

The Effectiveness of Ethical Leadership Based on Follower Gender: Focusing on the Mediating Role of Organizational Citizenship Behavior

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<https://doi.org/10.5392/IJoC.2025.21.4.056>

Manuscript Received 24 February 2025; Received 28 October 2025; Accepted 6 November 2025

Abstract: *This study empirically examines follower gender as a crucial moderator connecting ethical leadership (EL) to organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and, subsequently, to department performance. We analyzed survey data from 485 employees in Chinese SMEs using AMOS 18.0 and SPSS 18.0 to investigate both mediating and moderating effects, thus clarifying how EL influences performance. The results indicate that EL enhances department performance through OCB, with a stronger EL-OCB relationship observed among female followers compared to male followers. These findings provide practical guidance: promote ethical role modeling and procedural justice to encourage OCB, implement transparent decision-making and fair recognition to strengthen prosocial behavior, and customize communication, feedback, and recognition strategies in gender-responsive ways to optimize OCB's impact on performance. By moving beyond a leader-centric perspective to consider follower characteristics, this study delineates when and how EL translates into unit-level performance via OCB.*

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Organizational Citizenship Behavior; Followership; Gender

1. Introduction

With the increasing prevalence of unethical incidents in organizations, both academia and industry are placing greater emphasis on ethical management [1, 2]. In this context, the role of leaders in fostering ethics across the organization has gained prominence, leading to increased attention on ethical leadership [1], [3].

According to related studies, ethical leadership not only promotes ethical behavior among organizational members but also positively impacts overall organizational performance [4-6]. Leaders who exhibit ethical leadership strengthen trust and transparency within the organization, enabling members to feel a sense of psychological safety [7-9]. In such an environment, members are expected to actively support their teams without hesitation and assist other colleagues, which ultimately enhances group productivity and performance [10-12]. This study aims to empirically investigate how ethical leadership contributes to improved departmental performance, highlighting the critical role of proactive organizational citizenship behavior in this process [11, 12]. Furthermore, it seeks to reveal that the effectiveness of ethical leadership may vary depending on the gender of followers [13-15].

Leadership research has long focused on the relationship between a leader's gender and leadership effectiveness [16, 17]. These studies show that male and female leaders are perceived and evaluated differently, with gender playing a significant role in leadership effectiveness [16, 17]. While research examining leadership effectiveness by leader gender has accumulated, studies on the impact of follower gender on leadership effectiveness remain relatively scarce [18].

In recent leadership discourse, an increasing number of studies have emphasized the role of followers, recognizing them as critical agents in the leadership process [18]. Leadership scholars such as Kelley (1992) and Chaleff (1995) criticized leadership paradigms that focus solely on leaders, arguing that such perspectives

overlook the importance of followers [19, 20]. Consequently, the concept of followership has garnered significant attention [18]. Subsequent studies have analyzed the multidimensional interaction between followership and leadership, investigating the impact of follower characteristics, follower role perceptions, and follower behaviors on leadership effectiveness [21-23]. These studies highlight that leadership effectiveness ultimately operates through the perceptions of followers, underscoring the importance of follower traits as critical variables for leadership success [20], [23]. According to social role theory, individuals' standards for desirable behavior differ based on their gender and similarly influence their evaluations of the appropriateness of others' behavior [13]. Consequently, the gender characteristics of followers may influence their expectations of ethical behavior from leaders and their perceptions of its desirability, resulting in differing behavioral responses [14].

Based on this premise, this study posits that follower gender may act as a significant variable in the process through which ethical leadership operates [13, 14]. Specifically, it seeks to empirically examine how subordinate organizational citizenship behavior and departmental performance vary depending on follower gender when leaders exhibit ethical leadership [11, 12], [15].

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1 Ethical Leadership and Departmental Performance

Ethical leadership is defined as a leader's demonstration of normatively appropriate behavior through decision-making, communication, and interpersonal interactions, thereby influencing team members to follow such behaviors [3]. Ethical leadership is significantly associated with other leadership styles proposed as effective, such as transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, leader honesty, and fair treatment. However, Schwab (1980) highlighted a deficiency bias in existing leadership frameworks, noting that these leadership types only partially address certain aspects of ethical leadership and cannot replace or equate to it comprehensively [24]. This underscores the need to study the distinct effects of ethical leadership separately. Brown and Treviño (2006) further argued that while authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, and ethical leadership share common elements such as altruism, integrity, ethical decision-making, and role modeling, ethical leadership possesses unique characteristics [1]. Specifically, authentic leadership focuses on a leader's authenticity and self-awareness, spiritual leadership emphasizes inspiring a sense of calling through vision, hope, and faith, and transformational leadership tends to foster individual growth and innovation among followers through vision and values. In contrast, ethical leadership uniquely emphasizes moral management and adherence to ethical standards.

Subsequent research has reported various benefits that ethical leadership brings to organizations. Specifically, ethical leaders foster a positive atmosphere by enhancing trust among members through high moral standards and trust-building [3]. They also reinforce organizational norms and standards through exemplary behavior, encouraging members to comply with rules [2]. Moreover, the fairness exhibited by ethical leaders increases employee satisfaction and contributes to improved performance [6], while reducing conflicts and promoting a collaborative culture [25]. These findings underscore that ethical leadership is a crucial factor for the long-term growth and performance improvement of teams [26].

Based on this body of research, this study posits that leaders exhibiting ethical leadership guide their subordinates to model or normatively practice ethical values such as fairness, honesty, transparency, accountability, altruism, and trust, which are expected to lead to high levels of departmental performance.

H1. Ethical leadership positively influences departmental performance.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Organizational Citizenship Behavior

The positive impact of ethical leadership on departmental performance has been widely documented [5, 6]. Its contribution to group effectiveness is particularly evident in its ability to foster active participation and mutual support among team members [12]. Numerous studies have empirically demonstrated that ethical leadership positively influences subordinates' organizational citizenship behavior [1], [25]. In South Korea, similar findings have been reported, identifying ethical leadership as a significant antecedent of organizational citizenship behavior [27, 28]. Both domestic and international studies have predominantly explained the positive impact of ethical leadership on prosocial behaviors and organizational citizenship behavior through the lenses of social learning theory and social exchange theory [3], [29].

Ethical leaders treat their subordinates fairly and ethically, clearly conveying values that prioritize ethical order at the group level over individual interests [3], [6]. This leadership exerts a strong influence on subordinates and shapes the overall departmental climate through the “trickle-down effect,” where the behaviors and values of top leaders gradually permeate throughout the organization [30]. According to social learning theory, subordinates observe and imitate the ethical behavior of leaders, thereby learning ethical conduct [3]. Subordinates naturally take ethical leaders’ behavior as a model, applying fairness and ethical standards to others, and voluntarily putting in extra effort beyond their formal roles to enhance departmental performance [3], [11, 12].

This process can also be explained through social exchange theory. Ethical leaders strengthen trust with subordinates through fair and reliable actions [7], [29]. In this trust-based relationship, subordinates engage in voluntary prosocial behavior as a form of reciprocity toward the leader and organization [29]. Followers of ethical leaders are more likely to perceive their relationship with the leader not as a mere hierarchical connection but as a social exchange. This social exchange relationship further reinforces trust in the leader, motivating subordinates to commit beyond their required duties and engage in additional voluntary efforts [7], [29].

In terms of departmental performance, not only the performance of individual members but also the collaborative atmosphere and mutual support within the group are key determinants [12], [30]. Such a cooperative atmosphere is formed through behaviors where members support and assist one another, thereby enhancing departmental-level performance. Citizenship behavior was first conceptualized in the early 1980s by Bateman and Organ (1983) and by Smith, Organ, and Near (1983), and its positive effects on group performance have been consistently documented since then [10], [12]. This type of citizenship behavior was first conceptualized in the early 1980s by Bateman and Organ (1983) and Smith, Organ, and Near (1983), and its positive impact on performance has been consistently reported since. Initially, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) was defined as voluntary actions performed by organizational members to contribute to the development of their organization [11]. However, the definition of OCB has since expanded beyond voluntary behaviors to encompass a broader context. Organ (1997) redefined OCB as behaviors that support the social and psychological environment in which task performance occurs. This includes actions that foster a cooperative and trust-based environment within the organization or contribute to maintaining positive relationships among members [31].

In determining departmental performance, not only individual performance but also mutual support and a cooperative atmosphere within the group are critical factors [12], [30]. Ethical leadership plays an essential role in fostering such a collaborative atmosphere and mutual support among members [1], [6]. The essence of ethical leadership lies in fair and transparent decision-making, which enables employees to feel respected and reinforced by organizational ethical standards [2, 3]. This sense of respect encourages employees to voluntarily expand their psychological contracts and put in greater effort for the organization [29]. Notably, ethical leaders serve as role models for positive interactions within the organization by communicating and acting based on ethical standards, and these behaviors promote organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) within the group, strengthening collaboration and mutual support among members while elevating the overall level of ethical behavior [3], [11, 12]. This, in turn, enhances departmental performance and supports sustained positive changes [6], [26]. Consequently, ethical leadership positively influences departmental performance through the activation of OCB within the group [6], [12].

Based on this, the study posits that ethical leadership fosters group cooperation and commitment, ultimately contributing to improved performance [6]. It further hypothesizes that the relationship between ethical leadership and departmental performance is mediated by organizational citizenship behavior [12].

H2. Organizational citizenship behavior mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and departmental performance.

2.3 Gender as a Moderator

Gender has been consistently studied as a significant factor influencing ethical judgment and behavior perception in prior research. For instance, a study by [32] on managers in Turkey revealed that women exhibited a higher orientation toward ethical judgment and perception compared to men. [33], in their investigation of unethical behavior frequency in sales roles, found that women tended to apply stricter ethical standards than men. [34] also confirmed that female managers were more likely than their male counterparts to perceive gifts or favors as unethical. These findings collectively suggest that women are relatively more sensitive to ethical perceptions compared to men [35]. Beyond ethical judgment, a wide range of studies has explored the relationship between gender and various behaviors within organizational settings, examining how gender

influences members' actions, particularly attitudes and behavior patterns within the organization. For example, gender differences have been observed in communication styles [36], conflict resolution approaches [37], and voluntary behaviors such as organizational citizenship behavior.

This study particularly focuses on the relationship between gender and altruistic behaviors or cooperative attitudes exhibited by organizational members. According to Lin, women tend to demonstrate more altruistic behaviors than men [15]. On the other hand, [38] found no significant gender differences in altruistic behaviors but reported that women exerted greater influence in terms of compliance compared to men. Similarly, research by [39] indicated that women invest more time and effort in providing and receiving help than men. Prior work suggests that women, due to their nurturing roles, are more enthusiastic about prosocial behaviors, whereas men tend to be more responsive to economic incentives [13], [40]. These findings commonly explain behavioral differences by noting that men are task-oriented and individualistic, whereas women are relationally oriented, committed, and compliant [13], [40].

Building on these insights, it can be inferred that motivational factors driving organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) may also differ by gender. This study posits that men are more sensitive to formal or explicit rules and rewards, while women are more strongly influenced by implicit norms and intrinsic motivation. Consequently, under ethical leadership, women's motivation to engage in OCB may be more significantly amplified. Social role theory suggests that men and women develop distinct behavioral patterns and value systems based on socially prescribed role expectations, which can shape gendered responses in organizational contexts [13, 14].

Unlike dominance-based leadership, which drives compliance through coercion and fear [30], ethical leadership elicits voluntary cooperation by emphasizing the leader's moral standards, fairness, and trustworthiness [3]. Ethical leadership reinforces values of fairness and morality, fostering trust within the group and promoting long-term cooperation and coordination [3], [21]. Women, due to societal expectations emphasizing harmony, care, and relationship maintenance within groups, are more likely to respond strongly to the fair decision-making and trust-based style of ethical leadership [13], [40]. Moreover, ethical leaders tend to rely less on personal competence or coercive power and more on trust and respect to inspire voluntary participation and cooperation from followers [3], [21]. Bell and Khoury further suggested that women are particularly sensitive to procedural justice and are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors under management styles that prioritize procedural fairness [41]. Thus, by adhering to moral standards and ensuring fairness in group management processes, ethical leaders create an environment where followers naturally trust and respect them, leading to voluntary engagement and cooperation [3], [7], [41].

Consequently, under ethical leadership, women may be more inclined to exhibit higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) aimed at benefiting the group [13], [15], [40]. Given these gendered differences in values and behavioral tendencies, the study hypothesizes that women, compared to men, will respond more positively to supervisors' ethical leadership and demonstrate higher levels of OCB [3], [13], [15], [40, 41].

H3. Gender will moderate the positive relationship between ethical leadership and subordinates' organizational citizenship behavior, such that the relationship will be stronger for women than for men.

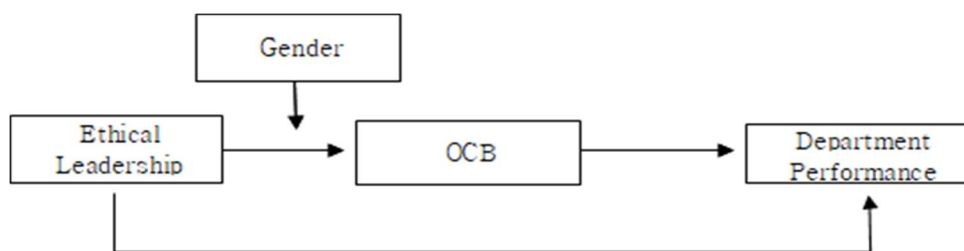


Figure 1. Research Model

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection and Participants

This study conducted a survey targeting employees of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) located in China. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed and 490 responses were collected. After excluding five responses due to insufficient or inconsistent answers, 485 valid responses were retained for the final analysis. This study employed a self-reported survey method, which has the potential to introduce common

method bias. To address this concern, Harman's one-factor test [42] was conducted. Specifically, a varimax factor analysis was performed using SPSS, incorporating the three variables used in the study. The results showed that the eigenvalues of all three variables exceeded 1. Furthermore, the rotated component matrix revealed a clear distinction among the three variables. These findings indicate that the analysis results derived from this survey are unlikely to be significantly affected by common method bias.

3.2 Measurement

This study measured five key variables: ethical leadership, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), gender, departmental performance, and control variables including demographic factors such as age, education, tenure, and industry type, which could potentially influence OCB and departmental performance [43]. All survey items, except for the control variables, were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree." Gender, which was used as a moderating variable, was dummy-coded (female = 1, male = 0) for the analysis.

3.2.1 Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership was defined based on the work of Brown et al. (2005) as "frequently communicating with subordinates, caring for them, establishing clear ethical standards, and actively serving as a role model for ethical behavior" [3]. To measure ethical leadership, this study utilized the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Brown et al. (2005), which includes seven items for analysis [3].

3.2.2 Organizational Citizenship Behavior

In this study, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) was defined as discretionary behaviors not formally required by the organization but voluntarily performed by employees to contribute to organizational effectiveness [11]. Among the dimensions of OCB proposed by Organ (1988), this study focused on altruism and conscientiousness, excluding factors such as sportsmanship, which are less relevant to ethical leadership [11]. Altruism pertains to behaviors that involve providing support and assistance to other members within the organization [11]. Conscientiousness relates to behaviors characterized by going beyond what is formally required in task performance, demonstrating higher levels of dedication [11].

3.2.3 Departmental Performance

In this study, departmental performance was defined—following [44]—as the degree to which a department achieves its goals. Specifically, departmental performance was measured using five items assessing the extent to which departmental goals are met and the department's overall effectiveness. While some studies assess departmental performance using objective indicators, it is also common to operationalize performance as perceived team performance reported by team members [45]. This approach helps minimize potential distortions that may arise when objective performance indicators are affected by external factors unrelated to the focal constructs. In addition, because the participants represented a wide range of organizations and industries, applying a standardized set of objective performance criteria across all departments was impractical. Therefore, this study measured departmental performance based on team members' perceptions, treated perceived departmental performance at the individual level, and conducted the analysis accordingly.

3.3 Analysis

This study utilized AMOS 18.0 and SPSS 18.0 to analyze the relationships between ethical leadership, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), departmental performance, and gender. Specifically, SPSS 18.0 was used for factor analysis, reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and moderation effect analysis. AMOS 18.0 was employed to evaluate the fit of the measurement model and to test mediation effects.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and Factor Analysis

Before hypothesis testing, this study conducted reliability and validity analyses to verify the measurement tools used. To assess the internal consistency of the items, reliability analysis was performed, and all Cronbach's

alpha values exceeded the threshold of .70, satisfying the reliability criteria proposed by [46]. The reliability values for each measurement tool are presented in Table 1.

In addition, to confirm that the measures appropriately captured the intended constructs and were empirically distinguishable from one another, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted as part of construct validity assessment [24]. The results indicated that all factor loadings exceeded .50, demonstrating adequate item-factor alignment and supporting construct validity. Detailed EFA results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability and Factor Analysis

Variables		Factor loading			Cronbach's α
Department Performance	T.P 1	.835			.911
	T.P 2	.829			
	T.P 3	.824			
	T.P 4	.792			
	T.P 5	.787			
Organizational Citizenship Behavior	OCB 1		.728		.780
	OCB 2		.715		
	OCB 3		.713		
	OCB 4		.710		
	OCB 5		.700		
Ethical Leadership	E.L 1			.856	.869
	E.L 2			.855	
	E.L 3			.818	
	E.L 4			.780	
	E.L 5			.730	
	E.L 6			.594	
	E.L 7			.588	

Furthermore, the validity of the measurement model was assessed. The results of the model fit analysis indicated that $\chi^2 = 413.650$, $df = 114$, $p = .000$, $CMIN/DF = 3.629$, $CFI = .932$, $NFI = .909$, $TLI = .919$, and $RMSEA = .074$. Generally, model fit is considered acceptable when the chi-square (χ^2) value is taken into account alongside CFI, NFI, and TLI values exceeding 0.9 and RMSEA values below 0.1. In this study, the CFI, NFI, TLI, and RMSEA values met these criteria, indicating that the model demonstrated good fit.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among key variables. In statistics, correlation analysis is a method used to measure and describe the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two quantitative variables. The primary result is the correlation coefficient, typically Pearson's r , which always falls between -1.0 and +1.0. A positive value indicates a positive relationship, where both variables tend to increase together, while a negative value indicates a negative relationship, where one variable tends to decrease as the other increases. The strength of the relationship is determined by the coefficient's proximity to +1.0 or -1.0; values closer to 0 indicate a weaker linear association. Furthermore, the analysis provides a p-value to determine statistical significance. A low p-value, conventionally below .05, suggests that the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by random chance. However, it is crucial to remember that correlation does not imply causation; it only indicates that a relationship exists, not that one variable causes the change in the other. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

	Mean	Std. Dev.	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)
1) Age	33.650	0.889	1							
2) Education	3.170	0.757	-.262**	1						
3) Tenure	2.540	1.490	.753**	-.446**	1					
4) Industry	3.640	2.071	.009	.148**	.060	1				
5) Gender	0.630	0.484	-.143**	.075	-.069	.173**	1			
6) Ethical Leadership	3.303	0.837	.023	.056	.001	-.027	-.021	1		
7) OCB	3.583	0.685	.003	.067	-.058	.127**	-.026	.368**	1	
8) Department Performance	3.722	0.706	.063	-.090*	.125**	-.056	-.077	.466**	.378**	1

Notes: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) and the Pearson correlation matrix for eight study variables. The descriptive statistics show, for instance, that the average participant Age is 33.65 years, the mean Ethical Leadership rating is 3.30, and the mean Department Performance rating is 3.72.

The key findings revolve around the relationships between leadership and organizational outcomes. There is a moderate, positive, and statistically significant correlation between Ethical Leadership (6) and OCB (7) ($r = .368$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher levels of ethical leadership are associated with more organizational citizenship behaviors. An even stronger positive and significant relationship exists between Ethical Leadership (6) and Department Performance (8) ($r = .466$, $p < .01$), indicating that better ethical leadership is strongly associated with higher department performance. Similarly, OCB (7) and Department Performance (8) are also moderately and positively correlated ($r = .378$, $p < .01$).

Other significant correlations are present among the demographic and control variables. As expected, Age (1) and Tenure (3) are very strongly and positively correlated ($r = .753$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, Education (2) has a significant negative relationship with both Age (1) ($r = -.262$, $p < .01$) and Tenure (3) ($r = -.446$, $p < .01$), suggesting that, in this sample, employees with higher education tend to be younger and have less tenure. Finally, it is noteworthy that Ethical Leadership (6) shows no significant correlation with any of the demographic variables (Age, Education, Tenure, Industry, or Gender), implying that perceptions of it are not dependent on these characteristics in this dataset.

The model was re-estimated after the independent variable 'Ethical Leadership' and the moderating variable 'OCB,' which constitute the interaction term, were respectively mean-centered. The VIF diagnostic results showed that while the VIFs for control variables such as 'Age_c' (VIF=4.51) and 'Tenure_c' (VIF=4.83) remained unchanged, the VIF values for the problematic 'Ethical Leadership_c' (VIF=1.72), 'OCB_c' (VIF=1.59), and the centered interaction term (VIF=1.90) were all dramatically reduced to very stable levels below 2.0. As all VIF values in the final model are below the threshold of 10, the multicollinearity problem has been resolved, confirming that the model is reliable for testing the interaction effect.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis 1 proposed that ethical leadership would have a positive effect on department performance, predicting that higher perceptions of ethical leadership among subordinates would lead to increased perceived department performance. The analysis of the direct effect of ethical leadership on department performance yielded a standardized estimate of .410, a C.R. value of 2.40, and a p-value of .016, which indicates statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. These results suggest that when supervisors demonstrate ethical leadership, employees perceive higher department performance. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 examined the mediating effect of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in the relationship between ethical leadership and department performance. The analysis revealed that ethical

leadership positively influenced OCB (standardized estimate = .361, C.R. = 2.051, $p = .005$), indicating statistical significance at the 90% confidence level. Similarly, OCB was found to positively and significantly affect department performance (standardized estimate = .260, C.R. = 2.042, $p = .005$), also significant at the 90% confidence level.

Finally, the indirect effect of ethical leadership on department performance through OCB was analyzed. The results showed a standardized estimate of .940 and a p -value of .004, indicating statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 3. Mediation Hypothesis Testing Results

Path	Direct Effect			Indirect Effect	
	Standardized Estimate	C.R	p-value	Standardized Estimate	p-value
Ethical Leadership → Department Performance	.410	.040	.016	.090	.004
Ethical Leadership → OCB	.361	.051	.005	.000	
OCB → Department Performance	.260	.042	.005	.000	

Hypothesis 3 proposed that gender moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Specifically, it was hypothesized that the positive relationship between ethical leadership and OCB would be stronger for women than for men. To test this, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the interaction effect of ethical leadership and gender on OCB. The analysis revealed that the interaction term for ethical leadership and gender had a significant effect on OCB ($\beta = -.399$, $p < .05$). As illustrated in Figure 2, the positive relationship between ethical leadership and OCB was stronger for women than for men. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Detailed results of the analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation Effect

	Organizational Citizenship Behavior (β)			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
<i>Age</i>	.117+	.104	.095	.109+
<i>Education</i>	.011	-.017	-.015	-.026
<i>Tenure</i>	-.149*	-.153*	-.149*	-.157*
<i>Industry</i>	.134**	.148**	.155***	.145**
Ethical Leadership		.370***	.370***	.486***
Gender			-.040	.336+
Ethical Leadership × Gender				-.399*
F	3.304	18.665	15.697	14.291
R ²	.027	.163	.165	.173
ΔR^2	.027	.136	.002	.009
Adjusted R ²	.019	.154	.154	.161

Notes: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$.

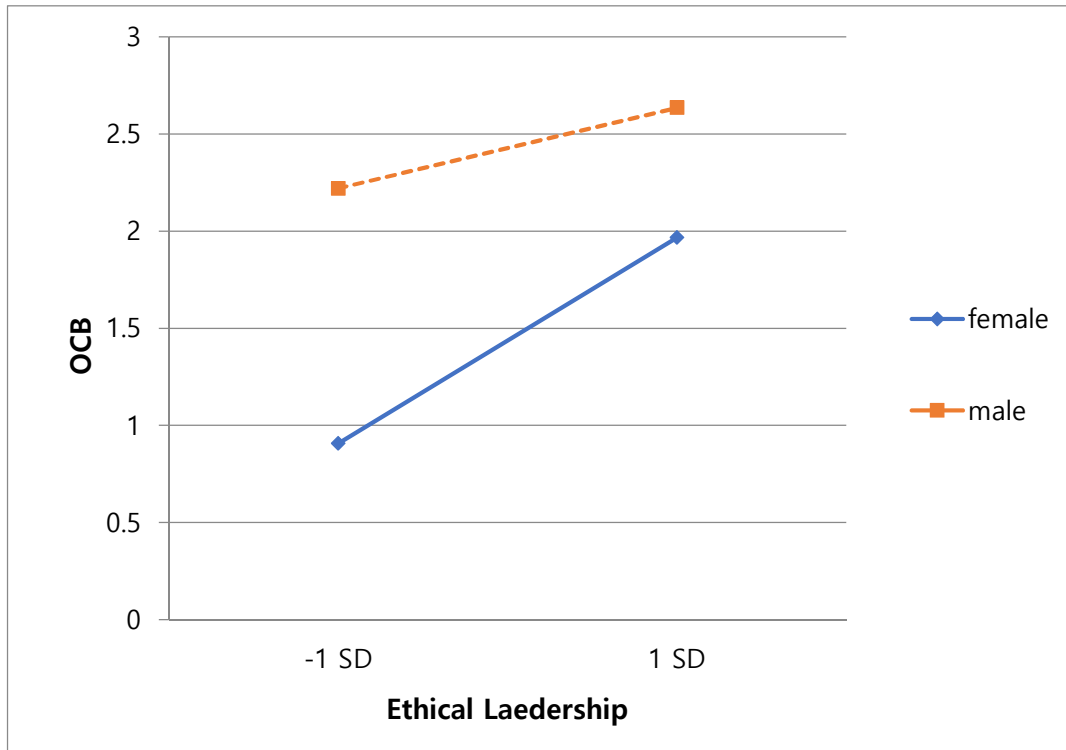


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Gender

V. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and department performance, while examining the moderating role of gender in these relationships. Three hypotheses were proposed and tested, all of which were supported by the results.

First, Hypothesis 1 proposed that ethical leadership has a positive effect on departmental performance. The analysis yielded significant results supporting this hypothesis. Leaders who exhibit ethical leadership demonstrate transparency and fairness, fostering trust among employees [8]. This trust strengthens collaboration and interaction among team members [47] while reducing conflicts [48], thereby enhancing group functionality and productivity. These findings align with prior evidence that ethical leadership contributes to favorable organizational outcomes and performance [5, 6], [26].

Next, Hypothesis 2 tested the mediating role of OCB in the relationship between ethical leadership and department performance. The results confirmed that OCB mediates this relationship, indicating that ethical leadership not only directly impacts department performance but also positively influences it through OCB [12]. Podsakoff et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 168 samples and found that OCB significantly correlates with individual-level performance evaluations and turnover intentions, as well as group-level productivity, efficiency, and customer satisfaction [12]. The findings of this study support these prior results and suggest that ethical leadership can enhance department performance through its influence on OCB [6], [25].

Finally, Hypothesis 3 proposed that the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) would differ based on gender, with women displaying stronger OCB in response to ethical leadership compared to men. The analysis revealed that women responded more positively to ethical leadership, showing a stronger positive relationship between ethical leadership and OCB than men. This finding is consistent with theoretical expectations that followers' gendered role expectations and value orientations shape how leader behaviors are perceived and internalized [13], and it is also broadly compatible with prior work linking gender to differences in OCB-related patterns (e.g., altruism and compliance) [15] and gendered sensitivity to procedural justice [41].

While the effects of ethical leadership have been examined through various lenses in previous studies, few have explored gender as a moderating variable in this relationship. Most leadership studies have focused on differences in leadership effectiveness based on the leader's gender. For instance, Eagly and Karau explained gendered leadership perceptions in terms of role congruity and social evaluation processes [16], and Gipson et

al. summarized gender differences in leadership style and effectiveness primarily with a leader-gender emphasis [17]. In contrast, this study provides a theoretical contribution by empirically analyzing the underexplored role of follower gender in moderating the effects of ethical leadership. Specifically, the findings highlight that follower gender can be a critical boundary condition in leadership effectiveness, thereby expanding leadership research from a leader-centered approach to include follower characteristics. Prior research has often explained the influence of ethical leadership on followers from a social learning perspective, suggesting that followers observe and emulate leaders' ethical behaviors, which triggers positive behaviors [3]. Accordingly, the positive effects of ethical leadership depend on how followers perceive and evaluate leadership, which meaningfully shapes leadership effectiveness. Building on social role theory, this study posits that expectations and perceptions of a leader's ethical behaviors may vary by follower gender [13]. This aligns with Carsten et al., who emphasized the importance of considering the social construction of followership and differences in role perceptions [23]. By explaining leadership-followership interaction through gender-based differences in leadership perception, this study contributes to refining ethical leadership research and underscores the value of incorporating follower characteristics in future models.

This study also provides practical implications by emphasizing the need for organizations to adopt and implement ethical leadership, especially given its growing relevance in contemporary management practice. Organizations and leaders should recognize that there may be gender-based differences in how employees perceive and respond to leadership, and apply this understanding in managerial practice. According to the findings, ethical leadership can play a particularly important role in fostering a supportive atmosphere and enhancing performance in teams or organizations with a higher proportion of female employees. Because ethical leadership may be perceived and received differently depending on follower gender, leadership strategies can be tailored to the gender composition of the team or department. For instance, in organizations with a high proportion of female employees, leadership training and development programs could prioritize strengthening ethical leadership behaviors. This targeted approach helps leaders better meet the expectations and needs of their teams and leverage ethical leadership to achieve improved outcomes.

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance by elucidating gender-based differences in the effectiveness of ethical leadership on followers. However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the data were collected at a single point in time, limiting inference about causality and long-term changes. Second, all variables were measured through self-reported surveys, which may introduce response biases. Third, the data were collected from companies in China, so cultural and contextual influences may limit generalizability to other countries or cultural settings.

To address these limitations, future research could incorporate objective performance indicators alongside subjective evaluations, adopt longitudinal designs to capture cumulative effects, and use qualitative methods to understand how followers experience and interpret ethical leadership (particularly regarding gendered perceptions). Finally, future research could examine additional individual factors such as age, job rank, and cultural background to develop a more comprehensive understanding of when and for whom ethical leadership is most effective.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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