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Motivating sustainability at work: How green pay and rewards influence environmental performance through autonomous motivation

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Abstract

The increasing evidence of climate change and its effects on society call for actions towards sustainable development. One of the instruments for steering sustainable development is the (introduction of) green pay. This paper takes the example of organizations in Karachi, Pakistan, and applied structural equation modelling for exploring the linkages between green compensation and organizational performance. The results suggest that green pay practices are positively associated with sustainable environmental performance. Similarly, autonomous motivations mediate the relationship with organizational environmental performance. The research contributes to the green human resources literature in two ways. First, it applies findings from Western and other contexts to Pakistani organizations. Second, we show that autonomous motivations contribute to the relationship among green compensation, benefits, and corporate environmental performance. The results suggested that green recruitment and selection, green training, green pay, and rewards positively affect autonomous motivation, and that autonomous motivation is positively associated with environmental performance. However, green involvement did not support autonomous motivation. The results indicated that autonomous motivation mediated the effects of green recruitment, selection, training, pay and reward, and environmental performance. Still, no mediating impact of autonomy on the relationship between green involvement and ecological performance was confirmed.

Keywords: green recruitment and selection, green training, green pay and reward, green involvement, autonomous motivation, environmental performance.

1. Introduction

Globally, extreme weather events have become more frequent and severe over the past 50 years, and this trend is attributable to climate change. Mitigating climate change and sustaining environmental productivity are essential. In view of these problems, all sectors of the economy must work to protect the environment and enhance societal well-being. The ecosystem is harmed by the ever-increasing use of natural resources and by adverse climate change (Sabo et al., 2024). Over the past several decades, the pursuit of growth and profitability, driven by overconsumption

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and overproduction, has exposed the world to an increasing number of natural capital hazards. This is because shifting economic patterns and lifestyles continually create new environmental pressures (Chen et al., 2022). Given the dramatic nature of climate change, it would take almost a millennium to revert sea levels and ocean temperatures to pre-industrial levels, even if carbon emissions ceased (Rignot, 2022). Thus, prior research suggests that the problem is worsening despite international efforts to address it.

Research has focused on regulations for environmental sustainability and sustainable development, driven by these globally recognized concerns (Nye & Hoff, 2023). The public expects corporations to behave in an environmentally responsible manner, particularly regarding pollution (Shan et al., 2023). The pursuit of economic growth has led to biodiversity loss, water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions—all of which are detrimental to individual health and well-being (Lüscher, Berli, & Scholz, 2017).

As society's growing attention to mitigating environmental damage from rapid economic growth has increased, environmental preservation is now a crucial component of sustainable development. Customers' awareness has also increased due to new narratives that make climate change and its effects more apparent in their everyday lives. As a result, companies must prioritize sustainability from economic and corporate perspectives (Raimjanova & Popluga, 2023). To reduce environmental degradation, organizations must develop and adopt structured human resources strategies. Efficient processes will undoubtedly affect sustainability, thereby minimizing environmental degradation.

Reward and compensation linking is a key human resource (HR) strategy for attaining corporate sustainability and reducing environmental impacts (Althnayan et al., 2022). The consideration of environmental performance in investment decisions is increasing among investors. Businesses with excellent environmental performance are thought to offer lower investment risk and higher profits. Industries that practice environmental responsibility benefit from lower costs, regulatory compliance, and enhanced status (Qadeer et al., 2014). This effort advances the field of business research. Acknowledging the role that employee compensation plays in promoting environmentally friendly behavior and contributing to environmental research (Sevim, 2021). To preserve the planet's ecosystems and natural resources, businesses should encourage their employees to adhere to environmentally friendly policies and practices (Xu & Tang, 2024). Those employee actions, such as recycling, resource efficiency, water conservation, and waste reduction, have beneficial environmental impacts (D'Antonio & Lindberg, 2022).

The current study is novel in applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to environmental performance, green remuneration, and benefits (Xu & Tang, 2024). The integration of environmental performance, autonomous and regulated motivation, and green incentives and benefits constitute another significant theoretical contribution of this work (Ahmed et al., 2020). Employee rewards are one of the highest organizational costs and are essential to the working relationship between the company and its workforce. The purpose of incentives and benefits is to

foster a positive work environment by providing a range of monetary and non-monetary rewards, such as salary, bonuses, learning and development opportunities, and professional growth and promotion.

This study seeks to explore the impact of green recruitment and selection, green training, green pay and reward, and green involvement on environmental performance. The mediating effect of Autonomous Motivation is considered in the latter setting. The novelty of this study lies in its application of SDT to environmental performance, green remuneration, and benefits. The case of Pakistani companies is considered an empirical application. The study contributes to understanding organizational and employee sustainability and to practical implications for the firm's performance, including improved employee compensation and benefits.

2. Literature review

2.1. Green human resources management

The study examines whether a sustainable compensation policy positively affects corporate environmental performance. However, little is known about how firms' involvement in corporate social responsibility influences the relationship between compensation and firm performance. There is little known about how the relationship between monetary pay and company performance is tempered by corporations' involvement in corporate social responsibility. Thus, previous research has shown that offering employees financial rewards for participating in environmentally related activities increases their loyalty to environmental sustainability projects, a pattern like that observed in the current study (Wei, 2023). The prior research analyzed 469 U.S.-Based companies operating in high-contamination business sectors and assessed the impact of green incentives and remuneration. Green capacity to do the work focuses on employee satisfaction with green awards and helps in attaining environmental excellence (Palaščáková & Michalska, 2023).

The literature indicates that the human resource management (HRM) system has advanced beyond low employee involvement, toward more supportive and participatory procedures that enable employees to develop their knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Gallego-Álvarez & Pucheta-Martínez, 2021). Green HRM promotes a sustainable environment. This is an innovative approach to recognizing HRM responsibilities, such as assessment and influence on the organization, as well as employment development, including hiring, selection, education and training, performance evaluation, and incentives (Jafir & Ahmed, 2023). At a time when resource sustainability and environmental management are increasingly recognized and essential, prior research suggests that green human resource management (GHRM) refers to HR Management techniques that target the environmental and ecological impacts of businesses. It is associated with business environmental strategy and environmentally conscious employee behavior. Green HRM serves as a bridge linking HRM practices to the firm's environmental management initiatives and is a crucial component of the literature on sustainable HRM (Abbas et al., 2023).

Thus, prior research has defined green HRM practices as organizational programs and procedures implemented to reduce adverse environmental effects or enhance beneficial ecological outcomes. The component of environmentally conscious HRM that addresses environmental protection is known as "green HRM." Green HRM practices are the most effective approach for organizations to implement environmental sustainability programs because they focus on green hiring and selection, green training and development, green performance evaluation and appraisal, green pay and reward systems, and the enhancement of organizational human capital (Manthar et al., 2025). These practices help employees recognize and appreciate environmental concerns in corporate activities (Shahzad, Jianguo, & Junaid, 2023).

2.2. Environmental performance

An ability to accomplish ecological objectives related to corporate policies (Abbas et al., 2023). Strategic environmental performance programs are currently being implemented by a variety of enterprises across most industries to gain a competitive advantage over rivals. As several stakeholders have noted, environmental performance can enhance corporate success because customers and capital markets value green companies. Thus, a growing amount of ecological legislation and market forces are making organizations and managers more aware of their commitment to sustainability (Palaščáková & Michalska, 2023). Thus, the adopting environmental performance programs, numerous companies were able to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, solid waste, hazardous waste, and other waste and the prior research, GHRM is a strategic organizational orientation that, with employee assistance, will enhance administrative procedures and operations to lessen the environmental effect of businesses and several companies are implementing ecologically friendly initiatives to achieve a competing edge (Abbas et al., 2023). The implementation of green management techniques by firms should involve allocating all available resources and efforts to implementing green practices or encouraging eco-friendly behaviors, such as waste control and reuse (Xu & Tang, 2024).

2.3. Compensation & benefits and environmental performance

Incentives and rewards are two main HRM processes that compensate employees for their performance. These human resources procedures are among the most effective approaches for aligning an individual's interests with the organization's (Chen et al., 2022). Thus, rewards and incentives can affect employees' focus on work and motivate them to work as hard as possible to achieve corporate objectives. Within the framework of green human resources management, incentives and remuneration can be adequate means of promoting ecological initiatives within firms and groups. Prior research identified a four-step green HRM strategy and outlined a procedure for its implementation. These actions consist of the following: (a) providing an environmental vision for guidance; (b) training employees and other stakeholders in line with the environmental vision of the organization; (c) evaluating employee

performance based on environmentally friendly behavior; and (d) implementing a rewards system for employees who behave in an environmentally friendly manner (Raimjanova & Popluga, 2023). Thus, highly successful companies benefit all parties involved, including consumers, investors, and employees, while also generating returns for investors. These highly successful companies support both excellent performance—which leads to profitability—and employees' prosperity, which encompasses well-being and job motivation. As many contemporary professionals propose, exceptional worker incentives, encouragement, and well-being can improve long-term organizational wellness, customer satisfaction and commitment, and revenue growth, rather than being antagonistic goals (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Thus, sustainable management can be achieved through a pay structure that compels managers to prioritize both profit- and environmental-performance tasks (Chen et al., 2022). Offering awards to staff members can help a company perform better overall and recognize employees' environmental achievements. For instance, 3M provides prizes for recommendations made by specific teams of staff and workers to support the ecosystem and enhance corporate value (Jafir & Ahmed, 2023). Thus, the study identifies two types of rewards: monetary (e.g., bonuses, cash, rates) and non-monetary (e.g., vacations, leave, gifts, credit). Rewarding employees for their contributions to environmental sustainability significantly improves their performance. Prior research suggests that employee rewards are among the highest organizational costs and are essential to the working relationship between the company and its workforce (Parmar & Ahmed, 2013). The purpose of incentives and benefits is to foster a positive work environment by providing a range of monetary and non-monetary rewards, such as salary, bonuses, learning and development opportunities, and professional growth and promotion. This is corroborated by a recent study that emphasizes that building a strong relationship with employees through recognition, appraisal, promotion, and pay—including incentives—as well as providing periodic leaves of absence and job rotation to accommodate shifting demands and the state of the economy—rather than focusing solely on salary (Abbas et al., 2023). Thus, prior research has explained that management experts have proposed a four-step approach to green human resource management (HRM) and recommended a process for its implementation. These activities include the following: (a) outlining an environmental vision for guidance; (b) educating staff and other stakeholders in accordance with the organization's environmental vision; (c) basing employee performance evaluations on environmentally friendly behavior; and (d) putting in place a rewards program for staff members who act in an environmentally friendly manner (Chen et al., 2022).

2.4. Green compensation & benefits and autonomous motivation

Prior research suggests that organizations worldwide employ most people, and the nature of their jobs varies widely. They consider their income fair and their working conditions beneficial. On the other hand, other people work in jobs that are humiliating and hard. Their compensation is insufficient to sustain a family, and

their working conditions are unpleasant (Xu & Tang, 2024). Self-determination theory (SDT) has studied the relationship between motivation and the twin concerns of performance. SDT clarifies that employees' motivation for their work activities affects both their performance and overall well-being (Raimjanova & Popluga, 2023). Individuals who participate in a task with full awareness of their eagerness, desire, and choice are considered autonomously motivated. Self-controllable activities are intrinsically motivated. When people understand the importance and purpose of their task, feel liberated and independent in completing it, and are given clear guidance and support, they are more likely to develop autonomous motivation, perform better consistently, learn more effectively, and feel more at ease. The extrinsic emphasis that results from regulating motivation, on the other hand, can negatively affect future performance and engagement at work, restrict the range of employees' efforts, and produce short-term gains in desired outcomes through power dynamics or contingent rewards (Xu & Tang, 2024).

2.5. Autonomous motivation

According to self-determination theory, people have diverse fundamental needs underlying their professions and activities. In accordance with the theory of self-determination, autonomous motivation provides individuals with a sense of choice, which helps them focus their attention, curiosity, drive, and excitement. People who follow their own motivation are more willing and able to focus on engaging in productive initiatives. When individuals engage in an activity under controlled motivation due to pressure, they may take the initiative with reluctance or halfheartedly (Selvamani et al., 2024). The SDT theory posits that activities can be categorized by the degree to which they are autonomous or controlled. It also argues that autonomous and controlled motivations differ in the experiences that support them and the underlying regulatory systems (Stauderman, 2024). Thus, SDT's primary concept is that individuals have a natural capacity for creativity and for developing an extended and consolidated sense of identity. Numerous fields, including education, video games and technology, jobs and organizations, athletics and physical exercise, medical services, and parenthood, psychopathology, and psychotherapy, are among those in which applications of SDT are a substantial correlation between an autonomy-oriented approach and enhanced performance as well as a greater feeling of mental well-being and physical health; that the impersonal perspective is linked to the worst results, including severe ill-being, and that the controlled orientation is linked to greater firmness, defensiveness, and a lower level of wellness (Kondja et al., 2024).

Figure 1 represents the conceptual model of the study. Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, as well as the relationships among the mediating variables.

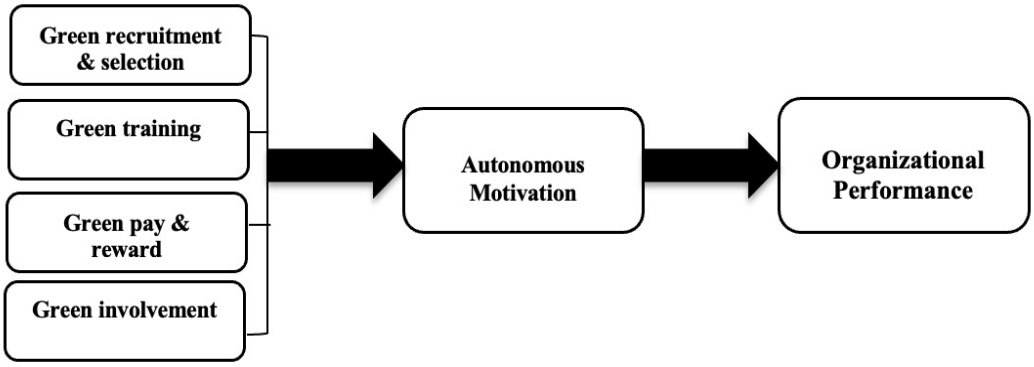

Fig. 1. Structural model.
Source: designed by the authors.

3. Methods

The study used primary data relevant to the research, and the sample comprised finance professionals and financial market experts with experience across organizations and knowledge of human resource management. A convenience sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria. The sample size of 350 was determined using the questionnaire to collect data, based on the principle of achieving sufficient statistical power for the analysis. The approach of data collection through non-probability sampling, convenience sampling, has the characteristics of being cheap and easy to collect data, and the respondents, the intended audience, have the specified practical knowledge and requirements, with accessibility. The sample of data, which is a representation of the population, is based on a subset of the population; thus, the current research study takes the respondents, the individuals, from the Pakistani markets, who have experience in human resources, and the respondents' attitudes to understand the behaviors of human resource management and working in organizations.

The respondents were informed that the data would be used solely for academic purposes, not for commercial purposes. The researchers personally visited respondents at selected firms to administer the questionnaire. The researcher obtained permission from the managers or other heads, thereby encouraging them to provide information without hesitation. The questionnaire was adapted from the literature and administered in person to respondents to collect data. A quantitative approach using Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the data. For this purpose, the measurement and structural models were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted, composite reliability, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, R-squared statistics, and Path coefficient analysis.

4. Results

Demographic statistics of the sample of 350 are provided in Table 1. The findings show that there are 168 (48.0%) females and 182 (52.0%) in our data. The data further demonstrate that 209 (59.71%) respondents are single; the remaining 141 (40.29%) are married. The detailed demographic statistics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic description of the sample

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	168	48.0
	Male	182	52.0
Marital Status	Single	209	59.71
	Married	141	40.29
Education	Diploma	109	31.14
	Bachelor	119	34.0
	Master	112	32.0
	Ph.D.	10	2.86
Age	Below 30	112	32.0
	30-35	124	35.43
	35-45	86	24.57
	45+	28	8.0
Total		350	100

Source: designed by the authors.

Cronbach's alpha is used to assess the reliability of the items within the constructs. Therefore, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability exceed 0.7, indicating that all items in the constructs in the current study are reliable. After the validity of the test, in the research study, researcher to examines the reliability test to examines the reliability of the construct, through the values of the Cronbach's alpha, and the values of the composite reliability, more than 0.6, which are suggested that the research study questionnaire has the sound level of the reliability to collect the data from the respondent, and analysis the variables in the research (Table 2). To assess discriminant validity, Table 3 and Figure 2 present the Fornell-Larcker criterion matrix and measurement model, respectively.

Table 2
Constructs Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Autonomous Motivation	0.862	0.867	0.917	0.787
Environmental Performance	0.820	0.823	0.874	0.581
Green Involvement	0.877	0.880	0.907	0.618
Green pay and reward	0.708	0.733	0.837	0.632
Green recruitment and selection	0.791	0.809	0.879	0.710
Green training	0.747	0.749	0.856	0.665

Source: designed by the authors.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker criterion

Constructs	Autonomous Motivation	Environmental Performance	Green Involvement	Green pay and reward	Green recruitment and selection	Green training
Autonomous Motivation	0.887					
Environmental Performance	0.486	0.763				
Green Involvement	0.745	0.593	0.786			
Green pay and reward	0.841	0.522	0.787	0.786		
Green recruitment and selection	0.853	0.535	0.756	0.747	0.842	
Green training	0.820	0.488	0.735	0.810	0.801	0.815

Source: designed by the authors.

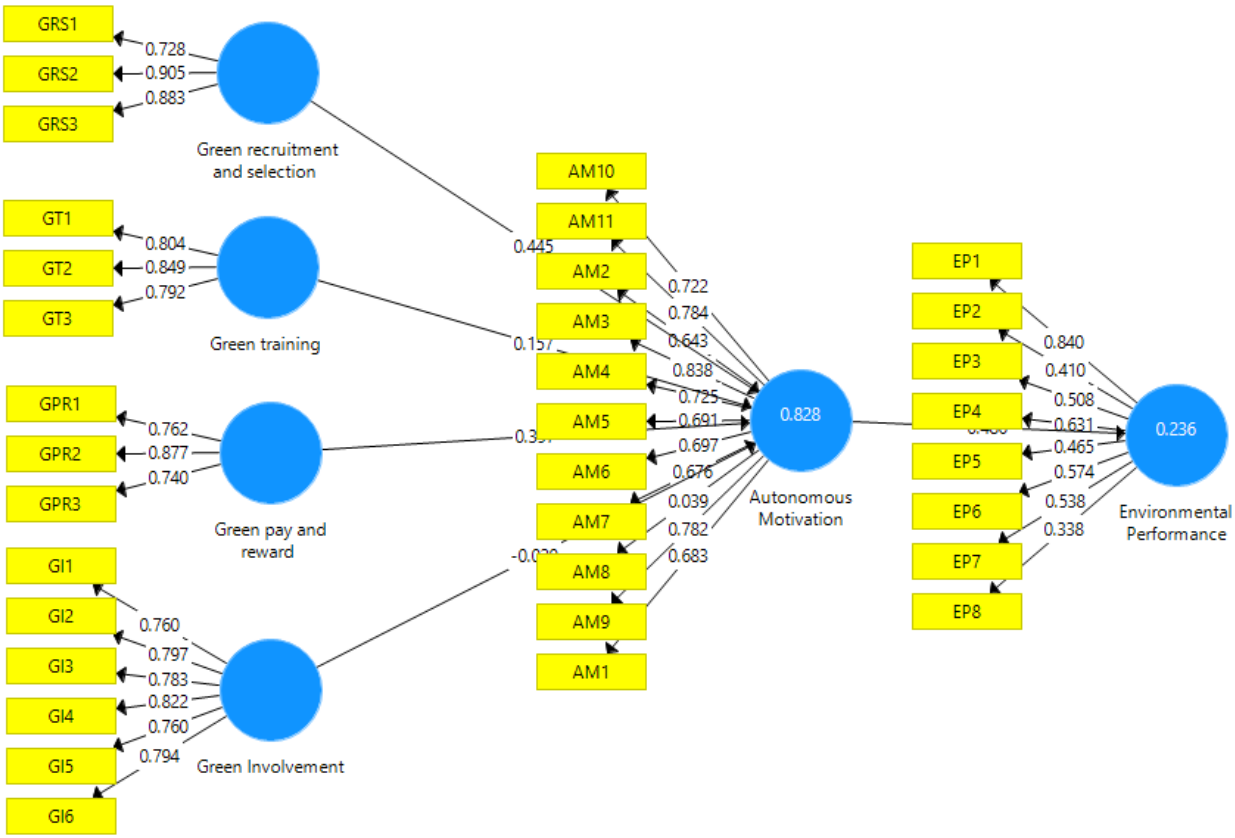

Fig. 2. Measurement model.
Source: designed by the authors.

The findings in Table 4 indicate an R-squared of 0.828 for the construct Autonomous motivation. Thus, 82% of the variation in the dependent variable, Autonomous motivation, is attributable to the independent variables, and that 23% of the change in environmental performance is attributable to the independent variable Autonomous motivation.

Table 4
R-Square statistics

Variables	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Autonomous Motivation	0.828	0.826
Environmental Performance	0.236	0.234

Source: designed by the authors.

The findings of Table 5 and Figure 3 suggest that autonomous motivations have a greater impact on environmental performance; thus, in any organization, incorporating them is essential for the human resources department and for employee productivity. Further results suggested that green involvement is also critical to autonomous motivation and employee productivity. Green recruitment and selection are more closely linked to employees' autonomous motivation and to the firm's performance. Still, the results suggested that green training is not associated with employees' autonomous motivation or firm performance. The detailed outcomes of hypotheses H1 to H5 are provided in Table 5.

Table 5
Path coefficient analysis (direct relationship)

Hypothesis Relationship	T Statistic	P-value
H1: Autonomous Motivation -> Environmental Performance	8.530	0.000
H2: Green Involvement -> Autonomous Motivation	0.406	0.685
H3: Green pay and reward -> Autonomous Motivation	6.481	0.000
H4: Green recruitment and selection -> Autonomous Motivation	7.155	0.000
H5: Green training -> Autonomous Motivation	2.357	0.019

Source: designed by the authors.

The findings in Table 6 and Figure 3 suggest that autonomous motivations do not mediate the effects of green involvement and environmental performance, indicating that these mediating effects are unrelated. Furthermore, the results suggested that autonomous motivation mediated the impact of green pay and rewards on the firm’s environmental performance. The findings indicate that autonomous motivation also mediates the relationship between green recruitment selection and ecological performance, and that green graining was observed. The detailed outcomes of hypotheses H6(a) to H6(d) are provided in Table 6.

Table 6
Mediating relationship

Indirect Relationship	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistic	P-value
H6(a): Green Involvement -> Autonomous Motivation -> Environmental Performance	-0.010	0.009	0.025	0.397	0.692
H6(b): Green pay and reward -> Autonomous Motivation -> Environmental Performance	0.193	0.200	0.037	5.182	0.000
H6(c): Green recruitment and selection -> Autonomous Motivation -> Environmental Performance	0.216	0.220	0.036	6.066	0.000
H6(d): Green training -> Autonomous Motivation -> Environmental Performance	0.076	0.080	0.036	2.138	0.033

Source: designed by the authors.

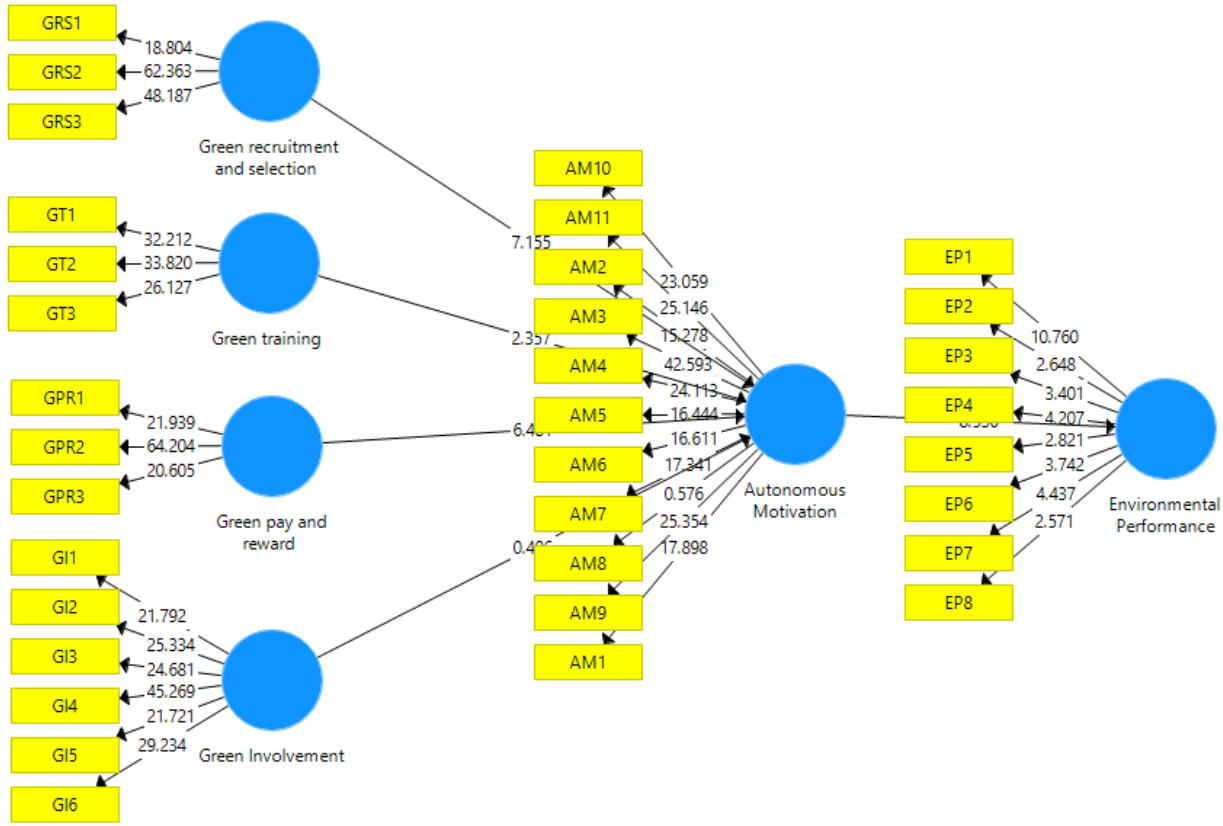

Fig. 3. Structural model.
Source: designed by the authors.

5. Discussion

Businesses have been constantly seeking new and creative ways to leverage their environmentally conscious marketing to sway customers who are aware of environmental issues. In settings with intense competition, practitioners could benefit from the strategy examined in this study (Ahmed et al., 2020). Enhanced environmental sustainability results from industry's systematic approach to maximizing ecological performance, which reduces waste, pollution, and emissions while conserving clean water, electrical power, and other resources. This is why environmental performance has become a priority for executives and regulators. HR managers in industry can establish objectives and adopt best practices to achieve green goals, thereby empowering their employees. Motivating people to adopt green practices can be achieved through green campaigns that offer financial and non-financial incentives. The results of the current study demonstrated that the most crucial elements for any firm operating in a green consumer environment are environmental performance and green reward and benefits. An organization's environmental sustainability is significantly influenced by its green reward management strategies. The rewards and benefits have a significant impact on employees' behavior. People are strongly motivated by the compensation and benefits they are offered. The integration of specific sustainable activities into the remuneration scheme should include a benefits package that incentivizes employees to modify their behavior (Qadeer et al., 2014). The green objective, coupled with rewards, is a more appropriate strategy for achieving and maintaining sustainability in organizations, especially in developing countries such as Pakistan. Environmental management rewards can be monetary, non-monetary, or recognition-based (Manthar et al., 2025). Examples include bonuses, cash, premiums, sabbaticals, awards, dinners, publicity, daily praise, feedback, personal reward plans, and linking suggestion schemes with reward systems.

The current study has various theoretical ramifications. Initially, as demonstrated by theories such as SDT (self-determination theory). According to the current research, environmental performance is influenced by favorable relationships between green compensation and reward, mediated by the relationship between autonomous and regulated motivation. This research work is novel in that it applies SDT theory to environmental performance, green remuneration, and benefits. Given the study context and SDT theory's application to environmental performance, green rewards, and benefits, this research is innovative. The integration of environmental performance, autonomous and regulated motivation, and green incentives and benefits constitute another significant theoretical contribution of this work. Thus, the present study has offered several new avenues for integrating theory into future research on autonomous and controlled motivation, human resource management, and environmental science. The primary breakthrough of this research is the integration of theories from all three disciplines to provide sound theoretical underpinnings; the result will help bridge the theoretical gap across these three realms of inquiry.

As environmental awareness has grown, numerous organizations have made "going green" a top priority. To achieve a high level of ecological efficiency, green factors such as management support and intangible environmental resources must be taken into account. Despite its many advantages, the current study has several limitations that future research should address. First, the current study was conducted among employees of a firm in Karachi; the findings are specific to the Karachi-based industry. Forthcoming research may include a large sample from various cities to get generalizable findings. Second, although the study aimed at evaluating the cross-sectional technique, the data were collected at a single point in time. Future researchers may employ a longitudinal design to understand the causes. Third, the only finding of this study was that green innovation did not mediate the relationship between environmental performance and environmental performance. Future studies might also examine environmental, societal, and sustainable economic performance.

6. Conclusion

The study examined linkages between green compensation and benefits practices and sustainability among firms in Pakistan. Thus, this study contributes to the understanding of green compensation and benefits practices in the current literature, particularly in developing countries. The results imply that decision-makers can enhance their strategic plans by selecting green competition and benefits practices that affect the sustainability pillars. When a company seeks to be sustainable, managers should invest more effort in developing and implementing green compensation & incentives policies.

This study developed a framework for understanding how green corporate benefits policies affect an organization's overall environmental performance. The developed conceptual framework may help analyze the relationship between green compensation and benefits practices and sustainable organizational performance. Per the results, bonuses and awards significantly influence employee behavior. Offering employees a benefits package that incentivizes behavior change is a necessary step toward incorporating specific sustainable activities into the corporate action plan. The green goals linked to specific incentives are a more effective way for businesses, particularly those in developing nations such as Pakistan, to achieve and maintain corporate sustainability. Rewards for environmental management might be cash, non-cash, or recognition-based ones. Examples include bonuses, compensation, premiums, sabbaticals, banquets, recognition, daily compliments, feedback, individual reward plans, and the integration of recommendation systems with rewards programs.

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