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Green Management Practices in Indian Multilevel Marketing Firms: A Multilevel Conceptual Perspective

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Abstract

Multilevel marketing (MLM) companies in India use a decentralised approach to distributing their products through individuals whose decision-making is influenced by social rather than formal management. Although sustainability and green management practices (GMPs) have been gaining prominence in current organisational research, their spread within MLM structures remains under-investigated. This paper constructs a multi-level conceptual model of how firm-level GMPs are translated into network-level mechanisms, which are then executed by individual distributors, resulting in organisational and environmental consequences. The framework, based on institutional theory, social learning theory, stakeholder theory, and the resource-based view, identifies environmental awareness, green trust, and social learning as the main mediating factors and hypothesises that the Indian institutional context serves as a moderator. This paper advances sustainability theory by integrating recent developments in green supply chain management, green human resource management, and studies of pro-environmental behaviour, and offers future directions for empirical research.

Keywords: green management practices, multilevel marketing, sustainability, social learning, institutional theory

Introduction

Growing universal awareness of the dangers of the ecological situation has led to greater adoption of sustainable lifestyles and a surge in demand for environmentally conscious products and services. Companies realise that sustainability is extremely paramount and adopt green marketing approaches to respond to the increased consumer awareness and regulatory demands (Subeesh & Shenbhagavadivu, 2024). It manifests especially in industries in India undergoing rapid industrialisation, where the environment is being degraded; as a result, innovations such as green marketing and green management practices remain necessary (Hinson et al., 2021). Green management practices (GMPs) entail adopting environmentally friendly approaches across an organisation's operations to minimise adverse ecological effects and enhance performance (Ma & Xue, 2024). These practices include eco-innovation, sustainable supply chain integration, waste minimisation, and energy efficiency (Vitratin et al., 2022). However, the specific factors that drive firms to adopt such alliance green management (AGM) practices are not always fully understood, especially within complex organisational structures (Ma & Xue, 2024). In India, practising green management in the context of Multilevel Marketing (MLM) companies has unique opportunities and challenges. MLM is a networked, decentralised, and informal method of distributing products that involves recruiting new members into the business by offering commissions to customers (Radhakrishnan & Aithal, 2024). While MLM has enabled Indian youth to build careers specifically in the fashion and apparel industry, it has also given people the opportunity to start a business with less capital (Selamet et al., 2022). This may lead to intensive operations, excessive packaging, logistics that are carbon-intensive and unsynchronised product lifecycles. The integration of GMPs into such a multi-layered structure requires a multilevel conceptual framework to address corporate headquarters, regional distributors, independent representatives, and the end consumer. The paper aims to theorise the practical application of GMPs at the interdependent levels of regulatory incentives and digital enablers, cultural norms, and the economic rationalities of actors on the ground. This type of research has helped to understand the sustainability of non-traditional organisational forms in emerging economies.

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Green Management Practices and MLM Structures

Green management, as applied in Multilevel Marketing (MLM) firms in India, presents both opportunities and challenges. MLM, also known as direct selling, is a decentralised, networked, and informal distribution channel that attracts customers to market products and recruit new members to earn commissions (Radhakrishnan & Aithal, 2024). Although Indian youth have been empowered through career development, particularly in the fashion and apparel industry, and people have the opportunity to venture without large capital due to the high growth rate (Selamet et al., 2022), environmental concerns have been neglected. It may lead to resource-intensive processes, overpacking, carbon-intensive logistics and uncontrolled product life cycles. The implementation of GMPs within such a multi-layered structure demands multiple levels of thought that must cover the corporate headquarters, regional distributors, independent representatives, and end consumers. The paper will theorise on how GMCs can be actualised to such heights of interdependence through regulatory incentives, digital intermediaries, cultural practices, and the economic rationalities of grassroots players. This study contributes to the body of knowledge of sustainability in non-traditional organisational forms in new economies.

Theoretical Foundations

1 Institutional Theory

The issue of green management in Multilevel Marketing (MLM) companies requires a robust theoretical foundation to understand how it is implemented and its effects. The institutional theory offers a critical perspective and holds that organisations may engage in practices not only to pursue efficiency but also to obtain legitimacy and to meet society's demands and expectations (Ma & Xue, 2024). When applied to green management, it implies that MLM companies can adopt green practices to align with the changing regulatory environment and stakeholder expectations, and to improve the company image, especially in emerging markets where industrialisation has increased awareness of the importance of the environment (Hinson et al., 2021). Organisations are forced to implement green initiatives by the isomorphic pressures, such as coercive (e.g., government regulations), mimetic (e.g., imitation of successful green competitors), and normative (e.g., professionalisation of environmental standards) pressures (Ma & Xue, 2024).

Figure 1.

2 Social Learning and Pro-Environmental Behaviour.

Social learning theory further illuminates how pro-environmental behaviour can be fostered among the decentralised network of MLM distributors and consumers. The theory assumes that people acquire behaviour by observing others and their effects. Green leaders and pioneers of green practices in an MLM setup can serve as role models for downline members and customers. Positive reinforcement of sustainable practices can also be spread through the network through effective communication and training in eco-friendly actions (Pallavi, 2023).

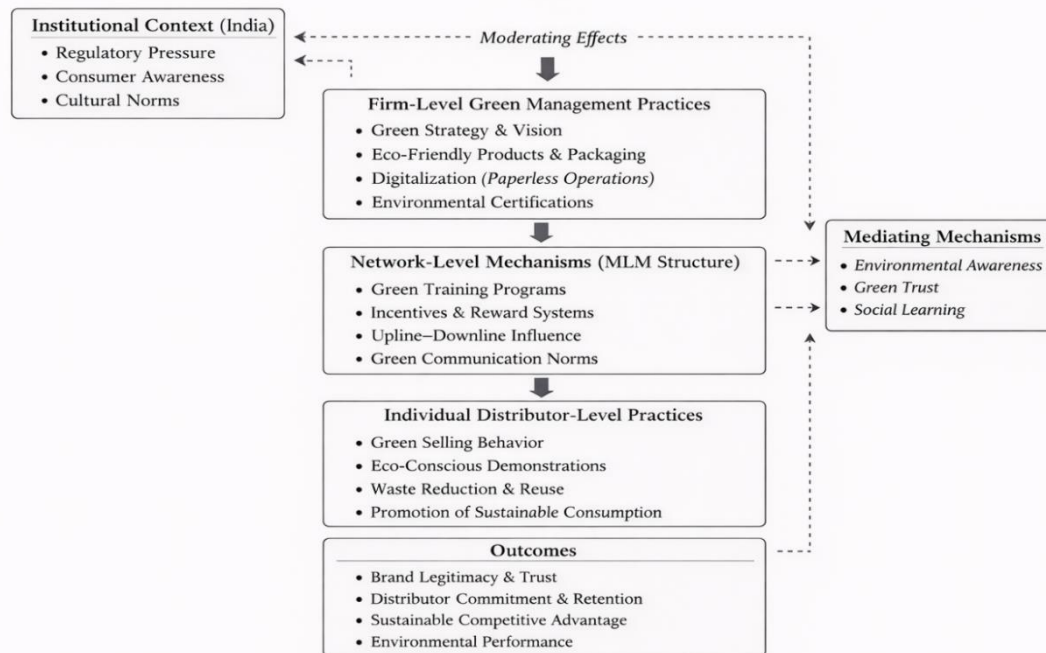
3 Stakeholder views and Resource-Based views.

Lastly, the resource-based view (RBV) and the stakeholder theory provide supplementary insights. According to the RBV, a firm can achieve sustainable competitive advantage through valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources and capabilities (Pallavi, 2023). Implementing strong green management practices may be seen as distinct competencies that set MLM companies apart and appeal to environmentally aware consumers and distributors. The stakeholder theory holds that organisations must take into account the interests of all stakeholders in their activities and operations, including customers, workers, communities, and the environment (Mourya & Verma, 2024). Green practices will enable MLM firms to meet stakeholders' demands for environmental responsibility, thereby building trust, enhancing corporate image, and securing sustainability and success in the competitive global market (Subeesh & Shenbhagavadivu, 2024).

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Justification

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed multilevel conceptual model of the diffusion of green management practices in Indian multilevel marketing (MLM) companies. The model integrates firm-level management of green practices, a network transmission mechanism, and distributor-level individual green behaviour to elucidate how sustainability undertakings are translated into organisational and environmental levels. It also includes major mediating processes such as environmental consciousness, social learning, and green trust, as well as the moderating impact of the Indian institutional context. Through the direct cross-level connection of these factors, the framework offers an organised account of how sustainability can be diffused in decentralised, networked organisational forms such as MLM firms.

A Multi-level Conceptual Framework of Green Management Practices in Multilevel Marketing Firms in India



Conceptual Framework Supported in Theory.

Figure 1 above presents a multilevel framework for the diffusion of green management practices in multilevel marketing firms in India. Green strategies, green products, digitalisation, and environmental firm-level certifications are all ways of achieving legitimacy under regulatory and market pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Raman et al., 2023). The framework takes into account the green ways of the network level, such as training programs, incentive programs, and communication needs and effects downline-uphill as the middle layer transmission because MLM organisations are decentralised, and social influence manages behaviour instead of hierarchy (Chopra et al., 2023; Huang & Rust, 2021). At the individual level, distributors' green behaviour is influenced by research on pro-environmental behaviour in organisational settings and by social influences (Norton et al., 2015). These relationships have mediators such as environmental awareness, social learning, and green trust, which are affected by the internalisation of behaviour and credibility (Haack, P., & Rasche, A., 2021). When supported by organisational practices and social conventions, individuals' pro-environmental behaviour within organisations drives environmental performance (Norton et al., 2015). In India, the relationships between green practices, environmental performance, and organisational legitimacy are mediated by institutional pressures (Gupta et al., 2025), implying that distributors' green behaviour influences performance and organisational legitimacy in this case.

Propositions

P1: There is a positive relationship between green mechanisms at MLM networks and firm-level green management practices.

The institutional theory holds that, at the firm level, through the diffusion of practices within internal networks, sustainability policies and formal structures can lead to legitimacy and consistency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

P2: Network-level green mechanisms positively influence distributor green behaviour.

The social learning theory explains that people acquire behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social networks, and that network-level cues are very influential on individuals' behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

P3: Environmental awareness, social learning, and green trust mediate the effect of network mechanisms on distributors' green practices.

Sustainability standard studies indicate that learning processes and credibility play a crucial role in the internalisation of green practices and the creation of trust in environmental claims (Haack & Rasche, 2021).

P4: Firm-level green management practices mediate-free between distributor green behaviour.

Signalling theory describes how apparent corporate sustainability behaviours directly influence stakeholders' identification and behaviour by expressing plausible organisational values (Spence, 1973).

P5: Green behaviour at the distributor level has a positive impact on the environmental performance and organisational legitimacy.

Multilevel research on employee green behaviour shows that aggregated individual actions contribute to organisational environmental performance and sustainability outcomes (Norton et al., 2015).

P6: The Indian institutional environment mediates the association between firm-level green practices and network- and individual-level green practices.

Empirical research in India has shown that the institutional environment is a mediating factor, supporting the claim that the relationships between green practices and environmental performance are mediated by other variables, with regulatory and institutional pressures identified as significant ones (Gupta et al., 2025).

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This model connects the green management theory to institutional pressure, social learning, and multilevel diffusion processes by integrating these factors into the model of decentralised organisational types (Galleli, 2025). It is also a step toward developing the existing body of interpretation of GHRM and GSCM as factors in distributor networks, with key implementation points (Tahir et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2012).

Implications to Management and Policies.

The managers should develop corporate sustainability plans into scalable networks, incentives, and green behaviours, and build green trust through transparency (Testa et al., 2020). Sustainability box: Eco-labels. Policymakers can create and enforce environmental claims, as well as tighten enforcement at the regional level, to support MLM sustainability (Zhu & Sarkis, 2013).

Limitations and Future Research.

Since it is a conceptual study, this paper needs empirical validation. Multilevel designs should be widely used in future research (Aguinis et al., 2020) and should account for methodological rigour and control-variable problems (Podsakoff et al., 2021), as well as the longitudinal diffusion of green practices within MLM networks or between them.

Conclusion

The paper presents a multilevel conceptual model of how green management diffuses within Indian MLM companies. It offers a theoretically sound foundation for future empirical research and practical applications of sustainability in network-based organisations by incorporating recent developments in sustainability, social learning, and institutional research.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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