

The Sustainability of Integrity within Life's Dynamics: Perspectives from the Individual, Organization, and Society

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Abstract

In the era of globalization and rapid technological advancement, the issue of integrity is gaining increasing attention as a core moral value in shaping ethical individuals, organizations, and societies. While integrity plays a crucial role in ensuring transparent and accountable service delivery systems, its implementation faces numerous challenges such as social pressure, moral dilemmas, material temptations, and the influence of popular culture. This study explores the meaning of integrity from various perspectives and examines the challenges of practicing it at three key levels: personal, organizational, and societal. Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach through content analysis of previous literature and secondary data to identify key issues and effective strategies for fostering integrity. A lack of deep understanding of the concept of integrity contributes to the erosion of this value, which may ultimately threaten social stability, public trust, and national development. Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for comprehensive intervention strategies to consistently nurture integrity and strengthen character development, organizational reputation, and societal harmony.

Keywords: Dynamics of life, Individual, Integrity, Organization, Society, Sustainability

Introduction

In the era of globalization and technological advancement, the issue of integrity has gained increasing attention across various sectors and layers of society. The development of the digital world, social pressures, and the demands of competitive living challenge the implementation of integrity values in daily life. One of the main causes of this problem is the lack of a deep understanding of the true meaning of integrity among society. Integrity is an

essential fundamental value in shaping an efficient, transparent, and accountable organizational culture, thus positively impacting the service delivery system of institutions (Salleh & Ahmad, 2018). This value is not only important at the organizational level but also in the formation of individual character and the overall well-being of society. However, practicing integrity is not easy because individuals often face moral dilemmas, peer pressure, conflicts of interest, and material temptations that undermine these values (Mokhtar & Halim, 2016). Integrity is also eroded by the influence of popular culture that prioritizes quick profits and external success over ethical principles. If left unaddressed, the collapse of integrity will have a detrimental effect on the socio-economic development and political stability of the country.

Etymologically, integrity comes from the Latin word *integer*, which means wholeness, perfection, and steadfast unity (Widang & Fridlund, 2003). Roberts (1994) defines integrity as the unity of commitment to values and the consistency between words and actions. According to Kamus Dewan (2005), integrity is defined as honesty and moral transparency in every decision and behavior of an individual or organization. Therefore, a study on the challenges of implementing integrity is necessary to develop effective intervention strategies. This study examines the main challenges in practicing integrity in the context of self, organizations, and society. Integrity is an important moral value that forms the foundation of behavior for individuals, organizations, and society. It involves not only adherence to the law but also the formation of an honest, trustworthy, responsible individual who adheres to moral principles even in challenging situations (Khan, 2019). Integrity is an inner strength that motivates individuals to do the right thing without supervision (Brown & Treviño, 2006). This value helps shape strong character and serves as a benchmark for making ethical and responsible decisions (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007).

In a complex and competitive world, maintaining integrity is important to ensure social harmony, justice in systems, and fair and sustainable progress (National Integrity Department, 2023). Integrity builds a strong foundation of trust between individuals, organizations, and institutions, which is key to effective cooperation and social development (Hosmer, 1995). Without integrity, the risks of abuse of power, injustice, and social conflicts increase, threatening societal stability (Zakaria & Yusoff, 2021). Integrity is also important in building trust between individuals and preventing the abuse of power, thus strengthening relationships across various segments of society (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). It is the foundation for respected leaders and credible organizations. Studies show that organizations emphasizing integrity values are more successful in the long run because they build a good reputation and enhance employee motivation (Kaptein, 2011). Conversely, the absence of integrity leads to a loss of trust, declining performance, and internal conflicts (Mayer et al., 2012).

This study focuses on the application of integrity in three main aspects: self, organization, and society. These three aspects are interrelated and have a significant impact on the formation of ethical individuals, credible organizations, and harmonious societies (Ismail & Rahman, 2020). However, various challenges such as social pressure, rationalization, and weak organizational culture can undermine efforts to maintain integrity. These pressures may cause individuals to disregard moral principles for personal or group interests (Bandura, 1991). Therefore, continuous efforts at all levels are required to cultivate and maintain integrity so that this value is consistently practiced and benefits both individuals and society (National Integrity Department, 2023).

Research Problem

Integrity is a core value that underpins the sustainability of individuals, organizations, and society. However, within the dynamics of modern life characterized by social pressures, institutional structural changes, and complex environmental influences the sustainability of integrity has become increasingly difficult to maintain (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Although integrity is often understood as an individual's ability to act in accordance with moral values, its development is in fact shaped by continuous interactions among personal, institutional, and social factors (Bandura, 1991).

At the individual level, a gap remains between moral awareness and actual practice, particularly when individuals face ethical dilemmas, peer pressure, and tendencies to rationalize unethical behaviour (Mokhtar & Halim, 2016). In the context of higher education, efforts to cultivate integrity through ethics education have been implemented; however, their effectiveness depends largely on the extent to which social and institutional environments consistently support the internalization of these values (Esa et al., 2025).

At the level of the family institution, changes in modern lifestyles have affected the family's role as the foundation for integrity formation. Although the family remains a primary institution in moral development, time constraints, economic pressures, and the influence of digital media have reduced the quality of parent child interactions, thereby weakening the modelling of integrity-based behaviour (Giddens, 1992; Zakaria & Yusoff, 2021). This situation becomes more critical in socioeconomically vulnerable communities, where academic dropout and unconducive social environments have long-term implications for the development of integrity among younger generations (Ismail & Rahman, 2020; Mokhtar et al., 2025).

At the societal and organizational levels, integrity serves as the foundation for social stability, effective governance, and sustainable development. Weaknesses in administrative transparency, service delivery systems, and law enforcement can erode public trust and encourage the normalization of unethical practices (Salleh & Ahmad, 2018). Organizational cultures that fail to support ethical values may further influence individuals to conform to collective norms that conflict with moral principles, in the interest of social and professional survival (Kaptein, 2011; Treviño et al., 2006).

Although numerous studies have examined integrity from individual, family, organizational, and societal perspectives separately, research that integrates all these dimensions within a dynamic life framework remains limited. This lack of a holistic approach raises critical questions about how integrity can be sustainably maintained when individuals are continuously shaped by complex interactions among personal values, institutional structures, and social norms. Therefore, a comprehensive approach encompassing education, enforcement, and the cultivation of integrity values across all stages of life is urgently needed (National Integrity Department, 2023).

Literature Review*Integrity at the Individual Level*

Individual integrity refers to the alignment between one's internal values and external actions. A person with integrity acts consistently based on moral principles, even without

external supervision. Palanski and Yammarino (2007) emphasized that individual integrity is not only about honesty but also the willingness to uphold principles in difficult or risky situations. In the Malaysian context, Mokhtar and Halim (2016) found that moral dilemmas, peer pressure, and the rationalization of unethical behavior are key challenges in maintaining individual integrity, especially among the younger generation. At the University of Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the teaching of KIAR plays a significant role in shaping students' moral reasoning and ethical awareness (Esa et al., 2025). Bandura (1991), through his social cognitive theory, stated that moral behavior is influenced by social observation and behavioral modeling. Therefore, developing integrity requires an environment that reinforces ethical values and counters the rationalization of unethical conduct.

Integrity within the Family Institution

The family is the fundamental institution that plays a crucial role in shaping a person's values and ethics from a young age. Giddens (1992) stated that although the structure and dynamics of modern families have changed significantly, the role of the family as a foundation for value formation remains relevant. In a local study, Ismail and Rahman (2020) emphasized that the interaction between parents and children is a key determinant of integrity in the younger generation. Parents' consistency in demonstrating integrity such as keeping promises, telling the truth, and being fair serves as a vital behavioral model for shaping children's character. Beyond the higher education setting, integrity development is also influenced by early educational experiences and socio-environmental factors. Academic dropout, particularly in rural and socioeconomically vulnerable areas, poses a serious challenge to the formation of integrity among students. In areas such as Zon OK9 Manggatal, Sabah, factors including limited access to education, family background, and social environment contribute to academic disengagement Mokhtar et al. (2025). However, modern life realities such as work commitments, economic pressures, and the influence of social media have reduced quality family interaction time, thereby weakening the natural inculcation of integrity within the family institution (Zakaria & Yusoff, 2021).

Integrity in the Societal Context

At the societal level, integrity is the foundation of social stability and sustainable development. A society that emphasizes integrity will foster credible institutions, ethical leadership, and a culture of mutual trust. Salleh and Ahmad (2018) stressed that public integrity is closely related to the efficiency of service delivery systems, administrative transparency, and the effectiveness of legal enforcement. Kaptein's (2011) study in the context of international organizations showed that organizational cultures that support ethics through policies, training, and appropriate reward systems can sustain integrity in the long term. Without a conducive social ecosystem, individuals tend to conform to collective norms even if they conflict with ethical principles (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). According to the National Integrity Department (2023), sustaining integrity in society requires a holistic approach encompassing education, enforcement, and the cultivation of integrity values across all sectors. This includes formal education in schools, public awareness campaigns, and comprehensive support and monitoring systems.

A summary of the literature review is presented in Table 1

Aspect	Key Points	References
Individual-Level Integrity	- Alignment between internal values and external actions. - Adherence to principles even without supervision. - Challenges: moral dilemmas, peer pressure, and rationalization of unethical behavior. - Influenced by social environment.	Palanski & Yammarino (2007); Mokhtar & Halim (2016); Bandura (1991)
Integrity within the Family Institution	- Family as the foundation for value and ethical development. - Parent-child interaction shapes children's integrity. - Parents' behavior serves as a model. - Challenges: lack of quality time, economic stress, social media influence. - Foundation of social stability and development.	Giddens (1992); Ismail & Rahman (2020); Zakaria & Yusoff (2021)
Integrity in the Societal Context	- Linked to transparency, legal effectiveness, and administrative efficiency. - Importance of ethical organizational culture. - Requires a holistic approach: education, enforcement, and value cultivation.	Salleh & Ahmad (2018); Kaptein (2011); Treviño, Weaver & Reynolds (2006); National Integrity Department (2023)

Source: Research Study (2025)

Based on Table 1, the sustainability of integrity requires a comprehensive approach involving various levels: the individual as the value actor, the family as the formative institution, and society as the supporting ecosystem. The challenges to integrity arise not only from personal moral weaknesses but are also influenced by social structures, contemporary culture, and institutional transparency. Therefore, integrity empowerment strategies must be holistic, intergenerational, and consistent, ensuring that these values are preserved in the long term. This reflects the need for a multi-layered and integrated approach to instilling and maintaining integrity throughout society, from personal development to institutional support and societal norms. Such an approach will require efforts across different sectors of education, policy, community involvement, and institutional governance to create a culture of integrity that endures and evolves over time.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, with the primary focus on content analysis of previous literature and secondary data related to integrity issues in the contexts of the individual, organization, and society (Creswell, 2013). Content analysis is systematically conducted to identify key themes, challenges in the implementation of integrity values, and effective strategies for fostering and sustaining these values (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the concept of integrity based on previous studies and relevant official documents (Bryman, 2016). The secondary data analyzed includes annual reports from government institutions, academic journal articles, and organizational documents related to integrity issues, including the National

Integrity Department's report (2023) and the study by Salleh and Ahmad (2018). The analysis of this secondary data helps to identify social challenges, moral pressures, and cultural factors influencing the implementation of integrity at various levels of society (Flick, 2018). This approach allows the study to formulate evidence-based and theory-driven strategic recommendations to strengthen the development of individual character, organizational reputation, as well as societal harmony and trust (Patton, 2015). The study also emphasizes the importance of integrated interventions at multiple levels to ensure holistic and sustainable continuation of integrity.

Discussion

The Relationship between Integrity and History: Perspectives of the Individual, Organization, and Society

The concept of integrity is not a new idea that emerged only in the era of globalization and technological advancement; rather, it has been deeply rooted since the early stages of human civilization. Throughout the history of world civilizations, integrity has consistently been regarded as the foundation for the formation of moral individuals, just systems of governance, and stable and harmonious societies. This passage indirectly reflects the continuity of integrity as a value that has long been discussed in the history of philosophy, religion, and social systems. From the perspective of Western intellectual history, integrity can be linked to classical Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's teachings on virtue ethics. Aristotle emphasized that the development of good character (moral virtue) is the key to a meaningful and prosperous life (eudaimonia). Values such as honesty, justice, and responsibility form the core of individual integrity, in line with the definition of integrity as consistency between values, words, and actions, as explained by Roberts (1994). In this context, integrity is seen as an inner strength that guides individuals to act morally without external coercion, as emphasized by Brown and Treviño (2006).

In the history of Islamic civilization, integrity is a fundamental principle manifested through the concepts of *amanah* (trustworthiness), *sidq* (truthfulness), and *'adl* (justice). The leadership of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Rightly Guided Caliphs (Khulafa' al-Rashidin) is often cited as exemplary models of integrity in governance. For example, Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab was renowned for his firmness and transparency in managing state resources, to the extent that he was willing to be held publicly accountable by the people. This historical experience demonstrates that integrity is not merely a personal value but also forms the basis of the legitimacy and stability of organizations and states, consistent with the arguments of Hosmer (1995) and Kaptein (2011) regarding the importance of integrity in building trust and long-term success. In the context of the history of modern organizations and administration, the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries introduced new challenges to integrity, particularly in economic and labour relations. Worker exploitation, corruption, and abuse of power led to the emergence of codes of ethics, labour laws, and principles of good governance. This illustrates that when integrity is neglected, negative consequences such as social imbalance and conflict arise, as noted by Mayer et al. (2012) and Zakaria and Yusoff (2021).

From the perspective of contemporary social history, the era of globalization and digitalization has presented new challenges to integrity, including the spread of misinformation, cyber corruption, and a culture of materialism. These phenomena reinforce

Bandura's (1991) argument on moral rationalization, whereby individuals tend to justify unethical behaviour for personal or group interests. History shows that the erosion of integrity values in society often leads to the collapse of public trust, political instability, and socio-economic decline, as seen in various institutional crises worldwide. This is consistent with historical developments demonstrating that integrity is a universal and timeless value. Whether at the level of the individual, organization, or society, history proves that the sustainability of a civilization largely depends on the extent to which integrity is understood, internalized, and consistently practiced. Therefore, efforts to cultivate integrity are not only relevant in the contemporary context but also represent a continuation of the moral struggle that has long existed throughout human history.

Challenges in the Implementation of Personal Integrity

Personal integrity refers to an individual's ability to uphold moral and ethical principles in thoughts, judgments, and behaviour, even when faced with internal and external pressures. Although integrity is often regarded as a personal value, its practice is influenced by various structural, social, and psychological factors. The challenges of practicing personal integrity have become increasingly evident in modern society, which is characterized by intense competition, life pressures, and changing social norms. The following discussion elaborates in detail on the main challenges in the implementation of personal integrity.

1. Lack of Values Education as a Major Challenge

Integrity is an internal value developed through continuous processes of education and socialization. It is not something that can be measured by material achievements such as wealth, rank, or social status. As stated by C.S. Lewis, *"Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching,"* emphasizing that integrity is the alignment between moral values and actions, rather than mere compliance due to external supervision. However, the lack of systematic and comprehensive values education poses a major challenge to the formation of personal integrity. Values education serves as the foundation for character development, moral judgment, and awareness of social responsibility. According to Ismail and Abdullah (2020), the absence of structured values education leads students to normalize unethical behaviours such as cheating in examinations, plagiarizing assignments, and manipulating systems for short-term success. This situation causes outcomes and results to be prioritized over ethical processes.

Furthermore, the removal or reduced emphasis on Civics and Citizenship Education has weakened efforts to cultivate moral awareness and civic responsibility among students. Yusof and Azlan (2021) argue that without formal exposure to ethical and civic values, students become more vulnerable to negative influences and fail to distinguish between right and wrong in complex situations. Hassan (2010) also emphasizes that the failure to instil integrity from an early stage of education has long-term consequences for organizations and the nation, including increased corruption, abuse of power, and misappropriation of public funds. Beyond formal education, the role of family and society is equally significant in nurturing personal integrity. Susan (2002) notes that moral development is strongly influenced by a consistent environment and positive role models. Without good examples from parents, teachers, and community leaders, the value of integrity is difficult to internalize deeply within individuals.

2. Life Pressures and Financial Problems

Life pressures, particularly those related to financial difficulties, are among the most significant challenges in maintaining personal integrity. *Kamus Dewan* (2005) defines integrity as honesty and high moral principles in one's actions and thinking. However, in the realities of modern life marked by rising living costs, economic uncertainty, and income inequality moral principles are frequently tested. Salleh and Ahmad (2018) explain that financial pressure can drive individuals to seek shortcuts to meet basic needs, including engaging in unethical acts such as corruption, fraud, or abuse of power. Such pressure not only affects physical and emotional well-being but also weakens moral judgment. When survival needs are perceived as more urgent than ethical values, personal integrity is at risk of being compromised. This situation indicates that efforts to preserve integrity cannot rely solely on individual strength. A holistic approach is required, including the provision of social safety nets, economic support for vulnerable groups, and continuous values education to enable individuals to uphold integrity even under challenging circumstances.

3. Environmental and Peer Influence

In addition to internal factors, environmental and peer influences play a crucial role in shaping and challenging personal integrity. Individuals tend to adjust their behaviour to align with prevailing social norms to gain acceptance and maintain social harmony. Mokhtar and Halim (2016) state that environments that normalize corruption, fraud, or abuse of power encourage individuals to perceive such behaviours as acceptable. The phenomenon of social conformity leads individuals to imitate majority behaviour even when it contradicts their personal principles. For example, in organizations that routinely conceal misconduct or legitimize unethical practices, new employees may feel pressured to comply with unethical instructions to protect their positions and workplace relationships. Over time, such adaptation results in the gradual erosion of integrity. Therefore, organizations must cultivate work cultures that support ethical values and integrity through ethical leadership, clear policies, and protection mechanisms for whistleblowers.

4. Lack of Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is a vital element in maintaining personal integrity, as it functions as an internal control that prevents individuals from engaging in unethical behaviour. According to *Kamus Dewan* (2005), discipline refers to the ability to control oneself and adhere to rules and principles. However, many individuals fail to uphold integrity when faced with opportunities for misconduct, particularly in the absence of supervision. Weak emotional control, greed, and material temptations especially in the digital era make integrity more vulnerable to erosion. For instance, the misuse of technology to steal data, manipulate information, or commit online fraud has become increasingly common. Therefore, self-discipline must be continuously cultivated through family upbringing, the education system, and professional training. Without strong self-discipline, integrity is difficult to sustain when confronting temptations and external pressures.

5. Social Pressure

Social pressure is a major challenge in maintaining personal integrity, particularly among adolescents and young professionals. Azmi (2021) notes that individuals are often exposed to pressure from peers, family members, or workplace cultures that encourage unethical behaviour, such as plagiarizing assignments, manipulating reports, or taking

shortcuts for personal gain. Hashim and Embong (2021) explain that the desire to be accepted within a group or the fear of being marginalized drives individuals to sacrifice integrity values. Such pressure is often subtle, manifested through justifications like “everyone does it” or “if we don’t follow, we will be left behind.” Social environments that legitimize unethical behaviour further reinforce negative norms and weaken individuals’ moral courage. Therefore, the courage to uphold what is right and strong self-confidence are essential in resisting social pressure (Azmi, 2021).

6. Rationalization

Rationalization is one of the most dangerous psychological challenges in the implementation of personal integrity. It refers to the cognitive process whereby individuals seek justifications to legitimize unethical behaviour. According to Suprianto Baen (2024), rationalization occurs when individuals convince themselves that wrongdoing is acceptable due to work pressure, organizational directives, or environmental norms. Bandura (1991) explains this phenomenon through the concept of *moral disengagement*, in which individuals distance themselves from moral responsibility by comparing their actions with worse offenses committed by others or by minimizing the impact of their behaviour. Rationalizations such as “others are worse” or “this does not harm anyone” erode self-awareness and normalize unethical conduct. If left unchecked, rationalization weakens ethical norms and undermines trust in social and organizational relationships. Therefore, enhancing self-awareness, critical reflection, and personal accountability is essential to building authentic and sustainable integrity.

Organizational Challenges in the Implementation of Integrity

Integrity is a core pillar in the development of sustainable, competitive organizations that are trusted by stakeholders such as employees, customers, investors, and the wider public. It does not merely refer to compliance with rules and laws, but reflects moral uprightness, transparency of processes, and an organizational commitment to the values of honesty, accountability, and fairness in every aspect of management. Hamoudah et al. (2021) emphasize that organizational integrity requires a balance between individual autonomy, personal principles, and collectively shared moral values within the organizational structure. Nevertheless, the implementation of integrity in organizations is not a simple process. In the reality of modern management, which is characterized by performance pressures, market competition, and profit demands, integrity is often marginalized or reduced to a slogan without deep internalization. Failure to embed integrity comprehensively will lead to resource leakages, erosion of trust, and the long-term deterioration of organizational reputation.

1. Erosion of Values in Organizational Culture

The erosion of values refers to a condition in which the principles of integrity are gradually undermined in an organization’s daily practices, whether in decision-making processes, task implementation, or resource management. According to *Kamus Dewan* (2005), “leakage” denotes a loss that results in damage. In an organizational context, such erosion involves not only financial losses but also the loss of moral values, procedural fairness, and public trust. Major manifestations of value erosion include corruption, cronyism, nepotism, and abuse of power. A contemporary example frequently highlighted in corporate governance reports is the awarding of contracts to certain parties without going through open

tender processes, often because of personal relationships or bribery. Such practices not only violate the principle of fair competition but also increase the risk of low-quality projects, wastage of public funds, and service failures (Incio & Seifert, 2024).

More concerning is the fact that many organizations only emphasize integrity after a scandal or media exposure occurs. Hoekstra et al. (2023) describe this approach as reactive, whereby corrective actions are taken only after the organization's reputation has already been damaged. The failure to proactively cultivate a culture of integrity allows unethical practices to become silently entrenched. Furthermore, the absence of a clear definition of integrity and shared ethical guidelines opens space for subjective interpretations among employees, resulting in inconsistencies in ethical practices. Therefore, organizations must invest seriously in building a culture of integrity through continuous training, clear ethical communication, and regular assessments of integrity compliance at all levels of the organization.

2. Fear of Retaliation

Fear of retaliation is one of the most significant barriers to upholding organizational integrity. Although many organizations have introduced internal reporting mechanisms such as whistleblowing systems, in practice employees remain reluctant to report misconduct due to fear of retaliation, including demotion, social exclusion, emotional distress, or job loss (Karatuna & Basol, 2018). In the Malaysian context, reports by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (SPRM, 2022) indicate that concerns over personal and family safety are the primary reasons individuals choose to remain silent despite being aware of misconduct. This situation allows unethical practices to persist, thereby normalizing a culture of corruption and abuse of power within organizations.

Gupta and Bhal (2021) assert that when employees' moral courage erodes, organizations lose one of their most critical internal control mechanisms. Without courageous internal voices willing to speak up and report wrongdoing, organizations are unable to correct weaknesses from within, exposing institutions to legal and reputational risks. Hence, comprehensive protection for whistleblowers including guarantees of confidentiality and clear legal action against retaliation is essential in fostering a culture of integrity.

3. Weak Organizational Culture

Organizational culture plays a crucial role in determining whether integrity can be effectively institutionalized. A weak organizational culture is typically characterized by the absence of clear core values, inconsistent ethical communication, and the failure of top leadership to lead by example. Harun and Ahmad (2024) state that when management fails to practice what it preaches, employees lose trust in the integrity values being promoted. Such cultural weaknesses create opportunities for various forms of misconduct, including manipulation of performance data, falsification of financial reports, and the neglect of work procedures to achieve short-term targets. In organizations without strict ethical guidelines, employees tend to prioritize personal interests over collective organizational goals. This phenomenon can lead to conflicts of interest, resource wastage, and biased decision-making. For example, failure to adhere to integrity principles in project management can result in budget leakages, implementation delays, and poor work quality. Management's indifferent

attitude toward internal complaints further exacerbates the situation, ultimately damaging the organization's reputation and credibility in the eyes of the public (Harun & Ahmad, 2024).

4. Addressing the Challenges of Integrity Implementation

To address these challenges, organizations must adopt a comprehensive and continuous approach that encompasses policy, structure, leadership, and workplace culture. The formulation of a clear, comprehensive, and context-relevant code of ethics is a fundamental step in setting expectations for acceptable behaviour. This code must be supported by continuous, practical, and contextual training so that employees understand how integrity applies in real-life situations. In addition, the provision of safe, confidential, and trustworthy reporting channels is essential to encourage the reporting of misconduct without fear. Organizations may also consider recognizing or rewarding individuals who demonstrate high levels of integrity as a means of reinforcing positive norms. According to Harun and Ahmad (2024), an organization's long-term success is determined not only by operational efficiency but also by the strength of its collectively practiced integrity culture. With clear leadership commitment and consistent implementation, organizations can not only reduce the risk of misconduct but also build a reputation as transparent, credible, and trustworthy institutions in the eyes of society.

Challenges Faced by Society in Strengthening Integrity

Societal integrity refers to the collective level of honesty, responsibility, fairness, and adherence to moral norms practiced by members of a society. It forms the foundation for the development of a stable social system, transparent governance, and sustainable, ethical national development. A society with high integrity tends to reject corruption, respect the rule of law, and uphold social justice. However, in contemporary reality, efforts to strengthen societal integrity face numerous challenges that are structural, cultural, and psychosocial in nature. These challenges are interconnected and, if not addressed holistically, can weaken the moral foundation of a nation.

1. Ineffective policing and permissive law enforcement

Weak law enforcement is one of the primary factors hindering the formation of an integrity-based society. When laws are not enforced consistently, fairly, and firmly, unethical behaviours such as corruption, abuse of power, and breach of trust tend to spread without fear of punishment (Razak, 2021). Inequality in law enforcement where certain groups appear "immune" from legal action creates perceptions of injustice within society. According to Ismail and Ahmad (2020), the perception that the justice system fails to protect public interests causes society to lose trust in state institutions. When perpetrators of misconduct escape punishment or receive only light penalties, the message conveyed to the public is that unethical behaviour is acceptable if one possesses power or influence. This situation weakens individuals' motivation to adhere to moral values, as honesty is perceived as unrewarding within an unjust system.

In the current context, reports by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (SPRM, 2022) indicate that weak oversight and ineffective enforcement contribute to financial leakages and damage to the reputation of public institutions. This not only harms the country's image but also instils cynicism within society toward anti-corruption efforts.

Without firm and transparent enforcement, societal integrity is difficult to strengthen because the law fails to function as an effective mechanism of social control.

2. Cultural and Social Influences

Culture and social norms play a significant role in shaping individual behaviour within society. In pluralistic societies, diversity of customs and values can be a strength; however, it also poses challenges in creating a shared understanding of integrity. In certain cultural contexts, practices such as giving gifts to officials or authorities are perceived as tokens of appreciation, even though they may violate integrity principles and open the door to hidden corruption (Mohamad, 2023; SPRM, 2023). Moreover, the value of preserving “face” and social harmony is often used as justification for concealing wrongdoing, particularly when influential individuals or community leaders are involved. Azam Baki (2023) emphasizes that a culture of covering up misconduct to protect image not only obstructs justice but also reinforces social norms that legitimize unethical behaviour. When society prioritizes reputation over truth, collective integrity gradually erodes.

Social and economic inequality further places pressure on the internalization of integrity. The World Bank (2021) reports that poverty and income inequality increase individuals’ likelihood of engaging in unethical activities such as fraud and petty corruption for survival. This demonstrates that integrity cannot be separated from issues of social justice and economic well-being. Societies struggling to meet basic needs face greater difficulty in maintaining high moral standards. In addition, globalization and social media introduce values of individualism, materialism, and hedonism that are increasingly pervasive, especially among younger generations. Sulaiman (2022) and the National Integrity Department (2023) note that without strong value education and critical filtering, exposure to such external influences can weaken collective responsibility, social empathy, and honesty.

3. Lack of Awareness and Moral Education

A lack of awareness and moral education from an early age constitutes a fundamental challenge in building a society with integrity. Moral education serves as a primary medium for instilling values such as honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and respect for the law. Sulaiman Mahbob (2005) asserts that moral values must be cultivated consistently through the roles of family, schools, and social institutions from the early stages of life. However, in contemporary practice, emphasis on academic achievement and material success often overshadows character formation and moral development. Insufficient exposure to ethical education results in individuals growing up without the capacity for mature moral judgment. When they later enter the workforce or hold positions of authority, they are more inclined to prioritize personal interests and misuse power. Failure to continuously nurture integrity values has long-term consequences for society. Individuals lacking a strong moral foundation struggle to distinguish right from wrong, thereby contributing to the erosion of integrity in critical sectors such as public administration, education, and the economy. Therefore, moral education should be viewed as a long-term investment in human capital development and social well-being.

4. Normalization of Unethical Behaviour

The normalization of unethical behaviour represents one of the most alarming challenges in modern society. When acts such as corruption, breach of trust, and abuse of power are perceived as commonplace, they become accepted as social norms (Widang & Fridlund, 2003). In such circumstances, unethical actions are no longer viewed as serious offenses but rather as a “way of life” or a survival strategy within a flawed system. For example, in certain sectors, deviant practices such as giving “facilitation payments” are considered normal to expedite processes. This normalization is reinforced when society chooses silence, refrains from reporting misconduct, and allows perpetrators to remain in power under the rationale that “everyone does it.” Such passivity lowers collective moral standards and erodes the spirit of shared responsibility. In the long run, the normalization of unethical behaviour creates a cycle of value degradation that is difficult to break. Younger generations raised in such environments may perceive unethical conduct as acceptable, thereby jeopardizing the future integrity of society and the nation.

Conclusion

Integrity is a fundamental foundation in shaping ethical individuals, transparent organizations, and just, responsible societies. However, its implementation is challenging due to obstacles at all levels. At the individual level, life pressures, lack of value education, peer influence, and weak self-discipline undermine the ability to uphold moral principles. At the organizational level, erosion of workplace culture, fear of reporting misconduct, and performance pressures without ethical grounding create opportunities for corruption, abuse of power, and mismanagement. At the societal level, weak law enforcement, social inequality, and negative cultural influences normalize unethical behaviour and weaken public trust in institutions. Therefore, efforts to uphold integrity require a holistic and integrated approach, beginning with value education from an early age, continuous training within organizations, firm law enforcement, and leadership by example. University students must practice integrity as the foundation of credible leadership, critical thinking, and resilience in facing the challenges of the modern world. All segments of society including educational institutions, the public and private sectors, and community leaders must share responsibility in cultivating integrity as a way of life. Only through sustained collective commitment can a society be developed that is not only materially advanced but also morally upright, honest, and just.

Overall, this study has successfully achieved its research objectives by providing a comprehensive and systematic understanding of integrity across personal, organizational, and societal levels. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of existing literature and secondary data, the study not only clarifies the conceptual meaning of integrity but also highlights practical challenges and effective strategies for its implementation in contemporary contexts. The findings contribute meaningful insights that enhance readers’ awareness of the importance of integrity as a foundational moral value in addressing ethical issues arising from globalization and technological advancement. Consequently, this study offers valuable guidance for academics, practitioners, policymakers, and the wider public, while reinforcing the significance of integrity as a critical element in sustaining ethical conduct, institutional credibility, and social well-being.

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