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LEADERSHIP STYLES IN MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY AND NETWORK RETENTION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

The Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) industry plays an important role to Malaysia economy, but yet faced some challenges likewise instability of MLM network and high turnover rate among distributors. Due to the lack of formal employment contracts among dispersed distributors, traditional command-and-control leadership styles are ineffective, necessitating a shift towards a people-centric Leadership 5.0 model. This paper proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain how different leadership styles influence the long-term sustainability of networks and distributor retention. By integrating the Resource-Based View (RBV), Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX), and Fiedler's contingency theory, this paper categorizes ten major leadership styles into a structured classification system (relational, developmental, and directional), built within an Input-Process-Output (IPO) framework. This paper presents five testable hypothesis, demonstrating that while directional leadership styles can improve short-term sales metrics, the long-term sustainability of networks highly depends on high-quality LMX relationships, which act as mediators. Furthermore, the Resource-Based Value (RBV) perspective suggests that leader's relational assets and ethics, including the Islamic leadership dimension are scarce, inimitable, and irreplaceable resources that buffer networks against market shocks, while pay equity and product quality serve as situational moderating factors. While future quantitative validation using structural equation modelling (SEM) is needed, this model provides a strategic

roadmap for MLM executives to restructure training around relationship coaching and offers a clear compliance benchmark for regulators such as the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN) to distinguish legitimate MLM networks from predatory scams.

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Business Sustainability, Contingency Theory, Leader-Member Exchange Theory, Leadership Styles, Malaysia, Multi-Level Marketing, Resource-Based View Theory.



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Introduction – Background of the Study

MLM and direct selling industry plays a critical role in the Asia-Pacific region as a backbone of socioeconomic empowerment, rapid transformation on retail industry as well as on entrepreneurship. Based on the data of Direct Selling Association of Malaysia (DSAM, 2025), Malaysia ranked as top ten in worldwide markets and top three in Southeast Asia, which the Malaysia MLM industry generated approximately RM51.02 billion or equivalent to 2.4% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) country. Besides that, MLM industry become major pillars to Malaysia's micro entrepreneurship, particularly to suburban and rural populations (Ambily, 2026; DSAM, 2025; Fuziah, 2025; Manyam, 2025). Despite the fact that MLM industry in Malaysia contribute a lot to Malaysia economy and social economy, but its operational structure way varies differently from normal traditional corporate organizations. Majority corporate entities, organizational behaviours are governed by basic salary, job scope, employment contracts and pyramid authority. In contrast, MLM industry operate via an asymmetric, decentralized network of independent distributors or downlines (Gross & Vriens, 2019). The distributors are independent workers or better known as freelancers, they don't have fixed basic salary, their income are generated from their sales and commissions earned by recruit a new member to organizations. In MLM industry, monitoring and directing or top-down hierarchy likewise transactional leadership styles are totally outdated, it's due to these distributors are voluntary micro-entrepreneurs, who can wish to be leaving and joining back the organization without any legal contract or no penalty imposed. On the other hand, in MLM industry, a leader can't coerce compliance by punishment or legal terms and conditions or contract. Alternatively, the success of MLM industry hugely relies on the capability to inspire, motivate and influence the downlines. In 2026, the rapid transformation of global economy to the era of Leadership 5.0, which transform to era of human-centric leadership (Peters, 2023), the business world been changing to artificial intelligence, e-commerce platforms, advanced

social media and digital tools, must work together with deep emotional intelligence, empathy and ethical management. Therefore, the sustainability of MLM industry are depends on the leader's strategic capacity on combining advanced socio-relational skills with quick adaptability of technology, in the hyperconnected world.

Problem Statement

According to Chuan & Loo (2022), even though MLM industry contribute a significant amount to GDP country, but the industry still faces a huge challenge on high distribution rate, network instability and systemic vulnerabilities. Based on the previous studies, the new joiner in MLM couldn't sustain on the first year and according to data approximately 60% to 90% new downline discontinue their business activities. The high turnover leads to the sustainability of MLM industry in long-term, driving to top-management and leaders into a continuous exhausting cycle of recruitment, instead of stable organization growth. As per Selamet et al. (2023), a sustainability of on organization is measured by its logistics capabilities, competitive advantage of product portfolios and financial allocations from compensation programs. However, these structural elements couldn't operate independently, a critical gap exists in literature is the lack of a comprehensive, non-empirical conceptual model explaining how a leader's leadership styles, relational, and situational dynamics interact to protect decentralized networks from collapse. Prior studies has explored leadership styles in isolation by focusing primarily on transformational leadership while neglecting the complex adaptive behaviours that network marketers need to succeed (Girardi & Sarate, 2023). In addition, standard models fail to show how a leader's relational assets serve as a firm-specific strategic resource under unstable economic environments, likewise changing public opinions and regulatory controls by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDN), where compliance with the Direct Sales and Anti-Pyramid Scheme Act limits aggressive recruitment, thereby elevating retention as the primary driver of network survival. The academic field lacks a conceptual framework that would provide predictive capabilities and industry professional lack of proven methods for identifying the underlying behavioural reasons that drive people to leave downline positions and cause network breakdown.

Literature Review

To conceptualize leadership framework for a MLM business, it's important to understand their unique organizational structure. MLM business operates as social networks, primarily focusing as a direct retail sales agent and an institutional recruiter. The distribution process creates a new downline network as distributors recruits new members. Recruiters are responsible for onboarding new team members and providing them with training and motivational support to help them grow into frontline leaders. This framework requires leadership effectiveness is defined as the non-coercive capacity to mobilize, upskill, and retain autonomous individuals who receive no guaranteed base salary (Ji & Modern, 2023). Consequently, sustainability within this framework cannot be evaluated through static accounting measures like quarterly corporate net profit. Instead, network sustainability is defined as a dynamic capability characterized by consistent downline retention, consistent sales performance, continuous network expansion, and cross-generational succession planning within the field team (Yaakop & Othman, 2023).

Critical Synthesis of Core Underpinning Theories

The Resource-Based View (RBV)

According to Kozlenkova et al. (2014), the RBV posits that a firm achieves a sustained competitive advantage when it possesses resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN criteria). In this research, RBV framework were utilized to expands and deconcentrate social networks, whereby prior research employed to covered corporate assets on physical, legally and financially. It disputes that MLM leader's behavioural, emotion and loyalty of their downline are form an industry key resource that satisfies the VRIN framework, which include of valuable are the social resource that directly reduce the costs related to distributor's turnover and constantly recruitment of new members, rare is strongly sympathetic, which are normally uncommon to strongly sales-driven and commission oriented environments to adaptive Leadership 5.0, inimitable is strong relationship between leaders and their downline that have strong alignment and mutual trust, that can't be easily imitated or replicated by competitors, lastly is non-substitutable, which is in MLM industry having an advanced digital sales channels or strategically marketing plan are hard to substitute for human coaching when conquering of extreme changes of market, a drop in personal performance or negative media attention.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

According to Setiawan (2020), an uncommon vertical dyadic relationship between leader and their subordinates are called as LMX theory.

In traditional corporation, low LMX connect to partially offset by formal corporate rules, contractual penalties and a basic salary. However, in MLM network, high-quality LMX dyads, defined by mutual respect, deep trust, and shared professional values serve as the vital "social cement" holding the network together.

In compliance with Hirvi et al. (2022), high LMX transform transactional downline distributors into committed organizational individual, helping them stay aligned with the leader's vision even during financial crisis.

Fiedler's Contingency Theory

According to Ayman et al. (1998), Fiedler's Contingency Theory defined as organizational performance is measure by ideal pairing between a leader's leadership style and the degree of situational control within the environment. If the strongly decentralized nature of network marketing, the leaders must demonstrate high situational adaptability. The success of any given leadership behaviour is dependent upon external factors, such as regulatory updates or macroeconomic shifts and internal structural constraints, such as corporate updates to the compensation structure or digital training tools.

Conceptual Framework of Dominant Leadership Styles

In order to shifting various leadership approaches into a rigorous conceptual taxonomy, this framework organizes 10 key leadership styles into 3 different functional categories, such as Relational Styles, Developmental Styles, and Directional Styles.



Relational Styles

According to Sendjaya et al (2008), a leader concentrated on subordinate's needs over the personal and professional needs called as servant leadership. In a way, the leader prioritizes downlines needs over his commission goals, which caused to build a long-term organizational loyalty. Secondly, collaborative leadership focus on fair communication structures and combining problem-solving among teams, breaking down traditional competition within the sales network. Lastly, Islamic and ethical leadership are leadership style based on moral authority and values-driven governance. As stated by Sanjaya et al. (2024), Malaysia as a multicultural country as well as dominant Muslim market, securing business activities within ethical boundaries provides deep moral validation, protecting the network from industry perceptions.

Developmental Styles

As stated by Kim et al. (2023), transformational leadership uses inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation to restructure a distributor's self-interest with the splendid vision of the network. Meanwhile, coaching leadership is constant learning, skill development, self-reflection and long-term professional growth by transforming new recruit to solely independent leaders. According to Aytekin and Temizkan (2022), democratic leadership are embracing subordinate participation in decision-making, in which leads to increase organizational commitment among distributors.

Directional and Action-Oriented Styles

As defined by Sanjaya et al. (2024), entrepreneurial leadership are grab new opportunities, taking calculated risk and driving digital business adoption. Furthermore, transactional leadership are providing reward and recognition to downline when they achieve target, as well as employs performance metrics and goal oriented KPIs. Lastly, according to Pizzolitto et al.

(2022), autocratic leadership are called as leaders are taking decisions, without involvement of subordinate's opinion. Even though, it not fair or productive among voluntary network, but it becomes key tools when organisation crisis.

Malaysia MLM Ecosystem and Operational Dynamics

The MLM Industry in Malaysia faced a critical challenge on governing for oversight in building leadership behaviour. In the past 1993, the MLM industry was largely not governing by rules and regulations, caused rapid spread of exploitative, fraudulent money laundering business and pyramid schemes, as well as society hard to differentiate legitimate MLM company vs scam business. Therefore, according to Mustaffa and Ishak, (2024), this crisis was addressed by the enactment of the Direct Sales and Anti-Pyramid Scheme Act 1993. These acts created a strict statutory boundary, establishing clear licensing mandates under the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDN). Therefore, leadership styles in Malaysia must constantly emphasize legal compliance and transparent business operations to maintain credibility. In addition, the industry's evolution can be showed across three different phases:

Historical Era	Primary Operational Driver	Dominant Leadership Challenge
Pre-1993 Era	Unregulated, rapid network propagation.	Combating widespread fraud and building institutional legitimacy.
Post-2020 (MCO Shift)	Rapid digital migration and reliance on e-commerce tools.	Managing remote teams and maintaining network cohesion without physical contact.
2026 Leadership 5.0 Era	Human-centric technology integration.	Balancing automated digital lead generation with deep personal empathy.

The introduction of the Movement Control Order (MCO) during the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a permanent digital shift, forcing field teams to replace physical home parties and hotel rallies with Zoom webinars, social media automation, and digital storefronts (Chuan & Loo, 2022). In the era of Leadership 5.0 environment, the core challenge for leaders is to prevent team isolation by intentionally mix digital efficiency with high-touch personal connection.

Industry Challenges as Environmental Stressors

The Malaysia direct selling industry faces unique environmental challenges that differ significantly from other industries, necessitating a conceptual framework for network sustainability.

MLM leaders need to address public scepticism stemming from past fraudulent activities and current financial scams mimicking legitimate network marketing operations.

Distributors move frequently between different organizations because they face virtually no financial barriers when joining or leaving. This continuous movement of personnel between

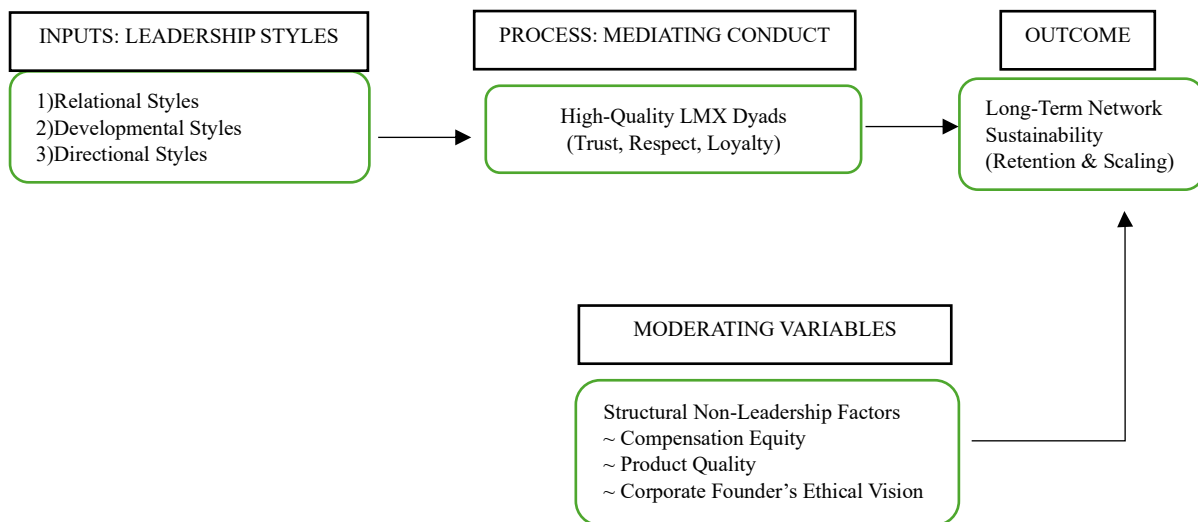
different locations makes establishing long-term, stable organizational structures for downline members virtually impossible.

Conceptual Framework and Research Hypothesis

The Conceptual Model (Input-Process-Outcome Architecture)

To move past isolated qualitative findings, this paper establishes a deductive Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) architecture. Therefore, blending of leadership taxonomy serves as the primary behavioural input, high-quality LMX dyads function as the core relational process and long-term network sustainability serves as the ultimate structural outcome. This overall ecosystem is moderated by corporate organizational factors and the founder's institutional vision.

Conceptual Framework (IPO)



Formulation of Theoretical Hypothesis

The Behavioural Relational Synergy

According to studies, team effort and success are often determined by developmental leadership behaviours, likewise continuous coaching, effective communication and persuasion skills. Nevertheless, in MLM industry as an independent network, this approach might be unsuccessful if they felt sycophantic. As disputed by Setiawan (2020), subordinate's voluntariness to employ or work together with their leaders are determined by the perceived quality of their relationship, in which is aligned with LMX theory. In MLM industry, the effectiveness and efficiency of continuous coaching and transformational motivation are built up from equal trust, psychological safety and common values by distributors. According to LMX theory, high LMX dyads are measured by the leader's continuous coaching and support rather than focusing on sales figure or leader's commission. It creates and builds a long-term trust among downline and upline, in which leads to long-term organizational commitment. Nonetheless, as highlighted below, the following hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The quality of LMX relationship among the downline are positively effect on developmental of leadership styles such as coaching, transformational and democratic leadership style.

Relational Capital as an Isolated RBV Resource

According to Kozlenkova et al. (2014), a company can protect its competitive advantage by growth the resources of inimitable, rare and hard to replicate, in which align to RBV theory. In MLM industry, the competitors can freely duplicate or replicate a company's key product's features or marketing plan, in order to competitive advantage. Nonetheless, it's hard to replicate a company or leader's styles, cultures, attitude and behaviours. Therefore, servant leadership styles, Islamic leadership styles and ethical leadership styles are classified as relational leadership styles, in which transform downline's intention from short term financial goals to long-term community value. According to Sanjaya et al. (2024), Malaysia as a multicultural country, depth moral legitimacy is caused by values-driven leadership. Therefore, these common alignments create a strong social asset that prevent MLM leaders or distributors been taken by competitor's company and decrease the number of downline's turnover. As overall, it created sustainable competitive advantage, as aligned to VRIN framework, in which led to following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: In order to produce sustainable competitive advantage, the key ethical leadership style, servant leadership style and Islamic leadership style or better called as relational leadership styles formed a company's specific social resources that can immediately reduce the distributor turnover, in which align to VRIN criteria.

The Contingency of Directional Leadership

According to Amghar (2022), he argued that strong task-oriented leadership styles can be strongly effective in high-risk situations, in which a quick decision making is important, as aligned to Fiedler's contingency theory. In MLM industry, the efficiency and effectiveness of leader's directional styles of entrepreneurial and transactional leadership styles plays a crucial role in shaping new recruitment or transforms them to more agile during uncertainty market, likewise Covid-19 pandemic or rapid transformation of global technology. Nonetheless, the main caused of MLM distributor's turnover are due to lack of moral support from upline, over focussing on sales figures or commission by ignoring their well-being. Therefore, in order to produce long-term sustainability in MLM industry, entrepreneurial leadership styles and transactional leadership styles are plays as non-linear relationships, in which needing key careful balance with relational support over time, as guided to following hypothesis as shown in below:

Hypothesis 3: During uncertainty of market environments or new recruitment onboard, directional leadership styles show a non-linear relationship with MLM sustainability, provides a strong effectiveness, as well as increase the downline stability.

The Moderating Role of Structural Non-Leadership Factors

The parent company's structural realities are broader context, when field leadership is crucial. According to Kozlenkova et al. (2014), RBV stated that organizational resources are needed to fully express the value of capabilities-based resources. In MLM industry, if the company's

structured are failed, even skilful or intelligent leaders are hard to sustain a downline. On the other hand, if company's marketing plan fail, product low quality, low demand in market, it caused low turnover among distributors. Therefore, for sustainability of MLM industry, the company's organizational structural and leadership capabilities have to work together, as well as supporting with legitimate high-quality product and fair marketing plan. It created the hypothesis as below:

Hypothesis 4: The structural organization are positively moderated by the relationship between the capability leadership and sustainability of MLM network.

Corporate Integrity and Founder's Vision

In MLM industry, the distributors are worked as voluntary based employee, and they believed their financial and social life are in risks when promoting a MLM brand among their friends and family. Therefore, their long-term stability and commitment are closely tied to the corporate integrity and founder's vision, particularly, founder's ethical, company long-term plan, transparency on decision making, disclose the financial health of the company. It will create the trust and credibility to distributors as well as prevent leaders to jump to competitor's company (Phathela, 2022). On the other hand, if a company fully focus on profit taking, by ignoring leaders or downline trust and well-being, it will create drastic fragile to network. It leads to hypothesis as shown below:

Hypothesis 5: The founder's integrity and vision are positively related to downlines long-term loyalty and their leadership styles.

Discussion and Contemporary Conceptual Insights

Theoretical Contributions

This paper provides several key contributions to the academic literature on organizational behaviour and entrepreneurship. First, it demonstrates that the Resource-Based View (RBV) can be effectively applied outside of traditional corporate hierarchies, showing its utility within decentralized, voluntary social networks. According to Peters (2023), it demonstrated a leader's behavioural toolkit and downline relationships as a firm-specific social resource, this model shifts the definition of strategic assets from physical capital to dynamic, relational capabilities managed through Leadership 5.0 competencies. Second, by blending LMX and Contingency theories, the framework moves past simplistic, one-size-fits-all leadership models. Instead, it offers a more realistic approach where relational trust, behavioural adaptability and structural business factors work together to drive sustainability. Finally, the inclusion of ethical and Islamic leadership dimensions addresses a critical gap in Western-centric management literature, providing a culturally nuanced framework tailored to multicultural, emerging economies like Malaysia.

Practical Contributions

This groundwork provides a practical succession planning to corporate leaders and management within the MLM industry, as tool for distributor's training program. This framework also served as module to sales training, recruitment method, leadership program, corporate governance and integrity team management. Besides that, this study can implement

in national policy likewise Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDN) can use these conceptualized ethical and structural standards to refine their evaluation guidelines. By establishing clearer compliance indicators, regulators can more effectively differentiation legitimate, sustainable direct-selling networks from predatory financial schemes, protecting consumers and strengthening public trust across the industry.

Future Research

The key suggestion for future research is explored more on empirical research, as well as to adopt more quantitative or mixed methods to validate the hypothesis. The researchers also can adopt longitudinal research designs that helpful to study stability of MLM downlines over multiple years, enhance to validate long-term non-linear effects of entrepreneurial and transactional leadership styles. Lastly, future research also can explore on Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), which helpful to study on numerical assess the straight way of sustainability of MLM network and leadership styles, as well as to measure of indirect effects of LMX and corporate structural factors.

Conclusion

In the era of rapid transformation of economy, sustaining MLM's distributors and leaders must outperform traditional transactional business models. This research blending few theories such as RBV, LMX and Contingency theories to provides a long-term sustainability among MLM networkers by purposely combine of relational trust, continuous coaching and structural corporate governance and integrity. It's because of MLM industry going to embrace on human centric Leadership 5.0, this groundwork employs a meaningful conceptual model that can help to increase the specialized, stability and comprehensive quality of the Malaysia MLM industry. Nonetheless, the MLM industry transforming from the predatory recruitment to relational-based retention, this groundwork offers a clear succession planning as well as to reduce distributors turnover. In overall, MLM industry can enhance sustainability of distributors and long-term of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Shalini Raja Kapol was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Balakrishnan Parasuraman handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Dzulkifli Bin Mukhtar contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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