Whistleblowing Behavior Model and Social Influence : A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Whistleblowing is a vital mechanism for exposing unethical practices and ensuring accountability in organizations. This systematic literature review explores the interplay between the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and social influence factors—conformity, compliance, and obedience—in shaping whistleblowing behaviour. The review examines empirical and theoretical studies from 2004 to 2024 to identify how TPB constructs (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control) integrate with social influence dynamics to influence the intention and action of whistleblowing. The findings highlight that attitudes toward whistleblowing, shaped by personal ethics and organizational culture, significantly influence individuals' willingness to report misconduct. Subjective norms, reflecting the perceived social pressure to act or remain silent, often intersect with conformity and compliance, either encouraging or deterring whistleblowing. Perceived behavioural control, influenced by organizational support structures and fear of retaliation, determines the feasibility of acting. The role of obedience to authority emerges as a double-edged sword, where supportive leadership fosters whistleblowing while hierarchical pressures discourage it. Furthermore, the review underscores the importance of ethical climates and whistle-blower protection mechanisms in mitigating the negative impact of social pressures. It also identifies gaps in existing research, including the limited exploration of whistleblowing in diverse cultural contexts and the lack of longitudinal studies examining long-term impacts. This study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated framework that combines TPB and social influence theories to understand whistleblowing behaviour. It offers practical insights for policymakers and organizational leaders to design interventions that encourage ethical reporting and protect whistle blowers.

Keywords: Compliance, Conformity, Governance, Obedience, Organizational Ethics, Social Influence, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Whistleblowing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whistleblowing the act of reporting unethical or illegal activities within an organization remains a critical mechanism for maintaining organizational integrity and accountability. Understanding the factors that influence an individual's decision to blow the whistle is essential for fostering environments that encourage ethical Behaviour. This systematic literature review examines the integration of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with social influence constructs conformity, compliance, and obedience to provide a comprehensive model of whistleblowing Behaviour.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour, proposed by Ajzen (1991), posits that an individual's intention to engage in a Behaviour is determined by three factors: attitude

toward the Behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived Behavioural control. In the context of whistleblowing, TPB has been utilized to predict individuals' intentions to report wrongdoing. For instance, Wahyuni et al. (2021) applied TPB to assess the impact of individual factors on whistleblowing intentions among government employees, highlighting the theory's relevance in this domain.

Social influence mechanisms conformity, compliance, and obedience play a significant role in shaping whistleblowing Behaviour. Conformity involves aligning one's Behaviour with group norms, compliance refers to acquiescing to direct requests, and obedience entails following orders from authority figures. These constructs can either facilitate or hinder the decision to report misconduct. For example, strong group cohesion may discourage whistleblowing due to fear of social ostracism, while authoritative encouragement can promote reporting. Guggenheim and Laméris (2023) discuss various experimental paradigms to study these dynamics in whistleblowing contexts.

Integrating TPB with social influence constructs offers a more nuanced understanding of whistleblowing Behaviour. Subjective norms within TPB are closely related to conformity and compliance, as they reflect perceived social pressures to perform or abstain from a Behaviour. Perceived Behavioural control can be influenced by obedience to authority, affecting an individual's confidence in their ability to report wrongdoing. Setiawan and Yanti (2022) conducted a systematic literature review highlighting the variability and research trends in whistleblowing intentions, emphasizing the importance of these integrated models.

Recent studies have explored the applicability of TPB in predicting whistleblowing intentions across different cultural contexts. Rustiarini and Sunarsih (2017) examined factors influencing whistleblowing Behaviour among Indonesian government auditors, finding that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived Behavioural control significantly affect intentions to report misconduct. Their findings suggest that TPB is a robust framework for understanding whistleblowing Behaviour in diverse settings.

Furthermore, the role of ethical climate and organizational culture has been examined in relation to TPB and social influence constructs. A positive ethical climate can strengthen subjective norms that favour whistleblowing, while a hierarchical culture emphasizing obedience may suppress perceived Behavioural control. Understanding these organizational factors is crucial for developing interventions that promote ethical reporting. Culiberg and Mihelič (2017) provide a critical review of the evolution of whistleblowing studies, highlighting the importance of organizational context.

Whistleblowing in the public sector serves as a vital mechanism for promoting transparency and accountability within governmental institutions. Public servants, by virtue of their positions, are often privy to information regarding unethical practices or corruption that could undermine public trust. Encouraging whistleblowing within this sector is essential for upholding integrity and ensuring that public resources are utilized appropriately. However, challenges persist, including potential retaliation against whistle-blowers and the need for robust protection mechanisms. Recent studies emphasize the importance of effective whistleblowing systems in deterring misconduct and fostering an ethical organizational culture (Fawole & Fasua, 2024).

The relationship between whistleblowing and fraud prevention is well-documented, with whistle-blowers playing a crucial role in identifying and reporting fraudulent activities. In the public sector, the implementation of comprehensive whistleblowing mechanisms has been shown to significantly enhance fraud awareness and prevention efforts. For instance, a study examining local government in Indonesia found that effective whistleblowing systems positively influence fraud prevention measures (Pamungkas et al., 2017). Furthermore, the presence of a supportive governance framework that encourages ethical Behaviour and protects whistle-blowers is instrumental in mitigating fraud risks. The integration of whistleblowing policies within governance structures not only aids in fraud detection but also reinforces a culture of integrity and ethical accountability. Integrating the Theory of Planned Behaviour with social influence constructs provides a comprehensive framework for understanding whistleblowing Behaviour. This approach acknowledges the complex interplay between individual intentions and social pressures, offering valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners aiming to foster ethical organizational cultures.

2. RESEARCH METHOD(S)

To investigate the interplay between whistleblowing Behaviour, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and social influence mechanisms namely conformity, compliance, and obedience a systematic literature review (SLR) will be conducted. The SLR methodology is chosen for its rigor in identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research relevant to specific research questions, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). This approach ensures an objective and reproducible process, minimizing bias and enhancing the reliability of findings. The research questions:

a. How does the Theory of Planned Behaviour explain whistleblowing intentions and actions?

b. In what ways do social influence factors (conformity, compliance, and obedience) affect whistleblowing Behaviour?

c. What is the relationship between TPB constructs and social influence factors in the context of whistleblowing?

A comprehensive search will be conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, focusing on publications from January 2018 to December 2023. The search terms will include combinations of keywords such as "whistleblowing," "Theory of Planned Behaviour," "conformity," "compliance," "obedience," and "social influence." Boolean operators (AND, OR) will be utilized to refine the search results.
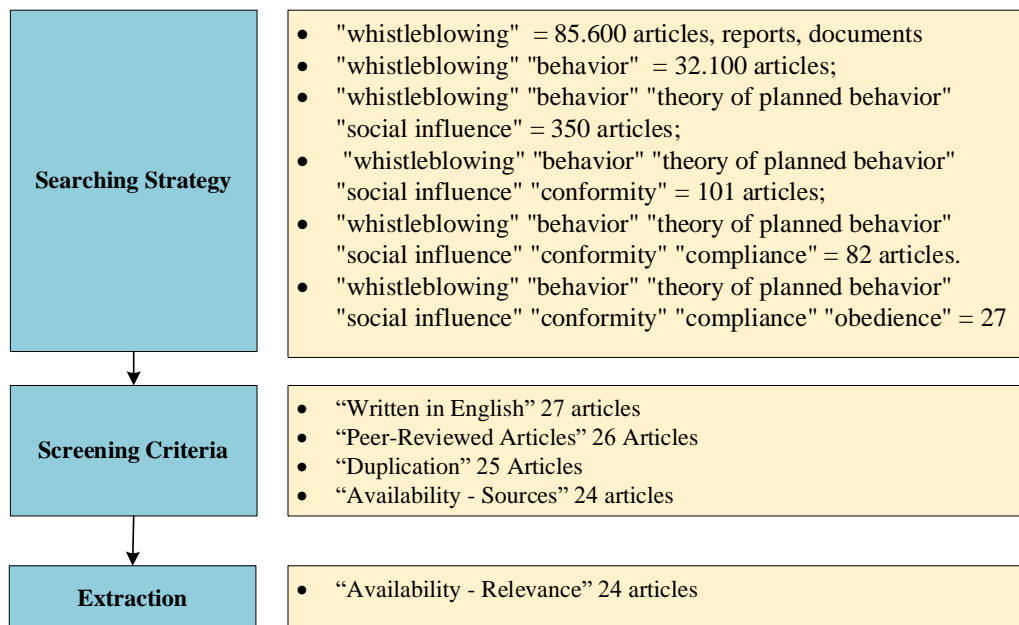
Searching Strategy	• "whistleblowing" = 85.600 articles, reports, documents • "whistleblowing" "behavior" = 32.100 articles; • "whistleblowing" "behavior" "theory of planned behavior" "social influence" = 350 articles; • "whistleblowing" "behavior" "theory of planned behavior" "social influence" "conformity" = 101 articles; • "whistleblowing" "behavior" "theory of planned behavior" "social influence" "conformity" "compliance" = 82 articles. • "whistleblowing" "behavior" "theory of planned behavior" "social influence" "conformity" "compliance" "obedience" = 27
Screening Criteria	• "Written in English" 27 articles • "Peer-Reviewed Articles" 26 Articles • "Duplication" 25 Articles • "Availability - Sources" 24 articles
Extraction	• "Availability - Relevance" 24 articles

Figure 1: Search Strategy

Inclusion criteria will encompass peer-reviewed articles, empirical studies, and theoretical papers directly related to the research questions, while exclusion criteria will eliminate studies not available in English or lacking relevance to the specified constructs. Relevant data, including study characteristics, methodologies, key findings, and theoretical frameworks, will be extracted from the selected articles. The analysis will involve thematic synthesis to identify patterns and relationships between TPB constructs and social influence factors in influencing whistleblowing Behaviour. Attention will be given to variations across different organizational contexts and cultural settings.

3. FINDINGS AND DUSCUSSION

Whistleblowing is a critical mechanism for maintaining ethical integrity in organizations, involving the disclosure of unethical or illegal activities by individuals within an organization. This review synthesizes literature examining whistleblowing Behaviours through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and social influence constructs—conformity, compliance, and obedience. The articles reviewed span diverse methodological approaches and cultural contexts, offering a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing whistleblowing intentions and actions.

The TPB framework has been widely used to predict whistleblowing intentions. Studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2023; Ningsih et al., 2024) confirm that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived Behavioural control significantly affect an individual's decision to report wrongdoing. For instance, Ahmed (2023) highlighted how organizational cynicism and religiosity mediate the relationship between these factors and whistleblowing in Pakistani banks.

Social Influence and Whistleblowing

Social influence plays a dual role in shaping whistleblowing Behaviour. Conformity and compliance often deter whistleblowing due to fear of ostracism or reprisal (Curtis et al., 2021), while supportive norms and ethical leadership can encourage it (Yu et al., 2024). Bergemann (2024) provided a broader sociological perspective, integrating whistleblowing with crime reporting and denunciation, emphasizing how group dynamics influence reporting Behaviours.

This review underscores the complexity of whistleblowing Behaviour, influenced by both individual cognitive processes (as framed by TPB) and social dynamics (conformity, compliance, and obedience). It highlights the need for organizational policies that strengthen ethical climates, provide robust protection mechanisms, and cultivate supportive norms. Future research should explore whistleblowing in varied cultural settings and examine long-term impacts on individuals and organizations.

Integration of TPB and Social Influence Constructs

Recent studies have integrated TPB with social influence theories to provide a holistic understanding of whistleblowing. For instance, Black et al. (2022) extended TPB to include moral disengagement, identifying its role in ethical decision-making. Similarly, Yasmin and Noermansyah (2023) investigated the interplay between commitment, attitude, and subjective norms in fostering whistleblowing intentions.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) Constructs

a. Attitudes:

　1) Positive attitudes toward whistleblowing significantly enhance reporting intentions (Ahmed, 2023; Ningsih et al., 2024).

　2) Organizational ethical climate and personal commitment strengthen attitudes favouring whistleblowing (Yasmin & Noermansyah, 2023).

b. Subjective Norms:

　1) Social pressure, especially supportive norms from peers or leaders, positively influences whistleblowing Behaviour (Curtis et al., 2021).

　2) Conversely, unsupportive norms and fear of ostracism act as barriers (Ahmed, 2023).

c. Perceived Behavioural Control:

　1) A sense of self-efficacy and belief in protection mechanisms bolster whistleblowing intentions (Black et al., 2022).

　2) Lack of control or fear of retaliation reduces the likelihood of reporting wrongdoing (Defiantoro & Mayasari, 2024).

Social Influence Constructs

a. Conformity:

　1) Group pressure discourages whistleblowing, particularly in tightly knit teams with unethical norms (Curtis et al., 2021).

　2) Ethical leadership and supportive peers can counteract conformity pressures (Yu et al., 2024).

b. Compliance:

　1) Compliance with authority often deters whistleblowing, especially when leaders discourage reporting (Rahman & Hayati, 2021).

　2) Structured policies and pro-whistleblowing directives from leaders foster reporting Behaviour.

c. Obedience:

　1) Strong hierarchical authority discourages whistleblowing when power dynamics are misused (Ulfa & Utami, 2023).

　2) Transparent governance systems can mitigate negative obedience effects (Eaton & Akers, 2007).

Additional Factors

a. Organizational Cynicism:

    1) Cynicism diminishes whistleblowing intentions by fostering distrust in reporting mechanisms (Ahmed, 2023).

b. Religiosity:

    1) Religious and ethical values enhance whistleblowing intentions by aligning personal beliefs with moral obligations (Ningsih et al., 2024).

c. Moral Disengagement:

    1) Acts as a significant barrier, allowing individuals to justify inaction despite awareness of wrongdoing (Black et al., 2022).

This categorization emphasizes the interplay of individual cognition (TPB constructs), social dynamics, and contextual factors in shaping whistleblowing Behaviour, offering insights for improving policies and ethical climates.
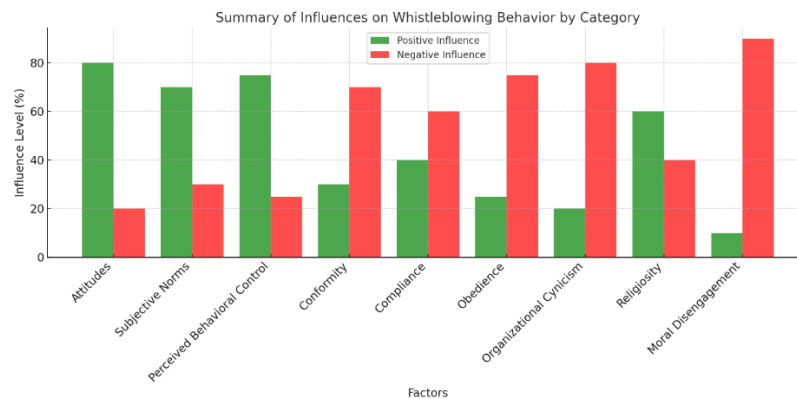

Figure 2: Summary of influences on Whistleblowing Behaviour by Category

The chart visualizes the positive and negative influences of key factors on whistleblowing Behaviour:

a. Positive Influences: Categories like "Attitudes," "Subjective Norms," "Perceived Behavioural Control," and "Religiosity" show stronger positive impacts, enhancing whistleblowing intentions.

b. Negative Influences: Factors such as "Conformity," "Compliance," "Obedience," and "Moral Disengagement" significantly deter whistleblowing Behaviour.

This highlights the dual roles of these constructs, providing insights into areas for organizational intervention to encourage ethical reporting

This review underscores the complexity of whistleblowing Behaviour, influenced by both individual cognitive processes (as framed by TPB) and social dynamics (conformity,

compliance, and obedience). It highlights the need for organizational policies that strengthen ethical climates, provide robust protection mechanisms, and cultivate supportive norms. Future research should explore whistleblowing in varied cultural settings and examine long-term impacts on individuals and organizations.

Policies that Improve Whistle-blower Protection

Policies that improve whistle-blower protection are essential for fostering an ethical environment where individuals feel secure reporting wrongdoing. These policies aim to mitigate risks, reduce retaliation, and ensure that whistle-blowers are supported throughout the reporting process. Here are key policies and measures that enhance whistle-blower protection:
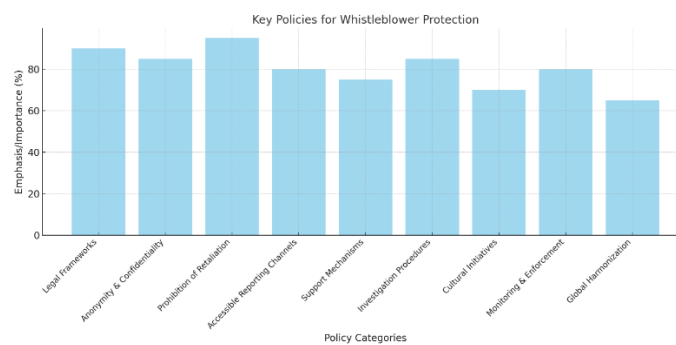

Figure 3: Key Policies for Whistle-blower Protection

The bar chart illustrates the emphasis placed on various whistle-blower protection policies. Key insights include:

a. High Priority: Prohibition of retaliation, legal frameworks, and anonymity/confidentiality mechanisms are given the highest importance, reflecting their critical role in protecting whistle-blowers.

b. Moderate Priority: Accessible reporting channels, investigation procedures, and monitoring/enforcement follow closely, emphasizing operational effectiveness.

c. Lower Priority: Cultural initiatives and global harmonization, while important, are foundational and require long-term integration.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has highlighted the intricate interplay between the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and social influence constructs—conformity, compliance, and obedience—in shaping whistleblowing Behaviour. The findings confirm that whistleblowing decisions are influenced by both individual cognitive factors, such as

attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived Behavioural control, and social dynamics within organizations. While TPB provides a robust framework for predicting whistleblowing intentions, integrating social influence factors enriches our understanding of how group pressures, authority dynamics, and ethical climates can either encourage or hinder ethical reporting. These insights underscore the need for organizations to adopt a holistic approach to promoting whistleblowing by addressing both individual and systemic factors.

The analysis also reveals that barriers such as fear of retaliation, moral disengagement, and negative social pressures significantly deter whistleblowing. Conversely, supportive organizational cultures, ethical leadership, and robust protection mechanisms foster an environment conducive to ethical reporting. This dual role of social influences emphasizes the importance of creating policies that not only encourage whistleblowing but also protect and support whistle-blowers throughout the process. Factors such as organizational cynicism, religiosity, and commitment further demonstrate the need to consider personal and contextual variables in designing interventions.

Fostering a whistle-blower-friendly environment requires a multifaceted strategy that integrates the insights from TPB and social influence theories. Organizations should prioritize legal protections, anonymous reporting channels, anti-retaliation measures, and cultural initiatives to build trust and empower individuals to report wrongdoing. Policymakers and researchers must also continue to explore the nuances of whistleblowing Behaviour across diverse cultural and organizational settings. By addressing the cognitive and social dimensions of whistleblowing, organizations can strengthen their ethical foundations and enhance overall governance and accountability.

Limitations

This systematic literature review, while comprehensive, is subject to several limitations. First, the review relies on existing studies that predominantly focus on specific regions or industries, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to diverse cultural or organizational contexts. For instance, much of the research reviewed emphasizes Western contexts, with limited representation from developing countries or multicultural environments. Second, the review does not include grey literature or unpublished studies, which may contain valuable insights into whistleblowing Behaviours and practices. This omission could result in a bias toward peer-reviewed publications. Third, the integration of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with social influence constructs remains largely theoretical in the literature, with limited empirical studies testing the combined framework.

This restricts the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the interactions between these constructs.

Another notable limitation is the cross-sectional nature of most of the studies analysed. Longitudinal studies are needed to capture the evolution of whistleblowing intentions and actions over time, particularly as organizational climates or personal circumstances change. Lastly, while this review identifies significant barriers and enablers of whistleblowing, it does not explore the psychological and emotional toll on whistle-blowers post-disclosure, an area that warrants deeper investigation.

Future Research Agenda

a. Exploration of Diverse Contexts: Future studies should examine whistleblowing Behaviours across a broader range of cultural, geographic, and organizational contexts. Investigating how cultural dimensions, such as collectivism or power distance, influence whistleblowing decisions will provide more nuanced insights.

b. Empirical Validation of Integrated Models: There is a need for empirical studies testing the combined framework of TPB and social influence constructs. Experimental and mixed-method designs can help validate how these constructs interact and affect whistleblowing Behaviour in practice.

c. Longitudinal Studies: Long-term studies are essential to track how whistleblowing intentions evolve and how individuals respond to changes in organizational policies, ethical climates, or personal circumstances.

d. Psychological and Emotional Impact: Future research should delve into the psychological and emotional consequences of whistleblowing, focusing on how whistle-blowers cope with retaliation, social ostracism, or ethical dilemmas.

e. Technology and Reporting Mechanisms: With the rise of digital platforms, research should explore how technology can enhance anonymous reporting channels and improve whistle-blower protection mechanisms. Studies should assess the effectiveness of AI-driven systems in maintaining confidentiality and minimizing bias.

f. Policy Impact Assessments: Empirical evaluations of whistle-blower protection policies across different sectors and countries can provide insights into their effectiveness, identifying best practices and areas for improvement.

g. Ethical Leadership and Organizational Culture: Future research should investigate how ethical leadership and supportive cultures can mitigate the deterrent effects of social pressures, such as conformity and obedience.

By addressing these research gaps, scholars and practitioners can further enhance the understanding of whistleblowing Behaviour and develop strategies that empower individuals to act ethically while ensuring their protection.

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