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Ethical Leadership and Academic Staff Behaviour: Ethical Climate's Role and Moral Identity's Limit

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ABSTRACT

Ethical behaviour among academic staff is essential for maintaining the integrity and reputation of educational institutions. However, there is limited understanding of the factors that influence such behaviour, especially among academic staff, in the context of Malaysian public universities. This study aims to investigate the effect of ethical leadership on ethical behaviour among academic staff, with a focus on the mediating role of ethical climate and the moderating effect of moral identity. Employing a quantitative research methodology, data were collected from 601 academic staff across five selected Malaysian public universities through a structured questionnaire. The principal results reveal that ethical leadership does not have a significant direct relationship with ethical behaviour. However, ethical climate significantly mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour. Contrary to expectations, moral identity does not moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour. These findings emphasize the importance of creating a supportive ethical climate to encourage ethical behaviour among academic staff. The study extends existing literature by providing new insights into the mechanisms underlying employee ethical behaviour and offers practical recommendations for public universities aiming to promote ethical conduct.

1. Introduction

Ethical behaviours have become significant concerns across various sectors, including higher education institutions. Ethical issues in higher education have been widely debated by researchers [1-7]. The ethical issues involving academic staff are particularly concerning, given that academicians are expected to maintain high standards of integrity and be free from ethical controversies [8]. Misconduct in higher education might be different from other organisations due to its nature and business [9]. It includes various forms of unethical behaviour, such as plagiarism, collusion, unethical research practices, and data fabrication [10,11]. Table 1 below presents examples of misconduct by academic staff from various countries worldwide from 2018 until 2023 that appeared in the news.

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The compilation of news reports from various countries, including Malaysia, reveals a troubling trend of ethical issues among academic staff, ranging from research misconduct and sexual harassment to racism, plagiarism, and corruption. These cases demonstrate that unethical conduct is widespread and not confined to specific countries or types of misconduct. Such occurrences not only undermine the integrity of academic institutions but also damage public trust and harm students and colleagues [12]. Consequently, these incidents highlight the need for implementing measures that promote ethical behaviour among academic staff and effectively prevent and address misconduct within higher education institutions [13-15].

Table 1
 News related to academic staff misconduct

No.	Year	News Title	Types of misconduct	Country
1.	2023	33 lecturers pass off purchased research papers as their own work [16]	Research Misconduct	Thailand
2.	2023	Selangor MACC nabs professor for alleged abuse of power [17]	Corruption	Malaysia
3.	2023	Exclusive: Top-tier university in Japan investigating Prof's alleged misconduct [18]	Research Misconduct	Japan
4.	2023	University of Michigan Researcher Resigns Following Falsified Data Accusations [19]	Research Misconduct	United States
5.	2022	University professor to be charged for falsely claiming RM66,000 in research funds [20]	Research Misconduct	Malaysia
6.	2022	Varsity lecturer charged over RM12,500 false claims [21]	False Claims	Malaysia
7.	2022	Professor sent on leave after charges of sexual misconduct [22]	Sexual Harassment	India
8.	2022	Delhi University suspends associate professor for 'sexually harassing' female teachers [23]	Sexual Harassment	India
9.	2022	NUS professor sacked after 'inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour' towards a student [24]	Sexual Harassment	Singapore
10.	2022	UiTM terminates lecturer accused of sexual harassment [25]	Sexual Harassment	Malaysia
11.	2022	UM Senior Lecturer Faces 9 Charges for Making False Claims [26]	False Claims	Malaysia
12.	2022	Stanford president's research under investigation for scientific misconduct, University admits 'mistakes' [26]	Research Misconduct	United States
13.	2021	Lecturer sacked for serious misconduct over racist remark [27]	Racism	Singapore
14.	2021	Lecturer and jobless man arrested for allegedly dealing drugs in Kuala Lumpur [28]	Drug	Malaysia
15.	2021	MACC arrests lecturer who asked for bribe from students to change their 'fail' to 'pass' [29]	Corruption	Malaysia
16.	2020	French professor faces disciplinary case over hydroxychloroquine claims [30]	Research Misconduct	France
17.	2019	University of Tennessee journalism professor accused of plagiarism [31]	Research Misconduct	United States
18.	2019	Terengganu Lecturer arrested for offering student RM500 to be her 'Sugar Daddy' [32]	Sexual Harassment	Malaysia

No.	Year	News Title	Types of misconduct	Country
19.	2018	University of Cambridge admits significant sexual misconduct problem [33]	Sexual Harassment	United Kingdom
20.	2018	Prominent researcher dismissed following misconduct probe [34]	Research Misconduct	Japan

Despite the importance of this issue, the ethical behaviour of employees at public universities has received limited attention where most research has focused on academic programmes, services, job satisfaction, and student behaviour, leaving employee ethics relatively unexplored [35-41]. Furthermore, the prevalence of global corporate scandals has heightened interest in understanding employee ethical behaviour in public organisations [42,43]. However, much of this research has been concentrated in Europe and other Western regions [44], highlighting the need for more studies in Asia, particularly Malaysia, to gain a deeper understanding of workplace ethics in diverse cultural contexts.

An organisation's success is often linked to the capabilities of its leaders [45-48]. Leadership style significantly impacts organisational success and employee behaviour. In public universities, leadership is especially important, as evidenced by initiatives within the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2023, which emphasises the need to strengthen leadership programmes for educators and administrators by incorporating elements of human governance [49]. However, there is limited research on how leadership styles, particularly ethical leadership, influence ethical behaviour among academic staff in public universities. Most studies have focused on other aspects such as organisational citizenship behaviour, innovative work behaviour, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions rather than directly addressing ethical behaviour [47,50-53]. Understanding how leadership styles influence ethical behaviour among academic staff is essential.

Ethical guidelines, procedures, and policies play a crucial role in shaping an ethical climate, which in turn influences employees' ethical behaviour [54-56]. Public universities in Malaysia have established comprehensive ethical regulations and guidelines to instill good values among their employees and students, as reflected in their governance policies [57,58]. For example, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) has implemented the "Kod Nilai dan Etika Warga UiTM," [59] while Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) follows the "Kod Etika Profesional dan Akademik UTM" [60]. Additionally, all 20 public universities in Malaysia have their own core values that incorporate elements of ethics and integrity. Examples include Universiti Malaya (UM) with its values of "Passion, Oneness, Integrity, Sincerity, Empathy" [61] and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) with "Exemplary, Collegiality, Integrity, Tenacity, Equity" [62]. Despite the implementation of these ethical standards and the promotion of core values, incidents of misconduct continue to occur [63]. The ethical climate, which encompasses the overall perception of ethical practices within an institution, can mediate the relationship between various factors such as organisational support, leadership, and ethical behaviour in different contexts, including manufacturing, legal, medical, and insurance industries [54,64,65]. However, the specific mechanisms through which ethical climate influences the ethical behaviour of academic staff in Malaysian public universities remain underexplored [66,67]. Understanding this mediating role within the context of Malaysian higher education is essential for developing a comprehensive approach to fostering ethical conduct in academic environments.

Another important factor that requires further investigation is moral identity. Previous research has demonstrated that moral identity significantly impacts individuals' moral functioning and behaviour, including ethical behaviour [68-71]. It also moderates various relationships, such as the link between workplace spirituality and ethical behaviour among project managers [72], organisational justice and counterproductive work behaviours among Chinese public servants [73],

organisational identification and unethical pro-organisational behaviour among higher education employees in India [74], and ethical leadership and unethical employee behaviour among employees in China's manufacturing sector [75]. However, the moderating effect of moral identity on the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour among academic staff in Malaysian public universities remains underexplored [76]. Understanding moral identity within higher education is crucial for promoting ethical behaviour and will provide valuable insights into the factors influencing ethical conduct among academic staff in Malaysian public universities.

In conclusion, this study aims to address the pressing issue of ethical behaviour among academic staff in Malaysian public universities by examining the influence of ethical leadership and the mediating role of ethical climate. Additionally, it explores the moderating effect of moral identity on the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour. This research is expected to fill significant gaps in the existing literature, particularly within the context of Malaysian public universities, and provide practical implications for fostering ethical behaviour in academic environments. Understanding these dynamics will offer valuable insights for developing strategies to cultivate a culture of integrity and ethical conduct in higher education institutions. Hence, this study will offer valuable contributions from both theoretical and practical standpoints.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1 Ethical Leadership and Ethical Behaviour

Brown *et al.*, [77] identified several dimensions of ethical leadership, including communication response, behaviour modelling, treating employees fairly, trustworthiness, and listening to employees. Additionally, ethical leadership should encompass power sharing, role clarification, and morality [78]. Ethical leadership is recognised as a crucial factor in shaping employee ethical behaviour within organisations [43,79–82]. Research indicates that ethical leadership enhances organisational commitment and ethical behaviour across various contexts, such as the South African steel industry [83], China's public-sector education [84] and UK police officers [85]. Silva and Duarte [86] confirmed its positive impact on organisational climate and job-related well-being in Portugal. However, other studies indicate complexities, such as the influence of role clarity and organisational culture [87], the negative impact of unethical leadership on employee well-being in Pakistan [88], and the importance of initial ethical choices by leaders [89]. Cultural and contextual factors also play a significant role, as evidenced by differing impacts on integrity violations in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia [56]. Based on this argument and the Social Exchange Theory (SET) [90], this study argues that ethical leadership influences employee behaviour.

To become an ethical leader, one must create an environment in the organisation that promotes ethical behaviour. Leaders should be perceived as ethical and focus on developing followers, enhancing their skills and confidence in ethical decision-making. According to SET, leaders' ethical values can instil trust in employees, encouraging them to reciprocate with positive behaviour [65]. Studies support the link between ethical leadership and employee behaviour. Al Halbusi *et al.*, [79] found a positive correlation between ethical leadership and employee behaviour, while Mayer *et al.* [65] suggested that ethical leadership improves employees' perceptions of the organisation's ethical climate, fostering ethical behaviour. Research also explores mechanisms driving this relationship. Imam and Kim [91] discovered that ethical leadership promotes positive academic behaviours in Pakistani higher education, with prosocial silence and organisational commitment as mediators. Additionally, Kim [92] showed that ethical leadership reduces unethical behaviour in public employees, with effective ethics programmes as a mediating factor. These findings underscore the importance of ethical leadership in promoting ethical behaviour within organisations.

In conclusion, research has highlighted the importance of ethical leadership in promoting employee ethical behaviour. Hypotheses have been developed to examine this relationship, and some studies have explored the mechanisms underlying it. Therefore, extending the social exchange theory, it is hypothesised that ethical leadership will positively relate to employee ethical behaviour.

H1 : Ethical leadership positively relate to employee ethical behaviour

2.2 Ethical Climate as A Mediating Variable

The relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour is complex, with the ethical climate playing a significant mediating role. Ethical leadership, as defined by Brown *et al.*, [77], involves morally and socially responsible decision-making and behaviour. Ethical leaders act as role models, creating an environment where ethical behaviour is both valued and encouraged. This leadership style has been shown to positively influence various employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and ethical behaviour [83,86].

Several studies have underscored the importance of the ethical climate as a mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour. Al Halbusi *et al.*, [79] found that in the Malaysian manufacturing industry, ethical climate significantly mediates this relationship. The study showed that ethical leadership positively influences the ethical climate, which in turn enhances employees' ethical behaviour. Similarly, Mitonga-Monga *et al.*, [83] demonstrated that in a South African manufacturing company, ethical leadership is positively linked to organisational commitment, with the ethical climate acting as a mediator. Ethical leaders who promote fairness, integrity, and ethical guidance contribute to a positive ethical climate, thereby enhancing employees' commitment and ethical behaviour. This highlights the ethical climate's critical role in linking ethical leadership to positive employee outcomes.

However, some studies have reported mixed findings, indicating that the mediating effect of the ethical climate may vary depending on contextual factors. For example, Bates *et al.*, [93] found that higher power-distance societal contexts strengthen the connection between ethical work climate (EWC) perceptions and ethical behaviour, while work contexts with higher autonomy weaken the connection. Additionally, research by Paterson and Huang [87] suggests that leaders' ethical voice and actions significantly influence employees' perceptions of ethical role requirements, which, in turn, impact ethical behaviour. This highlights the potential influence of cultural and contextual differences on the mediating role of the ethical climate and underscores the importance of ethical leadership in shaping the ethical climate and promoting ethical behaviour among employees.

In summary, the literature suggests that the ethical climate significantly mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour. A positive ethical climate can enhance the impact of ethical leadership on ethical behaviour, creating a supportive environment that promotes ethical conduct. Therefore, it is proposed that the ethical climate mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour.

H2 : Ethical climate mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour

2.3 Moral identity as A Moderator

Moral identity refers to the extent to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity [94]. This construct is crucial in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to ethical

leadership within an organisation. Ethical leadership is defined by leaders who exemplify and advocate ethical conduct through their actions and interactions with followers [77]. Research consistently indicates that ethical leadership positively influences employee ethical behaviour [95], [96]. However, the strength of this relationship can vary depending on individual differences, such as moral identity.

Several studies have examined the moderating effect of moral identity on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour. For instance, Erkutlu and Chafra [97] found that moral identity strengthens the negative relationship between leader integrity and employee interpersonal deviance, suggesting that individuals with a strong moral identity are more likely to respond positively to ethical leadership, thereby reducing deviant behaviours. Similarly, Al Halbusi *et al.*, [98] demonstrated that moral identity moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' ethical behaviour, with a more pronounced positive impact among those with a high moral identity. Additionally, Wang *et al.*, [99] highlighted that ethical leadership is more effective in mitigating unethical behaviour among followers with a strong moral identity and a high level of identification with the leader, indicating that moral identity not only moderates but also amplifies the positive effects of ethical leadership.

However, some studies have reported mixed findings, suggesting that the impact of moral identity may vary depending on contextual factors. For example, Hsieh *et al.*, [96] found that while moral identity moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB), the effect depends on coworkers' ethical behaviour, indicating that the social context within the organisation can influence this interaction. Additionally, Al Halbusi *et al.*, [100] found that person-organisation fit (P-O fit) enhances the moderating effect of moral identity on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour, implying that alignment of individual and organisational values strengthens this effect.

Previous studies have also confirmed that moral identity can moderate various relationships. For example, Eissa and Lester [101] demonstrated that moral identity can mitigate or enhance the effects of leadership behaviour on employees, while Skubinn and Herzog [102] emphasised the importance of ethics in leadership and the internalisation of moral identity. Similarly, Mayer *et al.*, [65] confirmed the impact of a leader's moral identity on ethical leadership behaviour. Al Halbusi *et al.*, [103] further investigated the interactive effects of ethical leadership, subordinates' moral identity, and self-control on ethical behaviour, finding that individuals with a strong moral identity perceive ethical leaders as role models. Overall, these studies highlight the crucial role of moral identity in shaping the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour, with employees who have a well-developed moral identity more likely to view ethical leaders as role models and exhibit ethical behaviour.

In summary, the literature suggests that moral identity significantly moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour. Employees with a strong moral identity are more inclined to respond favourably to ethical leadership, resulting in enhanced ethical behaviour and decreased deviance. Consequently, it is hypothesised that moral identity moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour.

H3: Moral identity moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour.

Figure 1 below illustrates the research model, which includes three proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3)

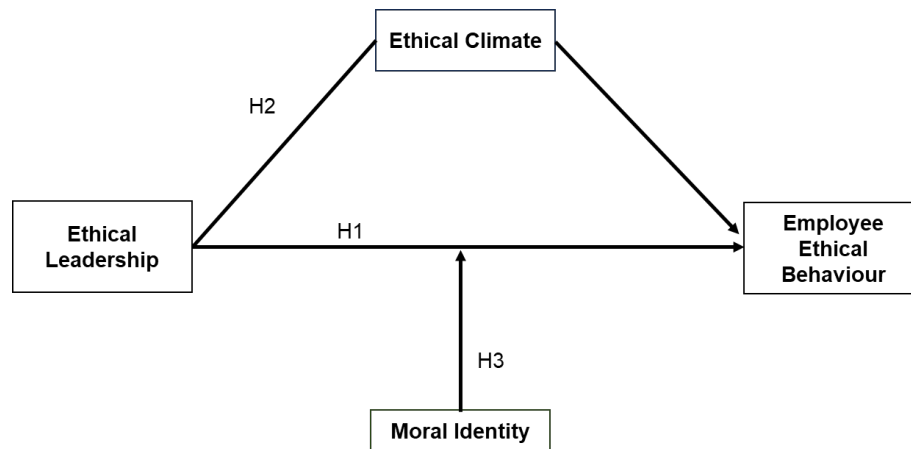


Figure 1. Research model

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Procedures

A total of 601 full-time academic staff from five selected Malaysian public universities participated in this study. These participants were affiliated with various faculties within their respective universities. The study focused on individual academic staff members, including lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and professors (Grade 45 – Special Grade). To ensure the sample accurately represented the population, respondents were carefully selected using a simple random sampling technique. This method involves randomly choosing participants from the population, ensuring each member has an equal chance of being selected [104].

3.2 Measurement

The questionnaires used in this study were adapted from well-established instruments and were kept in their original English to maintain the content's authenticity and to cater to the academic population proficient in English. To ensure reliability, the survey items were reviewed and approved by a panel of four experts familiar with ethics, governance, leadership, and individual values in higher education. After developing the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with fifty employees to confirm that the items were understandable and capable of eliciting the necessary information. All responses were based on a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from '1 = Strongly Disagree' to '5 = Strongly Agree.'

Ethical leadership was measured using the 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown *et al.*, [77]. This scale evaluates the extent to which leaders exhibit moral and professional principles, such as respect, fairness, responsibility, and the promotion of ethical behaviour within the university. An example item is, "My leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards." Ethical climate was assessed using the 7-item Ethical Climate Scale developed by Schwepker [105] which examines employees' perceptions of the ethical environment at their university, including norms, policies, values, and procedures. An example item is, "My university has a formal, written code of ethics." Moral identity was measured using the 5-item Moral Identity Scale developed by Aquino and Reed [106]. This scale assesses an individual's self-conception and identification with a set of moral traits

considered important to their self-identity, and the extent to which these traits are valued and embodied in their actions and behaviour. An example item is, “Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am.” Lastly, employee ethical behaviour was measured using the 12-item Employee Ethical Behaviour Scale adapted from Ferrell and Weaver [107] and Newstrom and Ruch [108]. This scale evaluates employee behaviours that align with moral principles and values, such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for others. Example items include, “I take responsibility for my own errors” and “I use university services appropriately and not for personal use.”

3.3 Data Analysis and Results

In this study, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using Partial Least Squares (PLS) was employed to test the proposed research model and examine the hypothesised relationships. The Smart-PLS 4.0 software was utilised for this purpose [109]. Following the recommendations of Hair *et al.*, [110], two analytical techniques were applied. The first step involved assessing the measurement model to ensure validity and reliability. The second step focused on evaluating the structural model to test the hypothesised relationships. This two-step assessment approach was thoroughly conducted, encompassing both the measurement model and the structural model.

3.4 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The SPSS version 26 was used to analyse the demographic information of the respondents. The sample included 66.90% females and 33.10% males. The age distribution showed a concentration in the middle age groups, with 41.40% aged 31-40 and 38.80% aged 41-50. A significant number of respondents are Senior Lecturers at the Grade 51/52 level. Regarding tenure, the most common range is 11-15 years, followed by those with 1-5 years and 6-10 years of service. The participants exhibit a high level of educational attainment, with 70.70% holding Doctorate degrees and 29.30% possessing Master's degrees. Most respondents (90.80%) hold permanent employment positions, while contract positions account for only 9.20%. Details are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
 Summary of demographic profile of respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	199	33.10%
	Female	402	66.90%
Age	21 – 30 years	10	1.70%
	31 – 40 years	249	41.40%
	41 – 50 years	233	38.80%
	51 years & above	109	18.10%
Job Title	Lecturer (Grade 45)	86	14.30%
	Senior Lecturer (Grade 51/52)	388	64.60%
	Associate Professor (Grade 53/54)	101	16.80%
	Professor (Grade VK7/6/5)	26	4.30%
Length of service at current university	Below 1 year	13	2.20%
	1 – 5 years	130	21.60%
	6 – 10 years	116	19.30%

		Frequency	Percentage
11 – 15 years		150	25.00%
16 - 20 years		87	14.50%
21 - 25 years		67	11.10%
26 years and above		38	6.30%
Highest level of education	Master's Degree	176	29.30%
	Doctorate	425	70.70%
Employment Status	Permanent	546	90.80%
	Contract	55	9.20%

3.4 Common Method Variance (CMV)

Common method variance (CMV) is a potential issue in survey-based research, as it can inflate relationships between variables due to a shared source of variance rather than the constructs themselves [111]. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings in this study, addressing CMV is crucial. Several techniques can mitigate CMV, including procedural remedies, statistical control, and methodological design [112]. For instance, this study included a question on a neutral topic unrelated to the study's constructs, such as respondents' age and education level, to reduce common method bias [111]. Additionally, to maintain confidentiality, respondents' email addresses were not collected.

The Harman [113] one-factor test was used to address the potential problem of common method variance or bias. This test involved conducting an unrotated factor analysis on all items within the constructs. If the first factor explains less than 50% of the total variance, it suggests that common method variance is not a significant issue [111]. As shown in Table 3, the first factor accounted for only 31.287% of the total variance, which is less than 50%. Therefore, common method variance does not pose a problem in this study.

Table 3
 Result of Common Method Variance (CMV) Test

Components	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	10.638	31.287	31.287	10.638	31.287	31.287

3.6 Assessment of Measurement Model

To assess the measurement model, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were examined. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scale. The Cronbach's Alpha ranged from 0.807 to 0.959, indicating an acceptable level above 0.70. Similarly, the Composite Reliability (CR) ranged from 0.822 to 0.965, also reflecting acceptable values. These results confirm the internal consistency reliability of the measurement scale [114]. Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The AVE for all constructs exceeded the 0.50 threshold, ranging from 0.523 to 0.732, thus confirming convergent validity [114]. The results of the measurement model are summarized and presented in Table 4. Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the AVE for each construct with the variance shared by each construct with other latent variables. No issues were found, as the AVE for each construct was greater than the shared variance. The heterotrait-monotrait

ratio (HTMT) of correlations, proposed by Henseler *et al.*, [115] was also used. The HTMT values were all below 0.90, indicating discriminant validity for each pair of variables. Additionally, all HTMT values were significantly different from 1, and the 95 percent confidence intervals did not include 1, further confirming discriminant validity [115].

Table 4
 Measurement model, loading, construct reliability and convergent Validity

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)
Ethical Leadership	C1	0.837	0.732	0.959	0.960	0.965
	C2	0.701				
	C3	0.881				
	C4	0.851				
	C5	0.893				
	C6	0.880				
	C7	0.856				
	C8	0.903				
	C9	0.862				
	C10	0.875				
Ethical Climate	E1	0.749	0.691	0.925	0.927	0.940
	E2	0.870				
	E3	0.813				
	E4	0.870				
	E5	0.835				
	E6	0.849				
	E7	0.825				
Moral Identity	F1	0.899	0.724	0.807	0.822	0.887
	F2	0.886				
	F3	Dropped				
	F4	Dropped				
	F5	0.760				
Ethical Behaviour	G1	0.761	0.523	0.844	0.853	0.883
	G2	0.810				
	G3	0.795				
	G4	0.749				
	G5	Dropped				
	G6	Dropped				
	G7	Dropped				
	G8	Dropped				
	G9	Dropped				
	G10	0.603				
	G11	0.736				
	G12	0.572				

3.7 Assessment of structural model: Hypothesis testing

The direct effect of hypothesis H1 was examined to understand the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour. The results indicated that ethical leadership does not have a significant direct relationship with ethical behaviour ($\beta = -0.070$, $t = 1.602$, $p = 0.055$), thus H1 was not supported, as shown in Table 5.

The mediation test was a key part of this study, examining whether the ethical climate mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour. Following the approaches suggested by Preacher and Hayes [116], the analysis revealed that the indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.179$, $t = 5.709$, $p = 0.000$). Since the value of 0.179 with a 95 percent confidence interval does not straddle 0, it indicates mediation. Therefore, the mediation effect of the ethical climate was statistically significant, supporting H2.

The moderation effect of moral identity on the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour was also tested. The results showed that moral identity does not moderate this relationship ($\beta = -0.011$, $t = 0.235$, $p = 0.814$), hence H3 was not supported.

Table 5
 Structural model hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Decision
H ₁	EL -> EB	-0.070	-0.071	0.044	1.602	0.055	Not Supported
H ₂	EL -> EC -> EB	0.179	0.182	0.031	5.709	0.000	Supported
H ₃	MI x EL -> EB	-0.011	-0.012	0.046	0.235	0.814	Not Supported

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of ethical leadership on ethical behaviour among academic staff in Malaysian public universities, mediated by ethical climate, and to examine the moderating effect of moral identity on this relationship. Using a quantitative research methodology, data were collected from 601 academic staff across five selected Malaysian public universities through a structured questionnaire.

The findings revealed a weak negative association between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour, with a path coefficient of -0.070 and a p-value of 0.055, indicating no statistical significance. This contradicts the initial hypothesis and the positive correlations typically supported by Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that ethical leadership should foster an ethical organisational climate and promote ethical behaviour among employees. The study's results necessitate further exploration of potential moderating or mediating variables that might influence this relationship within the specific context of Malaysian public universities.

Several potential explanations for this unexpected result include the study's conceptualisation and measurement of ethical leadership, which may have been limited, and the perceptions of academic staff, which could be influenced by personal values, past experiences, and cultural background [117, 118]. Additionally, the specific context of Malaysian public universities, with their unique institutional culture, norms, and practices, may moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour [119,120]. The reliance on self-reported data from a structured questionnaire may also have limitations in accurately capturing this complex relationship [121].

The study also investigated the mediating role of ethical climate in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour. The findings revealed that ethical climate significantly mediated this relationship, with a path coefficient of 0.179 and a p-value of 0.000, supporting the hypothesis derived from SET. This suggests that ethical leadership influences the ethical climate perceived by employees, which subsequently affects their ethical behaviour. The results underscore the importance of fostering a strong ethical climate, as it serves as a critical link between leadership and employee behaviour. When leaders consistently model and promote ethical values, they create a shared perception among employees that ethical conduct is expected and rewarded within the organisation [122-124].

The study's findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of ethical climate in shaping employee ethical behaviour. Ethical leaders are instrumental in shaping the ethical climate by modelling ethical conduct, communicating ethical values, and establishing systems and processes that promote ethical behaviour [54, 125]. The ethical climate acts as a contextual factor that provides cues and guidelines for employees to navigate ethical dilemmas and make ethical decisions [125,126]. The findings underscore the pivotal role of ethical climate as a mediating mechanism between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour.

Lastly, the study examined the role of moral identity as a moderator in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour. Contrary to expectations derived from Social Cognitive Theory, the results revealed that moral identity did not moderate this relationship. The path coefficient was -0.011 with a p-value of 0.814, indicating no statistical significance. This finding deviates from earlier research that identified a significant moderating role of moral identity in the association between ethical leadership and employee ethical outcomes. The lack of a substantial moderating effect of moral identity observed in this study may be attributed to the specific context of academic staff in a Malaysian public university, the conceptualisation and measurement of moral identity, and the possibility that other factors, such as the ethical climate of the organisation or individual ethical self-efficacy, play more pivotal roles in shaping ethical behaviour.

In conclusion, the study challenges the straightforward application of SET to ethical leadership and underscores the importance of considering a broader range of contextual and mediating factors to fully understand how ethical leadership influences employee ethical behaviour. While ethical leadership alone may not directly influence ethical conduct, cultivating an ethical climate within the institution emerges as a critical factor that amplifies the positive impact of ethical leadership on promoting ethical behaviour among academic staff. This highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach that not only emphasises ethical leadership but also fosters an organisational environment that prioritises ethical values, principles, and practices.

5. Theoretical Implications

This study adds to the existing literature on ethical leadership and ethical behaviour by questioning the straightforward application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) in Malaysian public universities. The weak negative association between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour suggests that the relationship is more complex than previously understood. This finding prompts a re-evaluation of the theoretical frameworks used to study ethical leadership, highlighting the need to consider additional contextual and mediating factors. The significant mediating role of ethical climate shows its importance as a contextual factor that shapes employee perceptions and behaviours. Future theoretical models should consider the interplay between ethical leadership, ethical climate, and other potential mediators and moderators to provide a more complete understanding of how ethical leadership influences employee behaviour.

6. Managerial Implications

For university administrators and policymakers, the study's findings offer several practical insights. First, while ethical leadership alone may not directly influence ethical behaviour, creating a strong ethical climate is crucial. Leaders should focus on establishing and maintaining an environment where ethical values are clearly communicated, consistently modelled, and rewarded. This can be achieved through regular training programs, transparent communication channels, and the establishment of ethical guidelines and policies. Additionally, the lack of a moderating effect of moral identity suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing individual moral identity may not be as effective as those targeting the broader organisational climate. Therefore, efforts should be directed towards building a cohesive ethical culture that supports and reinforces ethical behaviour across all levels of the institution.

7. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data from a structured questionnaire may introduce response biases and limit the accuracy of the findings. Future research could benefit from using a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative data to gain deeper insights into the perceptions and experiences of academic staff. Additionally, the study's focus on Malaysian public universities may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Comparative studies across different cultural and institutional settings could provide a broader understanding of the dynamics between ethical leadership, ethical climate, and employee behaviour. Further research should also explore other potential mediating and moderating variables, such as organisational justice, ethical self-efficacy, and individual values, to develop a more comprehensive model of ethical leadership.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the complexity of the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour in Malaysian public universities. The findings challenge the straightforward application of Social Exchange Theory and highlight the importance of considering a broader range of contextual and mediating factors. While ethical leadership alone may not directly influence ethical behaviour, creating an ethical climate within the institution emerges as a critical factor that amplifies the positive impact of ethical leadership. This underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that not only emphasises ethical leadership but also creates an organisational environment that prioritises ethical values, principles, and practices. By doing so, universities can create a conducive environment for promoting ethical behaviour among academic staff, ultimately contributing to the overall integrity and reputation of the institution.

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