ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 2.29$), were significant at 0.05 level. Strategic HRM practices

As proposed by Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro (2005), the overall predictive performance of the model can be confirmed through the evaluation of the global criterion of Goodness of Fit (GoF index) (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2005). GoF values of 0.1, 0.25 and 0.35 correspond to low, medium and high model predictive capability (Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder, & Van Oppen, 2009). We obtained a GoF index of 0.6 for our model. 415

Constructs	SSO	SSE	Q ² ≤ (=1-SSE/sSO)
Developmental pay	726.00	726.00	
Learning and development	968.00	968.00	
Performance appraisal	847.00	847.00	
Talent acquisition	242.00	242.00	
Learning orientation	726.00	544.86	0.25
Learning competence	968.00	600.01	0.38

Source: Authors’ own work

Table 4.
Q Square (via blindfolding procedure)

Constructs	R square	Communality	Q square	H square	F square
Developmental pay		0.55		0.36	
Learning and development		0.55		0.40	
Performance appraisal		0.65		0.53	
Talent acquisition		0.77		0.35	
Learning orientation	0.51	0.52		0.34	0.24
Learning competence	0.67	0.61		0.49	0.38

Source: Authors’ own work

Table 5.
Explained variance and communalities

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard error (STERR)	T statistics (O/STERR)	p values
TA → LO	0.23	0.23	0.09	2.51	0.01
LD → LO	0.30	0.30	0.09	3.17	0.00
PA → LO	0.09	0.08	0.11	0.85	0.39
DP → LO	0.26	0.28	0.07	3.65	0.00
TA → LC	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.79	0.43
LD → LC	0.40	0.39	0.09	4.26	0.00
PA → LC	0.25	0.26	0.11	2.29	0.02
DP → LC	-0.16	0.15	0.09	1.68	0.09
LO → LC	0.44	0.44	0.08	5.48	0.00

Notes: TA = Talent acquisition; LD = Learning and development; PA = Performance appraisal; DP = Development pay; LO = Learning orientation; LC = Learning competence

Source: Authors’ own work

Table 6.
Structural model evaluation – path coefficients (using bootstrapping)

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of SHRM on learning outcomes. This research study is the first of its kind in retail firms in Dubai (UAE) to empirically test the association between SHRM practices and learning outcomes. The proposed model can help retail firms to analyze the extent of contribution of SHRM practices towards the learning orientation and learning competence. The results of our study show that SHRM practices such as talent acquisition, learning and development and developmental pay, have significant and positive association with learning orientation, while learning and development and performance appraisal have significant and positive association with learning competence. The path coefficients and total effects signify that learning orientation mediates the relationship between SHRM practices and learning competence. The retail outlets can use specific SHRM practices to reinforce the learning processes and the learning orientation of individuals.

Organizations operating in dynamic environments need to develop employees who can respond to new situations, and learn to cope with new challenges (Yuan *et al.*, 2018). This need has been exacerbated by globalization and the onset of pandemics such as COVID-19. SHRM offers internal measures that organizations can adopt to counter the effects of turbulence in the external environment. Our results support earlier findings in the area of talent acquisition and development practices. For example, Harsch and Festing (2020) found that fast changes in customer needs and markets requires new ways of working and skill requirements, which can be addressed by adopting dynamic talent acquisition and development practices. Use of people analytics and technology-based talent acquisition has paid rich dividends in attracting a diverse pool of candidates that improves the quality of hire for organizations (Walford-Wright & Scott-Jackson, 2018). Digital HRM has also been found to be useful to deal with high rates of employee attrition in industries that face a lot of flux in employee ranks (Johnson, Stone, & Lukaszewski, 2021). The result of these talent acquisition practices is a diverse set of employees who are better equipped to face the challenges of the dynamic operating environment. Employee learning and development are also taking new shapes in the fast-changing world. Employees need to be able to generate new knowledge and learn from their external environment to ensure long term survival of the organization (Hoe, 2008). Organizations are adopting a dynamic, interactive and collaborative approach for employees to identify and participate in development programs that ensure professional advancement and organizational success (Dachner *et al.*, 2021). Organizations are also keen on leveraging technology to develop tools and practices to help practitioners participate in knowledge acquisition and learning (Fannoun & Kerins, 2019).

Employees who perceive that work and efforts are adequately compensated and find a supportive environment to learn new knowledge and skills, will subsequently execute the same in practice to contribute to learning orientation. Our results resonate earlier studies where compensation was found to impact learning capability (Hooi, 2021). Jimenez-Jimenez and Sanz-Valle (2013) found that performance appraisal, training and development enhance individuals' learning capability and better knowledge transfer within the organization. Effective talent management strategies have also been found to have a positive impact on learning through intellectual capital, indicating that organizations and HR development professionals should invest time in crafting an agile learning environment (Afshari & Hadian Nasab, 2021). Individuals with strong learning orientation consider the performance feedback as useful information to improve their skills and knowledge (VandeWalle, 2001). In line with the finding of ArunPrasad (2016) this study affirms that SHRM practices influence the learning orientation and learning competence in UAE retail sector.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Research on SHRM practices and its impact on organizational performance is widely examined by several authors (Huselid, 1995; Mitchell, Obeidat, & Bray, 2013); however, studies exploring the role of SHRM on learning outcomes remain limited (ArunPrasad, 2016; Baker *et al.*, 2022). Our empirical findings provide support for the argument that SHRM practices result in enhanced learning orientation and learning competence at the individual level.

A significant contribution of our research to learning outcomes research is that we have highlighted the role of learning orientation as a mediating factor. There are several papers that highlight the mediating role of learning organization, between organizational level practices and organizational outcomes (an example is Ngah, Tai, & Bontis, 2016). Our research throws light on the mechanism that enhances individual learning competence due to SHRM practices, through the mediating effect of learning orientation. Also, this study paves way for future research studies to explore the influence of SHRM practices on learning outcomes in varied sectors across countries.

5.2 Managerial implications

There exists significant empirical support to describe the significance of SHRM activities and its influence on firm productivity and firm performance across various industries in Western context (Delery, 1998; Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995; Richard & Johnson, 2001). This study shows the benefits of adopting SHRM practices in enhancing learning competence and learning orientation in retail firms at Dubai. It prescribes managers to focus on development pay, learning and development and talent acquisition to improve the same. One of the challenges faced by organizations is how to encourage members at all pay grades to be committed to and actively participate in learning. Developmental pay can be a strong motivator for individuals at all levels to engage in seeking new skills and knowledge, as the organization sets out clear policy guidelines that direct promotion and other opportunities for employees based on learning (Thiruvattal & Prasad, 2017).

As managers are crucial players in the implementation of strategic HR policies and practices, the first step is for organizations to educate managers about such policies and encourage them to implement them in the organization. Managerial training can help managers in identifying learning and developmental needs for their subordinates, as well as give constructive feedback for them.

The retail industry is a very volatile industry, and the COVID-19 pandemic has in fact made the operating environments of retail organizations even more so (Szczygielski, Charteris, Bwanya, & Brzeszczyński, 2022). One of the tried and trusted ways for organizations to deal with environment volatility is to improve learning within the organization (Worley & Jules, 2020). Employees should respond with creativity, and focus on completing the task when they are faced with new and uncertain challenges, rather than seek to be defensive (De Rue & Wellman, 2009). This can greatly improve the response of the organization as whole to the volatile environment. Our paper highlights that SHRM can be leveraged to create such an orientation and learning outcome among employees.

Managers need to be thoughtful in executing the SHRM practices (talent acquisition, learning and development, performance appraisal and developmental pay) towards employees, as these practices alone will not directly provide or enhance their learning competence. It is by building the learning orientation in the organization environment, that the learning competence will be attained. Osagie *et al.* (2018) highlighted the importance of learning climate in enhancing the learning behaviour in an organization. The learning climate can be enriched by developing a supportive environment by offering required

training opportunities and essential timely performance feedback and motivating employees by compensating for their quest for new knowledge.

However, caution must be used when planning and implementing SHRM practices in different countries. Al-Husan *et al.* (2009) found that adoption of high-performance HR practices created resistance and discontent among employees in Arab countries. Similarly, Aycan, Al-Hamadi, Davis, & Budhwar (2007) stated that adopting the HR policies and practices from a western context to the UAE caused problems, because of a wide array of institutional and cultural differences between the two contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study has certain limitations. First, the sample considered for the study is only from the retail industry, hence the findings of the study are generalizable to the retail industry. To generalize the findings of this research, cross-national studies should be conducted across various sectors and organizations. This will pave the way for continual advances in the knowledge on SHRM dimensions and learning outcomes.

Second, the study focused on the state of learning outcomes as a result of executing SHRM practices. However, the firm-level outcomes such as organizational performance, and productivity are not explored in this study. But, the general outline of this study can be related to studying firm performance and their linkage with learning outcomes. Examination of such firm level outcomes and organizational characteristics in association with learning aspects might provide better understanding to the top management in retail firms about the importance of focusing on SHRM activities.

It is essential for organizations to make investments in the right organizational activities. As HR makes a significant impact on important outcomes such as revenue and sales, specifically in the retail sector, it is vital to identify whether and how the investments are creating a learning organization. Redmond, Mumford, & Teach (1993) warned that the impact of learning orientation on organizational performance is apparent over the long-term, and hence the top management should be cautious about the time required to reap the benefits of the SHRM initiatives and the subsequent learning process. Therefore, managers should constantly monitor the variations in the learning outcomes and take necessary corrective actions to avoid any deviations from the upwards cycle of the learning process. Managers should set feasible competence goals for employees and fix the precise and measurable milestones to evaluate learning competence.

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Further reading

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