

Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Entrepreneurial Performance among Amway Business Owners in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of ethical leadership on sustainable entrepreneurial performance within Malaysia's direct selling ecosystem, with a focus on Amway Business Owners (ABOs). Malaysia's direct selling industry contributed RM34.4 billion to the national economy in 2024, recording 7.4% growth and ranking sixth globally and fourth in the Asia-Pacific region. The country also holds the highest global market penetration rate at 2.28%, underscoring the sector's socio-economic importance and its relevance to entrepreneurial research. Ethical leadership is defined in this study as the display of normatively appropriate behaviour by upline leaders and the reinforcement of ethical standards through transparent communication and responsible decision-making. In network-based direct selling environments where formal authority is limited, relational credibility becomes crucial for maintaining trust, engagement, and performance continuity. Grounded in ethical leadership theory, stakeholder theory, and sustainable entrepreneurship, this study proposes a structural equation model (SEM) in which ethical leadership predicts sustainable entrepreneurial performance conceptualised across economic, relational, and personal dimensions through the mediating roles of ABO engagement, ethical climate, and trust. The paper advances a clearer research gap by situating ethical leadership within Malaysia's collectivist, relationship-driven direct selling context, where informal governance requires strong moral leadership for sustainability. Practically, the study offers actionable guidance for strengthening ethical governance and responsible growth in network-based entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Direct Selling, Sustainable Entrepreneurial Performance, Abo Engagement, Ethical Climate, Trust, Malaysia

Introduction*Contextual Background*

The global business landscape is experiencing profound change, driven by accelerating digitalisation, heightened market uncertainty, and rising public expectations for ethical and sustainable business conduct (Liu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). Although technological progress has enhanced efficiency and expanded capacity across sectors, scholars increasingly emphasise that human-centered factors such as leadership behaviour, moral reasoning, and ethical decision-making remain essential to long-term organisational sustainability and resilience (Shi et al., 2019; Tushar, 2017). Without a strong ethical foundation, sustainability initiatives struggle to translate into genuine behavioural change, particularly in entrepreneurial settings where informal norms and social influence shape day-to-day operations. Against this backdrop, ethical leadership has become a vital force in shaping sustainable organisational performance. Leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and responsibility help to build trust and cultivate a positive work climate, thereby influencing followers' attitudes, engagement, and commitment (Hurduzeu, 2015; Nandasinghe, 2020). Treviño, Brown, and Hartman (2003), conceptualise ethical leadership as comprising both the moral person and the moral manager, while Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), draw on social learning theory to explain how observable, consistently reinforced conduct becomes a reference point for behavioural norms.

This dual role is especially salient in entrepreneurial ecosystems, where dependence on social influence is high and formal control mechanisms are minimal. The importance of ethical leadership is pronounced in direct selling, where business models rely on interpersonal persuasion, trust networks, and relational credibility. Malaysia's direct selling sector, valued at RM34.4 billion in 2024, plays a meaningful socio-economic role. Yet the same relational features that drive growth also create exposure to misconduct, misrepresentation, and opportunistic behavior; safeguarding legitimacy, therefore, hinges on visible, values-driven leadership. Within this industry, the Amway Business Owner (ABO) network presents a distinct leadership context. Unlike corporate environments with formal hierarchies, ABO leadership is relational, voluntary, and dependent on trust, credibility, and moral influence. Because leaders cannot rely on enforcement, ethical authenticity and transparent communication become central to sustaining downline commitment and overall network performance. Despite its clear relevance, research into ethical leadership within Malaysia's direct selling industry remains sparse and theoretically underdeveloped, highlighting the need for a contextually grounded account of how ethical leadership supports sustainable entrepreneurial outcomes in non-Western, collectivist settings. Entrepreneurial ecosystems that rely heavily on informal relationships and peer influence, such as the ABO network, present unique ethical vulnerabilities. In the absence of formal contracts and enforcement mechanisms, sustainability increasingly depends on trust, moral credibility, and perceived fairness among network members. When ethical leadership is weak, these relationship-driven systems become susceptible to misrepresentation, opportunism, and disengagement, ultimately undermining long-term entrepreneurial viability and sectoral legitimacy.

Problem Statement

Although ethical leadership is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of organisational sustainability, current scholarship offers limited insight into how it influences sustainable entrepreneurial performance within network-based direct selling models (Nguyen et al.,

2021; Xuecheng & Iqbal, 2022). Much of the existing research has concentrated on corporate or hierarchical settings, leaving a gap in understanding how ethical behaviour functions in entrepreneurial environments where leaders rely less on formal authority and more on interpersonal influence. This under-specification is consequential because relational credibility, trust, and moral conduct form the operational substrate of direct selling networks. A further limitation stems from the dominance of Western research, restricting theoretical generalisation to Asian, collectivist cultures such as Malaysia. Direct selling networks in Malaysia operate within strong relational norms and trust-based social structures; ethical leadership may therefore manifest differently and perhaps more strongly than in individualistic contexts. Another gap concerns the mechanisms through which ethical leadership promotes sustainable entrepreneurial performance. While ethical climate, trust, and engagement are frequently discussed, their mediating roles in entrepreneurial networks remain insufficiently theorised and tested. In parallel, persistent issues within Malaysia's direct selling sector, such as misleading income representations and manipulative recruitment, underscore the practical urgency of examining how ethical leadership can protect and strengthen sustainability across economic, relational, and personal domains. Accordingly, there remains limited empirical and conceptual understanding of how ethical leadership operates as a relational governance mechanism that sustains entrepreneurial performance in collectivist, network-based direct selling contexts.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine how ethical leadership influences sustainable entrepreneurial performance within Malaysia's direct selling industry, with a specific focus on Amway Business Owners (ABOs). In network-based entrepreneurial contexts where formal authority is minimal, uplines' ethical conduct plays a central role in shaping trust, relational cohesion, and engagement among downline entrepreneurs (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). A second objective is to explore the mediating mechanisms of ABO engagement, ethical climate, and trust through which ethical leadership may exert its influence, guided by social learning theory and ethical climate perspectives (Bandura, 1977; Victor & Cullen, 1988). Additionally, by situating the research within an emerging Asian market, the study addresses a notable gap regarding how ethical leadership functions in collectivist, relational entrepreneurial ecosystems. Finally, the study develops a conceptual framework suitable for structural equation modelling (SEM) to test both direct and indirect effects of ethical leadership on sustainable entrepreneurial performance.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the ethical leadership and sustainability literature. First, it extends ethical leadership theory beyond conventional corporate and hierarchical settings by situating it within a network-based entrepreneurial context characterized by informal authority and relational dependency. While ethical leadership has been widely examined in formal organizational structures (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006), its operation as a relational governance mechanism in decentralized entrepreneurial networks remains underexplored (Nguyen et al., 2021; Xuecheng & Iqbal, 2022). By integrating ethical leadership theory with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and sustainable entrepreneurship perspectives (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011), this study conceptualizes ethical leadership as a critical driver of sustainability in environments where

trust, moral credibility, and social influence substitute for formal controls. Second, the study addresses a persistent Western and firm-centric bias in ethical leadership research by providing theoretically grounded insights from a non-Western, collectivist context. Prior studies have predominantly focused on Western, individualistic cultures, limiting the generalizability of ethical leadership frameworks to relational, collectivist societies such as Malaysia (Madanchian et al., 2018; Dodamgoda et al., 2024). By examining ethical leadership within Malaysia's direct selling industry, the study enriches global leadership scholarship and demonstrates how ethical norms, moral role-modelling, and social learning processes function in culturally embedded entrepreneurial ecosystems (Bandura, 1977; Zainal et al., 2024). Finally, the study contributes to sustainability scholarship by adopting a multidimensional conceptualization of sustainable entrepreneurial performance, encompassing economic, relational, and personal dimensions. In contrast to traditional performance models that prioritize financial outcomes, this approach highlights the ethical and social foundations of long-term entrepreneurial viability (Tze San et al., 2022; Abdel-Zahra Hassan et al., 2023). By linking ethical leadership to sustainability outcomes through mediating mechanisms such as engagement, ethical climate, and trust, the study advances theory on how ethical leadership translates into durable value creation in relationship-driven entrepreneurial settings.

Practical Significance

From a practical standpoint, this study offers actionable insights for leaders, entrepreneurs, and organizations operating within Malaysia's direct selling industry. As the sector continues to expand, it faces increasing exposure to unethical practices such as misleading income representations, aggressive recruitment tactics, and weak accountability, all of which threaten trust, engagement, and long-term performance (Kaptein, 2024; Joseph, 2023). By empirically and conceptually demonstrating how ethical leadership shapes sustainable entrepreneurial performance, the study clarifies who benefits and how from ethical leadership practices. For Amway Business Owners (ABOs), ethical leadership promotes stronger engagement, trust, and relational cohesion within upline-downline networks, thereby enhancing stability, retention, and motivational sustainability (Mayer et al., 1995; Al Halbusi et al., 2023). At the organizational level, firms benefit from reduced reputational risk, greater consistency in ethical conduct across networks, and the development of resilient entrepreneurial communities capable of sustaining growth over time (Hameed et al., 2023; Pezzolo & Monaci, 2024). The findings underscore that sustainability in direct selling cannot be achieved solely through formal rules or codes of conduct; rather, it requires visible and consistently enacted ethical leadership that is reinforced through everyday interpersonal interactions (Treviño et al., 2003; Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Policy and Industry Significance

At the policy and industry level, the study provides timely and relevant insights to support stronger ethical governance within Malaysia's direct selling sector, which represents a substantial contributor to national economic activity (KLSE Screener, 2024). Regulators and industry associations continue to face challenges in safeguarding consumer trust, ensuring ethical recruitment practices, and maintaining the legitimacy of direct selling enterprises. The findings of this study highlight ethical leadership as a complementary mechanism to formal regulation by fostering self-regulation, shared ethical norms, and moral accountability within entrepreneurial networks (Abdelkarim, 2023; Kaptein, 2024).

By framing ethical leadership as a strategic capability rather than merely a moral ideal, the study informs the development of more effective policy frameworks, industry guidelines, and leadership development programmes aimed at promoting responsible and sustainable industry growth. In doing so, it offers policymakers evidence-based guidance on how ethical leadership can enhance legitimacy, strengthen stakeholder trust, and support the long-term sustainability of Malaysia's direct selling industry within an increasingly scrutinized business environment (Hsieh et al., 2023; Onori et al., 2025).

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership has gained prominence in organisational research, reflecting rising ethical complexity in modern firms. Brown et al. (2005) define ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and the promotion of such conduct via two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. This view elaborated by Brown and Treviño (2006) and Treviño, Brown & Hartman (2003) positions leaders as both moral persons and moral managers. In contrast to broader leadership lenses (e.g., transformational or authentic leadership), ethical leadership expressly addresses how leaders institutionalise ethics through systems, incentives, and sanctions. Recent studies link ethical leadership to the formation of an ethical climate, reduced misconduct, and improved trust and cohesion (Alsoqae et al., 2023; Onori et al., 2025). In emerging economies, including Malaysia, ethical leadership has been associated with stronger ethical cultures and sustainable performance in SMEs, underscoring its relevance beyond Western contexts (Madanchian et al., 2018; Zainal et al., 2024).

Sustainable Business Performance

Contemporary conceptions of performance extend beyond financial metrics to incorporate environmental and social dimensions. Sustainable performance reflects an organisation's ability to balance profitability with social responsibility and environmental stewardship (Al-Koliby et al., 2024; Tze San et al., 2022). Environmental performance concerns responsible resource use and ecological impact; economic performance emphasises resilient value creation rather than short-term maximisation; and social performance reflects contributions to stakeholder welfare, fairness, and community well-being (Abdul Rashid et al., 2017; Eltayeb et al., 2011). Within relationship-driven entrepreneurial ecosystems such as direct selling, social and relational facets of trust, loyalty, and cohesion are particularly salient to continuity and legitimacy.

Hypothesis Development

Ethical leadership is increasingly recognised as a determinant of sustainable entrepreneurial performance, particularly in network-based ecosystems where relational credibility and moral conduct underpin continuity and growth. Empirical work associates ethical leadership with integrity, transparency, and accountability—attributes linked to environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainability (Abdel-Zahra Hassan et al., 2023; Pezzolo & Monaci, 2024). In ABO networks, diffusion of ethical norms through upline–downline ties can reduce opportunism, stabilise engagement, and protect reputation.

Ethical Leadership and Environmental Performance

Research links ethical leadership with enhanced environmental outcomes via green identity, voluntary pro-environmental behaviour, and eco-innovation (Shuya & Mohamed Zainal, 2022; Al-Hawi & Cek, 2024; Rihal et al., 2025). Through signalling and role-modelling, ethical leaders create climates where ecological responsibility is normatively expected.

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on sustainable environmental performance.

Ethical Leadership and Economic Performance

Ethical leadership contributes to sustainable economic performance by embedding long-term value creation, reducing misconduct risk, and strengthening knowledge flows (Abdel-Zahra Hassan et al., 2023; Durst et al., 2024; Pezzolo & Monaci, 2024). Ethical climates also support transparency in reporting and responsible strategic choices, both of which underpin financial resilience.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on sustainable economic performance.

Ethical Leadership and Social Performance

Ethical leadership is associated with improved social sustainability via fairness, inclusion, and strengthened social capital, enhancing well-being and organisational citizenship behaviours (Abdi et al., 2024; Mseti et al., 2023). In relationship-driven settings, these dynamics translate into loyalty, reduced attrition, and reputational gains.

Hypothesis 1c (H1c): Ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on sustainable social performance.

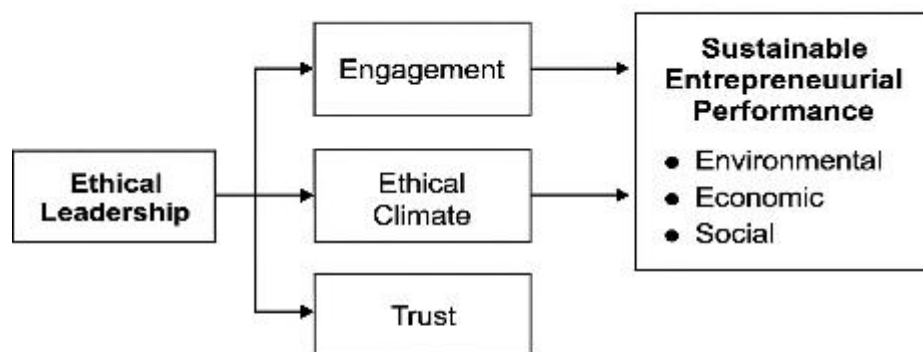


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Entrepreneurial Performance

Conceptual Framework of Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Entrepreneurial Performance

The framework illustrates pathways through which ethical leadership influences sustainable entrepreneurial performance. Ethical leadership functions as the independent variable, defined as integrity, fairness, moral accountability, and responsible decision-making reinforced through transparent communication and consistent role-modelling (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Al Halbusi et al., 2023). Sustainable entrepreneurial performance is

conceptualised across environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Engagement, ethical climate, and trust are proposed mediators that translate leader behaviour into durable sustainability outcomes within ABO networks.

Conclusion of Hypotheses Development

Evidence reviewed indicates that ethical leadership cultivates integrity, trust, learning, and ecological responsibility, supporting long-term outcomes across environmental, economic, and social pillars (Shuya & Mohamed Zainal, 2022; Durst et al., 2024; Abdi et al., 2024). Accordingly, the study positions ethical leadership as a strategic capability that aligns ethical culture with sustainability performance in network-based entrepreneurship.

Discussion

This conceptual analysis underscores three interlocking insights. First, ethical leadership in ABO networks operates as relational governance: in the absence of formal authority, moral exemplarity and transparent communication become the primary coordination mechanisms that reduce uncertainty and opportunism. Second, sustainability in direct selling is irreducibly multidimensional; beyond economic outcomes, relational durability (trust, loyalty, psychological safety) and personal well-being are necessary conditions for continuity. Third, mediators such as engagement, ethical climate, and trust provide the causal infrastructure that connects leader conduct to sustainability outcomes. These insights refine theory in two ways. They extend ethical leadership scholarship into collectivist, relationship-dense contexts, addressing a long-standing Western bias. They also integrate stakeholder and sustainable entrepreneurship perspectives by showing how ethical leadership aligns interdependent interests uplines, downlines, customers, and regulators around shared norms that support responsible growth. For practice, the discussion highlights that codified ethics are insufficient without visible leader behaviour. Organisations should therefore prioritise selection, training, and evaluation systems that reward ethical sense-making, fair decision-making, and transparent representations of income. At the field level, credible communication and coaching routines can institutionalize standards within upline-downline interactions, reducing attrition and reputational risk.

Research Implications

This study contributes to theory by positioning ethical leadership as a central driver of sustainability within network-based ecosystems and by refining stakeholder-oriented explanations in collectivist settings. It also offers practical guidance for embedding ethical leadership across recruitment, development, and recognition systems in direct selling organisations.

Theoretical Implications

The study integrates ethical leadership theory, relational governance, and sustainability principles to explain long-term entrepreneurial outcomes in decentralised ecosystems. It refines social learning accounts by emphasising how observable leader behaviour shapes shared expectations and ethical climates that guide decisions where formal controls are limited (Bandura, 1977; Brown & Treviño, 2006). By situating analysis within Malaysia's collectivist context, the study enhances generalisability beyond Western settings.

Practical Implications

For direct selling firms, embedding ethical criteria into selection, onboarding, leadership development, and recognition systems can institutionalise ethical norms and reduce practices that undermine credibility. Performance management should include transparent income communication, fair goal-setting, and coaching standards that reward integrity as well as growth. Given the sector's substantial economic contribution, strengthening governance through ethical leadership is a pragmatic route to sustained competitiveness and legitimacy.

Future Research

Future work should examine moderators (e.g., ethical climate strength, stakeholder engagement, innovation climate) that may condition the effects of ethical leadership on sustainability outcomes, and employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to capture how relationships evolve. Comparative studies across emerging markets can identify cultural and regulatory contingencies that shape ethical leadership's influence in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Overall Conclusion

Ethical leadership emerges as a cornerstone of sustainable entrepreneurial performance in Malaysia's relationship-driven direct selling sector. Within the ABO context, ethical conduct reinforced through responsible decision-making functions not merely as a moral signal, but as a relational governance mechanism that sustains trust, engagement, and stable norms across upline downline relationships. By framing ethical leadership as a strategic entrepreneurial capability rather than a moral preference, this paper clarifies how ethical practice and sustainability become mutually reinforcing, particularly in network-based ecosystems where formal control is limited and long-term performance depends on relational credibility.

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