

# A Study on The Agent of Multilevel Marketing (MLM) in Sabah

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**Abstract:** *The MLM sector is expected to gain traction and contribute to the development of the Malaysian economy. The Multilevel Marketing (MLM) business, on the other hand, has difficulties in recruiting and keeping agents. Instead of focusing on the agent's sales performance, as many scholars have done in the past, the researcher wants to concentrate on the agent's performance, which is considered the service quality based on contextual performance. In Sabah, MLM agent performance is inconsistent since it is difficult for them to maintain their downline to remain in the MLM company, and there is a lack of upline support or identification. Existing practises and gaps have been identified via a review of previous research and literature. This research looks at the relationship between interpersonal identification and the agent's performance, specifically in the Sabah Multilevel Marketing (MLM) sector. The Big Five Factors (BFF) of personality characteristics are used in this research. The main five factors are insufficient to characterize the agents fully. The agent's interpersonal identification will play a significant part in forecasting the agent's performance in the big five-factor model. Implementing the methods described in this research will contribute to societal change by improving the success rate of multilevel marketers, lowering unemployment, and having a beneficial effect on the economy. This study provides value to the MLM business as well as academics.*

**Keywords:** Direct Selling, MLM Sabah, Network Marketing, Agent's Performance, Personality

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## 1. Introduction

There are many options available to individuals who want to start their own company these days. Many people are attracted to the Multilevel Marketing (MLM) business because of the ease they may advance in their careers (Williams, 2018). The MLM sector is thought to be a major contribution to the Malaysian economy. According to the previous Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, Malaysia's direct selling sector is projected to contribute RM20 billion to the Malaysian economy by 2020. (Malay Mail, 2018). According to a study published by the Malaysian Direct Distribution Association (2020), direct sales in Malaysia increased by 20% to 30% during the Movement Control Order (MCO) era. Many people are searching for methods to supplement their income right now, while others may view MLM as a means to start their own company (The Edge Malaysia, 2020). The MCO directly affects every nation in Malaysia, with Sabah having the highest unemployment rate for both men and women at 14 percent, followed by the Northern Peninsular states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perak, and Perlis at 11 percent. Unemployed teenagers in Sabah were encouraged to become engaged in business, and one of the companies recommended direct selling (The Borneo Post, 2018). In reality, according to the Ministry of Education (2019), direct selling has become one of the most

popular business platforms among recent graduates, accounting for 5 percent to 8% of their participation. People are beginning to enter the MLM sector since it is equipped with excellent mechanisms, as shown by the growing knowledge of its presence, especially in Sabah.

### **Problem Statement**

MLM has become so popular because it offers everyone the chance to become an excellent self-employed opportunity with the freedom to gain and little losses. However, because of the ease of entry, the vetting process by recruiters is not as firm in many examples, and so most of the entrants into this type of business venture lack the necessary skills and competencies to accomplish goals (Isac & Isac, 2011; Omar, 2014; Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). The MLM industry is projected to increase attention in 2020 and contribute to the Malaysian economy's growth. Besides, based on the reputation improvement and performance cultivation of direct sellers provided by KPDKK, the MLM should be particularly essential for long-term relationships between consumers and the agents, which will have a high value-added to the services. These are some of the social factors that industry players need to consider. There is 60% of the inconsistent performance of the agents, as it is difficult for them to sustain their downline to remain in the MLM industry, specifically in Sabah, and this particular context has not received broad research interest, where there is a lack of upline or mentor support or identification (Interview, 2019). A previous study has shown that personality is vital to a salesperson (Espregren & Panicker, 2015). They suggested that further study needs to consider the personality and attitude of the individual, which may contribute to their working passion and higher aim engagement in achieving career development in MLM. This notion was supported by Roberts and Woodman (2017) as they urged for more attention given to personality concerning performance in the MLM industry. The authors have identified individual and performance personalities as a critical issue and an emerging area of discussion in this context. The extent to which these personalities influence the MLM or sales agent's behavior and performance has remained mainly uninvestigated in a particular context (Alexander & Goh, 2018). Besides, interpersonal identification has been acknowledged as one factor influencing performance (Ahearne et al., 2013; Vieira et al., 2018). However, the context so far lies in organizational identification, which neglects the relational level's interpersonal identification processes (Vieira et al., 2018).

Hence, the aim of this study is:

- To explore the influence of interpersonal identification on the relationship between personality and the agent's performance.

### **The MLM Agent's Performance in Sabah**

The researcher took advantage of the chance to focus its investigation. However, little attention has been paid to agents' performance in the MLM sector, particularly in Sabah. The researcher gathers information about difficulties and challenges by reviewing important news and data statistics in Malaysia and conducting unstructured interviews to learn more about the MLM business in Sabah. The questions cover the reasons why people join MLM companies in the first place, why they stay on as members of the MLM company if there has been any success, what challenges they have faced in achieving their goals, what motivates them to join or stay in the MLM business until success, and how well they have performed. Data was gathered first via interviews. An unstructured interview, often known as a preliminary interview, is the kind of interview that is performed. In the first part of the research, 15 people from Kota Kinabalu and Tuaran engaged in multilevel marketing were interviewed. The following is the respondent's profile and responses:

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondent**

	Demographic Factors	Percentage
Gender	Female	86.7%
	Male	13.3%
Age	21 years – 30 years	80%
	31 years – 40 years	20%
	41 years – 50 years	-
Marital Status	Female	86.7%
	Single	53.3%
	Married	46.7%
Education	SPM	-
	STPM/Diploma	66.7%
	Degree	13.3%
	Master	20%
	PhD	-
Occupation	Public Sector	60%
	Private Sector	6.7%
	Non-working	33.3%
Length of Time in MLM	1 month – 2 years	20%
	3 years – 5 years	80%
	More than 5 years	-
	Given up/No interest	-
Achievement in MLM	Very successful	-
	Successful	40%
	Moderate	33.3%
	Not successful	20%
	Very unsuccessful	6.7%
The Agent’s Performance	Consistent	40%
	Not Consistent	60%

The table above shows the profile of the respondents. The female respondents are 86.7%, and the male respondents are 13.3%. The respondents’ age, the number of respondents from 21 years old to 30 years old is 80%, and 31 years old to 40 years old, 20%. The numbers of single respondents are 53.3%, whereas the number of married respondents is 46.7%. The number of respondents with STPM/Diploma is 66.7%, Degree 13.3%, and Master 20% for education. Besides, 60% are working in the public sector for the respondents’ occupation, 6.7% are working in the private sector, and non-working respondents are 33.3%. Besides the MLM respondents’ designation, there are 66.7% as agents/distributors/stockiest, and 33.3% as the top/executive level. Additionally, table 1.3 shows that the respondents’ length of time as agents in the MLM industry is 20% of 1 month to 2 years and 80% of 3 years to 5 years.

The findings obtained from the researcher (Interview, 2019) to gauge initial insight into the phenomenon in Sabah and indicate that most of the agent’s performance is 60% inconsistent. The respondents were joining and stay to do MLM business primarily because of their upline or mentor’s influence in the MLM, back to the reasons mentioned in the interview. The respondents’ accomplishments in the MLM indicate that 40% are successful, 33.3% are moderate, 20% are not successful, and, unfortunately, 6.7% are very unsuccessful. There is a list of problems in achieving the respondent’s target, where their performance is inconsistent as it is difficult for them to sustain their downline to remain in the MLM industry, plus there is a lack of upline or mentor support and identification. It is impossible to encourage and approach consumers to enter or purchase goods when they assume the MLM industry of their opinions and mindsets (Interview, 2019).

## 2. Literature Review

### Personality and Performance

The researcher's literature study examined many topical concerns based on prior studies of the MLM business environment; Alexander and Goh (2018) cover career possibilities, income distribution, motivation, workplace flexibility, and working attitude. They discovered a strong link between these characteristics and concluded that workers' appropriate position and perception were critical to their performance. The authors point out that the MLM sector has done the most research into understanding Generation Y job options. However, a person's personality, which may influence their job enthusiasm, has received less study attention. As a result, further research should be considered. To broaden the scope of the literature study, Roberts and Woodman (2017) highlight individual and performance personalities as a key problem and a hot topic in the MLM business. When it comes to performance, the author recommends paying greater attention to personality.

Furthermore, the researcher highlights the MLM business's role, factors, and employment effect (Kumar & Satsangi, 2018). This research aimed to study MLM's part in examining factors joining the MLM business and analyzing the MLM business's effect on employment. The study reveals that 35% of people are unemployed in the example. They generate their income only from MLM business. Hence it could be a substitute for full-time employment. Based on the data analyzed from the previous study, MLM has a significant effect on employment opportunities, which is determined. MLM is a prominent business model of direct selling, helping the country's economic and social development. Therefore, it suggested spreading awareness among people.

Another relevant research paper discussed the strategies for building and retaining a productive MLM downline (Williams, 2018). The article explores the specific business problem that some multilevel marketers lack to develop and maintain a productive downline during the five years of operations. The paper draws on entrepreneurship theory and three emergent themes of a method used by multilevel marketers to build and retain a productive downline. These themes are (1) entrepreneurial mindset, including the associated personality traits and skills, (2) strong leadership and support, and (3) training and development. According to Williams (2018), multilevel marketers who employ these strategies and train their downlines in these areas can build and retain productive downlines, resulting in their MLM business's growth and sustainability.

Scholars from various cultures accept that behavior patterns are critical for human performance, organizational productivity, and subsequent profitability beyond structured work task specifications (Borman & Motowidlo 1997). Organ (1997) argues that contextual behaviors contribute to preserving and developing the social and psychological environment that promotes organizations' technological production processes. There is also data to show that the efficacy of workgroups and organizations as a whole is enhanced through contextual performance (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997; Podsakoff et al., 1997). The position of human resource management professionals' culture and change agents proposed by some contemporary researchers (Ulrich et al., 2013) involves recognizing personality traits and using relevant performance measures to create successful management performance systems.

In a meta-analysis study that found significant associations between satisfaction and the number of various contextual performance measures, Organ and Ryan (1995) presented the most convincing evidence for a connection between contextual output and work satisfaction,

believing they were not specified in the direction of causality. Besides, Van Scotter (2000) proposed in another paper that contextual performance could affect work satisfaction. Van Scotter observed that, as assessed many years back, the contextual performance scores of air force mechanics by managers had an extraordinary impact on work satisfaction. Because contextual performance supports the social and psychological work climate, it seems viable to affect employee happiness, but this thought has been widely overlooked.

One of the significant conclusions from Borman and Motowidlo's (1997) research; firstly, it seems contextual performance crucial and empirically distinct from task performance. Indeed, it was assumed that (a) as global rivalry in the future as the amount of effort needed by workers continues to increase, (b) as team-based organizations become more prevalent, (c) as downsizing continues to make them more general. The adaptability of employees and willingness to exhibit additional effort more than required, (d) as customer service is increasingly emphasized, and (e) partly as fields of work as the work envelope at least replace employment, contextual performance in organizations will become more and more relevant. For example, Motowidlo and Van Scotter's previous research (1994) showed that the big five personality variables have different relationships with job performance within the task versus contextual performance, as explained by Borman (1993) and Motowidlo (1997). More generally, evidence for establishing empirical ties between personality constructs and relatively basic criteria contributes significantly to selection science.

The researcher discovered that Sev (2019) conducted a study that enabled the researcher to identify good work performance habits, such as acceptable actions, based on empirical research findings. Aside from that, it creates work techniques that enhance productivity, dependability, and efficiency, better performance in unfamiliar settings, the capacity to explore new perspectives, increased motivation, and job satisfaction. It was determined that the research yielded personality characteristics. Aside from that, contextual performance necessitates discretionary behaviours such as task completion and peer assistance and communication. Such positions are not usually regarded as part of a formal job, and pay systems do not recognize them explicitly or implicitly. Nonetheless, they maintain the social system through supporting organizational objectives (Organ & Ryan, 1995; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Whitman et al., 2010).

When Abe and Mason (2016) looked at the impact of individual, interpersonal relationships on work performance, they discovered that the relationship between interpersonal identification and employee performance for supervisors was weak, while the variables for subordinate workers had a less significant relationship. Because salespeople react to leadership, prior studies think that management assistance will enhance interpersonal identification in a sales environment. This personality characteristic affects how workers feel about themselves and how they absorb the values and beliefs of the companies they work for (Ashforth et al., 2016). It is widely accepted that personality influences interpersonal actions and that knowing the connections between personality and behaviours provides important insights into attaining desired group results (Jeong, Bozkurt & Sunkara, 2012; Forrester, Tashchian & Shore, 2016).

When the agents identify with their manager, they expand their self-concept to include that manager's resources, for example, knowledge, information, experience, etc. They also learn what values are held by that manager concerning firm goals (Vieira et al., 2018). It is supported that a manager with a strong customer orientation may rub off on the sales team if the team identifies strongly with it (Mullins & Syam, 2014). Besides, the sales team performs better by adopting this orientation and better fulfilling customer needs (Ashforth et al., 2016; Aron et al.,

2004). Using this logic, the researcher predicts that potent agents who identify with their manager will adopt the values and utilize the resources to meet or exceed both company and managerial expectations (Siders et al., 2001).

MLM requires current agents to recruit new distributors to develop the company, and maintaining the appropriate attitude of new distributors is essential to encourage them to be successful (Alexander & Goh, 2018). In reality, it has the potential to improve the agent's performance at the same time. It backed up Koroth's earlier research (2012). Most direct selling businesses, including MLMs, rely on their capacity to attract new members to replace those who have left. According to previous researchers Espegren and Panicker (2015), managers should be aware of their personality characteristics while hiring and putting individuals in the sales function. Personality has a major impact on a salesman. Furthermore, salesperson personal variables are the most frequently researched category in salesperson performance studies, owing to individuals' internal factors that assist them in achieving their optimum performance. As a result, it is a crucial component in cultivating positive relationships with customers, colleagues, and other stakeholders (Muir, 2007; Herjanto & Franklin, 2019).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The research is still in its early stages and will need to be evaluated in the multilevel marketing (MLM) sector. Nonetheless, this study has emphasized that the MLM sector, in particular, is experiencing a lack of productive agents. This issue is unlikely to go away; therefore, practitioners and academics must develop solutions that will help alleviate the problem. This document is being presented to raise public knowledge of the true nature of the business. Further study, new methods, and tactics must be used to recruit and keep competent people in the dynamic and exciting MLM business. As a result of the findings of this research, MLM recruiters should consider the personality characteristics of each team member while making hiring choices.

To this aim, academics, government officials, and industry practitioners must continue communicating and working collaboratively. The potential for good social change refers to the ability to offer success methods to existing and prospective multilevel marketers, which may lead to additional income-generating possibilities for individuals who choose this route.

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