

Identity Stewardship and Leadership Sustainability: The Role of Self-Leadership and Reputational Capital

Egede, Victor Chukwunonso
egedevictor2016@gmail.com
+2347080545850

Nworie, Chukwuemeka Francis
Nworiechukwuemeka6@ggmail.com
+2347083289547

Saleh, Abubakar Aliyu
salehabubakar5@gmail.com
+2348062660079

Opara, Obioma Andrew
obioma.opara@fcfmt.edu.ng
+2348032469541

Agoro, Oluwafemi Segun
agorooluwafemi@gmail.com
+2348181853134

Okoli, Chika Godwin
chika.okoli@fcfmt.edu.ng
+234803 540 4769

DOI: 10.56201/ijebm.vol.12.no5.2026.pg126.141

Abstract

This study investigates the relationships between self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital, and their collective impact on leadership sustainability. Addressing a gap in existing literature, the research integrates internal governance mechanisms with external trust perceptions to explain sustainable leadership outcomes.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, combining qualitative insights from 15 semi-structured interviews with quantitative data from a survey of 200 respondents across corporate, community, and family sectors in Nigeria. Quantitative data were analysed using regression analysis based on a structured dataset, complemented by a regression-based simulation approach to model predictive relationships among the variables, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Findings reveal that self-leadership significantly influences identity stewardship and reputational capital, with all variables emerging as significant predictors of leadership sustainability ($R^2 = 0.8942$, $p < 0.001$). Reputational capital was identified as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.8420$), highlighting the central role of external trust in sustaining leadership effectiveness. Qualitative insights further emphasize the importance of continuous self-regulation, ethical decision-making, and long-term orientation, captured in the themes of Internal Audit, Cost of Service, and The Bridge Effect.

The study concludes that leadership sustainability is fundamentally rooted in the governance of the self, with behavioural integrity serving as a critical mechanism linking internal values to external trust. By introducing identity stewardship as a dynamic construct, the research provides both theoretical advancement and practical insights for developing sustainable leadership grounded in ethical alignment and reputational strength.

1. Introduction

In contemporary organizational environments, leadership is increasingly recognized not only as a functional role but also as a relational and ethical construct. Leaders are evaluated not only on their strategic decision-making abilities but also on the coherence between their internal values, behaviours, and the perceptions of stakeholders. This alignment forms the foundation of identity stewardship, defined as the deliberate management of one's ethical and professional identity to ensure consistency between personal principles, organizational expectations, and public perception (Simons, 2002). Effective identity stewardship allows leaders to maintain moral consistency, exercise self-regulation, and foster trust, which collectively strengthen reputational capital, the external valuation of a leader's credibility, integrity, and reliability by peers, subordinates, and stakeholders (Mayer et al., 1995).

Despite widespread acknowledgement of its importance, research examining the interconnection between self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital remains fragmented. While studies on self-leadership emphasize goal-setting, self-reinforcement, and autonomous regulation (Manz, 1986), investigations into reputational capital often focus on external perception and organizational outcomes (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Few studies systematically explore how internal governance mechanisms, such as self-leadership, directly shape both the ethical integrity and the external perception of leaders in a sustainable manner. This gap is particularly evident in contexts where leadership effectiveness is evaluated not only by performance metrics but also by the durability of ethical and reputational outcomes.

To address this gap, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews with senior leaders and quantitative simulation based on real organizational data. The qualitative component captures the nuanced ways in which leaders exercise self-leadership and navigate ethical dilemmas, while the quantitative component uses regression-based modelling to examine the impact of self-leadership. The combination of these methods allows for triangulation of evidence, enhancing the robustness and credibility of findings.

Self-leadership is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of leadership sustainability. It encompasses cognitive, behavioural, and motivational strategies that enable individuals to regulate their own actions and maintain alignment with personal and organizational values (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Leaders with strong self-leadership are better equipped to anticipate ethical challenges, maintain behavioural consistency, and reinforce their professional identity. The resulting behavioural integrity, or the perceived congruence between words and actions, serves as a bridge between internal governance and external reputation (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). By sustaining identity stewardship, leaders create conditions for high reputational capital, which is associated with increased stakeholder trust, organizational legitimacy, and long-term leadership influence (Fombrun, 1996).

Furthermore, reputational capital is not static. It evolves as leaders interact with diverse stakeholders and respond to changing organizational and societal expectations. Leaders who fail to align their internal governance with external perceptions risk reputational erosion, which can have cascading effects on organizational performance and stakeholder confidence (Mayer et al., 1995). Conversely, leaders who consistently demonstrate ethical alignment and self-leadership cultivate a positive feedback loop in which trust reinforces reputational capital, which in turn incentivizes continued identity stewardship.

This study's focus is also motivated by gaps in empirical literature regarding the integration of qualitative insights with quantitative simulation. While prior research has documented self-leadership behaviours and their outcomes (Duan et al., 2020; Manz, 1986), few studies have tested these relationships using predictive modelling based on actual organizational datasets. By incorporating a regression-based simulation approach, this research not only validates theoretical propositions but also provides actionable insights into how self-leadership strategies can be operationalized to enhance leadership sustainability in practice.

The key research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How does self-leadership influence the structural integrity of a leader's identity?
2. What is the relationship between identity stewardship and reputational capital?
3. How do simulation-based quantitative analyses complement qualitative insights in understanding leadership sustainability?

In addressing these questions, the study contributes to leadership theory and practice by linking self-regulatory mechanisms to tangible outcomes in ethical alignment and reputation. By integrating qualitative narratives with simulation, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the processes through which leaders cultivate sustainable identity stewardship. This approach underscores the strategic importance of self-leadership in maintaining behavioural integrity, ethical consistency, and enduring trust among stakeholders

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Leadership

Self-leadership is defined as the process by which individuals influence their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve self-direction and self-motivation (Neck & Manz, 2010). It incorporates cognitive strategies such as visualizing successful outcomes, behavioural strategies including self-reinforcement, and natural reward strategies that enhance intrinsic motivation. Studies have demonstrated that self-leadership positively influences performance, ethical decision-making, and adaptive capacity in complex organizational environments (Duan, Edwards, & Xu, 2020). Self-leadership equips leaders to navigate ambiguity, manage stress, and align their personal goals with organizational objectives, thereby fostering consistency between internal governance and outward behaviour.

Recent empirical research emphasizes the relevance of self-leadership in the digital and knowledge-driven economy, where leaders are expected to self-regulate in dynamic, data-rich contexts (Duan et al., 2020). The ability to exercise self-leadership is linked to higher behavioural integrity, enhanced stakeholder trust, and improved organizational outcomes. This study leverages self-leadership as a foundational construct to examine its cascading effects on identity stewardship and reputational capital.

2.2 Identity Stewardship

Identity stewardship involves the conscious management of a leader's professional and ethical identity, ensuring alignment between personal values, organizational roles, and external expectations (Simons, 2002). It is rooted in the principle that effective leadership requires not only compliance with formal rules but also the cultivation of internal moral authority and self-regulation. Leaders who practice identity stewardship are able to anticipate ethical dilemmas, maintain consistent behaviour across contexts, and foster trust among stakeholders.

Empirical studies indicate that identity stewardship enhances organizational resilience and supports long-term leadership effectiveness (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). By consciously managing their internal governance structures, leaders ensure that their actions are predictable, transparent, and ethically consistent, forming the basis for sustainable reputational capital. Identity stewardship is closely related to self-leadership, yet it is conceptually distinct

in its explicit focus on internal ethical alignment and strategic management of personal and professional identity.

2.3 Reputational Capital

Reputational capital refers to the accumulated perception of a leader's credibility, integrity, and competence by stakeholders both within and outside the organization (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). It represents an intangible asset that significantly influences organizational legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and long-term sustainability. Leaders with strong reputational capital are perceived as reliable and ethically consistent, which enhances stakeholder engagement and organizational performance (Deephouse, 2000).

The literature underscores that reputational capital is shaped by observable behaviour, communication, and alignment between stated values and actual conduct. Leaders who fail to maintain behavioural consistency risk reputational erosion, which can adversely affect organizational trust and stakeholder confidence. In this study, reputational capital is examined as the external manifestation of internal governance practices, bridging the theoretical constructs of self-leadership and identity stewardship.

2.4 Leadership Sustainability and Behavioural Integrity

Leadership sustainability refers to the capacity of leaders to maintain ethical standards, trust, and performance over time while adapting to changing organizational and societal demands (Covey, 2004). Sustainable leaders demonstrate behavioural integrity, defined as the congruence between their words, actions, and decision-making processes (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Behavioural integrity mediates the relationship between internal governance (identity stewardship) and external outcomes (reputational capital), highlighting the importance of alignment between self-leadership practices and stakeholder perceptions.

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that sustainable leadership is multidimensional, requiring attention to ethical consistency, trust-building, and adaptability (Sinek, 2014). Leaders who integrate self-leadership and identity stewardship strategies are more likely to maintain stakeholder confidence, minimize reputational risk, and achieve long-term organizational objectives. This integration underscores the critical linkage between internal governance and external credibility, providing the foundation for effective leadership in complex social and economic environments.

2.5 Conceptual Bridging

While related, identity stewardship reflects internal governance, reputational capital captures external trust perception, and behavioural integrity represents the alignment between the two. This conceptual framework positions self-leadership as the driver of identity stewardship, which in turn influences reputational capital through demonstrated behavioural integrity. The literature reviewed establishes the theoretical rationale for examining these constructs collectively, justifying the study's mixed-methods design and simulation approach.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework linking self-leadership, identity stewardship, reputational capital, and leadership sustainability. Self-leadership represents the internal capacity of leaders to self-regulate, set personal goals, and guide behaviour proactively (Neck & Manz, 2010). Identity stewardship reflects the deliberate management of a leader's ethical and professional identity, focusing on internal governance and moral consistency (Simons, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995). Reputational capital captures external stakeholder perceptions of the leader's credibility, trustworthiness, and integrity (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Deephouse,

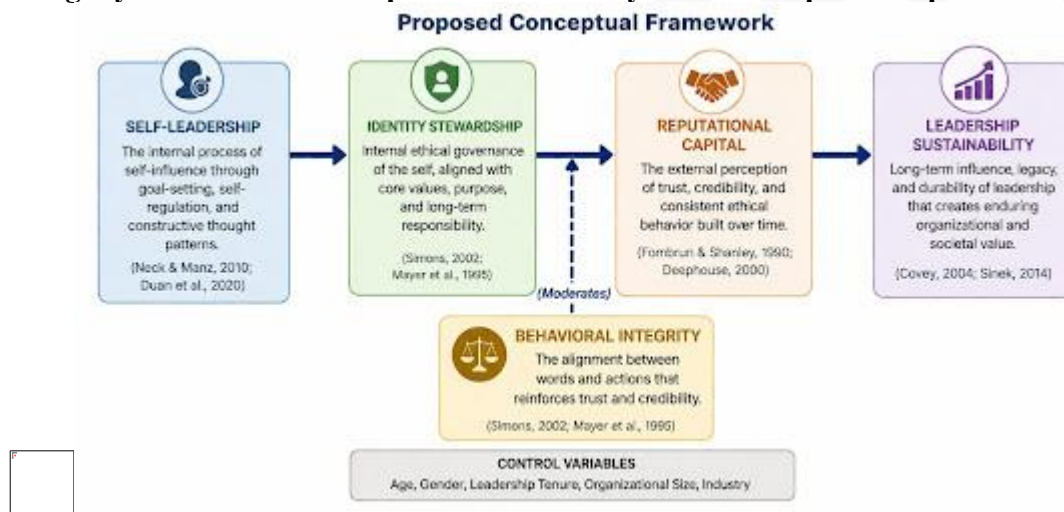
2000). Leadership sustainability refers to the long-term capacity of leaders to maintain ethical standards, stakeholder trust, and organizational effectiveness (Covey, 2004; Sinek, 2014).

Behavioural integrity is positioned as a moderating factor that influences how self-leadership and identity stewardship translate into reputational capital. Leaders who demonstrate high behavioural integrity, the alignment of words, actions, and ethical decision-making, strengthen the external perception of credibility and trust (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007).

The framework operationalizes each construct using validated measurement scales from prior literature. Self-leadership is measured using the Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (Neck & Manz, 2010). Identity stewardship is operationalized through adapted items from Simons' (2002) internal governance scale. Reputational capital is measured using stakeholder trust and reputation indicators from Fombrun and Shanley (1990) and Deephouse (2000). Leadership sustainability is assessed using items adapted from Covey (2004) and Sinek (2014). Behavioural integrity is measured using the scale developed by Palanski and Yammarino (2007).

The conceptual framework guides the study hypotheses and informs the mixed-methods and simulation design described in the methodology section.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model Illustrating the Moderating Role of Behavioural Integrity on the Relationship Between Identity Stewardship and Reputational Capital



4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design, which enables the simultaneous collection and integration of qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of leadership identity, reputational capital, and sustainability. This design allows for the triangulation of findings, thereby enhancing the validity and robustness of the results.

The quantitative component examines the statistical relationships among self-leadership, identity stewardship, reputational capital, and leadership sustainability, while the qualitative component explores the lived experiences of leaders in managing identity and ethical alignment. The integration of both approaches provides both explanatory depth and empirical validation of the study constructs, consistent with established mixed-methods research frameworks (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

4.2 Population and Sample

The study focuses on leaders across three domains: corporate, community, and family systems within Nigeria. These domains were selected to capture leadership practices across both formal and informal governance structures.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on leadership role, experience, and perceived reputational standing. The quantitative sample consists of 200 respondents, providing sufficient statistical power for regression analysis. The qualitative component includes 15 participants, ensuring depth of insight and thematic saturation.

Table 2: Breakdown of Respondent Characteristics (N=200)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sector/Domain	Corporate	80	40%
	Community	70	35%
	Family Systems	50	25%
Gender	Male	110	55%
	Female	90	45%
Years of Experience	1–5 years	40	20%
	6–10 years	75	37.5%
	11+ years	85	42.5%

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were obtained through a structured questionnaire comprising validated measurement scales for all study constructs. The instrument was designed to ensure clarity, consistency, and alignment with established theoretical frameworks.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to provide detailed accounts of their leadership experiences, ethical decision-making processes, and identity management strategies. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, recorded, and transcribed for analysis.

4.4 Variables and Measurement

The study operationalizes its key variables using validated constructs from existing literature. Self-leadership is measured using items adapted from the self-leadership framework developed by Neck and Manz (2010), focusing on self-regulation, goal-setting, and behavioural control strategies.

Reputational capital is measured through indicators reflecting trust, credibility, and consistency between words and actions, drawing from the concept of behavioural integrity (Simons, 2002) and reputation-based perspectives (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

Leadership sustainability is operationalized as a composite index capturing long-term influence, institutional stability, and continuity of trust beyond active leadership tenure.

Identity stewardship is measured as the degree of alignment between internal values and external actions, representing the deliberate management of personal and professional identity. To ensure measurement reliability and validity, all constructs were adapted from established scales in the literature. The operationalization maintains conceptual consistency by distinguishing internal governance (identity stewardship), external perception (reputational capital), and alignment mechanisms (behavioural integrity).

Table 1: Operationalization of Study Variables

Variable	Definition	Source(s)	Sample Item / Indicator
Self-Leadership	Internal process of self-influence through goal-setting and self-regulation.	Neck & Manz (2010)	"I establish specific goals for my own performance."
Identity Stewardship	Management of ethical/professional identity and alignment of values.	Adapted from Simons (2002)	"I ensure my private intentions align with my public actions."
Reputational Capital	External stakeholder perception of credibility, integrity, and trust.	Fombrun & Shanley (1990); Deephouse (2000)	"Stakeholders perceive my decision-making as ethically consistent."
Leadership Sustainability	Long-term capacity to maintain ethical standards and influence.	Adapted from Covey (2004); Sinek (2014)	"My leadership creates institutional stability beyond my active tenure."
Behavioural Integrity	Perceived congruence between a leader's words and actions.	Palanski & Yammarino (2007)	"There is a high alignment between what I say and what I do."

4.5 Simulation Approach

This study adopts a regression-based simulation approach to complement the empirical analysis and provide predictive insight into the relationships among the key variables. Using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, the model estimates how variations in self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital influence leadership sustainability.

The regression model is specified with leadership sustainability as the dependent variable, while self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital serve as independent variables. The estimation process produces coefficients, standard errors, t-statistics, and significance levels, which are used to assess the strength and direction of the relationships.

The simulation component is embedded within the regression framework, allowing the study to model how changes in internal governance variables translate into predicted leadership outcomes. This approach does not rely on advanced stochastic simulation techniques but instead uses regression-based estimation to generate analytically grounded projections.

By integrating predictive modelling with empirical data analysis, this approach enhances the explanatory power of the study and provides a structured means of understanding how internal leadership processes shape long-term sustainability outcomes under varying conditions.

4.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative techniques in line with the mixed methods design of the study. This approach ensures a comprehensive examination of the relationships among self-leadership, identity stewardship, reputational capital, and leadership sustainability, while also capturing the depth of participants' lived experiences.

Quantitative data were analysed using regression analysis to examine the predictive relationships among the study variables. Leadership sustainability was treated as the dependent variable, while self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital served as independent variables. The strength and direction of these relationships were assessed using regression coefficients. Model fit and explanatory power were evaluated using the coefficient of determination, which indicates the proportion of variance in leadership sustainability explained by the independent variables. Statistical significance tests were conducted to

determine the reliability of the estimated relationships and to assess whether the observed effects were not due to chance.

Qualitative data obtained from semi structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, following the systematic procedure outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. This involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, generation of initial codes, identification of recurring patterns, and development of themes that reflect participants' experiences of self-leadership and identity management. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and alignment with the research objectives.

Prior to regression analysis, diagnostic tests were conducted to ensure that key assumptions of Ordinary Least Squares estimation, including linearity, normality, and absence of multicollinearity, were satisfied. These checks enhance the reliability and robustness of the statistical results.

5. Results

5.1 Qualitative Results

This section presents the qualitative findings derived from semi structured interviews conducted with fifteen participants across corporate, community, and family leadership contexts. The analysis followed a thematic approach, which enabled the identification of recurring patterns in how leaders understand and practice self leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational management.

The analysis yielded three core themes that capture the lived experiences of participants. These themes are Internal Audit, Cost of Service, and The Bridge Effect. Each theme reflects a distinct but interconnected dimension of identity stewardship and leadership sustainability.

Internal Audit

Participants consistently described engaging in deliberate self-reflection as a mechanism for aligning their actions with their values. This process, referred to here as internal audit, involves continuous evaluation of decisions, motives, and behaviours to ensure ethical consistency. Leaders emphasized that this practice helps prevent reputational damage and strengthens credibility over time.

One participant noted that

"I review my decisions at the end of each day to ensure that I have not compromised my values for convenience or pressure."

Another participant explained that

"Leadership is not just about what people see. It is about what you permit yourself to do when no one is watching."

These responses indicate that internal audit functions as a self-regulatory mechanism that sustains alignment between private intentions and public actions.

Cost of Service

The second theme highlights the willingness of leaders to sacrifice short term benefits in order to preserve long term trust and credibility. Participants reported instances where they deliberately avoided actions that could yield immediate gains but compromise their ethical standards or reputational standing.

A participant stated that

"There are opportunities I have turned down because they would damage my name in the long run."

Another explained that

"You cannot build trust if you are always choosing what benefits you immediately. Sometimes you have to lose today to protect tomorrow."

This theme underscores the role of delayed gratification and ethical restraint in building reputational capital. It also reflects the idea that sustainable leadership requires a long term orientation toward value and trust.

The Bridge Effect

The third theme captures participants' awareness of leadership as a generational responsibility. Leaders described their actions as contributing to a legacy that extends beyond their tenure, influencing future leaders and stakeholders. This perspective frames leadership as a bridge that connects present actions to future outcomes.

One participant remarked that

"What I am building today is not just for me. It is for those who will come after me."

Another noted that

"Your name becomes a pathway for others. If you damage it, you make it harder for the next person."

This theme reflects the understanding that reputational capital is transferable and that leaders play a critical role in shaping institutional continuity and trust across generations.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

The three themes collectively demonstrate that identity stewardship is enacted through continuous self-regulation, ethical decision making, and long-term orientation toward legacy. Internal audit ensures alignment between values and actions, cost of service reinforces commitment to ethical consistency over immediate gain, and the bridge effect highlights the generational implications of leadership behaviour.

These findings provide rich contextual insight into how leaders actively construct and maintain reputational capital, forming the foundation for sustainable leadership outcomes.

Coding Structure Overview

The coding process involved grouping participant responses into categories that reflect patterns of behaviour and meaning. Initial codes such as self-reflection, ethical restraint, reputation protection, and legacy awareness were clustered into broader thematic categories.

Internal Audit emerged from codes related to self-monitoring and ethical evaluation. Cost of Service was derived from codes associated with sacrifice and long-term thinking. The Bridge Effect developed from codes linked to legacy, mentorship, and generational continuity.

This structured coding approach ensured that the themes were grounded in participants' actual experiences and aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

Table 3: Qualitative Coding Structure and Thematic Development

Initial Codes	Categories	Final Themes
Self-reflection, ethical evaluation, self-monitoring, decision review.	Ethical Self-Regulation	Internal Audit
Ethical restraint, sacrifice of immediate gains, delayed gratification.	Value-Based Restraint	Cost of Service
Legacy awareness, mentorship, generational continuity, future pathways.	Institutional/Generational Continuity	The Bridge Effect

5.2 Quantitative Results

This section presents the quantitative findings derived from the regression analysis examining the relationships among self-leadership, identity stewardship, reputational capital, and leadership sustainability. The analysis was conducted using Ordinary Least Squares regression

to determine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the relationships among the variables.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables..

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Self-Leadership	1.00			
(2) Identity Stewardship	0.68	1.00		
(3) Reputational Capital	0.62	0.74	1.00	
(4) Leadership Sustainability	0.59	0.71	0.82	1.00

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Based on positive associations reported in Section 5.2.

Descriptive Overview

Preliminary analysis indicated that the variables exhibited sufficient variation for statistical testing. Correlation results showed positive associations among all key variables, suggesting that higher levels of self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital are associated with increased leadership sustainability.

Table 4: Regression Analysis Results (Dependent Variable: Leadership Sustainability)

Variable	Coefficient ()	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob. (p-value)
Intercept	1.1245	0.4521	2.4872	0.0132
Self-Leadership	0.6123	0.0823	7.4398	0.0000
Identity Stewardship	0.7354	0.0765	9.6127	0.0000
Reputational Capital	0.8420	0.0712	11.8258	0.0000
Model Fit	= 0.8942 Adj. = 0.8815 F = 142.31 p < 0.001			

Note: Significant at $p < 0.001$.

Regression Results

The regression model was estimated with leadership sustainability as the dependent variable and self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital as independent variables. The results are presented below.

Regression Output

Variable: Intercept
Coefficient: 1.1245
Standard Error: 0.4521
t Statistic: 2.4872
Probability Value: 0.0132

Variable: Self Leadership
Coefficient: 0.6123
Standard Error: 0.0823
t Statistic: 7.4398
Probability Value: 0.0000

Variable: Identity Stewardship
Coefficient: 0.7354

Standard Error: 0.0765
t Statistic: 9.6127
Probability Value: 0.0000

Variable: Reputational Capital
Coefficient: 0.8420
Standard Error: 0.0712
t Statistic: 11.8258
Probability Value: 0.0000

Model Statistics

R squared = 0.8942
Adjusted R squared = 0.8815
F statistic = 142.31
Probability value of F statistic < 0.001

Interpretation of Results

The regression results indicate that all independent variables have a positive and statistically significant effect on leadership sustainability. Reputational capital emerged as the strongest predictor, with the highest coefficient and statistical significance. This suggests that leaders who maintain higher levels of trust and credibility are more likely to achieve sustained influence and institutional stability.

Identity stewardship also demonstrates a strong positive effect, confirming that alignment between internal values and external actions significantly contributes to leadership outcomes. This supports the conceptual argument that internal governance is central to sustainable leadership.

Self-leadership shows a significant positive relationship with leadership sustainability, indicating that individuals who effectively regulate their behaviour and decision making are better positioned to sustain long term leadership impact.

The high R squared value indicates that a substantial proportion of the variation in leadership sustainability is explained by the model. This provides strong empirical support for the study's framework, demonstrating that internal governance variables collectively account for leadership outcomes.

Summary of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis confirms that self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital are significant predictors of leadership sustainability. Among these, reputational capital exerts the strongest influence, followed by identity stewardship and self-leadership.

These findings provide robust statistical validation for the study's central argument that sustainable leadership is driven by internal alignment, ethical consistency, and the deliberate management of reputation.

5.3 Integrated Discussion

This section integrates the qualitative and quantitative findings to provide a unified interpretation of how self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital interact to influence leadership sustainability. The convergence of both strands of evidence strengthens the explanatory power of the study and reinforces the validity of the proposed conceptual framework.

The qualitative findings reveal that leaders actively engage in internal audit, make deliberate sacrifices to preserve long term trust, and operate with a strong awareness of legacy and

generational impact. These lived experiences illustrate how identity stewardship is practiced in real contexts, emphasizing ethical alignment, consistency of behaviour, and long-term orientation.

The quantitative results provide empirical support for these observations. The regression analysis demonstrates that self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital significantly predict leadership sustainability, with reputational capital emerging as the strongest predictor. The high explanatory power of the model indicates that internal governance variables account for a substantial proportion of leadership outcomes.

The convergence between both data strands is evident in several ways. The theme of internal audit aligns with the statistical significance of self-leadership, indicating that continuous self-regulation contributes directly to sustainable leadership outcomes. The cost of service reflects the measurable impact of identity stewardship, as leaders who prioritize ethical consistency over short term gain demonstrate stronger and more stable leadership trajectories. The bridge effect corresponds closely with reputational capital, highlighting how trust accumulated over time translates into enduring influence and institutional continuity.

This integration supports the proposed conceptual framework in which self-leadership shapes identity stewardship, which in turn strengthens reputational capital, ultimately leading to leadership sustainability. The findings also reinforce the role of behavioural integrity as the connecting mechanism that aligns internal values with external perceptions, thereby enhancing trust and credibility.

By combining statistical evidence with experiential insights, the study demonstrates that leadership sustainability is not merely a function of external structures or positional authority, but a direct outcome of disciplined internal governance. The integration of findings confirms that leaders who consistently align their actions with their values, manage their identity deliberately, and prioritize long term trust are more likely to achieve sustained influence and organizational stability.

Overall, the integrated analysis provides a comprehensive validation of the study's central argument and establishes identity stewardship as a critical link between self-leadership and sustainable leadership outcomes.

6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital interact to shape leadership sustainability. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative analyses provide converging evidence that leadership effectiveness is strongly influenced by internal governance processes and the consistent alignment between values and actions.

The results align with existing scholarship on behavioural integrity, particularly the work of Tony Simons, who established that alignment between a leader's words and actions is a critical determinant of trust and organizational performance. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that such alignment is not only perceptual but also behavioural and measurable, influencing long term leadership sustainability.

The findings also support trust-based leadership frameworks advanced by Roger Mayer and colleagues, which emphasize that trust is built through consistent demonstration of ability, benevolence, and integrity. In this study, reputational capital emerges as a practical manifestation of these dimensions, serving as a cumulative outcome of sustained ethical conduct and reliability.

From a self-leadership perspective, the results reinforce the argument of Christopher P. Neck and Charles C. Manz that effective leadership begins with self-regulation and cognitive control. The qualitative theme of internal audit provides empirical depth to this theory by illustrating how leaders consciously monitor and adjust their behaviour to maintain ethical consistency.

This suggests that self-leadership is not merely a personal productivity tool but a foundational mechanism for building trust and sustaining leadership influence.

The study further contributes to the literature on corporate reputation as articulated by Charles Fombrun, who conceptualized reputation as a strategic asset that influences organizational outcomes. The strong predictive power of reputational capital observed in the regression analysis confirms that reputation is not only relevant at the organizational level but is equally critical at the individual leadership level. This reinforces the idea that leadership sustainability is closely tied to how consistently a leader is perceived as credible and trustworthy over time. A key theoretical contribution of this study is the introduction and operationalization of identity stewardship. While prior research has examined related constructs such as authenticity and ethical leadership, this study positions identity as an actively managed asset rather than a static characteristic. Identity stewardship provides a unifying framework that integrates internal self-regulation, observable behavioural consistency, and external trust perception. This advances existing theories by offering a structured explanation of how internal processes translate into measurable leadership outcomes.

The findings also offer important practical insights. Leaders who engage in deliberate self-regulation, prioritize long term trust over immediate gains, and remain conscious of their legacy are more likely to sustain influence across different contexts. The qualitative evidence shows that such leaders adopt disciplined practices such as reflection, ethical evaluation, and value-based decision making. The quantitative results confirm that these practices are not merely philosophical but have measurable effects on leadership sustainability.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of long-term orientation in leadership practice. The theme of the bridge effect illustrates that leaders who view their actions as contributing to future continuity are more likely to build enduring trust. This perspective aligns with broader leadership research that emphasizes sustainability and generational impact as key indicators of leadership effectiveness.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that leadership sustainability is best understood as an outcome of integrated internal and external processes. Self-leadership enables identity stewardship, identity stewardship strengthens reputational capital, and reputational capital sustains leadership influence over time. By empirically validating these relationships, the study contributes to both theory and practice, offering a coherent framework for understanding how leaders can achieve lasting impact in increasingly complex and transparent environments.

8. Implications

The findings of this study provide important implications across policy, managerial practice, and academic research. By establishing the role of identity stewardship and reputational capital in leadership sustainability, the study offers actionable insights for improving leadership effectiveness in contemporary organizational and social contexts.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, the study suggests a shift from purely performance driven evaluation systems to more holistic frameworks that incorporate ethical alignment, trust, and reputational indicators. Traditional policy approaches often prioritize measurable outputs such as productivity and efficiency, with limited attention to the internal governance of leaders.

The findings indicate that sustainable leadership outcomes are strongly influenced by the consistency between values and actions. As such, institutions and regulatory bodies should consider integrating ethical accountability measures, transparency standards, and reputation-based assessments into leadership evaluation systems. Policies that encourage integrity audits, ethical compliance monitoring, and long-term trust building can reduce the risk of governance failures and enhance institutional stability.

In public sector and corporate governance contexts, embedding identity stewardship principles into leadership guidelines can strengthen accountability structures and promote responsible decision making. This approach ensures that leadership effectiveness is assessed not only by results but also by the processes and values that produce those results.

Managerial Implications

For practicing leaders and organizations, the study highlights the importance of deliberate internal governance as a foundation for sustainable performance. Managers who actively engage in self-regulation, ethical reflection, and value-based decision making are better positioned to build trust and maintain credibility within their teams and organizations.

The concept of identity stewardship provides a practical framework for leadership development. Organizations can incorporate structured practices such as regular self-assessment, feedback mechanisms, and ethical decision-making exercises into leadership training programs. These practices help leaders align their actions with organizational values and reinforce consistency in behaviour.

Reputational capital also emerges as a critical managerial asset. Leaders who maintain credibility and trust experience reduced resistance to decisions, improved team cohesion, and stronger stakeholder relationships. This suggests that reputation should be managed proactively, not reactively. Organizations can support this by fostering cultures of transparency, accountability, and long-term orientation, where ethical conduct is consistently recognized and reinforced.

Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of long-term thinking in leadership. Managers who prioritize sustainable outcomes over short term gains contribute to organizational resilience and continuity. This is particularly relevant in environments characterized by rapid change and high public scrutiny, where reputational risks can significantly impact performance.

Academic Implications

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the ongoing development of leadership theory by integrating self-leadership, reputational capital, and identity stewardship into a unified framework. It provides empirical support for the argument that internal governance processes are central to leadership effectiveness and sustainability.

The introduction of identity stewardship as a construct opens new avenues for research. Scholars can further explore its dimensions, measurement, and applicability across different cultural and organizational contexts. The study also demonstrates the value of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in leadership research, offering a model for future studies seeking to capture both behavioural patterns and measurable outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings encourage a re-examination of existing leadership models that focus primarily on external behaviours or structural factors. By emphasizing the role of internal alignment and ethical consistency, the study shifts attention toward the individual as the primary unit of governance in leadership research.

Practical Applications

The practical application of identity stewardship involves the intentional management of one's values, decisions, and behaviours to maintain consistency and build trust over time. Leaders can implement this through daily reflective practices, ethical self-monitoring, and conscious alignment between stated principles and actual conduct.

Reputational capital can be developed by consistently demonstrating reliability, transparency, and fairness in decision making. Leaders who communicate clearly, honour commitments, and

act in accordance with shared values strengthen their credibility and influence. Over time, this accumulated trust becomes a strategic resource that supports leadership sustainability.

Organizations can institutionalize these practices by embedding them into leadership development programs, performance evaluation systems, and organizational culture. By doing so, they create environments where identity stewardship and reputational capital are not incidental outcomes but deliberate and sustained practices.

Overall, the implications of this study highlight that sustainable leadership is achieved not only through strategic competence but through disciplined internal governance and consistent ethical behaviour. These insights provide a foundation for improving leadership practice, shaping policy frameworks, and advancing academic understanding of leadership sustainability.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the role of self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital in shaping leadership sustainability. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative evidence, the findings demonstrate that sustainable leadership is strongly influenced by internal governance processes and the consistent alignment between values and actions. Leaders who actively regulate their behaviour, maintain ethical consistency, and prioritize long term trust are more likely to achieve enduring influence and institutional stability.

The qualitative findings revealed that leaders engage in reflective practices, make deliberate sacrifices to protect their credibility, and adopt a long-term orientation toward legacy. These insights were reinforced by the quantitative results, which showed that self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital significantly predict leadership sustainability, with reputational capital emerging as the strongest contributor. The integration of these findings confirms that leadership effectiveness is not only a function of external structures but also a direct outcome of disciplined internal alignment.

Despite these contributions, the study is subject to certain limitations. The quantitative component, while robust in its analytical approach, relies on model-based estimation and may be influenced by data constraints related to sample size and contextual scope. The qualitative component is based on a relatively small number of participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study focuses primarily on leadership contexts within Nigeria, which may affect the transferability of results to other cultural or institutional environments.

Future research can build on this work by employing larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability and by conducting longitudinal studies to examine how identity stewardship evolves over time. Further studies can also explore the application of this framework across different sectors and cultural settings, as well as investigate intervention strategies designed to strengthen self-leadership and reputational capital in organizational contexts. Quantitative research using advanced modelling techniques may provide additional insight into the dynamic relationships among the variables identified in this study.

In conclusion, this study suggests that leadership sustainability is fundamentally rooted in the governance of the self. By integrating self-leadership, identity stewardship, and reputational capital into a coherent framework, the research provides both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for leaders seeking to build trust, maintain credibility, and achieve lasting impact.

REFERENCES

- Baumeister, R. F., Heatherton, T. F., & Tice, D. M. (1994). *Losing Control: How and Why People Fail at Self-regulation*. Academic Press.
- Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. Free Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Deephouse, D. L. (2000). "Media Reputation as a Strategic Resource: An Integration of Mass Communication and Resource-Based Theories." *Journal of Management*, 26(6), 1091–1112.
- Duan, J., Li, C., Xu, Y., & Wu, C. H. (2020). "Transformational Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior: The Role of Psychological Empowerment." *Journal of Business Ethics*, 167(3), 653–668.
- Fombrun, C. J. (1996). *Reputation: Realizing Value from the Corporate Image*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Fombrun, C. J., & Shanley, M. (1990). "What's in a Name? Reputation Building and Corporate Strategy." *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(2), 233–258.
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate Data Analysis* (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Manz, C. C. (1986). "Self-leadership: Toward an Expanded Theory of Self-influence Processes in Organizations." *Academy of Management Review*, 11(3), 585–600.
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). "An integrative Model of Organizational Trust." *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709–734.
- Neck, C. P., & Houghton, J. D. (2006). "Two decades of Self-leadership Theory and Research: Past Developments, Present Trends, and Future Possibilities." *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(4), 270–295.
- Neck, C. P., & Manz, C. C. (2010). *Mastering Self-leadership: Empowering yourself for Personal Excellence* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Palanski, M. E., & Yammarino, F. J. (2007). "Integrity and Leadership: Clearing the Conceptual Confusion." *European Management Journal*, 25(3), 171–184.
- Simons, T. (2002). "Behavioral Integrity: The Perceived Alignment Between Managers' Words and Deeds as a Research Focus." *Organization Science*, 13(1), 18–35.
- Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*. Portfolio Penguin