

Balancing Integrity and Trust: Professional Skepticism, Professional Ethics, and Auditors' Whistleblowing Decisions in an Emerging Economy

Fadly Achmad A. M.¹, Arifuddin², Agus Bandang³, Abdul Rahman⁴, Haryanto⁵

Department of Accountancy, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4}
Department of Accountancy, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia⁵

Corresponding Author: Fadly Achmad A. M. (fadlyachmad@fe.unhas.ac.id)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of professional skepticism and professional ethics on auditors' whistleblowing decisions and investigates whether organizational culture moderates these relationships. Data were collected from 81 auditors at Public Accounting Firms in South Sulawesi Province using a closed questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using multiple linear regression and Moderated Regression Analysis in IBM SPSS Statistics 32. The findings show that professional skepticism and professional ethics have positive and significant effects on whistleblowing. However, organizational culture does not moderate either relationship. These results indicate that auditors' reporting decisions are primarily driven by internal professional values rather than organizational factors. This study extends Goal-Setting Theory in the auditing context by demonstrating that auditors' commitment to integrity, objectivity, and public responsibility is more influential than organizational culture in promoting whistleblowing. Its novelty lies in examining the limited moderating role of organizational culture in regional Public Accounting Firms. The findings also confirm that professional skepticism should be evidence-based and proportionate rather than excessive. Practically, strengthening whistleblowing should focus on internalizing professional ethics, enhancing risk-based professional skepticism training, and implementing a safe reporting system.

Keywords: Professional Skepticism; Professional Ethics; Whistleblowing; Organizational Culture; Auditors; Public Accounting Firms



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INTRODUCTION

The audit profession stands above the public mandate. Auditors not only check the numbers, but also maintain the credibility of the information used by investors, regulators, creditors, and the public in making decisions. When auditors fail to maintain professional independence and courage, the quality of financial reporting can decline, and the room for fraud widens. The Enron, WorldCom,

and global financial crises show that audit failures can cause economic losses and lower trust in the public accounting profession (Sikka, 2009). In such situations, whistleblowing becomes an important mechanism to uncover violations that are not caught by formal control procedures. Whistleblowing is understood as the act of members of an organization or parties with access to information reporting illegal, unethical, or unauthorized practices to those who can make corrections (Near & Miceli, 1985; Miceli et al., 2008). In the context of audits, these actions often arise when the auditor finds indications of fraud, management pressure, violations of professional standards, or manipulation of financial information. However, the auditor's decision to report violations is not simple. Auditors weigh the risks of retaliation, labor-relations pressure, career consequences, client confidentiality, and moral responsibility to the public interest (Alleyne et al., 2013; Latan et al., 2019).

Two individual factors that are often associated with whistleblowing auditors are professional skepticism and professional ethics. Professional skepticism helps auditors question evidence, delay assessments until sufficient evidence is available, and seek additional information when inconsistencies arise (Nelson, 2009; Hurtt, 2010). More skeptical auditors are expected to be better at recognizing signs of violations and more willing to push for corrections. Professional ethics is also an important basis, as the code of ethics requires auditors to maintain integrity, objectivity, professional competence, confidentiality, and professional behavior (IESBA, 2020). If the auditor internalizes the principle, reporting violations can be seen as part of the profession's responsibility. While the relationship appears theoretically strong, previous studies have reported findings that are not entirely consistent. Otchere et al. (2022), Mande et al. (2020), and Ningsih et al. (2022) show that professional skepticism is positively related to the tendency to whistleblow or to detect fraud. However, Elias and Farag (2015) show that the relationship between skepticism and whistleblowing can weaken when individuals face the risk of retaliation. Mastiniwati and Mansor (2020) also found that attitudes do not always directly affect reporting intentions. Another finding from Rizal et al. (2026) points to a negative direction in certain contexts, namely, when the existence of a climate or whistleblowing system can lead auditors to lower their level of skepticism because they believe the reporting mechanism has captured important issues. These differences in results suggest that skepticism does not always work automatically. The effect depends on the context, risk perception, and the professional standards the auditor advocates.

Inconsistencies are also evident in the organization's ethical and cultural roles. Curtis and Taylor (2009) and Treviño et al. (2006) show that ethical understanding and professional ethical orientation can increase auditors' propensity to report violations. Seifert et al. (2010) found that organizational fairness and whistleblowing procedures encourage reporting. Kaptein (2011) also asserts that ethical culture can influence an individual's response to wrongdoing. However, Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) show that ethical judgments do not always turn into actual whistleblowing acts because individuals still consider social risks, retaliation, and personal costs. This difference creates research space regarding when individual auditor factors are strong enough to drive whistleblowing and when the organizational context actually strengthens the relationship.

The main research gap in this article lies in three aspects. First, most whistleblowing studies treat organizational culture as a general supporting factor. Still, few have tested whether it actually moderates the relationship between professional skepticism, professional ethics, and whistleblowing among auditors in regional Public Accounting Firms. Second, studies of skepticism often emphasize its usefulness in detecting cheating but still lack clarity about the limits of skepticism to avoid excessive suspicion. Third, empirical evidence in the context of Public Accounting Firms in South Sulawesi remains limited, even though auditors in this region face close working relationships, smaller audit market structures than in national business centers, and professional pressures that can affect reporting decisions. Based on these gaps, this study examines the influence of professional skepticism and professional ethics on whistleblowing auditors and examines the role of organizational culture as a moderator. The novelty of this article lies in its use of organizational culture as a boundary test for the relationship between individual auditor factors and whistleblowing

in the context of regional Public Accounting Firms. In addition, this article explicitly distinguishes proportionate professional skepticism from cynicism or over-skepticism. In this way, the study not only assesses whether skeptical auditors are more courageous in reporting but also explains that skepticism must remain within professional boundaries and be grounded in evidence, risk, and audit standards.

This research contributes to the development of Goal-Setting Theory in auditing. This theory explains that clear, internalized goals can direct an individual's effort, focus, and choice of action (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2006). In the context of this study, the auditor's professional goals of integrity, objectivity, and protection of the public interest are positioned as internal mechanisms that encourage whistleblowing. If organizational culture has not been shown to moderate such relationships, then these findings point to the limits of the organizational context's role when the auditor's professional goals have been firmly internalized.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Goal Setting Theory

The Goal-Setting Theory was developed by Locke and Latham (1990). This theory explains that individual behavior is influenced by goals that are specific, challenging, and accepted by the individual. Goals work through four main mechanisms: directing attention, increasing effort, strengthening persistence, and driving goal-achievement strategies (Locke & Latham, 2006). In the audit profession, the auditor's professional goal is not only to complete the audit procedure, but also to maintain the quality of evidence, protect the public interest, and ensure that material violations are not allowed. In this study, professional skepticism and professional ethics are positioned as a form of internalization of auditors' professional goals. Auditors who have strong professional goals will be more sensitive to indications of violations and better prepared to take reporting action when they find wrongdoing. Organizational culture is positioned as a contextual factor that can, in theory, strengthen or weaken those relationships. If the organization's culture supports transparency, whistleblower protection, and follow-up on findings, it should be easier for auditors to translate their professional goals into whistleblowing actions.

Whistleblowing Auditor

Whistleblowing is the reporting of illegal or unethical practices to those with the authority to remedy the situation (Near & Miceli, 1985; Miceli et al., 2008). Reporting can be internal through superiors, audit committees, or organizational reporting mechanisms. Reporting can also be external to regulators, law enforcement, or the public when internal channels are ineffective (Park et al., 2008). In the context of auditors, whistleblowing has a dual position. On the one hand, auditors must maintain the confidentiality of client information. On the other hand, auditors have a public responsibility when they find violations that could harm the users of financial statements. This dilemma makes whistleblowing auditors determined not only by technical knowledge but also by moral courage, risk assessment, organizational protection, and commitment to professional ethics (Alleyne et al., 2013; Latan et al., 2019).

Professional Skepticism

Professional skepticism is an attitude of thinking that is always questioning, aware of conditions that may indicate misrepresentation due to error or fraud, and critically assessing audit evidence (IAASB, 2022). Nelson (2009) places skepticism as a cognitive mechanism that helps auditors assess evidence and the risk of misrepresentation. Hurlt (2010) developed the Professional Skepticism Scale, which contains the dimensions of questioning mind, suspension of judgment, search for knowledge, interpersonal understanding, autonomy, and self-confidence. Professional skepticism needs to be given clear boundaries. Skepticism does not mean that auditors always think clients are lying. Skepticism is also not cynicism, permanent suspicion, or rejection of all the information the client

provides. Healthy skepticism is a professional's skepticism that is proportionate, evidence-based, and tailored to audit risk. Auditors need to postpone conclusions until there is sufficient evidence, but still maintain the objectivity and efficiency of the audit. Thus, the bottom line of skepticism is an overly trusting attitude that leads auditors to miss red flags. The upper limit is excessive suspicion that can lead to over-auditing, magnify audit costs, slow down decisions, and damage professional working relationships (Quadackers et al., 2012). The limits of skepticism are important because whistleblowing should be based on sufficient judgment, not just prejudice. A professionally skeptical auditor will look for additional evidence, test the consistency of the information, and evaluate whether the indications of a violation are strong enough to report. Therefore, proportionate skepticism can improve the quality of whistleblowing decisions, while excessive skepticism can lead to premature or non-evidence-based reporting.

Professional Ethics of Auditors

Professional ethics is a set of moral principles and standards of conduct that govern auditors in carrying out their professional duties. IESBA (2020) emphasizes five basic principles, namely integrity, objectivity, professional competence and prudence, confidentiality, and professional behavior. This principle leads auditors not only to adhere to procedures but also to make decisions that safeguard the public interest. Professional ethics are relevant to whistleblowing because reporting violations often requires courage to put integrity above personal interests or organizational pressures. Auditors who internalize professional ethics tend to view reporting violations as part of professional responsibility, rather than simply an optional action. Curtis and Taylor (2009) show that ethical orientation influences auditors' willingness to whistleblow. Treviño et al. (2006) also explain that ethical behavior in organizations is influenced by moral awareness and a supportive environment.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture comprises the basic values, norms, and assumptions that shape how members of an organization think and act (Schein, 2010). In an audit organization, organizational culture can be seen in management's support for transparency, the existence of reporting channels, the protection of whistleblowers, the enforcement of ethical standards, and the organization's consistency in following up on findings. Organizational culture can theoretically strengthen whistleblowing when auditors feel safe speaking, trust that reports will be acted upon, and are confident that the organization protects whistleblowers. Kaptein (2011) shows that ethical culture influences an individual's response to wrongdoing. Seifert et al. (2010) found that organizational fairness and whistleblowing procedures can increase reporting tendencies. However, organizational culture can also fail to serve as a driver when auditors' professional values prevail, when the risk of retaliation remains high, or when organizational support is only formal.

Hypothesis Development

Professional Skepticism and Whistleblowing

Professional skepticism is a core attribute of high-quality audits. It refers to an auditor's questioning mind, critical assessment of audit evidence, and alertness to conditions that may indicate possible misstatements due to fraud or error (Nelson, 2009). Hurlt (2010) conceptualizes professional skepticism as a multidimensional construct that includes a questioning mind, suspension of judgment, search for knowledge, interpersonal understanding, autonomy, and self-confidence. These dimensions are relevant to whistle-blowing because auditors must not only identify suspicious circumstances but also decide whether the evidence is sufficient to justify reporting. Auditors with higher professional skepticism are more likely to question the explanations provided by clients or colleagues, seek corroborating evidence, and recognize inconsistencies. Such auditors may be less likely to accept management representations at face value and more likely to identify wrongdoings. Once a wrongdoing is identified, skepticism can increase the perceived seriousness of the issue and the auditor's sense of professional responsibility to report it. Prior studies suggest that professional

skepticism is related to auditors' ability to detect fraud and their willingness to act when they encounter irregularities (Nelson, 2009; Quadackers et al., 2014; Shaub & Lawrence, 1996).

In the whistle-blowing process, the first stage is often the recognition that an act is improper. Professional skepticism supports this stage by encouraging auditors to examine whether the reported information is reliable, whether the explanations are plausible, and whether unusual transactions indicate fraud. If skepticism leads auditors to identify stronger evidence of wrongdoing, it should increase their willingness to report the issue through appropriate channels. Based on this reasoning, the first hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H1. Professional Skepticism Positively Affects Auditors' Whistle-Blowing Decisions.

Professional Ethics and Whistleblowing

Professional ethics refer to the principles, standards, and moral responsibilities that guide auditors in performing their duties. The ethical principles commonly emphasized in the accounting profession include integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behavior. These principles are central to whistle-blowing because they define how auditors should act when they encounter wrongdoing. An auditor with strong professional ethics is expected to prioritize truthfulness, fairness, and public interest over personal or organizational advantage. Integrity requires auditors to be honest and straightforward; objectivity requires freedom from bias or undue influence; professional competence and due care require auditors to perform their work diligently and in accordance with standards; confidentiality requires careful handling of information; and professional behavior requires compliance with laws and professional regulations. When auditors observe fraud or unethical conduct, these ethical principles can motivate them to report the matter rather than remain silent.

Ethical decision-making literature suggests that individuals are more likely to take moral action when they recognize an ethical issue, make a moral judgment, establish moral intent, and possess the courage to act. In auditing, professional ethics support each stage of the process. It provides a framework for recognizing wrongdoing, evaluating its consequences, and determining whether reporting is required. Prior studies have found that ethical climate, ethical judgment, and ethical commitment are associated with whistleblowing intentions (Alleyne et al., 2013; Latan et al., 2018; Taylor & Curtis, 2010; Treviño et al., 2006). Accordingly, auditors who adhere more strongly to professional ethics should be more willing to report wrongdoing when it conflicts with the professional standards and public interest. Therefore, the second hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H2. Professional Ethics Positively Affect Auditors' Whistleblowing Decisions.

Organizational Culture as A Moderating Variable

Organizational culture refers to the shared values, norms, and assumptions that influence how members think, act, and interact within an organization (Kaptein, 2011; Schein, 2010). In the context of whistleblowing, culture can signal whether speaking up is encouraged or punished in a given organization. A culture that supports transparency, accountability, and fairness should reduce the fear of retaliation and increase auditors' willingness to report wrongdoing. Conversely, a culture that emphasizes silence, hierarchy, or loyalty to individuals may discourage whistle-blowing. Organizational culture may moderate the relationship between professionalism and whistleblowing. Professional skepticism helps auditors identify suspicious conditions; however, whether they act on such suspicions may depend on the organizational context. If a firm supports open communication, protects whistleblowers, and values ethical conduct, skeptical auditors may feel safer and more motivated to report wrongdoing. If the firm discourages criticism or retaliates against reporters, skeptical auditors may detect wrongdoing but remain silent. Therefore, the third hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H3. Organizational culture moderates the effect of professional skepticism on auditors' whistle-blowing decisions.

Organizational culture may also moderate the relationship between professional ethics and whistleblowing behavior. Auditors with strong professional ethics may feel morally obligated to report wrongdoing; however, the organizational environment may influence whether they act on that obligation. Ethical culture, leadership support, and clear reporting procedures can strengthen the effect of ethics on whistleblowing. In contrast, weak organizational support may suppress ethical actions because auditors may fear retaliation or believe that reporting will not lead to corrective actions. Thus, the fourth hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H4. Organizational Culture Moderates the Effect of Professional Ethics on Auditors' Whistleblowing Decisions.

METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with explanatory and cross-sectional designs. A cross-sectional design is used because data is collected over a single observation period to answer research questions (Sekaran, 2009). The analysis unit is an individual auditor. The study focused on the auditor's decision to engage in whistleblowing, which was explained by professional skepticism and professional ethics, with organizational culture as a moderating variable. The research model comprises two independent variables: professional skepticism and professional ethics. The dependent variable is auditor whistleblowing. The moderating variable is the organization's culture. The test is conducted using multiple linear regression and Moderated Regression Analysis.

Population, Sample, and Data Collection Techniques

The population comprised auditors working in public accounting firms in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The aggregate population was estimated to be 150 auditors. The study used probability sampling, specifically simple random sampling, to ensure equal opportunities for members of the population to be selected. The final sample comprised 81 usable responses from auditors working in public accounting firms in South Sulawesi. The respondent profile shows that 60 respondents (74 percent) were male and 21 respondents (26 percent) were female. Most respondents were aged 36–45 years, representing 61.7 percent of the sample. In terms of education, 30 respondents (37 percent) held undergraduate degrees, 45 respondents (55.5 percent) held master's degrees, and six respondents (7.5 percent) held doctoral degrees. Regarding job position, 46 respondents (56.8 percent) were junior auditors and 35 respondents (43.2 percent) were senior auditors.

Research Instruments and Measurement Scales

The research instrument used a closed questionnaire. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = hesitant or neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The direction of the score is made consistent, so a higher value indicates a stronger construct level. Negative items are reversed before the analysis process so that the entire score moves in the same direction. The professional skepticism instrument was developed from the concepts of Nelson (2009), Hurtt (2010), and Hurtt et al. (2013). The professional ethics instrument refers to the IESBA's (2020) basic principles. The whistleblowing instrument refers to the concepts of Near and Miceli (1985), Miceli et al. (2008), and Miceli et al. (2013). Organizational culture instruments were developed from Schein (2010), Hofstede et al. (2010), and Kaptein (2011), with an emphasis on openness, reporting support, and ethical compliance.

Table 1. Operationalization of Variables and Instruments

Whistleblowing	The tendency of auditors to report violations, fraud, or unethical actions to the authorities.	Reporting intention, reporting channels, whistleblower protection, and moral responsibility.	10 item valid	Near & Miceli (1985); Miceli et al. (2008, 2013)
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Skepticism professional	Proportionate, critical, and evidence-based professional doubt in evaluating audit information.	Questioning mind, suspension of judgment, search for knowledge, autonomy, self-confidence.	6 item valid	Nelson (2009); Hurtt (2010); Hurtt et al. (2013)
Professional ethics	Auditor's adherence to moral principles and standards of professional conduct.	Integrity, objectivity, professional competence and prudence, confidentiality, and professional conduct.	9 item valid	IESBA (2020)
Organizational culture	Organizational values and norms that affect openness, reporting security, and ethical compliance.	Transparency, whistleblowing support, follow-up findings, ethics, and compliance.	10 item valid	Schein (2010); Hofstede et al. (2010); Captain (2011)

Source: Primary data processed, 2026.

Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics, validity and reliability testing, classical assumption testing, multiple linear regression, and moderated regression analysis. Validity was assessed using Pearson's correlation by comparing the item correlation value with the critical r-value. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Classical assumption tests included tests for normality, multicollinearity, and heteroskedasticity. Hypotheses H1 and H2 were tested using multiple linear regression. Hypotheses H3 and H4 were tested using moderated regression analysis by including interaction terms between professional skepticism and organizational culture, and between professional ethics and organizational culture, in line with the moderator variable logic discussed by Baron and Kenny (1986).

The multiple regression model is specified as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \varepsilon$$

where Y is whistle-blowing, X1 is professional skepticism, X2 is professional ethics, and ε is the error term.

The moderated regression model is specified as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 Z + \beta_4 (X_1 \times Z) + \beta_5 (X_2 \times Z) + \varepsilon$$

where Z is the organizational culture, $X_1 \times Z$ is the interaction between professional skepticism and organizational culture, and $X_2 \times Z$ is the interaction between professional ethics and organizational culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Validity And Reliability

The validity test showed that all questionnaire items had Pearson correlation values above the critical r-value of 0.219 and significance values below 0.05. The professional skepticism items had correlation values ranging from 0.982 to 0.999. The professional ethics items had correlation values ranging from 0.498 to 0.732. The whistleblowing items had correlation values ranging from 0.515 to 0.933. The correlation values for organizational culture items ranged from 0.361 to 0.758. These

results indicate that all the items were valid. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Professional skepticism had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.997, professional ethics had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.789, whistleblowing had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.942, and organizational culture had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.768. As all values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.60, the instruments were considered reliable.

Classical Assumption Tests

The normality test using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test showed an asymptotic. Sig. The value was 0.200, and the Monte Carlo significance value was 0.386, both greater than 0.05. Therefore, the residuals were normally distributed. The multicollinearity test showed that the tolerance and variance inflation factor values were within acceptable limits, indicating that multicollinearity was not a significant problem. The Glejser test for heteroskedasticity showed p-values greater than 0.05 for professional skepticism, ethics, and culture. Therefore, the model showed no evidence of heteroscedasticity.

Multiple Regression Results

The first model tested the direct effects of professional skepticism and ethics on whistleblowing. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Multiple regression results

Variable	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.044	0.191	-	0.231	0.818
Professional skepticism	0.563	0.037	0.701	15.109	<0.001
Professional ethics	0.424	0.061	0.321	6.921	<0.001
Dependent Variable: Whistleblowing	Dependent Variable: Whistleblowing	Dependent Variable: Whistleblowing	Dependent Variable: Whistleblowing	Dependent Variable: Whistleblowing	Dependent Variable: Whistleblowing

Source: Primary data processed by SPSS V.32, 2026

The regression equation is as follows:

$$Y = 0.044 + 0.563X_1 + 0.424X_2 + \varepsilon$$

The model had an R value of 0.960, an R² value of 0.921, and an adjusted R² value of 0.919. This means that professional skepticism and ethics jointly explained 91.9 percent of the variation in whistleblowing decisions. The F-test showed that the model was significant (F = 456.046, p < 0.001). The coefficient for professional skepticism was positive and significant (B = 0.563, t = 15.109, p < 0.001). Therefore, H1 is supported in this study. The coefficient for professional ethics was positive and significant (B = 0.424, t = 6.921, p < 0.001). Therefore, H2 was supported.

Moderated Regression Analysis

The second model tests the moderating role of organizational culture. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Moderated Regression Analysis Results

Variable	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.820	0.908	—	0.904	0.369
Professional skepticism	0.728	0.271	0.907	2.684	0.009
Professional ethics	0.191	0.310	0.144	0.616	0.540
Organizational culture	0.169	0.515	0.138	0.328	0.744

Professional skepticism × Organizational culture	-0.156	0.169	-0.403	-0.924	0.359
Professional ethics × Organizational culture	0.050	0.191	0.143	0.263	0.794

Source: Primary data processed by SPSS V.32, 2026

The moderated regression equation is as follows:

$$Y = 0.820 + 0.728X_1 + 0.191X_2 + 0.169Z - 0.156(X_1 \times Z) + 0.050(X_2 \times Z) + \varepsilon$$

The moderated model had an R value of 0.972, an R² value of 0.945, and an adjusted R² value of 0.941. This indicates that the full model explains 94.1 percent of the variation in whistle-blowing decisions. The F-test showed that the model was significant (F = 257.283, p < 0.001).

The interaction between professional skepticism and organizational culture was not significant (B = -0.156, t = -0.924, p = 0.359). Therefore, H3 is not supported in this study. The interaction between professional ethics and organizational culture was also not significant (B = 0.050, t = 0.263, p = 0.794). Therefore, H4 was not supported.

Table 3. Summary Of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Professional skepticism has a positive effect on whistleblowing decisions	Supported
H2	Professional ethics has a positive effect on whistleblowing decisions	Supported
H3	Organizational culture moderates the effect of professional skepticism on whistleblowing decisions	Not supported
H4	Organizational culture moderates the effect of professional ethics on whistleblowing decisions	Not supported

Source: Primary data processed by SPSS V.32, 2026

Professional Skepticism and Whistleblowing

The results of the study show that professional skepticism has a positive and significant effect on whistleblowing. Auditors who have a critical attitude, do not readily accept information without verification, and actively seek additional evidence are more likely to report indications of violations. These findings are consistent with Otchere et al. (2022), Mande et al. (2020), Ningsih et al. (2022), and Amyar et al. (2023), who show that professional skepticism is associated with the courage to report and the ability to detect fraud. These findings also support the Goal-Setting Theory. Auditors who have a professional goal of maintaining audit integrity will use skepticism as a cognitive strategy to achieve those goals. When evidence indicates a violation, whistleblowing is consistent with the auditor's professional goals. In other words, skepticism is not just a personal character, but part of the process of achieving responsible audit goals. However, these results need to be read with the right limits of skepticism. Auditors should not equate skepticism with suspicion that lacks evidence. Effective skepticism is proportional skepticism. Auditors should be critical enough to identify red flags, but remain objective and report only with adequate evidence. This affirmation of the limit is important to ensure that whistleblowing does not become a reactive act that undermines the fairness of the audit process.

Professional Ethics and Whistleblowing

Professional ethics have a positive and significant effect on whistleblowing. These results show that auditors who are more adherent to the principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence, confidentiality, and professional conduct are more likely to report violations. Professional ethics provide a moral basis for auditors to put the public interest above personal and organizational

pressure. These findings are in line with Curtis and Taylor (2009), Treviño et al. (2006), and Barnett et al. (1993). Auditors who understand ethical standards are better able to recognize moral dilemmas and assess that reporting violations is part of the profession's responsibility. Within the framework of Goal-Setting Theory, professional ethics help to form clear professional goals. When these goals are internalized, auditors tend to choose actions that uphold the integrity of the profession. In practice, these results confirm that ethics training does not stop at understanding the code of ethics. Training needs to be geared towards real-life cases, simulated dilemmas, and decision-making exercises that auditors face when they encounter client pressure, retaliatory risks, or conflicts of interest. Thus, professional ethics can change from normative knowledge to readiness for action.

Organizational Culture and the Professional Skepticism–Whistleblowing Relationship

Organizational culture does not moderate the influence of professional skepticism on whistleblowing. These results suggest that the strength or weakness of an organizational culture does not change the relationship between professional skepticism and auditors' propensity to underperform. In other words, skeptical auditors are still more likely to whistleblow because of internal professional encouragement, not because the organization's culture reinforces the relationship. These findings differ from theoretical assumptions that place organizational culture as a supporting factor in reporting. Kaptein (2011) and Alleyne et al. (2013) show that ethical culture and organizational support can drive reporting. However, the results of this study are in line with the logic of Elias and Farag (2015) and Apadore et al. (2018), which hold that situational factors such as retaliation, social consequences, and a sense of security can mean that the organizational context does not always strengthen the relationship between individual factors and whistleblowing. There are two possible explanations. First, the professional skepticism of KAP auditors has become an inherent internal standard of the profession's role, so it is less dependent on variations in organizational culture. Second, the organizational culture respondents perceive may not be strong enough to drive reporting behavior. The existence of openness or reporting procedures is not necessarily perceived as real protection if the auditor still assesses social and career risks.

Organizational Culture and the Professional Ethics Whistleblowing Relationship

Organizational culture also does not moderate the influence of professional ethics on whistleblowing. These findings suggest that professional ethics work as a personal commitment that is relatively independent of the organization's culture. Auditors who have internalized the code of conduct still tend to report, even when the organizational culture does not significantly strengthen the relationship. These results expand on the findings of Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) that ethical judgments do not always turn into actual actions because individuals are still weighing situational consequences. These results also differ from Seifert et al. (2010), who showed that whistleblowing procedures and organizational fairness can encourage reporting. In the context of this study, organizational culture is not strong enough to change the impact of professional ethics on whistleblowing. This finding is theoretically important. Goal-Setting Theory explains that goals that have been accepted and internalized will direct individual behavior. The results of this study show that professional ethics has become an internal goal of auditors. Therefore, organizational culture does not play a role in changing relationships; rather, it is more likely to function as a general supportive condition that does not necessarily produce significant interaction effects.

Theoretical Contributions, Novelties, and Practical Implications

Theoretical Contribution

This research makes a theoretical contribution to Goal-Setting Theory in the context of auditing. The research findings show that professional goals, internalized through professional skepticism and ethics, encourage whistleblowing by auditors. When organizational culture has not been shown to moderate such relationships, this theory provides the additional explanation that the profession's internal goals can be more dominant than the organization's contextual factors in any given situation. The second contribution is the affirmation of the limits of professional skepticism. This article distinguishes skepticism as evidence-based doubt from excessive suspicion. This distinction is important because the whistleblowing literature often links skepticism to the courage to report, but

it does not always define boundaries to prevent auditors from over-skepticizing. Thus, this study helps position skepticism as a rational professional attitude rather than a cynical one.

Research Novelty

The novelty of this study lies in examining organizational culture as a moderating variable in the relationship among professional skepticism, professional ethics, and whistleblowing among auditors at Public Accounting Firms in South Sulawesi. This regional context is important because social relations, audit market structure, and workload pressures can differ from the national or cross-country contexts widely used in previous studies. The next novelty is the finding that organizational culture does not moderate two main relationships. These results not only show the rejected hypothesis but also reveal the boundary condition. In the context of this study, the influence of individual auditor factors is stronger than the role of organizational culture as a relationship changer. These findings open up new research space regarding other variables, such as fear of retaliation, perceived organizational support, ethical climate, and whistleblower protection, as mechanisms that may be more appropriate.

Practical Implications

Public Accounting Firms need to strengthen case-based training in professional skepticism. Training needs to emphasize how to identify red flags, evaluate evidence, and determine when to report. Training also needs to emphasize the limits of skepticism so that auditors do not act too trusting or too suspicious. Public Accounting Firms also need to strengthen the internalization of the code of ethics through simulating ethical dilemmas. Auditors need to be trained to deal with client pressure, conflicts of interest, the risk of losing their jobs, and the threat of retaliation. Scenario-based training helps auditors translate ethical principles into real decisions. Organizations still need to provide a safe, independent, and trustworthy whistleblowing channel. Even if the organization's culture is not proven to be a moderator, it is still responsible for creating real protection for whistleblowers. These protections include the confidentiality of identities, follow-up on reports, a prohibition on retaliation, and clear communication about reporting procedures.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that professional skepticism has a positive and significant effect on whistleblowing auditors. Auditors who are more critical, thorough, and evidence-based are more likely to report violations. Professional ethics also have a positive and significant effect on whistleblowing. Auditors who are stronger in upholding the principles of integrity and professional responsibility are more likely to report wrongdoing. Organizational culture does not moderate the influence of professional skepticism on whistleblowing. Organizational culture also does not moderate the influence of professional ethics on whistleblowing. These findings show that auditors' decisions to engage in whistleblowing in the context of Public Accounting Firms in South Sulawesi are driven more by internal factors within the profession than by interactions with organizational culture. This research has several limitations. First, the research population is limited to auditors of Public Accounting Firms in South Sulawesi Province, so generalizations to other regions should be made with caution. Second, data were obtained through questionnaires, so there is still a possibility of respondent perception bias. Third, the whistleblowing variable is measured as a tendency or intention, not an actual whistleblowing act. Fourth, the model uses organizational culture only as a moderating variable.

Subsequent research could expand the sample of auditors across different provinces or compare external and internal auditors. The next study can also use mixed methods, including in-depth interviews, to better understand why auditors do or do not blow the whistle. Variables such as fear of retaliation, ethical climate, perceived organizational support, organizational commitment, and whistleblower protection can be tested as mediators or moderators. In addition to the Goal-Setting

Theory, subsequent research can combine the Theory of Planned Behavior or Prosocial Organizational Behavior to explain whistleblowing intentions and actions more broadly.

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