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Authentic Leadership, Trust, and Social Exchange Relationships under the Influence of Leader Behavior

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Abstract: During the pandemic, government policies such as social distancing and telework have impacted trust and working or social exchange relationships in the workplace. The behavior of leaders is critical for good leadership, employees' trust, and social exchange relationships. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to assess the associations among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships under the influence of leader behavior. A regression-based approach was used to test the moderating and mediating effects. The results show that authentic leadership positively impacts trust and social exchange relationships, whereas trust directly affects social exchange relationships. During COVID-19, leader behaviors with ability, ethics, and positive relationships have had a positive impact on the association between authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships. Additionally, trust positively mediates authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. The findings of this paper suggest that authentic leadership promotes trust and high-quality social exchange relationships. Moreover, based on leader behaviors during COVID-19, the ability to manage change effectively, boost employees' work motivation, provide support, and take appropriate action is essential for authentic leadership to increase trust and foster a positive working relationship based on social exchange. Finally, regarding social exchange theory, high-quality leader behaviors and the leader–follower relationships drive positive associations among variables. These results will help organizational management teams to find methods to improve their organizational working relationships. The implication is that the abilities, ethics, and supportive and positive relationship behaviors of leaders are essential for effective management to improve leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships. Leaders should have the ability to manage work and people, even with teleworkers. Therefore, leader behaviors are important to maintain organizational sustainability. Further discussion on theoretical and practical implications is provided in the section.

Keywords: leader behaviors with ability (LBF1); leader behaviors with ethics (LBF2); leader behaviors with positive relationships (LBF3); authentic leadership; trust; social exchange relationship



Citation: Chen, J.K.C.; Sriphon, T. Authentic Leadership, Trust, and Social Exchange Relationships under the Influence of Leader Behavior. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 5883.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su14105883>

Academic Editors: Anne Bardoeel, Melissa Wheeler and Asanka Gunasekara

Received: 19 March 2022

Accepted: 9 May 2022

Published: 12 May 2022

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1. Introduction

Thailand has faced the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic like many countries around the world. For example, the EU countries have been impacted by COVID-19 in terms of slow economic growth, especially in sectors involving human contact and interaction, and supply shortages that negatively impact value chains and employment [1]. On the one hand, employees are scared in these situations, which have a negative impact on trust and working relationships. As another example, countries in Southeast Asia have also faced health problems from COVID-19, causing economic and social conditions that negatively impact employment and the working relationships in organizations [2].

Based on Thailand's situation as a member of the Southeast Asian community, COVID-19 leads to health crises and economic problems. Small and medium-sized businesses, which are considered the main businesses in Thailand, have encountered difficulties because of supply chain interruptions, leading to a decreased revenue in the country [3]. Entrepreneurs

must operate their organizations under unexpected conditions concerning their employees, such as physical and social distancing. COVID-19 has negatively impacted employees as well; for example, employees feel worried about job security in terms of aspects such as salary reduction and other company changes [4,5]. These situations can affect positive working relationships in the workplace. Leaders are responsible for employees' well-being, since employees are an organization's most valuable asset, and this promotes sustainability in their organization [6–8]. Employees' well-being and excellent working relationships between leaders and followers and among peers reflect sustainability in organizations [8]. Therefore, leader behaviors lead to organizational citizenship behavior by employees and relationships in the organization [7,9]. For example, leaders who allow employees more freedom, trust, and engagement in decisions can improve the employees' citizenship behavior and working relationships [7]. Moreover, humble leaders positively impact team performance and relationships [9].

Telework, or work from home, has become more prevalent in Thai organizations to alleviate economic distress and deal with COVID-19 [4]. However, not all telework employees are satisfied with this work style. Some teleworkers are unhappy with their work–life balance, having less social interaction with coworkers, and the work environment. On the other hand, they delight in the flexibility and time saved on travel. Hence, telework impacts employees' trust and social exchange relationships [10]. Based on social exchange theory, a social exchange relationship (SER) is defined as an exchange relationship between an employee and an organization that involves interactions with others in the work environment [11]. Commanding and controlling leadership negatively affects employees' relationships and work performance [10] and causes a lack of trust between leaders and followers in the context of telework [12]. When leaders have negative feelings about telework, they will inspect and control their employees more closely, leading to negative and unpleasant feelings toward the leaders [9]. Moreover, a lack of social interaction with colleagues may lead to feelings of social isolation and negative effects on performance, when a basic human need is social interactions with others via positive long-term relationships [13]. Therefore, a positive organizational relationship will influence employees to achieve objectives and improve performance [14].

Positive social relationships are necessary for organizations when the people in the organization, such as leaders, peers, and followers, are required to spend more time at work than on other daily activities, so they can feel connected to one another [15]. Therefore, positive social exchange relationships at work depend on positive social relationships [16]. Furthermore, social exchange relationships can influence employee behaviors, which can enhance organizational objectives, because they positively affect organizational citizenship behavior and job performance [17]. Regarding social exchange theory, leader–follower friendships are positively associated with exchange relationships among employees in the workplace [18]. Hence, friendships in the workplace strengthen the social exchange relationships among employees and between leaders and employees. Regarding the combined extrinsic and intrinsic motives, social exchange relationships encourage employees to support their workplace colleagues [19]. Nevertheless, social exchange relationships require trust to mediate their association with organizational citizenship behavior and job satisfaction [20].

Trust is a crucial factor that influences cooperation in organizations; a high level of trust balances cooperative and competitive relationships leading to better performance [21]. Molm et al. [22] indicated that trust is developed between partners when they generate a high-quality social exchange relationship. Thus, trust is vital for building social exchange relationships in the workplace. Consequently, leader behaviors impact trust and social exchange relationships in organizations, which has engendered organizational stability during the pandemic. Thus, the success or failure of the organization is based on leader behaviors [23].

Authentic leadership emphasizes employees' engagement in the organization's activities to promote trust between the employees and the organization. When followers

realize that leaders trust them, they will make every effort to meet their responsibilities [24]. Actions and leadership characteristics are important for leaders to influence employees' willingness to trust them [25,26]. A productive work environment requires a positive relationship between leaders and followers to sustain trust, morale, and commitment [27]. In addition, authentic leadership nourishes the leader–follower relationship, which reinforces high-quality social exchange relationships in organizations [28].

This study aimed to explore the associations among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships in organizations based on the influence of leader behaviors, which has had an impact on employee behaviors during the pandemic. A regression-based approach was applied as a tool for this study. Thailand's economy was chosen for this study because Thai organizations have been severely impacted by government policies and health problems that affect their sustainability based on trust and social exchange relationships [4]. The paper is presented as follows: Section 2 describes the theoretical background; Section 3 includes the proposed research model and hypotheses, data collection, and methodology; Section 4 provides the data analysis and results; Section 5 includes a discussion and theoretical and practical implications; and Section 6 provides the conclusions, future study prospects, and limitations. The findings benefit CEOs in terms of improving the appropriate approaches to enhance trust and social exchange relationships in the workplace. Moreover, this study contributes to the literature and policymaking in terms of promoting working relationships and related fields. For example, the other 10 Southeast Asian countries may face similar problems, such as changes toward negative working relationships in the workplace; therefore, this research can support them in studying how to enhance working relationships in their organizations. The main implications will be useful for researchers and practitioners in providing training programs and promoting social innovations to encourage a positive work environment in the workplace.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Trust

Mayer et al. [29] noted that trust is belief in another party's words, actions, or decisions and a feeling of confidence by an individual or group that the party can be relied on. Trust reinforces positive working relationships [30], leading to successful cooperation among employees at the workplace [31]. Moreover, trust strongly affects leadership in an organization [32]. Consequently, a trustworthy leader who is open, reliable, benevolent, and capable can develop strong leadership skills [32]. Similarly, leaders with excellent leadership can establish a trusting environment in the workplace, which will encourage trusting behaviors among employees and influence trust in leaders [33,34].

Trust is necessary for working relationships when the relationships among organizational members require individuals' ability to be able to meet their responsibilities [35]. Leaders motivate and create a positive working environment and a culture of trust; as a result, employees can trust their peers [36]. Leaders must show empathy and treat their colleagues and followers with respect and courtesy in order to establish a culture of trust in the organization and promote an appropriate work environment [36]. For example, when employees feel leaders understand them and treat them with respect and politeness, they tend to be more innovative and engaged in their organizations' matters because they feel they are valued by organizations, leading to increased trust and cooperation in organizations. In addition, new leaders' success at prior jobs can enhance employees' affective reactions and awareness of the leader's abilities [31]. Therefore, effective leadership enhances trust in organizations, leading to knowledge sharing and team efficacy, which encourages successful team performance and positive organizational performance [37].

2.2. Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership integrates servant, transformational, charismatic, and spiritual leadership [38]. Leaders with authenticity have characteristics such as self-confidence, optimism, hopefulness, flexibility, and a sense of ethics or morality [38], that can stimulate

their behavior development through honest relationships toward creating an ethical environment in the workplace [39]. This kind of leadership can develop excellent leaders who comprehend their true selves, and their strengths and weaknesses, and motivate others to engage in activities of the organization [40]. Furthermore, it encourages a positive mental capacity, which leads to an ethical environment and inspires followers to show their true emotions and focus on completing their tasks [24,40]. Authentic leadership comprises self-awareness, flow experience, self-esteem, and self-expression, and has an influence on social exchange relationships and positive emotions between leaders and followers and their well-being [41]. Likewise, it stimulates positive behaviors of leaders and followers that promote positive personal growth, leading to self-improvement in emotions, identity, motivations, and values, since the vital components of authentic leadership include self-regulation and self-awareness [38,41]. Leaders foster mutual trust in the workplace and positive working relationships between leaders and followers or among peers, by which they can understand and express their true selves and feelings toward others [42].

Therefore, the four important elements of this leadership style are self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing of information [38–40]. Ilies et al. [41] stated that feedback from others is essential to develop self-awareness or self-realization. This leadership style also influences the virtuousness and effectiveness of teams, by promoting ethical and better performance, which leads to an ethical environment in the workplace [43]. Having teams with integrity can encourage organizational members' affective commitment. Therefore, authentic leadership skills positively affect and shape positive working relationships to enhance work effectiveness.

2.3. Social Exchange Relationship

A social exchange relationship is a working relationship in which organizational members seek equal benefits in return [17]. The relationship involves an exchange and affective and continuance commitment; similarly, when employees perceive organizational support, they feel an obligation to repay them [17]. The salary expectation is one of the conditions that affect the turnover rate of employees, since unsatisfactory payment increases the desire to leave that workplace. Additionally, supervisory physical and psychological support is another condition concerning employee turnover. When employees perceive organizational support, they tend to have less intention to resign [44,45]. Consequently, employees' behaviors can be predicted by the quality of the social exchange relationship [44,45]. At the same time, social motivation and trust have a positive association with social exchange relationships [46]. Based on social exchange theory, trust is essential for exchange partners; regarding cognitive-based trust, employees require competency and dependability of their partners to help them accomplish their tasks [44]. On the other hand, affective trust is emotional engagement in a high-quality social exchange relationship; thus, receiving care and concern from another party can foster a positive working relationship [46]. Furthermore, a communal relationship can evolve from a high-quality social exchange relationship [19,47]. Social exchange relationships are crucial even with business partners or customers, not only within organizations, because they are required to have contact and conduct business together [48]. This kind of relationship, which is based on social exchange theory, includes an economic exchange and a social relationship, allowing businesses to understand and predict their partners' behaviors. A high-level social exchange relationship between business partners enhances smooth business transactions [48].

2.4. Leader Behaviors during COVID-19

Leader behaviors have had an impact on organizational survival during COVID-19. High-quality leadership must focus on rapid and effective responses with clear communication, flexibility, compassion, and empathy to manage followers [49,50]. Likewise, it is essential to have authentic leaders with emotional stability and emotional intelligence when dealing with employee difficulties during the pandemic. Highly talented leaders require both job management skills and emotional intelligence (EI). EI is the emotional

competence to manage relationships and comprises five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills [51]. Emmett et al. [50] suggested that authentic leaders must show empathy and transparency to promote trust and high-quality social exchange relationships, leading to employees' social well-being and physical and psychological health. Edmondson [52] indicated that coaching and context support from excellent leaders positively influences employees' psychological safety and enhances learning behavior and performance of work teams. Team learning behavior also requires feedback, experimentation, and discussion of failure. In addition, humble and empowering behaviors of leaders positively influence employees' organizational citizenship behaviors and positive working relationships [7,9]. When employees experience the humble behavior of leaders, they tend to increase their level of organizational citizenship behavior and improve their working relationships. Leaders' empowerment behaviors contribute to employees' experiencing meaningfulness in their work and being engaged in the decision-making process to maintain effectiveness and competitiveness [7].

Additionally, social skills are essential for leaders during COVID-19 to promote positive working relationships by listening to others and providing psychological and physical safety in the workplace. Goleman [51] indicated that social skills are part of social competence, including communication, influence, cooperation and collaboration, leadership, conflict management, catalyzing change, and creating bonds. These skills help leaders manage their and others' emotions, and connect, interact, and work with others. Communication is critical to connect to others and establish collaboration. Therefore, leaders need to be good communicators and listeners to build employees' social exchange relationships in the workplace. Leaders need the ability to influence employees and guide them in a valuable direction, such as through team building and cooperation among employees, to build excellent working relationships or high-quality social exchange relationships in the workplace. The ability to resolve disagreements and prevent conflicts among people (conflict management) is required to create a win-win situation. Managing change or catalyzing change is essential for skillful leaders at all levels. Finally, leaders must have the ability to build bonds and cultivate valuable relationships in their organization. Fernandez and Shaw [49] argued that good working relationships during COVID-19 are crucial; thus, authentic leaders should promote healthy relationships in the workplace by being good listeners, accepting advice from others without criticism, and building mutual trust with others. In addition, for excellent leadership, it is necessary for leaders to take care of employees and meet their expectations with clear and effective communication [53].

The COVID-19 situation had adverse effects from the emotional, ethical, and economic perspectives [54]. Trust becomes the most crucial component in the working process and working relationships. However, such a situation can generate leaders with strong leadership skills whom employees can trust [49]. Carrington et al. [55] report that consensus will be successful when it originates from both leaders and followers. The American Psychological Association [56] reported that stress from a leader causes more anxiety in followers. Therefore, effective communication is required of leaders in order to reduce employees' stress and maximize trust [56].

Wisittigars and Siengthai [57] indicated that in times of crisis, leaders require competencies, such as business management, people management, and self-management, to deal with rapid changes in an uncertain organizational environment. Thus, managerial skills, e.g., decision-making with regard to analytical and problem-solving skills, the ability to simplify problems, and the ability to manage and organize people and social skills through empathy, communication, cooperation, listening, and negotiation, become vital for excellent leaders [57]. Therefore, leader behaviors with authentic leadership require the abilities and ethics to generate trust and establish social exchange relationships [58,59].

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the influences of leader behaviors on the association among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships. Leader behaviors during COVID-19 (see Appendix B, Table A2) act as moderators that may influence the association between authentic leadership and trust, between authentic leadership

and social exchange relationships, and between trust and social exchange relationships. High-quality social exchange relationships are essential for inducing good employee performance [60]. Trust in leadership and the organization is necessary to improve the quality of the social exchange relationships and the performance of employees [61–64]. The trustworthiness of authentic leaders can promote trust and social exchange relationships in their organizations [36,65].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Procedure, Method and Data Collection

This research employed a regression-based approach, using the PROCESS procedure for SPSS version 4.0 written by Andrew F. Hayes [66] (Hayes' PROCESS macro) to investigate the association among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships, the moderating effect of leader behaviors, and the mediating effect of trust. The following steps were taken: First, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify factors and construct a set of moderating variables, as this approach is able to identify the underlying relationships between those variables [67,68]. Second, Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS was adopted as a tool to explore the relationship among variables, the moderating effect and the mediating effects in this study [61]. This software can determine an interaction term to test the interaction effect of leader behaviors on the association between (1) authentic leadership and trust, (2) authentic leadership and social exchange relationships, and (3) trust and social exchange relationships. Regression analysis was conducted to explore the interactions of the main predictor and moderator and the impact on an outcome variable.

The regression equation is expressed based on the moderator model (Figure 1) [69]:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \beta_3 (X \cdot Z) + E_i$$

Third, a regression-based approach was applied to analyze the mediating effect of trust on the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships by using Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS as a tool to perform bootstrapping to analyze total, direct, and indirect effects (Figure 2) [66,70].

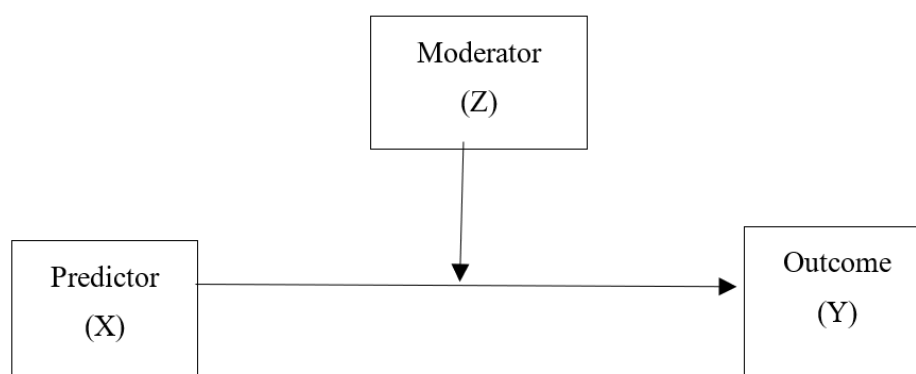


Figure 1. The concept diagram of the moderation model [71].

Data Collection

The study was related to authentic leadership, trust, social exchange relationship, and leader behaviors during the pandemic. First-line managers, middle managers, and top managers of private sectors were respondents in this study. We collected data in Thailand over four months, from 1 August to 30 November 2021. The data were collected from 380 Thai managers in four industries, manufacturing, wholesale, retail, and service, through a convenience sampling approach. First, a total of 380 questionnaires were distributed to respondents through Facebook, e-mail, and online to obtain an appropriate sample size. However, 360 questionnaires (94.70%) were returned. After removing incomplete

questionnaires, we were able to use 318 questionnaires (88.33%). Respondent demographics included gender, age, manager level, duration of work at current company, experiences in a manager position, and company size (see more details in Appendix A, Table A1).

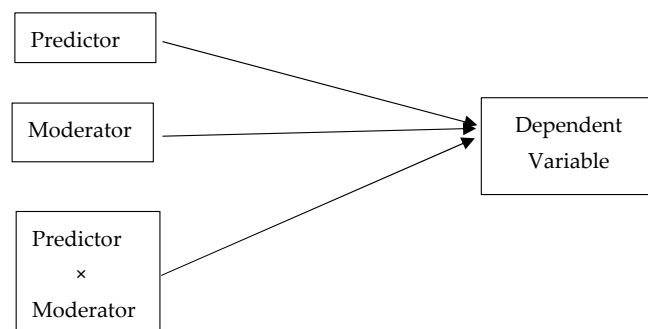


Figure 2. An analytic framework for testing interaction [72,73].

3.2. Measurement Variables

A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, was used to measure 29 statements, which were slight modifications from existing validated sources to fit this study. Cronbach alpha was 0.913 for all statements. The statements included trust (5 questions, with 0.723 reliability, developed from Mcallister [35]), social exchange relationship (4 questions, with 0.730 reliability, developed from Shore et al. [17]), authentic leadership (4 questions, with 0.852, developed from Walumbwa et al. [40]), and leader behaviors during the pandemic (16 questions, with 0.901 reliability, developed from Fernandez and Shaw [49], Dolan et al. [54], Argyle Public Relationships Index [53], and Kaul et al. [74]).

3.3. Factor Analysis (EFA)

Regarding 16 statements after factor analysis, 3 statements were deleted due to factor loadings less than 0.4; each item should have a factor loading of at least an absolute value of 0.4 ($\geq +0.4$ or ≤ -0.4) onto one of the factors considered to be important [75]. Therefore, 13 statements on leader behaviors during COVID-19 could separate 3 leader behavior factors, LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 (KMO = 0.814 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 765.864, $df = 120$, sig. < 0.05).

As shown in Table 1, the results of factor analysis generated three sub-factors as follows: sub-factor one included six variables (9, 13, 12, 5, 16, 1), which were the leader behaviors with ability, with the label of sub-factor one being LBF1; sub-factor two comprised five variables (3, 10, 7, 6, 2), which were the leader behaviors with ethics, with the label of sub-factor two being LBF2; and sub-factor three consisted of two variables (8, 11), which were leader behaviors with positive relationships, with the label of sub-factor three being LBF3. These three sub-factors acted as moderating variables.

Table 1. Factor loading analysis.

	Leader Behaviors		
	Factor 1 (F1)	Factor 2 (F2)	Factor 3 (F3)
Item (9)	0.748		
Item (13)	0.552		
Item (12)	0.545		
Item (5)	0.529		
Item (16)	0.518		
Item (1)	0.415		
Item (3)		0.634	
Item (10)		0.542	
Item (7)		0.529	

Table 1. Cont.

	Leader Behaviors		
	Factor 1 (F1)	Factor 2 (F2)	Factor 3 (F3)
Item (6)		0.522	
Item (2)		0.421	
Item (8)			0.740
Item (11)			0.719

3.4. Research Model and Hypothesis

The research model was developed based on the reviewed literature, as shown in Figure 3. It comprised authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships and leader behaviors (LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3) as moderating variables (factor analysis; see details in Table 1). The relationships among the variables are discussed below.

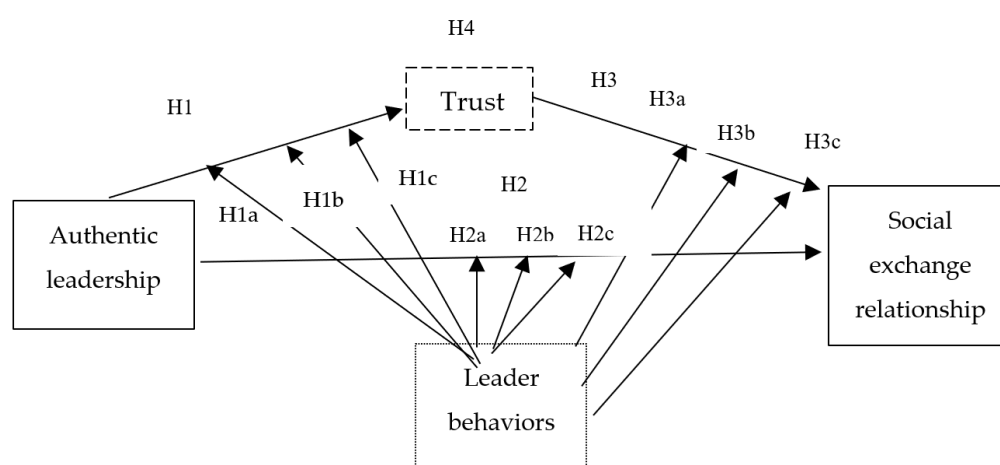


Figure 3. Research model. Moderator (Leader behaviors with ability, ethics, positive relationships). Mediator (Trust).

3.4.1. Authentic Leadership and Trust

Authentic leadership influences trust in leaders and their organizations. Moreover, trust in the organization and coworkers positively affects organizational citizenship behavior [76]. This type of leadership values relationships, cooperation, and interpersonal interactions. Leaders with authenticity are willing to help their followers to achieve their own objectives, which enhances the organization's common goals. Authentic leadership behaviors motivate trust in leaders, encouraging desired employee behaviors that positively impact human capital management. Therefore, authentic leadership indirectly influences employees' organizational citizenship behavior through trust [77]. Moreover, procedural justice positively impacts trust between leaders and followers, leading to better organizational citizenship behaviors by employees [78]. Transparency, integrity, and openness are vital elements of authentic leadership to promote trust, enabling authentic relationships with organizational members [39]. Hence, organizational leaders can establish a fair and open environment. Authentic leadership can motivate employees' affective-based and cognitive-based trust [79].

Additionally, trust in leadership affects team performance. For example, trusting the coach can enhance a basketball team's chance to win a game [61,62]. It can be concluded that trust in leadership positively reinforces performance within teams [61]. Druskat and Wheeler [80] reported that trust in leadership can lead a team to a stronger position in an organization; however, competency and reliability are still essential for leaders and followers. Stander et al. [81] also noted that authentic leadership increases trust among employees. Consequently, it is impossible to influence working relationships without having trust from organizational members. It is important to explore the associations

between authentic leadership and trust based on the pandemic situation. Hypothesis 1 (H1) is proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Authentic leadership positively influences trust.*

COVID-19 has had an impact on employees' well-being. However, supportive behaviors of leaders positively affect the physical, social and psychological well-being of employees, which promotes trust and authentic leadership in organizations. Moreover, support from others and a positive work climate also positively influence employees' well-being, encouraging better performance [82]. Leaders' supportive behaviors include physical, social, and emotional support for employees, e.g., understanding their needs and listening to and taking care of them [83]. Therefore, leaders' and employees' supportive behaviors can establish a supportive environment that increases trust in organizations [83]. Hailey [84] stated that leaders' abilities can influence employees' trust in them and their organizations. Employees are willing to follow their leader's guidance and take risks to make changes based on the leader's orders if they trust the leader. The trustworthiness of leaders comprises ability, benevolence, integrity, and predictability. Ability includes communication, motivation, decision-making skills, listening to others, problem-solving skills, flexibility, etc. Benevolence refers to care and support for employees, both emotionally and physically. Integrity refers to fairness, openness, and respect. Predictability indicates that leaders can build a bridge to a bright future, and that they have a good understanding of their employees and situations to make decisions. Thus, leader behaviors such as ability, ethics, and positive working relationships may impact the relationship between authentic leadership and trust [59]. Moderating hypotheses are formed as follows:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a). *LBF1 has a significant and positive influence on the association between authentic leadership and trust.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b). *LBF2 has a significant and positive influence on the association between authentic leadership and trust.*

Hypothesis 1c (H1c). *LBF3 has a significant and positive influence on the association between authentic leadership and trust.*

3.4.2. Authentic Leadership and Social Exchange Relationships

Avolio and Gardner [38] argued that authentic leaders with high-quality leadership ability concentrate on building positive social exchange relationships with their followers. A positive affect, trust, and a high level of respect influence the leader–follower relationship. Authentic leadership positively influences the leader–follower relationship through self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing of information. Furthermore, within this relationship, the self-development of both leaders and followers can grow [28]. Based on the social exchange theory, a positive leader–follower exchange relationship is conducive to organizational success in cooperation between organizational members [28]. Thus, pro-social value orientation such as members with altruistic and cooperative behaviors is necessary for cooperation, and leaders' entrepreneurial characters can enhance social innovation in the workplace [85]. Furthermore, employees who perceive organizational support tend to generate social exchange relationships with others in the workplace [60]. Employees will acknowledge new leaders who show excellent leadership and foster high-quality social exchange relationships [32]. A positive social exchange relationship cannot be generated when employees are treated badly [86]. Therefore, authentic leaders pay attention to their social responsibility to boost organizational citizenship behaviors [87]. A good relationship between leaders and followers generates a productive work environment, career satisfaction, and employee loyalty to the organization [88]. A high-quality social exchange relationship is required in their workplace, since it encourages good employee performance and willingness to work [89,90]. Hence, authentic leadership

positively influences social exchange relationships [86]. Regarding social exchange theory, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Authentic leadership positively influences social exchange relationships.*

During the pandemic, high-quality social exchange relationships between leaders and followers are important to alleviate employee burnout, reduce turnover, and promote better organizational citizenship behavior [91]. Hence, leaders can improve their leadership skills and promote high-quality social exchange relationships in organizations through affection, loyalty, and professional respect [91]. However, a poor fit between people and the organization negatively affects the leader–member social exchange relationship and leads to employee burnout and turnover intention. On the other hand, a positive fit between people and the organization positively affects the leader–member social exchange relationship and employees’ organizational citizenship behavior [92]. In addition, a leader’s ability to put employees in the proper positions will improve the social exchange relationship, which will reduce employee burnout and turnover intention and enhance organizational citizenship behavior [92]. Leaders should give employees opportunities, establish a welcoming and open environment in the workplace, and provide resources for employees to strengthen their social relationships. Therefore, leader behaviors such as ability, ethics, and positive working relationships may influence the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships [59]. The moderating hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a). *LBF1 has a significant and positive influence on the association between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b). *LBF2 has a significant and positive influence on the association between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.*

Hypothesis 2c (H2c). *LBF3 has a significant and positive influence on the association between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.*

3.4.3. Trust and Social Exchange Relationships

A good working relationship between leaders and employees increases trust in the organization and minimizes workplace conflict [27]. Employees’ propensity to trust affects high-quality social exchange relationships; moreover, the interaction between managers’ and employees’ propensity to trust enhances positive social exchange relationships [90]. Trust positively affects satisfaction with the social exchange relationship [82] because this type of relationship requires good communication, financial dependence, and social dependence [48]. Additionally, trust is essential for the process of developing a high-quality social exchange relationship; for instance, leaders can establish strong social bonds with their followers if they increase trust and decrease their control [93]. In comparison, control and trust can make a megaproject successful. However, trust promotes social exchange norms, which comprise reciprocity, negotiation, and information sharing, while control does not [94]. It implies that a high level of trust increases reciprocity, negotiation, and information sharing that promotes social exchange relationships [94]. Moreover, cognitive-and affective-based trust enhances the social exchange relationship [46], and cognitive-based trust will occur before affective-based trust starts [46]. Leaders’ social intelligence is important to increase trust in the organization, leading to high-quality social exchange relationships; as a result, leaders can cooperate with employees who have different backgrounds [46]. Hypothesis3 (H3) is proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Trust positively influences social exchange relationships.*

Due to COVID-19, many organizations have been forced to arrange work from home for their employees, leading to changes in leader behaviors, quality and productivity.

During the pandemic, leader behaviors became more controlling, affecting the leadership quality and reducing productivity, which hampers trust and social exchange or working relationships [95]. On the other hand, when leaders delegate more responsibilities to employees and are less controlling, employees are more productive [95]. In addition, support from team leaders and members is necessary to improve employees' citizenship behaviors and increase organizational performance efficiency, which leads to sustainability in the organization [96]. Therefore, leader behaviors concerning ability, benevolence and positive social relationships in organizations are essential for increasing trust and social exchange relationships between leaders and followers and among organizational members [96]. When employees are happy with their job, they will work hard and dedicate themselves to the organization. Thus, leader behaviors such as ability, ethics and positive working relationships may affect the relationship between trust and social exchange relationships [59]. The moderating hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a). *LBF1 has a significant and positive influence on the association between trust and social exchange relationships.*

Hypothesis 3b (H3b). *LBF2 has a significant and positive influence on the association between trust and social exchange relationships.*

Hypothesis 3c (H3c). *LBF3 has a significant and positive influence on the association between trust and social exchange relationships.*

In addition, trust is an important mechanism through which authentic leadership can improve the level of social exchange relationships [48,93]. Both affective-based and cognitive-based trust impact the quality of social exchange relationships [46]. The propensity to trust directly affects social exchange relationships; based on the interaction of managers' and employees' propensity to trust, when this propensity is high, the quality of social exchange relationships is also high [90]. Authentic leadership enhances social exchange relationships based on fairness between leaders and followers [18]. Thus, trust between leaders and followers positively impacts high-quality social exchange relationships in the workplace [97]. According to Blau [98], social exchange relationships generate feelings of obligation and appreciation; hence, they require trust. With this, the mediating Hypothesis (H4) is as follows:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Trust has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.*

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The regression-based approach was adopted to investigate the relationships among factors and the interaction of leader behaviors with the association between predictors and dependent variables. LBF1, 2, and 3 act as moderators, affecting the association between authentic leadership and trust, authentic leadership and social exchange relationships, and trust and social exchange relationships. In addition, this study also tested the mediating effect of trust on the association between authentic leadership and a social exchange relationship.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of all variables and correlations. The results show that all variables have relationships with each other. Therefore, we can apply the regression-based approach to this study.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation.

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Trust	3.7730	0.48539	1					
SER	3.7932	0.51428	0.398 **	1				
AL	3.7728	0.57112	0.519 **	0.495 **	1			
LBF1	3.6724	0.56497	0.376 **	0.395 **	0.479 **	1		
LBF2	3.8233	0.56218	0.303 **	0.400 **	0.455 **	0.477 **	1	
LBF3	3.5912	0.83563	0.260 **	0.250 **	0.214 **	0.337 **	0.188 **	1

Notes: $N = 318$; ** $p < 0.01$; SER (social exchange relationship), AL (authentic leadership), LBF1 (leader behaviors with ability), LBF2 (leader behaviors with ethics), LBF3 (leader behaviors with positive relationships).

4.2. The Results of the Hypothesis Test

4.2.1. Hypotheses H1, H1a, H1b, H1c

In this study, the PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by Hayes was used to analyze the moderating hypotheses. Model 1 from the PROCESS macro was selected to find the direct effect of authentic leadership on trust and the moderating effects of LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 on the relationship between authentic leadership and trust. Table 3 presents the relationships between variables as follows:

- (1) Authentic leadership positively impacts trust ($\beta = 0.3767^{***}$, 0.4117^{***} , 0.4154^{***}); therefore, Hypothesis 1 (H1) is accepted. By these results, we can conclude that authentic leadership influences trust among organizational members; when authentic leadership behavior improves, trust increases.
- (2) The interaction of authentic leadership * LBF1 has significant and positive impacts on trust ($\beta = 0.2674^{***}$, LLCI = 0.1508, and ULCI = 0.3839); therefore, Hypothesis 1a (H1a) is accepted.
- (3) The interaction of authentic leadership * LBF2 has a significant and positive impact on trust ($\beta = 0.2475^{***}$, LLCI = 0.1390, and ULCI = 0.3561); therefore, Hypothesis 1b (H1b) is accepted.
- (4) The interaction of authentic leadership * LBF3 has a significant and positive impact on trust ($\beta = 0.1862^{***}$, LLCI = 0.0956, and ULCI = 0.2768); therefore, Hypothesis 1c (H1c) is accepted.

Table 3 shows that authentic leadership under the influence of LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 can predict trust by 33.7%, 31.86%, and 32.74%, respectively. The main and interaction effects are all positively significant. It can be concluded that LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 strengthen the positive relationship between authentic leadership and trust. Moreover, LBF1 is more powerful than LBF2 and LBF3 when creating an interaction effect with authentic leadership. Therefore, during the pandemic, leader behaviors establish a stronger relationship between authentic leadership and trust.

Simple slopes were applied to investigate the interaction between authentic leadership and leader behaviors (during COVID-19), as shown in Figure 4.

Table 3. Results of regression analysis for moderation analysis.

R	R ²	F	sig			
0.5776	0.337	52.41	0.0000 ($p < 0.0001$)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping LLCI	ULCI
AL \rightarrow trust		0.3767 ***	0.0446	8.4458	0.2889	0.4644
LBF1 \rightarrow trust		0.1508 ***	0.0451	3.3436	0.0621	0.2396
Interaction						
AL * LBF1 \rightarrow trust		0.2674 ***	0.0593	4.5120	0.1508	0.3839

Table 3. Cont.

R	R ²	F	sig			
0.5645	0.3186	48.95	0.0000 ($p < 0.0001$)			
Testing paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping	
					LLCI	ULCI
AL→trust		0.4117 ***	0.0445	9.2600	0.3242	0.4992
LBF2→trust		0.1091 *	0.0459	2.3787	0.0189	0.1993
Interaction						
AL * LBF2→trust		0.2475 ***	0.0552	4.4878	0.1390	0.3561
R	R ²	F	sig			
0.5722	0.3274	50.95	0.0000 ($p < 0.0001$)			
Testing paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping	
					LLCI	ULCI
AL→trust		0.4154 ***	0.0403	10.3156	0.3362	0.4947
LBF3→trust		0.0877 **	0.0275	3.1862	0.0335	0.1419
Interaction						
AL * LBF3→trust		0.1862 ***	0.0461	4.0427	0.0956	0.2768

Note: N = 318; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; AL (Authentic leadership), LBF1 (leader behaviors with ability), LBF2 (leader behaviors with ethics), LBF3 (leader behaviors with positive relationships).

The graphs in Figure 4 show that LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 influence the positive relationship between authentic leadership and trust. Authentic leadership gradually and steadily encourages trust under the positive impact of LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3. The figure also shows that LBF1 has the strongest interaction effect with authentic leadership. First, under the influence of LBF1, authentic leadership sharply and steadily increases trust during the first phase continuing to the final phase. Second, under the influence of LBF2, authentic leadership sharply and steadily increases trust during the first phase; however, after the second phase, the increase slows down. Third, under the influence of LBF3, authentic leadership slowly increases trust during the first phase; however, after the second phase, the increase sharpens. It can be concluded that leaders with ability are required to strengthen the positive relationship between authentic leadership and trust during the initial and final phases. When we look at leaders with ethics, they are strongly required during the first phase. Finally, leaders with positive relationships are strongly required after the second phase. This implies that employees require different behaviors from leaders in different situations to encourage authentic leadership and trust. However, promoting trust requires a high level of authentic leadership with high levels of leader behaviors with ability, ethics, and positive relationships.

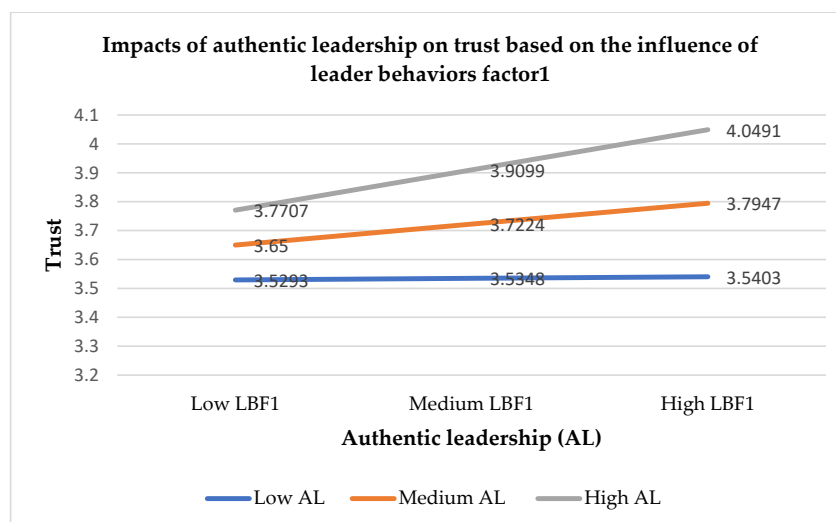


Figure 4. Cont.

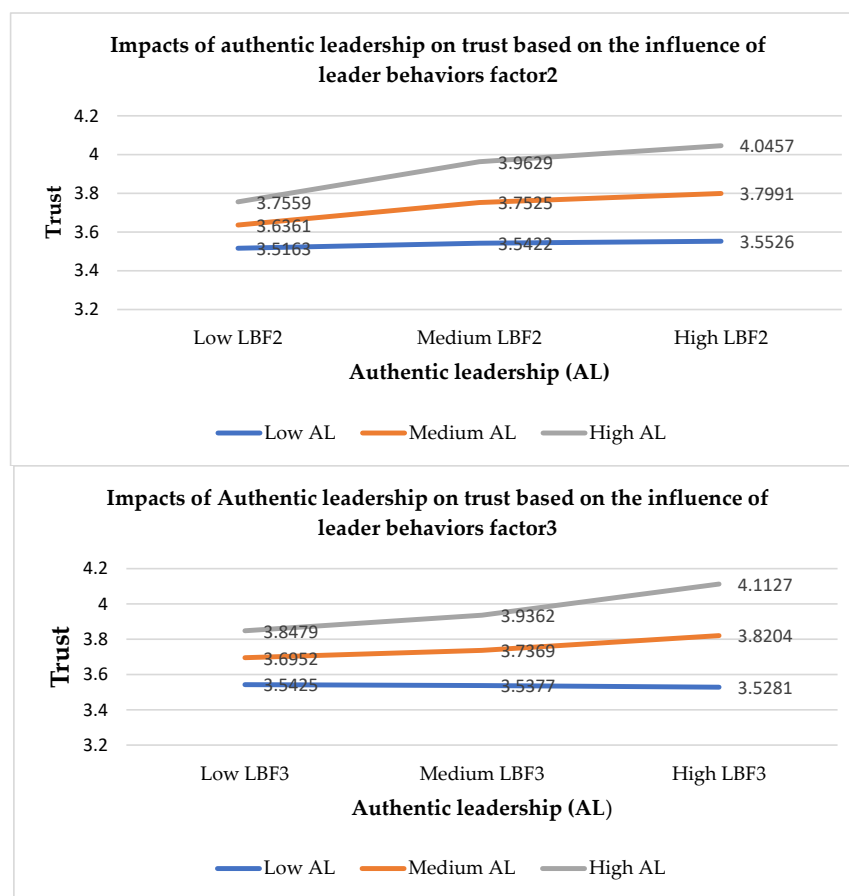


Figure 4. Impact of leader behaviors on the association between authentic leadership and trust.

4.2.2. Hypotheses H2, H2a, H2b, and H2c

Similarly, according to Hypothesis 2 (H2), Hypothesis 2a (H2a), Hypothesis 2b (H2b) and Hypothesis 2c (H2c), model 1 from the PROCESS macro was selected to find the direct effect of authentic leadership on social exchange relationships, as well as the moderating effects of LBF1, LBF2 and LBF3 on the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. Table 4 presents the relationship between variables as follows:

- (1) Authentic leadership positively impacts social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.3608^{***}$, 0.3587^{***} , 0.4185^{***}); therefore, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is accepted. It can be concluded that authentic leadership influences social exchange relationships among the organizational members; when authentic leadership improves, social exchange relationships also tend to improve.
- (2) The interaction of authentic leadership * LBF1 has a significant and positive impact on social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.2684^{***}$, LLCI = 0.1433 and ULCI = 0.3934); therefore, Hypothesis 2a (H2a) is accepted.
- (3) The interaction of authentic leadership * LBF2 has a significant and positive impact on social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.1852^{**}$, LLCI = 0.0691 and ULCI = 0.3013); therefore, Hypothesis 2b (H2b) is accepted.
- (4) The interaction of authentic leadership * LBF3 has a significant and positive impacts on social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.1061^{*}$, LLCI = 0.0066 and ULCI = 0.2056); therefore, Hypothesis 2c (H2c) is accepted.

Table 4 shows that authentic leadership under the influence of LBF1, LBF2 and LBF3 can predict social exchange relationships by 31.67%, 30.55%, and 27.74%, respectively. The main and interaction effects are all positively significant. It can be concluded that LBF1, LBF2 and LBF3 strengthen the positive relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships and LBF1 is a more powerful moderator than LBF2 and LBF3 when

creating an interaction effect with authentic leadership. Therefore, leader behaviors establish a stronger association between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.

Table 4. Results of regression analysis for moderation analysis.

R 0.5627	R² 0.3167	F 48.51	sig (<i>p</i> < 0.001)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping LLCI	ULCI
AL→SER		0.3608 ***	0.0479	7.5403	0.2667	0.4550
LBF1→SER		0.1952 ***	0.0484	4.0319	0.0999	0.2904
Interaction AL * LBF1→SER		0.2684 ***	0.0636	4.2209	0.1433	0.3934
R 0.5528	R² 0.3055	F 46.05	sig (<i>p</i> < 0.001)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping LLCI	ULCI
AL→SER		0.3587 ***	0.0476	7.5429	0.2651	0.4523
LBF2→SER		0.2278 ***	0.0490	4.6453	0.1313	0.3243
Interaction AL * LBF2→SER		0.1852 **	0.0590	3.1389	0.0691	0.3013
R 0.5267	R² 0.2774	F 40.1886	sig (<i>p</i> < 0.001)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping LLCI	ULCI
AL→SER		0.4185 ***	0.0442	9.4629	0.3315	0.5055
LBF3→SER		0.0916 **	0.0302	3.0310	0.0321	0.1511
Interaction AL * LBF3→SER		0.1061 *	0.0506	2.0987	0.0066	0.2056

Note: *N* = 318; * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001; AL (authentic leadership), SER (social exchange relationship), LBF1 (leader behaviors with ability, LBF2 (leader behaviors with ethics), LBF3 (leader behaviors with positive relationships).

Simple slopes were applied to investigate the interaction between authentic leadership and leader behaviors (during COVID-19), as shown in Figure 5:

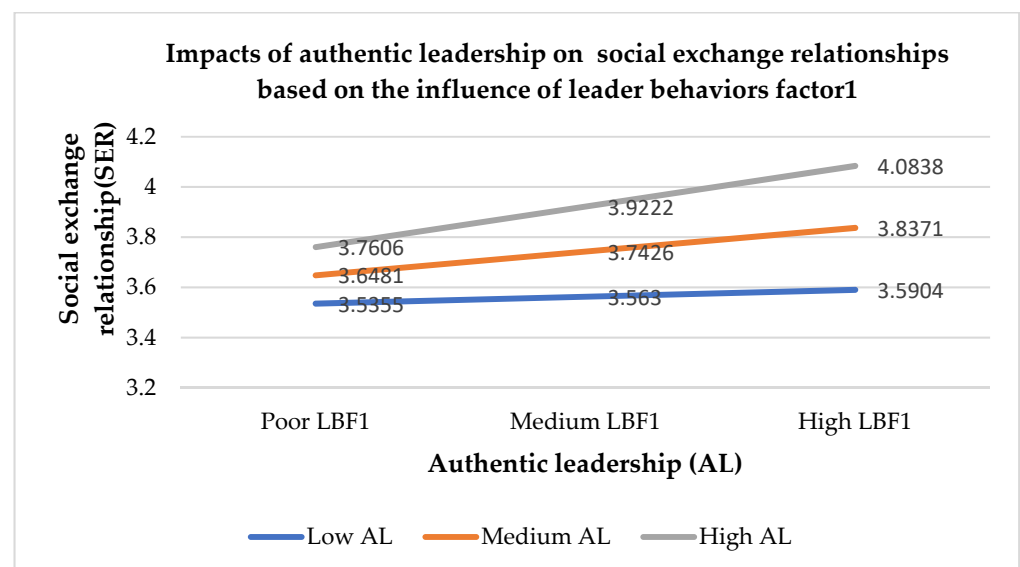


Figure 5. Cont.

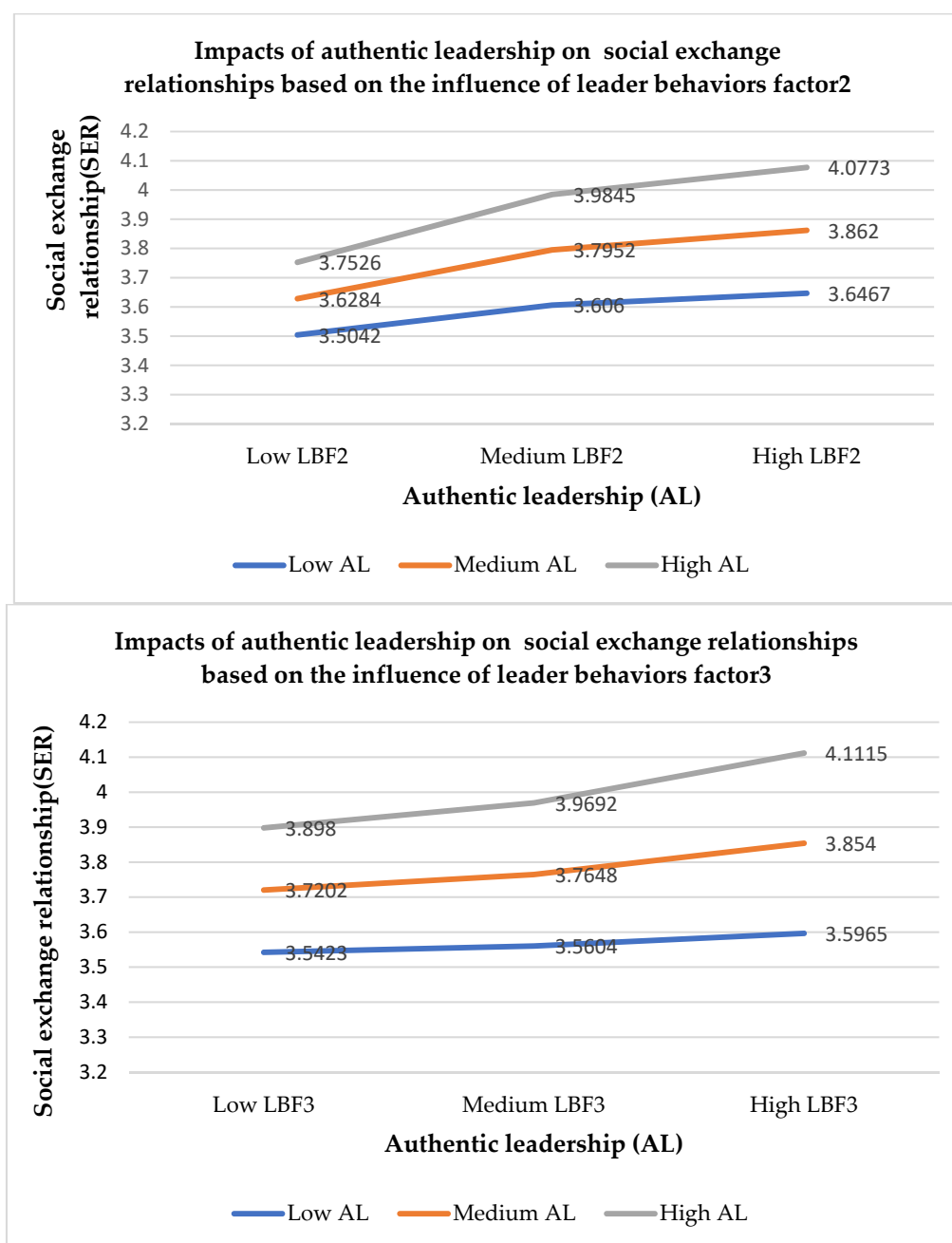


Figure 5. Impacts of leader behaviors on the association between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.

The graphs in Figure 5 show that LBF1, LBF2 and LBF3 significantly influence the positive relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. Authentic leadership gradually and steadily encourages social exchange relationships under the positive impact of LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3. The figure also shows that LBF1 has the strongest interaction effect with authentic leadership. First, under the influence of LBF1, authentic leadership sharply and steadily improves social exchange relationships during the first phase, continuing to the final phase. Second, under the influence of LBF2, authentic leadership sharply and steadily improves social exchange relationships during the first phase; however, after the second phase, the increase slows down. Third, under the influence of LBF3, authentic leadership slowly improves social exchange relationships during the first phase; however, after the second phase, the increase sharpens. It can be concluded that leaders with ability are required to strengthen the positive relationship between authentic

leadership and social exchange relationships during the initial and final phases. When we look at leaders with ethics, they are strongly required during the first phase. Finally, leaders with positive relationships are strongly required after the second phase. This implies that employees require different behaviors from leaders in different situations to enhance authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. In addition, promoting high-quality social exchange relationships requires a high level of authentic leadership with a high level of leader behaviors with ability, ethics, and positive relationships.

4.2.3. Hypotheses H3, H3a, H3b, and H3c

Similarly, according to Hypothesis 3 (H3), Hypothesis 3a (H3a), Hypothesis 3b (H3b) and Hypothesis 3c (H3c), model 1 from the PROCESS macro was selected to find the direct effect of trust on social exchange relationships, as well as the moderating effects of LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 on the relationship between trust and social exchange relationships. Table 5 presents the relationship between variables as follows:

- (1) Trust positively impacts social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.2909^{***}$, 0.3083^{***} , 0.3667^{***}); therefore, Hypothesis 3 (H3) is accepted. It can be concluded that trust influences positive social exchange relationships among organizational members; when trust increases, social exchange relationships tend to increase as well.
- (2) The interaction of trust * LBF1 has a significant and positive impact on social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.3050^{***}$, LLCI = 0.1313 and ULCI = 0.4786); therefore, Hypothesis 3a (H3a) is accepted.
- (3) The interaction of trust * LBF2 has a significant and positive impact on social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.1893^{*}$, LLCI = 0.0313 and ULCI = 0.3473); therefore, Hypothesis 3b (H3b) is accepted.
- (4) The interaction of trust * LBF3 has a significant and positive impact on social exchange relationships ($\beta = 0.1308^{*}$, LLCI = 0.0107 and ULCI = 0.2509); therefore, Hypothesis 3c (H3c) is accepted.

Table 5 shows that trust under the influence of LBF1, LBF2 and LBF3 can predict social exchange relationships by 25.72%, 25.74%, and 19.36%, respectively. The main and interaction effects are all positively significant. It can be concluded that LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 strengthen the positive relationship between trust and social exchange relationships, and LBF1 is a more powerful moderator than LBF2 and LBF3 when creating an interaction effect with trust. Therefore, leader behaviors establish a stronger association between trust and social exchange relationships.

Table 5. Results of regression analysis for moderation analysis.

R	R ²	F	sig			
0.5071	0.2572	36.23	0.0000 ($p < 0.001$)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping	
					LLCI	ULCI
Trust→SER		0.2909 ***	0.0558	5.2096	0.1810	0.4008
LBF1→SER		0.2539 ***	0.0478	5.3099	0.1598	0.3480
Interaction						
Trust * LBF1→SER		0.3050 ***	0.0882	3.4559	0.1313	0.4786
R	R ²	F	sig			
0.5074	0.2574	36.30	0.0000 ($p < 0.0001$)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping	
					LLCI	ULCI
Trust→SER		0.3083 ***	0.0544	5.6622	0.2012	0.4154
LBF2→SER		0.2825 ***	0.0467	6.0514	0.1907	0.3744
Interaction						
Trust * LBF2→SER		0.1893 *	0.0803	2.3567	0.0313	0.3473

Table 5. Cont.

R	R ²	F	sig			
0.4401	0.1936	25.14	0.0000 ($p < 0.0001$)			
Testing Paths		β	se	t	Bootstrapping LLCI	ULCI
Trust→SER		0.3667 ***	0.0559	6.5617	0.2567	0.4766
LBF3→SER		0.1003 **	0.0323	3.1034	0.0367	0.1640
Interaction						
Trust * LBF3→SER		0.1308 *	0.0610	2.1424	0.0107	0.2509

Note: $N = 318$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; SER (social exchange relationship), LBF1 (leader behaviors with ability), LBF2 (leader behaviors with ethics), LBF3 (leader behaviors with positive relationships).

Simple slopes were applied to investigate the interaction between trust and social exchange relationships, as shown in Figure 6.

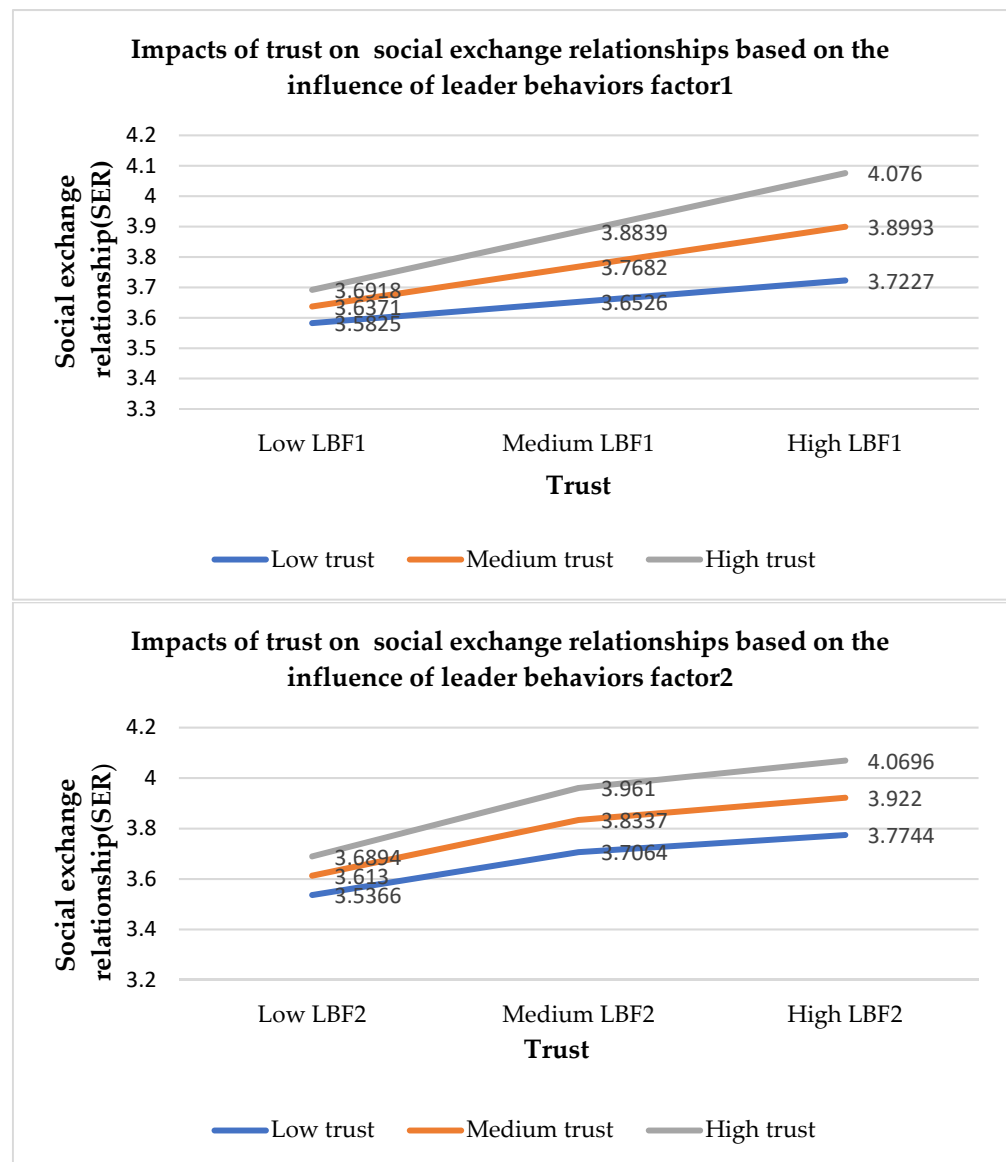


Figure 6. Cont.

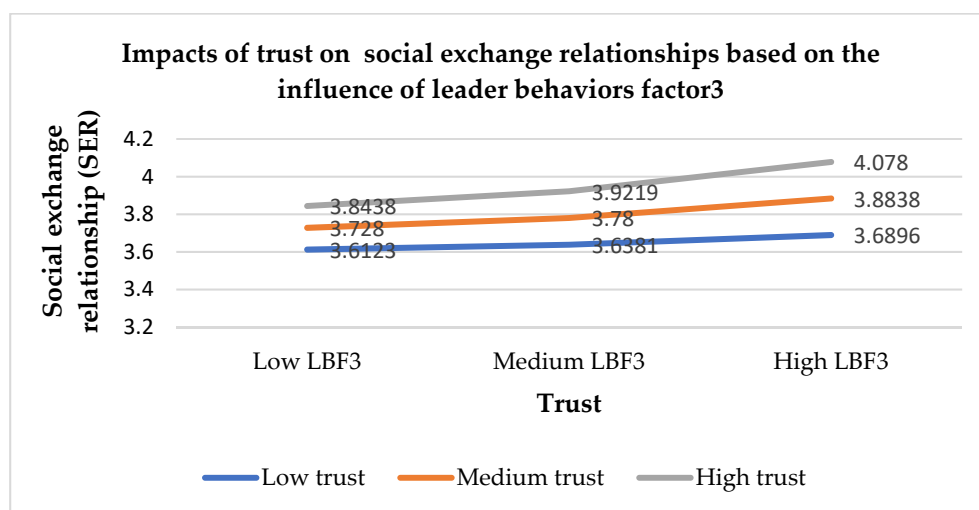


Figure 6. Impact of leader behaviors on the association between trust and social exchange relationships.

The graphs in Figure 6 show that LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3 have a significant influence on the positive relationship between trust and social exchange relationships. Trust gradually and steadily encourages social exchange relationships under the positive impact of LBF1, LBF2, and LBF3. The figure also shows that LBF1 has the strongest interaction effect with trust. First, under the influence of LBF1, trust sharply and steadily increases social exchange relationships during the first phase, continuing to the final phase. Second, under the influence of LBF2, trust sharply and steadily increases social exchange relationships during the first phase; however, after the second phase, the increase slows down. Third, under the influence of LBF3, trust slowly increases social exchange relationships during the first phase; however, after the second phase, the increase sharpens. It can be concluded that leaders with ability are required to strengthen the positive relationship between trust and social exchange relationships during the initial and final phases. When we look at leaders with ethics, they are strongly required during the first phase. Finally, leaders with positive relationships are strongly required after the second phase. This implies that employees require different behaviors from leaders in different situations to enhance trust and social exchange relationships. Therefore, promoting strong social exchange relationships requires a high level of trust with high levels of leader behaviors with ability, ethics, and positive relationships.

4.2.4. Hypothesis H4 (Mediation Analysis)

The PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by Hayes was adopted to examine the mediating hypothesis in the study. Model 4 was used to discover the direct effect of authentic leadership on social exchange relationships and the mediating role of trust in the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. The result shows that trust mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships.

In Hypothesis 4 (H4), we hypothesize that trust has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. As shown in Table 6, for the indirect effect of authentic leadership on social exchange relationships, the lower bound and upper bound confidence intervals do not cross zero. As a result, the indirect effect of authentic leadership on social exchange relationships is positively significant. In addition, the coefficient of the total effect (C) of authentic leadership on social exchange relationships is greater than the coefficient of direct effect (C'). This implies that trust has a partial mediating effect on the relationship between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships. Thus, authentic leadership needs a high level of trust to increase social exchange relationships. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 (H4) is fully supported.

Table 6. Mediation coefficient and bootstrapping.

Testing Paths	Unstandardized Coefficient		t	Bootstrapping	
	Standard Coefficient Error			LLCI	ULCI
IV→M (a)	0.4410 ***	0.0409	10.7894	0.3606	0.5214
M→DV (b)	0.2049 ***	0.0596	3.4402	0.0877	0.3220
IV→M→DV(C')	0.3557 ***	0.0506	7.0284	0.2562	0.4553
IV→DV (C)	0.4460 ***	0.0440	10.1374	0.3595	0.5327
Indirect effect	0.0903	0.0306		0.0328	0.1529

Note: N = 318; *** $p < 0.001$; IV (authentic leadership), M (trust), DV (social exchange relationship).

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 situation has had adverse effects on working relationships, leading to decreased organizational performance. This study investigated three types of leader behavior. First, leader behaviors with ability (LBF1) are defined as leaders who can manage people and work effectively. Second, leader behaviors with ethics (LBF2) are defined as leaders who are concerned about employees' well-being and take care of them with good and clear communication. Third, leader behaviors with positive relationships (LBF3) are described as leaders who focus on supporting positive relationship environments in organizations, even in the work-from-home situation (see Appendix B, Table A2). The results show that three leader behaviors, namely ability, ethics, and positive relationships, induce positive associations among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships that can bring about positive outcomes for organizations. It can be concluded that during the pandemic, the characteristics and qualities of good leader behaviors are vital factors that can moderate a positive relationship among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships.

5.1. Hypothesis Findings

The findings show that authentic leadership positively impacts employees' trust in leaders and the organization. Effective leaders need to earn the employees' trust, which is an essential construct of social exchange theory [98]. Mayer et al. [29] argued that trustworthy leaders require ability, benevolence, and integrity as essential characteristics. This leadership style motivates employees' positive attitudes and behaviors, leading to job satisfaction, trust, and better performance [24]. Hassan and Ahamed [99] also indicated that authentic leaders show a high degree of integrity, focus on their purpose, and commit to their core values. Consequently, this stimulates more trusting relationships among people, leading to positive outcomes for work engagement. Moreover, trust mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and employee work engagement. People believe that the best place to work is where they can trust the leaders and teams and feel enthusiastic about working with them. Farid et al. [100] indicated that authentic leadership promotes a higher level of cognitive-based and affective-based trust; it also has a positive relationship with organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Coxen et al. [76] reported that authentic leadership motivates organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) through trust and influences a culture of trust in the workplace. Iqbal et al. [79] firmly stated that authentic leadership has a positive influence on both affective-based and cognitive-based trust, and moreover, that both positively mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and OCBs. Authentic leaders always show their true selves to their followers; as a result, they can encourage their followers to trust them and the organization, which is conducive to better cooperation and teamwork [39]. Employees trust leaders based on their actions and character [26]. Thus, authentic leadership positively impacts trust [25].

Avolio and Gardner [36] stated that this leadership style positively affects employees' social exchange relationships. Authentic leaders develop positive emotions and social exchange relationships in organizational culture. Leaders' and followers' positive psychological capacities, confidence, optimism, resiliency, and hope can be improved by authentic leadership. Additionally, this kind of leadership strengthens employees' self-awareness

and self-regulation, leading to a process of positive self-development. Leaders' positive attitudes and skills motivate collaboration, employee commitment, and high-quality social exchange relationships [45]. The leadership role is essential for shaping quality social exchange relationships [101]. Therefore, leaders with competency, authenticity, and honesty are the appropriate partners for employees to engage in social exchange relationships [35]. At the same time, it is the leaders' duty to establish a conducive environment by building a transparent relationship with organizational members, enhancing good communication within the organization, which leads to sustainable management. A healthy social exchange relationship among team leaders and members can help employees accomplish organizational goals [28]. This implies that authentic leadership positively influences a high level of social exchange relationships between leaders and followers, leading to high work engagement of employees because this relationship motivates their perception, attitudes, and behaviors [102]. Therefore, setting the social exchange relationship as a mediator can induce a positive relationship between authentic leadership and employee work engagement that can bring about sustainable integration within companies. Moreover, the interaction between authentic leadership and high-power distance of employees induces a strong social exchange relationship between leaders and members [102].

According to Blau [98], trust has a direct effect on social exchange relationships, since trust is a fundamental element in this kind of relationship, which spotlights feelings and obligations. When someone does a favor for another, they expect to receive some return benefit in the future [17]; therefore, trust is required, implying that trust is essential for maintaining a social exchange relationship. Trust and macromotives, e.g., commitment and loyalty, form the basis of a social exchange relationship that characterizes the feelings and beliefs of partners about each other [89,98]. On the one hand, trust, mutual commitment, and loyalty have a direct impact on high-quality social exchange relationships [11]. A social exchange relationship is a two-way arrangement, with giving away and giving back. Therefore, one party's behavior will affect the other party; thus, interdependence between parties can decrease the risk of poorly cooperative relationships and promote cooperative behaviors [11]. Moreover, based on social exchange theory, partners' trustworthiness increases trust and commitment under the risk condition and uncertainty of the exchange situation [22]. Konovsky and Pugh [78] indicated that procedural justice can improve employees' trust in their leaders. Trust in leaders can mediate the relationship between procedural justice and organizational citizenship behaviors, leading to high-quality social exchange relationships.

Leader behaviors with ability (LBF1) strengthen the positive relationship between authentic leadership and trust, between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships, and between trust and social exchange relationships during the pandemic. Based on LBF1 (see Appendix B, Table A2), this suggests that authentic leaders must give more support to followers and show their abilities in managing work and people during a crisis. Leaders need to show empathy with their followers and boost employee motivation and confidence. Finally, leaders' action is required to promote trust and social exchange relationships. Cortez and Johnston [103] argued that authentic leadership is associated with trust, social exchange relationships, commitment, reliability, values, and competency. Therefore, authentic leaders should focus on encouraging trust and social exchange relationships during COVID-19 [49]. Elrod and Ramaley [104] noted that decentralization is needed when rapid responses from leaders are required; therefore, shared leadership is critical during a crisis. Hence, a leader's role can change based on their knowledge of and experience with solving problems based on the situation [104]. Skillful leadership must include competencies in team building, coordination, problem-solving, and communication in order to improve trust and social exchange relationships [23]. Therefore, the skills and styles of leaders strongly impact trust and social exchange relationships [105]. Chou [60] stated that employees' perceived organizational support, such as being valued and cared for, can promote positive behaviors and attitudes toward the organization. Hence, employees' perceived organizational support enhances high-quality social exchange

relationships in the workplace. Dolan et al. [54] argued that trust influences social exchange relationships. Additionally, high-quality social exchange relationships foster relationship satisfaction, which encourages better cooperation and performance in the organization [48]. Thus, employees' competence and self-determination are boosted when the organization supports them [106]. Leaders need to have the ability to address employees' needs, both physical and mental, to promote authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships [107].

Leader behaviors with ethics (LBF2) enhance the positive relationship between authentic leadership and trust, authentic leadership and social exchange relationships, and trust and social exchange relationships during the pandemic. Based on LBF2 (see Appendix B, Table A2), this suggests that authentic leaders must focus on promoting ethics in the workplace. For example, leaders must take care of employees during the pandemic, and employees must be able to rely on their leaders [107]. It is essential for leaders to have more upward and horizontal communication [108] and meet employees' expectations to improve trust and social exchange relationships. Hence, authentic leaders require high-quality leadership to maintain trust in the organization, which influences social exchange relationships [65]. Creating a culture of trust is the first priority of skillful leaders to promote employee performance. Thereby, authentic leadership reinforces the employees' emotional connection to the organization, enhancing their creativity and encouraging better job performance [109]. The ethics underlying leaders' behaviors positively affect employees' behavior toward the organization. On the other hand, unethical leader behaviors, such as refusing to support their subordinates, giving them extra work, and having an unequal environment in the workplace, have negative consequences on employees' psychological empowerment, bringing about unhappiness at work and lowered performance, which negatively impacts the organizational goals [110]. Therefore, it is important for leader behaviors to consider ethics in their actions to promote authentic leadership and encourage strong social relationships.

Leader behaviors with positive relationships (LBF3) promote a positive relationship between authentic leadership and trust, between authentic leadership and social exchange relationships, and between trust and social exchange relationships during the pandemic. Due to the influence of COVID-19, people are forced to perform work from home. The effects of working from home change leader behaviors [95]. Based on the results of the study, leader behaviors with a positive relationship suggest that remote work has an effect on the relationships between leaders and followers and among coworkers. Therefore, authentic leaders should focus on increasing trust and positive working relationships through online tools such as video calling services, instant communication tools, and task management platforms [111]. Along with the importance of working in teams during the pandemic, trust is an essential element of collaboration and cooperation in the workplace; thus, social exchange or working relationships require trust, especially during telework [12,111]. Conversely, leaders with controlling and monitoring behaviors will diminish their leadership and interrupt trust and social exchange relationships in organizations [12]. Hence, leaders who function with less control and more delegation and allow employees to participate in organizational matters can generate more trust to reduce the conflict between parties, promoting a social exchange relationship, leading to sustainable human capital management [53,95,112]. A high-quality social exchange relationship will be generated based on the leader's social skills and trustworthiness [50]. Mental safety positively impacts social exchange relationships among employees, leading to good performance [113–115].

Interpreting the Hypothesis Findings

Authentic leadership increases trust in leaders and organizations, facilitating a social exchange relationship, thus promoting better cooperation in the workplace. This kind of leadership shows authenticity or being genuine. If organizational leaders can show their true selves, employees know what they can expect from their leaders and how they can begin to establish trust in their workplace. Moreover, trust is generated from leaders'

consistent behavior and integrity and their transparency with those whom they lead [59]. Additionally, authentic leadership significantly increases a leader–member social exchange relationship that enhances organizational goal accomplishment and organizations' overall effectiveness and efficiency. Hence, authentic leaders must inspire and support the team to achieve organizational goals [28]. A high level of trust also increases a high-quality social exchange relationship [116]. Leader behaviors with ability, ethics, and positive relationships enhance authentic leadership, trust, and a social exchange relationship [59]. During the pandemic, leader behaviors that have the ability to manage people and their work are strongly required to improve authentic leadership, trust, and a social exchange relationship [23,60,104,106,107]. Leaders' ability is necessary to build a trusting environment that promotes high social exchange relationships, since employees want leaders who can direct them to the right position and help them accomplish the common goal. Moreover, leader behaviors with ethics are strongly required to improve authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships [107–110]. Ethical behaviors of leaders are essential during the first phase of COVID-19 because employees require mental and physical health safety, stability, and security in order to progress [117]. On the basis of the social exchange theory, when employees perceive high social exchange relationships with ethical behaviors from leaders, they tend to develop feelings, such as trust, gratitude, and obligation, which motivate employees to provide benefit in return with positive attitudes and beneficial working behaviors such as taking charge [118]. Finally, leader behaviors with positive relationships are strongly required to improve authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships [53,95,111,112]. In establishing the relationships that inspire employees to achieve a common goal, leaders who can build positive organizational relationships through networking collaboration and conflict management are required [119].

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This paper explores the associations among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships based on leader behaviors during the pandemic. The empirical study shows that authentic leadership is positively associated with trust and social exchange relationships. Qiu et al. [80] noted that based on exchange theory, authentic leadership is associated with trust and integrity to handle the leader and follower relationship. Authentic leadership encourages trust, optimism, and cooperation among employees to support a high-quality social exchange relationship [77,81]. Furthermore, fair leadership is conducive to employees having trust in leaders and the organization [120]. In addition, quality social exchange relationships influence positive leader and follower relationships [86]. Strong leadership skills are essential for establishing high-quality social exchange relationships to keep employees from leaving the organization [121].

Applying leader behavior factors (LBF1, LBF2 and LBF3) as moderators positively influences the associations among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships during the pandemic. The leader behavior factors include 13 sub-factors, which are shown in Appendix B, Table A2.

Regarding LBF1, a leader's ability to manage work and people is necessary to improve authentic leadership, trust, and high-social exchange relationships. Leaders should focus on boosting employee motivation and confidence to encourage their performance. Leaders must have empathy and know how to support their employees. Therefore, they required the ability to address their employees' needs [107]. It is necessary for leaders to take action and respond rapidly to situations in order to increase trust in leaders and organizations during this crisis; thus, shared leadership is required to solve problems more quickly according to the situation [74]. Shared leadership positively impacts agility, innovation, and collaboration among employees [104]. During the pandemic, authentic leadership should provide long-term and short-term planning that integrates standard solutions with solutions outside the box [74].

In regard to LBF2, leader behaviors with ethics and social skills positively impact authentic leadership, trust and social exchange relationships. During the first phase of

the pandemic, the basic needs of employees were safety, stability and security, including their physical and mental well-being; over time, those needs have evolved, requiring more complicated procedures [50]. Emmett et al. [50] indicated that to show strong leadership, leaders must understand the most crucial needs of employees so they can make changes to the organizational operation while being action-oriented, empathetic and transparent. Conversely, unethical leader behaviors negatively affect employees' psychological outcomes, reducing their performance efficiency and happiness at work, leading to decreased leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships; thus, leaders behaving ethically is crucial to develop employees' organizational citizenship behaviors, leading to sustainable organizational management [110]. Additionally, leaders can improve trusting relationships, social cohesion, and personal purpose by prioritizing actions that can cover a broad range of needs for the majority of employees. Finally, by applying the combination of technology, data, and analytics to identify employees who are confronting unexpected changes, leaders can support their employees in meaningful ways. Thus, leaders should keep listening to their employees, share information transparently and empathetically, and develop a plan to implement changes with clear communication to build employees' trust, confidence and the working relationship during this crisis [50].

Regarding LBF3, leader behaviors with positive relationships are essential for improving authentic leadership, trust and high social exchange relationships. During the pandemic, many employees have had to work from home due to government policies, including social distancing, to alleviate COVID-19 infection. Working from home has changed the way people work. There are both advantages and disadvantages of working from home. Many reports argue that working from home negatively impacts trust between leaders and followers, and diminished social exchange relationships in the organization become one of the disadvantages [111]. Contreras et al. [122] noted that effective leaders view working from home as an advantage for organizational productivity, the environment, and workers. However, leaders must shift the hierarchical work structure to make it less complex to increase the effectiveness of working from home. In addition, leaders must have the ability to build trust with team members and establish a virtual presence to help with and promote association and communication among them. Therefore, it is necessary to select suitable communication tools. In the telework environment, effective communication is required; hence, it should be developed by providing training programs for organizational members. Successful work from home requires leaders who pursue positive relationships in the organization to build strong trust and high-level social exchange relationships [123]. Additionally, to promote a positive relationship environment, authentic leaders need interpersonal skills, such as active listening and communication and the ability to inspire in order to encourage social exchange relationships in the workplace [88,124].

Moreover, organizations should promote humble behavior by providing a training program for leaders and employees to support a friendly working environment [9].

5.3. Practical Implications

The implications of this study can be of benefit to managers and practitioners under pandemic pressure when reviewing the literature from different countries. Authentic leadership behaviors and trust are imperative in order to increase social exchange relationships. Employees need leaders' guidance to pointing them in the right direction. Therefore, the trustworthiness of leaders is a vital factor that can enhance trust and social exchange relationships in organizations. The following practical implications are suggested:

Authentic leaders must have the ability to manage their stress in order to deliver decisions and take actions effectively. When leaders express stress in highly emotional ways, employees' stress and anxiety can increase. Authentic leaders must share information with empathy and optimism to reduce employees' stress. Leaders should understand and address employees' stress and anxiety, e.g., by reducing work hours, and clarify that there is hope for them and that help is available in these situations.

Authentic leaders must have credibility to establish trust in them and their organizations by showing honesty and transparency. Trustworthiness of leaders is vital to enhance trust in organizations and social exchange relationships. The three dimensions of trustworthiness are ability, benevolence, and integrity, which can promote a culture of trust, leading to high-quality social exchange relationships. They can improve trust and positive working relationships by delivering bad news or facts quickly and straightforwardly and providing a communication routine for employees, and they can follow current situations. Employee feedback is important, because sometimes employees want to give leaders suggestions. Finally, leaders should be role models for employees in a crisis, such as by cutting back on travel and practicing social distancing.

Authentic leaders must have strong social skills to maximize trust and minimize stress, which contributes to increased social exchange relationships. Social skills comprise communication, influence, cooperation and collaboration, leadership, conflict management, catalyzing change and building bonds. These skills can develop employees' organizational citizenship behaviors, which influence them to support one another.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 situation has heightened the demand to uphold trust and social exchange relationships in the workplace. Authentic leadership promotes trust and social exchange relationships, while trust influences social exchange relationships in the workplace. Furthermore, authentic leadership under the influence of leader behaviors induces trust and social exchange relationships, while trust under the influence of ideal leader behaviors positively motivates high-quality social exchange relationships. Hence, managers should focus on behaviors that promote authentic leadership to improve trust and social exchange relationships. Decentralization, or shared leadership, can help organizations solve their problems effectively when organizational problems require team leaders in specific fields and rapid responses. Authentic leadership can boost trust and social exchange relationships because authentic leaders promote genuine relationships with followers and colleagues. Furthermore, leaders' care and concern foster a culture of trust that is conducive to high-quality social exchange relationships. High-quality leadership can manage work from home or telework effectively, although it is difficult to manage trust and social exchange relationships in the process of working from home [120].

This study will benefit leaders seeking a suitable method to improve high-quality social exchange relationships in the workplace to promote cooperation and performance during COVID-19 and post COVID-19. Leader behaviors with leadership always impact organizational performance. With effective leadership behaviors, leaders will guide employees to innovative work behavior and organizational citizenship behavior, which can inspire employees to perform their best. Furthermore, behaviors of highly authentic leaders can build a culture of trust, bringing about positive working relationships, leading to sustainable integration of organizations. Trusting and positive working relationships or high-level social exchange relationships can make employees feel happy to cooperate with their colleagues and leaders, which will positively affect organizational performance.

The suggestion from the implications is that if organizations want employees to do their best work, good leaders need to show ability in terms of coaching, inspiring and motivating their employees, leading to effective human capital management, which positively affects achieving a common goal of the organization. Command and control behavior does not affect the success of an organizational goal in the long run since the leader's goal is to direct and develop employees who understand how organizations work and are able to produce an organization's success in the same way as the previous successes. Nowadays, rapid, constant, and disruptive change has become the norm; however, success in the past cannot guarantee success in the future. To deal with the actual situations, organizations need to move away from traditional command and control practices toward a model of leaders who provide support and guidance rather than instructions. Therefore, a new role for leaders is a coach. On the basis of the leader's ability to coach, organizational members

can learn how to adapt to a constantly changing work environment with fresh energy, innovation, and commitment. Happy employees tend to stay with organizations, put more effort into doing their best work, and follow their leaders' needs. However, leaders need to have the ability to motivate and inspire employees to create workplace environments that support organizational members' happiness. Leaders who make employees feel that their leaders care for them and that they are important to organizations can inspire and motivate employees to work harder. Therefore, positive coaching, motivation, and inspiration help organizational members to be more satisfied and happier with their work environment, leading to better productive work and productivity that can affect the organization's growth. Finally, understanding each member is important for leaders because leaders can help members by assigning suitable tasks for them; as a result, they can achieve those tasks that benefit members by increasing their confidence and performance, leading to successful organizational goals.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

This study investigated the associations among authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships on the basis of the influence of leader behaviors. However, this study had limitations that call for a careful interpretation of the findings. First, this paper studied authentic leadership. Other forms of leadership might not be applicable in terms of these findings. Second, the use of the sample of Thai managers might limit the generalizability of the findings. The findings might differ if data were collected from more than one country. Third, COVID-19 is continuing to spread globally, causing difficulties in data collection; therefore, this study only collected data using Facebook, online groups, and e-mail, which led to a limit in the number of respondents in this study. Finally, this research collected data from different types of organizations. A focus on the specific industry can provide more specific conclusions for future studies.

Although the findings shed light on how leader behaviors promoted authentic leadership, trust, and social exchange relationships during the pandemic, in terms of leader behaviors with positive relationships, which were mentioned with regard to leaders, followers, and peers using online tools for communication and interaction among them, this paper did not study the details of how they could effectively use technology for cooperation during work-from-home situations. It would be interesting to explore how organizations use new technology to improve communication, cooperation, and relationships.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.K.C.C.; methodology, J.K.C.C. and T.S.; software and validation, T.S.; data analysis and investigation, T.S.; Resources, J.K.C.C. and T.S.; Writing—review and editing, J.K.C.C. and T.S.; Supervision, J.K.C.C.; the other contributions belong to T.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Regarding Ethics Committee or Institutional Review Board approval, we have reasons that we do not need to get approval from Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in this study are available on request from the authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Respondent Demographics.

Demographics	Numbers	Percentage
Gender		
Female	148	46.5
Male	170	53.5

Table A1. *Cont.*

Demographics	Numbers	Percentage
Age (year)		
Under 30	14	4.4
30–35	32	10.1
36–40	74	23.3
41–45	62	19.5
46–50	46	14.5
51–55	36	11.3
56–60	26	8.2
Over 60	28	8.6
Managers (Level)		
First-line	136	42.8
Middle	79	24.8
Top	103	32.4
Duration of work in a current company (years)		
5	58	18.2
6–10	79	24.8
11–15	89	28
16–20	40	12.6
Over 20	52	16.4
Experiences in a manager position (years)		
Less than 5	90	28.3
5–10	105	33
11–15	63	19.8
16–20	26	8.2
Over 20	34	10.7
Industries		
Manufacturing	63	19.8
Wholesale	56	17.6
Retail	52	16.4
Service	147	46.2
Employees' numbers (business size)		
Fewer than 10	138	43.4
10–49	132	41.5
50–249	25	7.9
≥250	23	7.2
Total	318	100

Appendix B

Table A2. The Leader Behaviors' Sub-Factors.

LBF1 (Abilities)	LBF2 (Ethics)	LBF3 (Positive Relationships)
(1) Employees need more care from leaders during COVID-19, especially infected employees. (Item 9)	(1) Employees can rely on leaders during COVID-19. (Item 3)	(1) Employees who are working from home have intimately interacted with their colleagues from their home online. (Item 8)
(2) Leaders have abilities to manage change effectively during COVID-19. (Item 13)	(2) Leaders can meet their employee expectations to maintain being productive and healthy. (Item 10)	(2) Leaders and employees increase their interdependence online during COVID-19. (Item 11)
(3) Leaders boost employees' working motivation by providing support. (Item 12)	(3) Leaders are concerned about their employees' well-being during COVID-19. (Item 7)	

Table A2. Cont.

LBF1 (Abilities)		LBF2 (Ethics)		LBF3 (Positive Relationships)	
(4)	Employees want to follow their leaders such as their family leaders during COVID-19. (Item 5)	(4)	Leaders look after employees during COVID-19. (Item 6)		
(5)	Employees need more support, resources, and empathy from leaders to build their confidence. (Item 16)	(5)	Leaders have good and clear communication with employees frequently. (Item 2)		
(6)	Employees need more action from leaders than their word during COVID-19. (Item 1)				

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