

Employees' Identities, Cultural Values, and Leadership Preferences in a Multicultural Workplace in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

Multicultural working environments, diversity, and inclusion are the topics of interest in contemporary human resource management and leadership studies (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020). Since working environments with truly homogeneous workforce are difficult to find, it is acknowledged in the literature that diversity brings benefits along with challenges for leadership to handle. This case study of a higher education institution in a governmental sector in the Sultanate of Oman aims to explore the role of cultural values, cultural and social identities in employees' preferences of leadership styles. In this study, quantitative and qualitative approaches were combined to triangulate the findings and ensure their reliability. Initially, data were collected using an online survey distributed among employees of a governmental higher education institution in Oman. 153 responses were obtained with 52% response rate. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed statistically with the help of SPSS software. This was followed by one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 28 participants to clarify the findings of the first stage and ensure their reliability. Thematic analysis with thematic mapping was utilized to analyze the data collected by grouping concepts into themes and establishing the relationships between them. Overall, the current study attempts to demonstrate how employees' identities and cultural values affect individuals' leadership style preferences. The findings, in general, support previously conducted studies. However, they highlight the lack and inconsistency of other works regarding the correlation between leadership style preferences and cultural values in non-Western countries.

Keywords

Cultural Values, Leadership, Cultural Identities, Social Identities

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on identities and cultural values and the way they affect employees' leadership perceptions. The study was conducted in the Sultanate of Oman—a developing country in the Middle East (ME) with a relatively small (5.1 mln in 2023) but diverse population (National Center for Statistics & Information (NCSI), 2023). Oman's workforce is equally diverse with 34% of it (1.8 million in 2023) being foreigners (NCSI, 2023). Cultural diversity shapes organizational culture and dynamics in workplaces resulting in a variety of opinions, including different leadership style preferences.

The topic of diversity and inclusion has been widely discussed in literature for the last 16 years (Wood et al., 2022; Fox-Kirk et al., 2020; Janssens & Cappellen, 2008). It is connected to the recent changes in the workforce composition worldwide resulting from increasing globalization, technological development, interconnectedness of markets, and easier movement of information, goods, and people (Roberson, 2019). The new landscape of HRM and workplace relationships requires managers to be more culturally aware (Caprar et al., 2015; Zander & Romani, 2004; Getha-Taylor et al., 2020). Acknowledging cultural diversity in teams and “building bridges” are some essential contemporary managerial skills (Henson, 2016). Cultural norms and values affect not only leaders and their behavior, but also followers and their expectations from leaders (Aycan et al., 2014).

Despite extensive existing research on cross cultural leadership and leadership perceptions in various cultural contexts, the correlation between cultural values and leadership style preferences is not sufficiently studied. Moreover, research on organizational leadership in the Middle Eastern countries in general and in Oman in particular is scarce. First, the sector of higher education (HE) and research is quite new and is still developing (Al-Qarshoubi, 2020). The first HE institutions appeared in Oman in the 1980s and the first university was established in 1986 (The Education Council of the Diwan the Royal Court, 2016). The Ministry of HE was founded in 1994, and the Scientific Research Council emerged in 2005 (The Education Council of the Diwan the Royal Court, 2016).

The second factor is the Western origin of most leadership theories and the lack of research coverage of the ME countries (Chaudhry et al., 2019; O'Sullivan, 2016). The GLOBE studies (House, 2004; GLOBE, 2020), for example, included only a few countries in the ME. These studies cannot be generalized to Oman because of the evident cultural differences between Oman and other GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. Its unique features of societal, economic, and political processes result from the combination of Islam, tribal culture, and multiculturalism (Al Asmi & Caldwell, 2018). Oman's rich cultural context makes it challenging to define and conceptualize organizational leadership (Common, 2011).

This article aims to investigate the correlation between employees' cultural values, identities, and their leadership preferences in a multicultural workplace in the governmental sector in Oman.

The following research questions have shaped this study:

1) How are employees' cultural values related to their perceptions and preferences of leadership styles?

2) How do employees' social identities affect their perceptions and preferences of leadership styles?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Values

Culture is a concept that is hard to define because of its abstract nature. [Martin \(2002\)](#), for example, lists numerous definitions of culture (pp. 57-58). Although most of them emphasize its "sharedness", [Martin \(1992\)](#) argues that there are three philosophies underpinning the definitions of culture. A traditional integrated perspective views culture as homogenous mini societies with shared meaning, values and norms ([Martin, 2002](#)). Despite its prevalence in literature, it is too simplistic and idealistic ([Smerek, 2010](#); [Alvesson, 2011](#); [Parker, 2000](#)). Therefore, recent research acknowledges cultural heterogeneity and complexity in modern societies and follows differentiation and fragmentation philosophies ([Cameron & Quinn, 2011](#)). Both admit cultural pluralism in societies and the existence of subgroups and sub-cultures resulting in conflicting views ([Cameron & Quinn, 2011](#)). Consensus can be seen only within subgroups, so conflicts are considered normal ([Martin, 2002](#)). Fragmentation perspective, however, sees consensus as temporary and ambiguity as a permanent feature of culture with multiplicity of cultural interpretations ([Martin, 2002](#)).

In addition to the three dimensions of culture, current research views culture in two ways. The first one sees it as more measurable, related to values, norms, and actions. This approach can be encountered in international management and organizational behavior research ([Adler & Gundersen, 2008](#)), in intercultural communication research ([Ting-Toomey, 1999](#)), and in cultural intelligence studies ([Ang & Van Dyne, 2008](#)). The second view posits that culture is more complicated as it does not exclusively dwell in people's minds but is shared among people. It entails language, communication, symbolism where different meanings can be found in public expression in interactions ([Alvesson, 2011](#)). Based on the second approach, symbols are words, actions, or material phenomena standing for something else ([Alvesson, 2011](#)). Meanings are subjective and are interpreted based on the expectations beyond the literal meanings of objects ([Yanow, 2000](#); [Alvesson, 2011](#)).

The structure of culture is best described by the visual Created by Schein in 1985 ([Schein & Schein, 2016](#)) ([Figure 1](#)) who spoke about cultural layers. The studies built on Schein's work further developed the model. Sackman's Iceberg Model of Culture (1991) and Cameron and Quinn's Triangle of Culture (2011) ([Figure 2 & Figure 3](#)) divide cultural elements into visible and invisible. At the fundamental level, there are assumptions and beliefs, while the most visible layers are their manifestations—explicit behaviors and artifacts (physical or non-physical) ([Cameron & Quinn, 2011](#)). Assumptions can only be seen when they

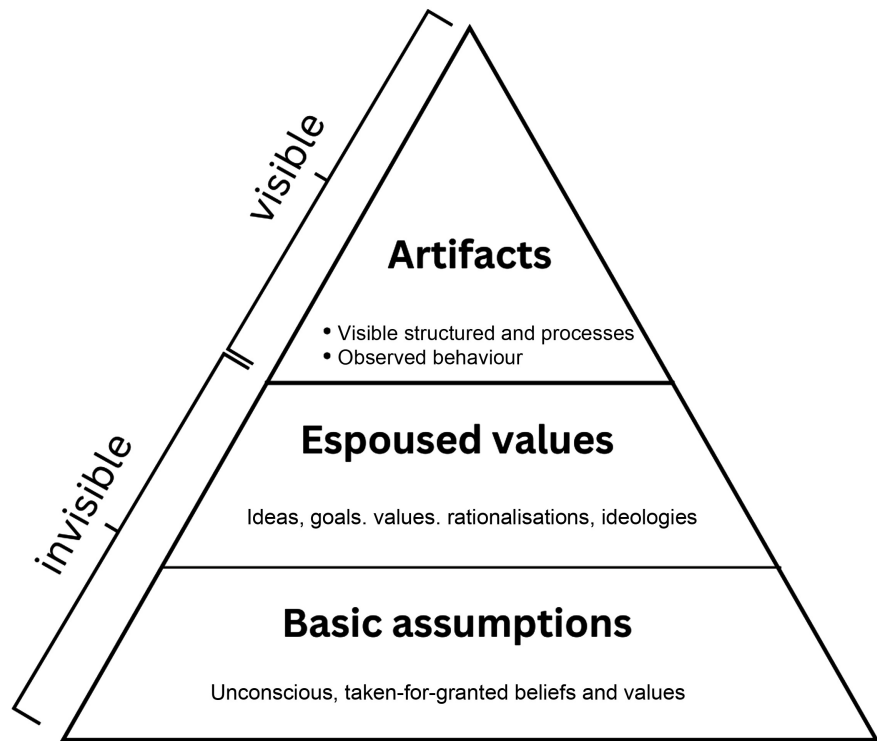


Figure 1. Edgar Schein’s Culture Triangle (1985).

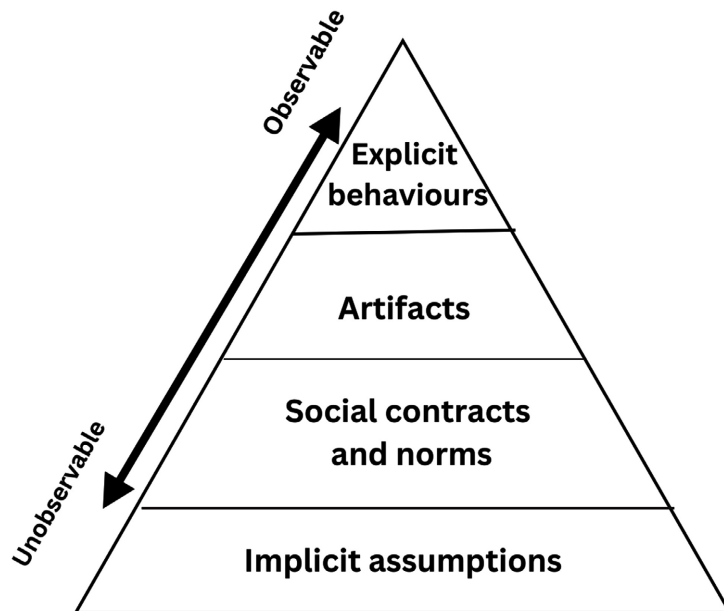


Figure 2. Cameron and Quinn’s (2011) Triangle of Culture.

are challenged by contradictory assumptions (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

Hofstede et al. (2010) present cultural manifestations—practices—as an “onion” with different levels of depth, as can be seen in Figure 4. Apart from symbols, they name heroes—people possessing highly valued features in a culture—and rituals—collective activities considered essential in a culture (Hofstede et al., 2010).

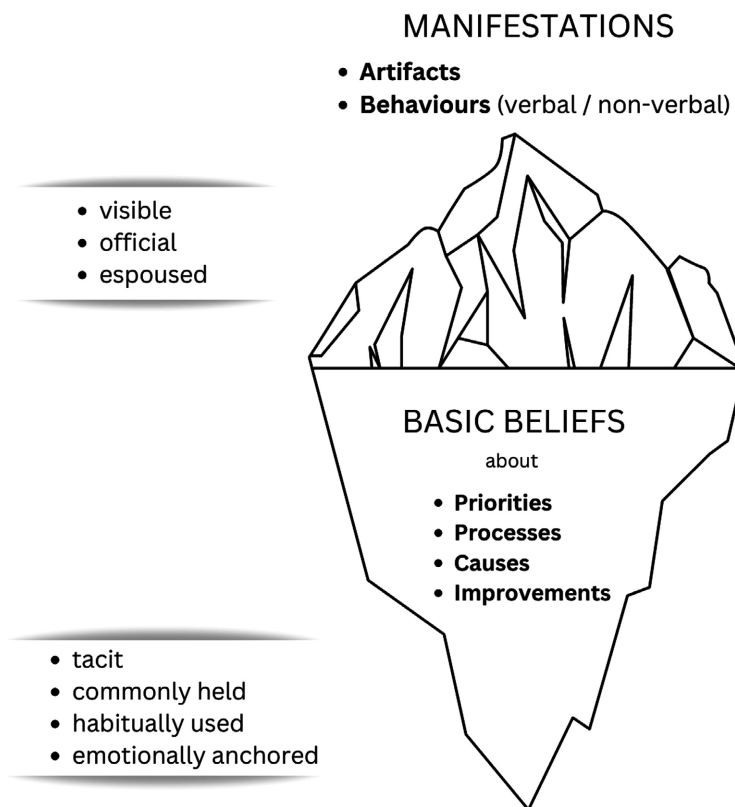


Figure 3. Sackman’s Iceberg Model of Culture (1991).

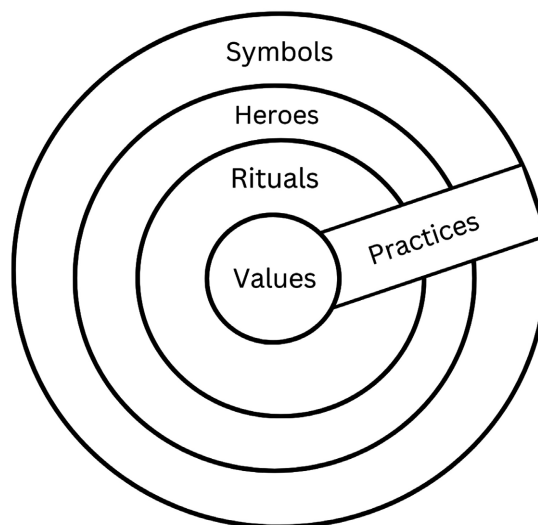


Figure 4. Cultural Manifestations at different levels of depth—Hofstede et al., (2010).

Values are the core of the culture because they determine the preferred situation and mark events as positive or negative (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Values are defined as “conceptions of the desirable that guide the way social actors select actions, evaluate people and events, and explain their actions and evaluations” (Schwartz, 1999). They are learned in the group and are expressed in

group norms, customs, laws, and practices (Schwartz & Sagie, 2000). According to Schwartz and Sagie (2000), individuals tend to adjust their personal values to fit in the group.

Cross-cultural value dimensions are devised primarily for organizational use by Hofstede (2010) and are widely utilized to evaluate cultural variability among companies across cultures (Figure 5). However, in recent years, this framework has been adapted for measuring individual values (Yoo et al., 2011). CVSCALE developed by Yoo et al. (2011) managed to overcome the limitations of the previous studies and successfully assess Hofstede's cultural dimensions at the individual level.

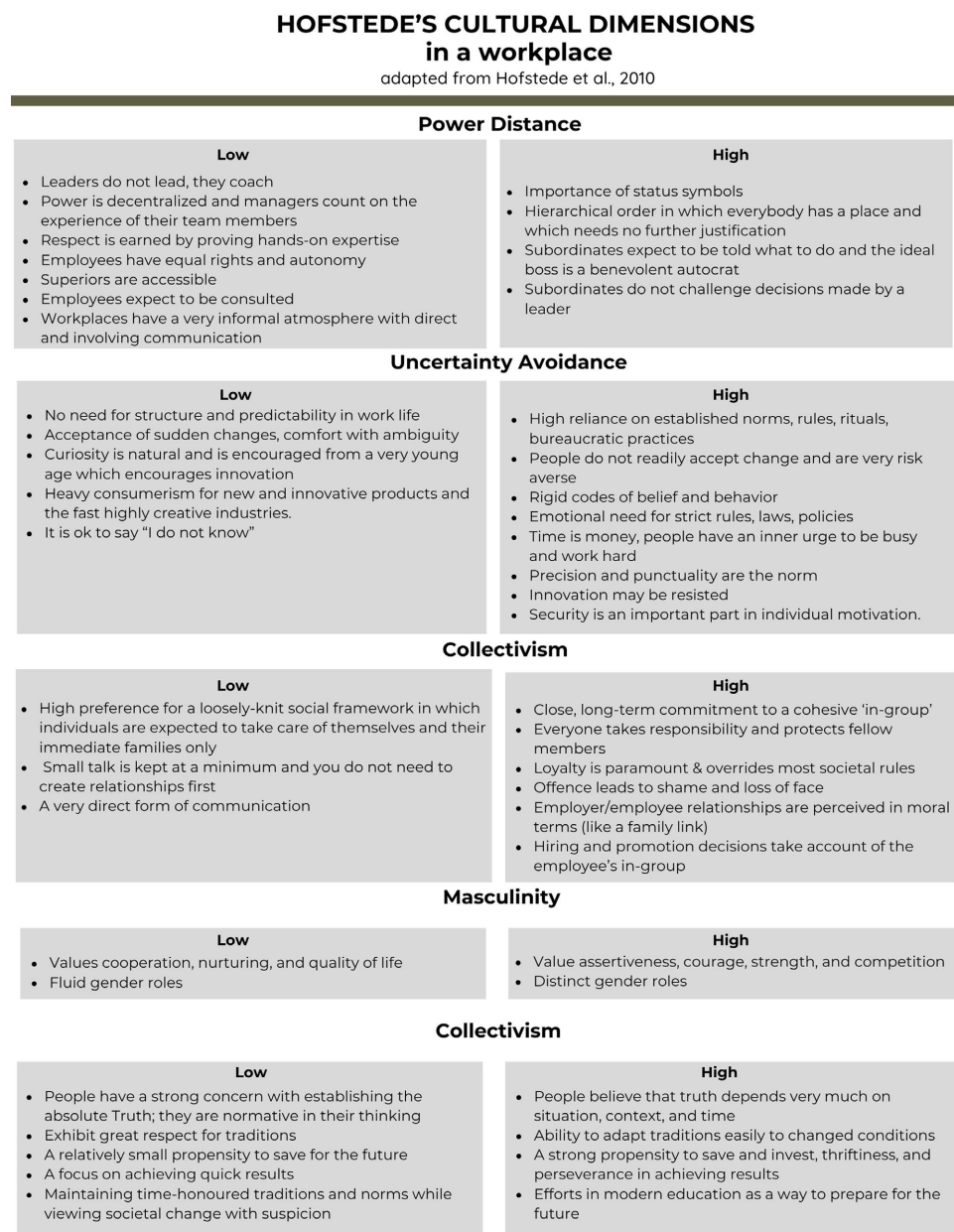


Figure 5. Cultural Dimensions in a Workplace (adapted from Hofstede et al., 2010).

2.2. Identities in a Workplace

The complex nature of identities and their formation is highlighted in a large volume of published studies (Breakwell, 2010; Guerraoui & Troadec, 2000; Chao & Moon, 2005). Identity Process Theory, for example, divides identity into two parts: content and value (Breakwell, 2010). A content dimension is personal and social identity traits making an individual unique, while the value dimension encompasses positive or negative values associated with content elements (Breakwell, 2010). In the social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1987) identities are divided into personal and social with the latter including cultural membership, gender, sexual orientation, disability, occupation, and age identities. Like Tajfel and Turner (1987), Guerraoui and Troadec (2000) argue that identity comprises three facets: personal (self-awareness and representation), social (role, age, profession), and cultural (shared values) (Guerraoui & Troadec, 2000). Identity expressions adapt to context, evolving with changes in the cultural environment.

This view is supported in multiple studies. According to the identity negotiation theory, identities are grouped into primary and situational (Ting-Toomey, 1999). They affect each other and individuals' everyday interactions (Ting-Toomey, 1999). While primary identities have consistent and constant effects on our lives, situational ones vary depending on the situation (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Caprar et al. (2015) argue that individuals representing several "latent" cultures have attributes of many cultural dimensions at the same time. In various situations, they create a "visible" culture by combining the suitable attributes (Caprar et al., 2015).

In literature, disagreements persist regarding the role of values in identity. Breakwell (2010) includes values as affective elements of identity, while Guerraoui and Troadec (2000) argue that shared values constitute its cultural element. In contrast, Hofstede and Hofstede (2001) assert that values are not integral to identities, contending that the latter are rooted in stereotypes and emotions tied to the outer layers of culture shared with group members (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001). In essence, individuals may share values but differ on superficial cultural elements (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001).

2.3. Leadership Styles

The definition of leadership is best summarized by Northouse (2015): "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). In literature, leadership is distinguished from management, its main function being dealing with movement, while the function of management is maintaining order and consistency in operations (Northouse, 2015). The similarities make these two concepts frequently used interchangeably since both include working with people and goal achievement, and those in charge can combine different functions (Simonet & Tett, 2012; Northouse, 2015).

Leadership is an evolving concept and the current business reality gave rise to new leadership styles like transformational, authentic, servant, distributed and charismatic, each of them fulfilling the need for certain leadership requirements

in the modern-day world (Subramanian & Banihashemi, 2024). However, one of the most well-known behavioral theories—White and Lippitt’s (1968)—still offers valuable guidance regarding the effects of the three leadership approaches on group dynamics and overall effectiveness. In today’s context where diversity and inclusion are valued, democratic (participative) style is the most suitable since leaders involve team members in decision making and welcome diverse viewpoints (Wang et al., 2022). This, as a result, increases follower motivation and team engagement (Northouse, 2015).

Conversely, authoritative and laissez-faire styles should be used with caution and based on the circumstances. Authoritative style in its pure form is stiffening for employees valuing autonomy and eager to express their opinions. This approach can suppress creativity and adaptability and lower motivation. It can be, however, used in situations where team members’ input is not required, and decisions must be made rapidly (Northouse, 2015). Laissez-faire, as the opposite of the authoritative style, provides freedom for followers to identify and resolve issues themselves. Nevertheless, it requires employees to be self-starters and being able to direct and regulate themselves because a leader exerts no effort to control the situation and to set standards. This can lead to confusion, ambiguity, and the lack of direction among the employees which lower team effectiveness (Biloa, 2023).

2.4. Diverse Workplaces and Cross-Cultural Leadership

In organizational leadership literature, the research focus has shifted from gender and racial equality issues (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Rubin, 1997) to diversity in a workplace (Wood et al., 2022; Fox-Kirk et al., 2020; Janssens & Cappellen, 2008). This change was prompted by the workforce becoming more mobile and international (Karjalainen, 2020; Roberson, 2019). Diversity is “any compositional differences among people within a work unit” (Roberson, 2019). Workplaces experience not only superficial diversity visible to others (age, race, gender), but also deep-level cultural diversity rooted in group-based differences, interpersonal attraction and group cohesion (Lambert & Bell, 2013).

Cultural diversity in a workplace displays both benefits and challenges (Stahl et al., 2010; Telyani et al., 2022). The information-processing approach, for example, argues that cultural diversity results in cognitive diversity since individuals in multicultural workplaces bring in their various backgrounds, networks, skills, and experiences (Jones et al., 2020; Velten & Lashley, 2017). This allows organizations to gain access to a variety of information sources, ideas, and perspectives fostering innovation, enhancing creativity, and resulting in process gains (Martin, 2002; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Stahl et al., 2010).

However, many researchers emphasize that cultural diversity can negatively affect group dynamics by impairing social integration and leading to conflicts (Trepte & Loy, 2017; Brewer & Yuki, 2007; Reimer et al., 2011; Sindic & Condor, 2014; Hornsey, 2008). The self-categorization theory suggests that there exists a

social comparison between in- and outgroup members leading to bias formation against “the others” and support toward the in-group (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). The similarity-attraction theory highlights the attraction to those people perceive as demographically or psychologically similar to themselves (Abbasi et al., 2023).

The way effective leadership deals with organizational diversity and makes workplaces inclusive is one of the main topics of research on leadership in the 21st century (Roberson, 2019). Cross-cultural competency including recognizing employees’ cultural differences, ability to align one’s management style to the followers’ needs is essential in multinational business environments (Caprar et al., 2015; Zander & Romani, 2004; Getha-Taylor et al., 2020; Henson, 2016). On the contrary, disregarding employees’ culture code can lead to lowered morale, the lack of team cohesion, and increased conflicts (Backmann et al., 2020).

The impact of culture on leadership and its effectiveness is widely examined in literature. On the one hand, leaders’ cultural values influence their choice of communication, decision-making, and conflict management styles (Gunkel et al., 2016; Bartel-Radic & Munch, 2023; Yukl, 2010). On the other hand, leadership does not exist in the vacuum but is embedded in the cultural context (Erez & Earley, 1993). Therefore, it is affected by national cultures and societal norms because leaders have to adhere to those (Yukl, 2010). Employees’ leadership perceptions also depend on their cultural identities, so each follower has different assumptions and expectations with regard to the “ideal” leadership (Yukl, 2010; Lee et al., 2014; Aycan et al., 2014). For instance, Dynamic Model of Leader-Follower Interaction (Figure 6) illustrates the impact of both cultural and non-cultural factors on leader-follower interactions (Aycan et al., 2014). Leaders and followers interact according to their cultural values, assumptions, and expectations along with non-cultural factors like organizational context, task characteristics, and individuals’ characteristics (Aycan et al., 2014).

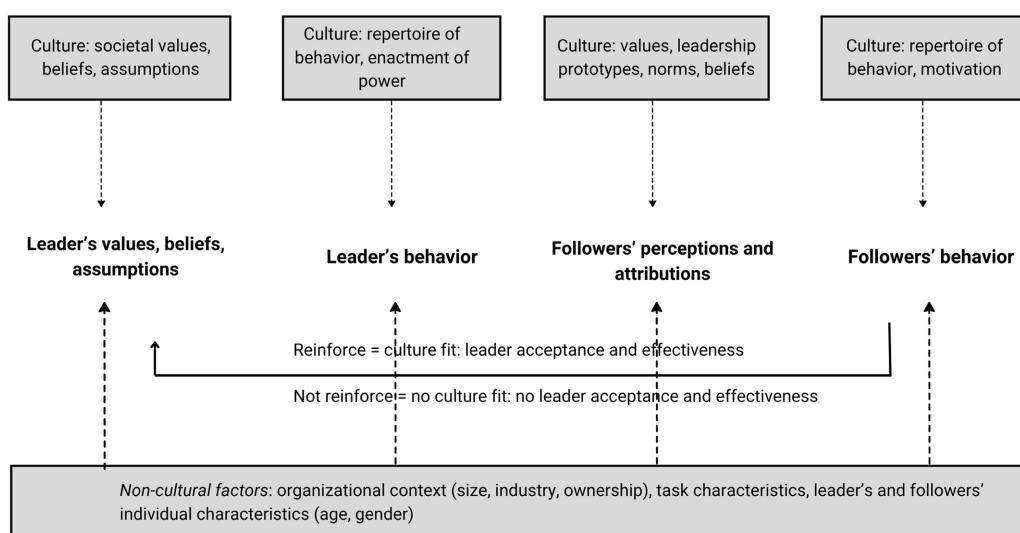


Figure 6. Dynamic model of leader-follower interaction (Aycan et al., 2014).

2.5. Leadership Research in Oman

The existing literature on leadership is extensive, the generalizability of much published research on this topic for the Middle East (ME) and Oman in particular is problematic (Abi-Raad, 2019; Ramdani et al., 2014; Weir & Hutchings, 2005). First of all, there is the lack of research on how Western leadership theories are adapted to the local environments (Dorfman & House, 2004). Another contributing factor is some cultural and political aspects complicating data collection in the region (Dorfman & House, 2004).

“Middle East” refers not only to the geographic location, but also the region’s culture that affects social structure and managerial styles (Gould, 2020; AlHashmi, 2017; Muna & Zennie, 2010). ME countries having low-context cultures with low-performance orientation where work-life balance, loyalty, belongingness and harmony are appreciated more than control (Moua, 2011). In such cultures, feedback and appraisal can be considered judgmental and unnecessary, while ambiguity and subtlety in communication are preferred (Javidan, 2004; Al-Badri, 2012). Just like daily life in the ME, organizational culture, workplace ethics, and policies are affected by Islamic values (Febriani, 2021). From Islamic perspective, leadership is a psychological agreement between a leader and followers according to which a leader must protect, guide, and treat each follower equally (Febriani, 2021; Eleswed, 2020; Al Asmi & Carn, 2018). However, leadership research in the ME highlights that this principle contradicts tribal relationships where kinship and interpersonal connections (*wasta*) play a crucial role in all aspects of life (Gould, 2020; Elbanna et al., 2020). While managers tend to prioritize the in-group with relationships being paternalistic and directive, it is the opposite with the out-group connections (non-kin members or guest workers) (Al-Azri, 2014; Common, 2011). Religion also brings past-orientation to the culture and work ethics with the future seen as uncertain and unchangeable, so planning and organizing are not prioritized (Al-Badri, 2012).

Although Oman is one of the GCC countries and shares many of the values, it also is unique from a geopolitical, historical, and socioeconomic perspective (Funsch, 2016; Mishra et al., 2014; AlHashmi, 2017). This has consequences for the organizational culture, managerial practices and relationships dynamics. According to AlHashmi (2017), the combination of religious education, relative wealth, and tribal ties results in a hierarchy governing society and organizations. Cultural and economic dualism as a distinct feature of Omani developing society is noted by several authors (AlHashmi, 2017; Common, 2011). This means that keeping traditions goes along with Western corporate culture adoption, while formal merit-based systems are combined with social criteria for recruitment and promotion (AlHashmi, 2017; Common, 2011).

Organizational management research in Oman is scarce. Studies on leadership style preferences in Oman take a variety of approaches. Some studies lack correlation to respondents’ demographics or cultural backgrounds (Mishra et al., 2014), some investigated correlations of age and tenure (Chaudhry et al., 2019), others

were conducted among Omani citizens without including foreign workers (Al-Kindi & Bailie, 2015; Mujtaba et al., 2010). Al-Muqarshi (2022) and Al-Muqarshi et al. (2021) highlights the relationship between cultural diversity in Oman's working environment in higher education and issues in creating collective identity as opposed to separate social identities undermining group work dynamics.

Overall, the literature on leadership, values and identities is comprehensive including numerous theories and frameworks. However, little effort has been made to investigate the interplay between various factors in a multicultural workplace and its effect on employees' perception of various leadership styles. This topic in the HE industry and the GCC countries particularly remains understudied.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Design

A sequential explanatory mixed method approach was employed in this study. The data collection and analysis were conducted in two stages. First, hypotheses that emerged from the theories mentioned below were tested statistically via quantitative research. Then, qualitative research deepened the understanding of the findings and expanded them. A mixed method approach was selected to increase the breadth and depth of exploration and enhance result validation (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021; Molina-Azorin et al., 2017). It also allows to mitigate the weaknesses of each method utilized separately (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021).

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Survey

Stage 1 of the study adopted positivist philosophy which is theory-driven and focusing on measurable facts. The deductive quantitative approach helped develop hypotheses based on existing theories of Hofstede (cultural dimensions) and Lewin (leadership types) and test them. It involved investigating correlations between variables (employees' cultural values and leadership preferences).

A survey—"a structured method of asking the same questions in the same order, to different respondents, and creating a database of answers for analysis" (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015) was used to collect the data. It was selected for its ability to investigate perceptions of a large sample with quantification.

The survey contained 12 demographic questions, 15 questions on cultural values and 9 questions on leadership style preferences. A 7-point Likert scale was used in the items except for the demographics part. The questions about cultural values were based on Hofstede's research and GLOBE study (Hofstede et al., 2010; House, 2004). Nevertheless, because the current study explored cultural values from a personal (not national) perspective, CVSCALE instrument developed by Yoo et al. (2011) was utilized with the authors' permission. Leadership style preference questions were adapted from Lewin's theory (1939).

The survey was translated into Arabic to aid item comprehension for the participants whose English proficiency is insufficient. It was further proofread and

piloted, and, based on the feedback, modified to improve its structure, questions wording, and formatting.

The survey was distributed to 262 employees of the center via email that included the link to online Microsoft Forms survey. The self-administered mode of delivery was chosen because it is less time-consuming than researcher-administered and does not subject the respondents to researcher bias. Its limitations (possibly missing data and misinterpretation of the questions) were reduced by the following stage (interviews) that clarified the inconsistencies. 153 subjects completed and returned the survey with 52% response rate.

3.2.2. Interviews

The aims of Stage 2 were two-fold. On the one hand, it aimed to explore the deeper meanings and causality of the survey findings and clarify unexpected results. On the other hand, the themes that emerged during the first research stage were further analyzed and correlated with theories of Tajfel and Turner (1987) and Guerraoui and Troadec (2000). The point of interest of this stage was employees' experiencing different social realities, as a result of their different identities and values, affecting their perception and preference of leadership styles. Therefore, since reality is viewed as socially constructed and subjective, epistemologically, an interpretivist direction was taken. An interpretivist approach allowed this research to consider the complexity of reality of a multicultural workplace where a variety of meanings is created.

Thematic format semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect the data and clarify the survey findings. They encouraged participants' freedom to express their perspectives in their own natural language. After literature review and based on survey answers, interview questions were written in line with the research questions. The sense of direction was established by the interview protocol describing the procedure, providing a script for opening and closing remarks and questions arranged topic-wise.

Prior to the interviews, participants were contacted via email to get them acquainted with the interview protocol and consent form. 28 interviews were conducted face-to face and online, recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' permission.

3.3. Participants

The study was conducted in a preparatory center in a governmental university in the Sultanate of Oman. For the first part of the study (survey), 262 employees of the center were selected by convenience sampling due to geographical and time limitations. 153 subjects completed and returned the survey with 52% response rate.

Survey respondents could opt for participation in the following stage (interviews). Non-probability stratified sampling was done by selecting the participants from those individuals who took part in the survey and signed up for the interview. To ensure the diversity of opinions, 28 participants chosen were of various

backgrounds.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Surveys

Prior to the analysis, the data was cleaned and coded. IBM SPSS Software was used to conduct statistical analysis. Pearson correlation analysis explored the relationships between the independent (employees' cultural values) and dependent variables (employees' leadership style preferences). T-test was performed to evaluate the significance of mean differences between leadership preferences gender-wise. Cronbach's alpha as a reliability measure ensured the consistency of responses across various items.

3.4.2. Interviews

Since the data was complex, thematic analysis—a method involving the identification and interpretation of themes in a data set—was used to analyze it (Saunders et al., 2022). The data from transcribed interviews was coded, i.e. each data unit in the scripts was labeled with a short word or a phrase based on the common meanings identified. Subsequently, patterns and relationships were determined in the list of codes thus grouping them into themes—broad categories of related codes indicating ideas relevant to research questions. After the initial theme list was refined, thematic mapping helped to identify the relationships between the themes, sub-themes and overlapping themes, their organizing concepts and salient elements. The analysis allowed to decode specific meanings interviewees put into their answers.

4. Results

4.1. Survey

With Cronbach's Alpha being 0.895, it can be confidently assessed that the reliability of the collected data is high. It is worth noting that the accepted threshold is 0.7 to 0.8. This assessment strengthens the validity of our survey findings and underscores the trustworthiness of the insights derived from respondents' feedback.

1) *Demographic characteristics, identities, and leadership preferences*

a) Gender

The analysis of leadership style variables' means and the t-test show a significant difference between males and females in their preference of authoritarian style ($p = 0.005$). This can be seen in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Leadership style preferences (means) gender-wise.

	Leadership style preferences (mean)		
	Democratic	Laissez-faire	Authoritarian
male	21.4	17.8	15
female	21.1	18.6	13

b) Origin

Table 2 demonstrates that the mean (out of 28) of leadership style variables differs among the respondent groups based on the regions of origin. Five distinct regions were selected from the data set: Oman, the GCC countries, English speaking Western countries (West), South Asia, and Eastern Europe.

In general, the representatives of South Asian countries prefer a more authoritarian leadership style than other participants. Democratic style preferences mean is similar across the regions with the smallest mean in South Asia.

Table 2. Leadership style preferences (means) gender-wise.

	Leadership style preferences (mean)		
	Democratic	Laissez-faire	Authoritarian
Oman	21.2	18.4	15.4
GCC	20.6	17.8	15.2
West ^a	21.5	19.8	12
South Asia	12.8	16.7	20.5
Eastern Europe	22	19.2	13.55

a. English speaking Western countries.

2) *The relationship between cultural values and leadership preferences*

The correlation between the variables was examined using the Pearson correlation (r) and is shown in **Table 3**. The correlation between power distance (PD), masculinity (MSC) and leadership style preferences are distributed in line with the findings of Hofstede et al. (2010). Laissez-faire style did not display significant correlation with any cultural values. PD is negatively correlated with Laissez-faire style, while it has a stronger correlation with Authoritarian (AU) than with Democratic (D) style. MSC has the strongest correlation to AU and the lowest to Laissez-faire. It can be explained by the fact that high PD and MSC lead to employees' drop in desire to participate in decision-making which is done mainly without their consent (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Table 3. Leadership style preferences correlations (r) with cultural values.

	Leadership style preferences		
	Democratic	Laissez-faire	Authoritarian
Power distance	0.08	-0.17	0.28
Uncertainty avoidance	0.45	0.09	0.30
Collectivism	0.24	0.09i	0.12
Masculinity	0.17	0.01	0.44
Long-term orientaion	0.52	0.20	0.14

Democratic leadership style preference is moderately correlated to uncertainty

avoidance (UnC) and long-term orientation (LT) values. Interestingly, UnC value has a correlation with both democratic and authoritarian leadership styles. This can be explained by the fact that different people seek certainty whether through the actions of a group or a leader.

A very interesting finding is the differences in region-wise correlations seen in **Table 4** and **Table 5**.

Table 4. Democratic leadership style preferences correlations (r) with cultural values region-wise.

	Regions				
	Oman	GCC	West	South Asia	Eastern Europe
Power distance	0.081	0.295	-0.257	0.278	0.492
Uncertainty avoidance	0.459	0.636	0.109	0.848	-0.229
Collectivism	0.322	0.395	-0.321	0.626	0.266
Masculinity	0.220	0.475	-0.256	0.400	-0.026
Long-term orientation	0.556	0.20	0.291	0.783	0.129

Table 5. Authoritarian leadership style preferences correlations (r) with cultural values region-wise.

	Regions				
	Oman	GCC	West	South Asia	Eastern Europe
Power distance	0.345	0.111	0.030	0.509	0.427
Uncertainty avoidance	0.530	0.491	0.035	0.139	0.095
Collectivism	0.150	0.281	-0.070	-0.155	0.788
Masculinity	0.272	0.428	0.410	0.403	-0.217
Long-term orientation	0.109	0.403	0.121	-0.037	0.017

For participants from Oman, democratic style is moderately correlated with UnC and collectivism (Col) and highly correlated to LT. Authoritarian style shows moderate correlation with PD and moderate one with UnC. Compared to Oman, the GCC countries demonstrate stronger correlation D-UnC, D-Col, D-Masc, and D-LT as well as Au-LT and Au-Masc. The most striking difference between Oman and English-speaking Western countries is that in the latter there was a negative correlation between democratic leadership style and PD, Col, and Masc. There is also a moderate correlation Au-Masc. Regarding South Asian countries, a strong correlation D-UnC, D-Col, D-LT, Au-Col is evident.

Interestingly, unlike the previous research saying that UnC is negatively correlated with democratic style (House, 2004), a moderate to strong correlation is seen in responses of representatives from the GCC, South Asia, and Oman. PD that is previously said to be negatively correlated with participative leadership, is only negatively correlated in the English-speaking Western countries.

There are differences in authoritarian style correlations with cultural values across the regions. It is strongly correlated with collectivism in Eastern European countries, while in English-speaking Western countries and South Asia they are negatively correlated. PD correlated moderately in Oman, South Asia, and Eastern European countries, uncertainty avoidance in Oman and the GCC countries, LT in Arab countries. Masculinity correlated with authoritarian style in Western, South Asian, GCC countries, while in Eastern European countries it was a negative correlation.

To summarise, the survey results demonstrated that respondents' leadership style preferences differed depending on their gender, the region of origin, and cultural values.

4.2. Interviews

How are employees' leadership styles perceptions affected by their values?

With regard to this research question, five themes emerged:

1) *Respect*

The majority of respondents expressed their preference for a manager who possesses a "human part". Respect is seen in treating employees not as a faceless collective entity, but as a group of distinct individuals having various backgrounds, needs and issues. Recognizing followers' contributions is another sign of respect. On the other hand, managers' extreme fixation on rules and regulations and task-orientation as opposed to people orientation are viewed as diminishing individuals' value in an organization. Showing respect is crucial for mitigating the differences arising in a multicultural space. According to interviewees, it includes making team members heard even if their perspectives differ.

This can be illustrated by what Interviewee #10 said:

"We need to always think outside the box. Yes, we understand the rules, we respect the rules, we apply the rules, but when it comes to exceptional situations, we'd always think differently and we'd always find a way to help."

Respect for elders in cultures like GCC countries and Asia is shown through absolute agreement with the management. It cannot be criticized even indirectly in the same way one cannot disagree with the elders.

2) *Fairness and equality*

Some respondents felt it is unfair to base workplace relationships on anything but competencies and merits. Another side of it is the level of power distance between managers and subordinates. While some respondents needed leaders to be more approachable and have more informal relationships, others felt comfortable with them being distant.

Although some interviewees admitted they do not need to be included in decision-making as long it does not affect them directly, many would like to have more say in the matters directly affecting their classroom. Many participants talked about effective decision-making as non-prescriptive and balanced. Because teachers and course coordinators dealing with day-to-day matters know the situation in a classroom better, 90% of the decisions should go through them.

3) *Trust*

Most respondents saw the autonomy to exercise their professional choices in a classroom as the trust managers have in them as professionals. Conversely, the majority mentioned micromanaging as something to be avoided for a good leader as it shows distrust in subordinates.

Other forms of trust mentioned—inclusion in decision-making and transparency—are connected to communication and being “in the loop”. Although most employees were satisfied with “being trusted to do a good job” without “anyone watching over”, others saw it as “indifference” of the management.

4) *Time orientation*

There was a clear difference in opinions between those who value productivity and efficient time use and those preferring a more laid-back attitude to time. What the first ones view as “time-stretching” and waste, the latter see as work-life balance. This understanding of how a good leader should spend time translated into the demands towards managers to keep the balance between task and people orientation. For example, while some employees said that they prefer managers to be formal, others would like them to be “warmer”, “more flexible” and respect work-life balance.

Respondents who said they did not like time wasting also expressed frustration when there is no proper planning and clarity. It was mentioned by several interviewees, like Interviewee #7, that “*People often feel stressed when things deviate from their plan. That’s why it’s important to understand the importance of flexibility. Changes happen randomly [here], so you shouldn’t be prescriptive—it doesn’t match this cultural space*”.

5) *Uncertainty avoidance*

Many participants mentioned the increased feeling of uncertainty in employees as a drawback of the leadership. Some participants said they appreciate transparency and clear communication with managers. While many do not mind “going with the flow” and adapt to ambiguity, some find it frustrating, like Interviewee #2: “*I don’t like getting information often after the fact, not knowing who’s making decisions, who’s in charge of what. I prefer clear communication, not wondering what’s going on, not getting the news from colleagues*”.

How are employees’ perceptions of leadership styles related to their identities?

One of the findings is that most participants prefer a participative leadership style. However, those holding managerial positions confessed it might not be always possible to embody these principles when one is under pressure. Top-down

decisions are faster, easier, and create less workload for leaders, although consulting with teams provides different ideas and perspectives. Interviewee #11 used to oversee a course and shared her viewpoint: *“I was top-down because I was very anxious, and I don’t think I trusted teachers. Because you are so anxious, you find trusting teachers difficult.”*

While many teachers accept the top-down decision-making regarding administrative matters, when it comes teaching and learning, *“it should be the top consideration”*. It was also noted that such decisions should not be made without considering teachers and students.

Participants’ cultural identities were another factor as some of them admitted that a certain leadership style is common whether in their country of origin or in their family. Several participants mentioned their religious practices that, as they said, shape their attitude towards various leadership styles. Overall, although they prefer participative style, they acknowledge that their religion makes them more tolerant to authoritarian style.

Apart from the differences in cultural identities and values, participants named personality differences that make working in each team unique. Managers create a “mini-culture” in each course, unit, or committee and the extent to which team members feel comfortable sharing their opinions and the degree to which their concerns are addressed.

Another finding is that participants perceived leadership styles and managerial practices through their previous experiences in other workplaces. If a participant recollected about a “more participative” environment in other workplaces, they saw the current experiences as “more restrictive”. On the contrary, when they spoke about “toxic” and “extremely authoritative” cultures in previous jobs, the current workplace was rated as “democratic” and “pleasant”.

Not only did interviewees talk about their former workplaces, but also about the Centre in the past. Those participants who had worked more than 8 years in the Centre, compared the current workplace culture to the one before the merger with another department eight years ago. Most of them, like Interviewee #9, noted that the comparison is not fair because there were fewer staff members, established practices, and more cordial and personal relationships in the Centre.

5. Discussion

The survey and interviews’ results show that leadership styles’ perceptions and preferences differ among employees. The majority of participants preferred participative style. However, all participants appreciated the combination of different management styles in various ratios and balance of task- and people orientation. Their choices relied on their understanding and definitions of professionalism, appreciation, respect, inclusion, time, and the extent they valued these concepts in the workplace.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the complexity and multilayered nature of leadership style preferences among the employees of the center under study

(Figure 7). On the macrolevel, organizational culture that is affected by the industry features, cultural, political, economic and social factors, dictates requirements for the leadership and suggests the lens through which employees view leadership. For example, in the organization under the current study, hierarchy, diversity, and ambiguity as characteristics of the workplace culture make a mixture of the three management styles with predominance of participative style preferred. On the microlevel, individuals' various personalities, experiences, and cultural differences impact the way they define the concepts of respect, time, professionalism, and appreciation. They accordingly perceive leadership styles and prefer communication, decision-making, motivation, and conflict-resolution techniques.

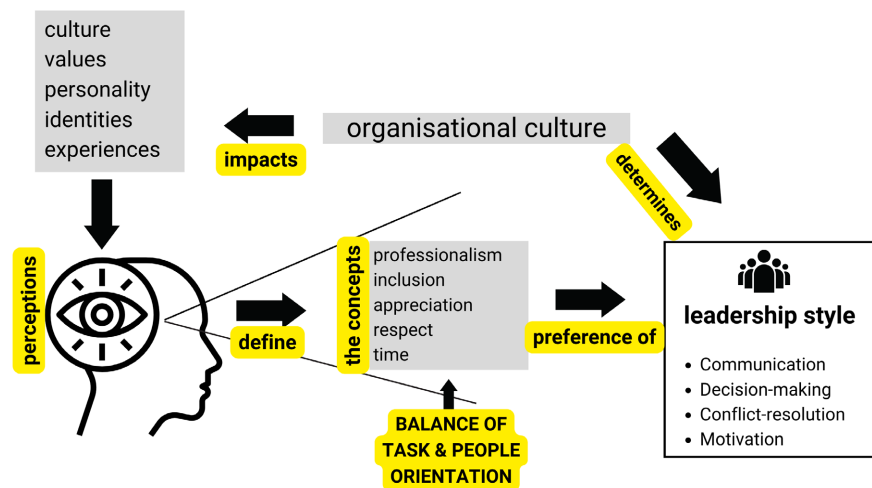


Figure 7. The factors affecting employees' perceptions and preferences of leadership styles (own).

1) *Employees' values and leadership style preferences*

The findings demonstrate that employees' values can impact not only their leadership style preferences and the preferred ratio of task- and people orientation in management. The majority of the participants from low-context cultures preferred more task-oriented managers with exceptional time management, planning, and explicit communication skills. The representatives from high-context cultures, on the contrary, needed more "human touch", flexibility, and common sense without exclusively relying on the rules (Moua, 2011). It is worth mentioning that those participants that needed more task-orientation from managers ignored their interpersonal skills (Yukl, 2010). On the contrary, these skills demonstrate that a manager does not care about task achievement more than about people (Yukl, 2010). This study findings support the idea that managers' relationships-oriented behaviors enable trust, respect, and ease communication in an environment that is often fragmented and ambiguous and minimize the differences between employees in a multicultural space. Task orientation serves as structure initiation in a situation where direction and clear communication of roles and responsibilities are needed, whereas people orientation provides "consideration"

including support, appreciation, caring about employees' welfare (Taberner et al., 2009; Henkel et al., 2019).

Both survey and interview results showed the following relationships between cultural values and leadership preferences. Collectivism as a feature of high-context societies is negatively correlated with democratic leadership style preference among employees from Western English-speaking countries. The opposite is observed among the participants from South Asian and GCC countries: a moderate to strong correlation between these variables was seen. Uncertainty avoidance, interestingly, demonstrated moderate positive correlation with both democratic and authoritarian leadership styles preferences. This can be explained by the differences in ambiguity coping strategies the participants selected. Some preferred being flexible and "going with the flow", waiting to see what happens next, exerting effort to collect opinions and viewpoints, while others used detailed and extensive planning and liked the fast and authoritative decisions.

There were some results that did not match the previous research. Uncertainty avoidance value among the participants from the GCC countries and SA correlated positively with participative leadership style. This is inconsistent with House (2004) who argued that uncertainty avoidance is negatively correlated with democratic style. The finding is further explained by the qualitative results saying that in Oman, for instance, there is a tradition of participative and consultative decision-making (Al-Farsi, 2013). Another unexpected result is that power distance that is previously said (House, 2004) to be negatively correlated with participative leadership, is only negatively correlated among the participants from the English-speaking Western countries based on the results. This could be explained by the different versions of participative leadership existing in various countries. Aldulaimi (2019), for example, argues that it is impossible to completely transfer a Western classification of the management styles to the Arab countries due to the distinct features of these cultures. Therefore, in countries like Oman, there is a unique combination of authoritarian, participative, and consultative leadership styles (Aldulaimi, 2019). This is in line with the interview results: although none of the participants said they prefer authoritarian leadership style, when their power distance score was low, they placed significantly higher importance on participation in decision-making on different levels and expressed more frustration when some completely top-down decision came from the higher management. While participants with a high-power distance score preferred a democratic style, they were more capable of accepting authoritarian decisions.

2) *Employees' identities and leadership style preferences*

The factors mentioned above (Figure 7) impact employees' perceptions through the layers of identities each employee holds since identities shape individuals' perceptions and sense-making (Alvesson, 2011). Organizational identity is formed when employees reflect on the workplace culture and mirror the image of other employees (Lin, 2004). It serves as an interpretive lens and influences the way employees evaluate events within the organization and the applicability of

certain managerial styles (Lin, 2004). Leadership preferences can be affected by social identities, specifically the cognitive processes linked to inter-group relations (Hogg, 2001). Cultural identities as a form of social identities equally impact individuals' thinking patterns, behaviors, and affective processes (Gyamfi & Lee, 2023). In the case of multiculturalism of a person, there are various ways in which different cultural identities can interact thus affecting their perceptions.

Employees' multifaceted identities play a crucial role in how they view effective leadership with every layer of their identity being shaped by various factors (Figure 8). Individuals' demographics, personalities, experiences, and expectations form a personal identity with personal values as the basis. Even if employees have the same values, their behavior and reaction to the same circumstances can be different (Hofstede et al., 2010). Belonging to different groups at work and outside creates various social, cultural and subcultural identities. Each group has its culture (values, assumptions, beliefs) that affects its members' behaviors and attitudes (Khan & Law, 2018). By being a member of these groups, a person inevitably learns their culture (Khan & Law, 2018; Albert et al., 2000). However, person-environment fit (ranging from person-supervisor to person-organization fit) determines the level of individuals' congruence with the group, i.e. the match between employees' and group's values (Ahmad, 2022).

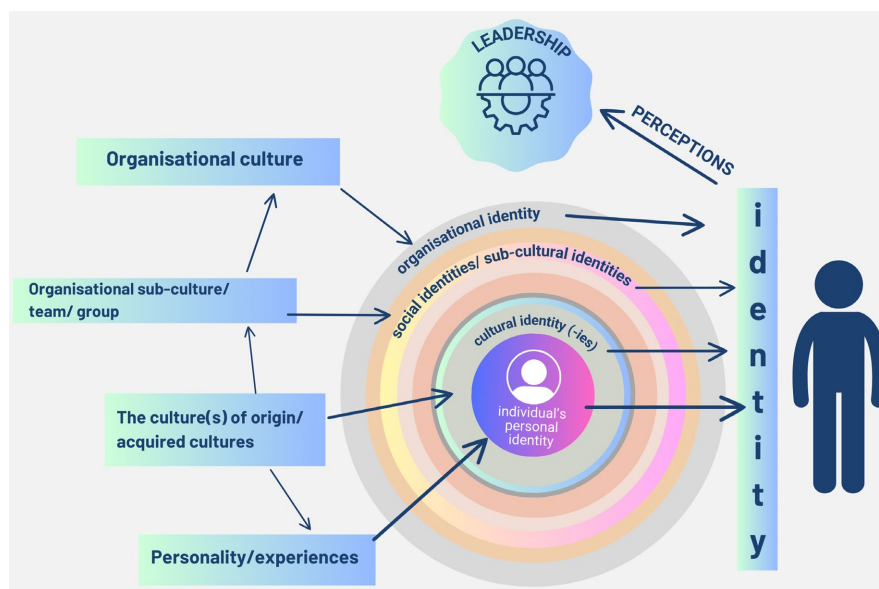


Figure 8. The link of employees' identities to their perceptions and preferences of leadership styles (own).

This can be seen in the results. Participants acknowledged the differences in their experiences with managers in different teams and units affected the way they viewed certain managerial styles. It was not only the manager themselves but also the team that co-created this “mini-culture” that revealed the need for a certain style in various situations.

When it comes to leadership style preferences region-wise, the participants

from South Asia demonstrated more inclination towards authoritarian style than those from the GCC, English-speaking Western or Eastern European countries. This does not match the previous research stating that the GCC scores lowest in participative (democratic) leadership (House, 2004). In fact, Oman's preference for democratic leadership style matches Al-Farsi (2013) findings about democratization in Oman.

Another important finding is that employees' perceptions of managers' style and their preference of communication, decision-making, and motivation were formed under the influence of their personal, cultural, social, and organizational identities. When it comes to organizational culture, not only is it found to impact these perceptions, but also to determine a leadership style appropriate in it. This means that employees do not prefer a certain leadership style in a vacuum, but in the context of a given organization its organizational culture characteristics.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Cultural diversity as a feature of the present-day workforce presents both benefits and challenges for management. Dealing with these challenges and harnessing the potential of diverse teams are tasks of a modern leader. The new organizational values that have emerged worldwide, especially after the COVID pandemic, include efficient, transparent and clear communication, employee welfare and psychological safety, flexibility and agility in a rapidly changing environment cannot be fostered without understanding existing cultural gaps and bridging them (Schotter et al., 2017).

High degree of differentiation in leadership preferences presents a unique managerial challenge. Dealing with a heterogeneous team can be both rewarding and demanding. Therefore, the following recommendations for management and for HR are derived from the data analysis.

1) *For managers*

It is essential for managers to be culturally aware and emotionally intelligent. Cross-cultural awareness increases sensitivity to difference, decreases ignorance and prejudice (Mullins & Christy, 2010; Brett et al., 2006). This is important for managers since recognising differences in attitudes and behaviors between individuals and groups is the essence of managing people. Emotional intelligence and ability to take another person's perspective are closely related to cultural awareness (Galinsky et al., 2015; Adler & Gundersen, 2008). They help reduce stereotyping and solve the three problems related to diversity in organizations: mistrust, miscommunication, and not being able to agree.

Managers need flexibility and openness to employees' different perspectives on communication preferences, decision-making norms, and concepts such as respect and time. For instance, team members might have varying attitudes towards hierarchy. Employees from egalitarian cultures prefer a flatter hierarchy, more approachable managers, and participation in decision-making as opposed to those from hierarchical cultures (Brannen, 2020). Another difference is between

individuals from high and low-context cultures. Those from the high context cultures prefer indirect communication, with a lot “unsaid”, not going directly to the problem, taking time to make decisions (Jones et al., 2020). They also choose to establish relationships at work and trust only those colleagues they can relate to.

As literature suggests, in the situation of high diversity, distributed and situational leadership is preferred (Lizier et al., 2022; Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017; Gosling et al., 2009). It is a flexible framework where leaders adjust their approach to the team’s or individual member’s needs. It requires, however, agreement on its definitions, aims, goals, and processes among leaders and employees exhibiting the balance between hierarchy, clarity, and trust.

The theme of dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty in leadership has become increasingly investigated, especially after the COVID pandemic. Most scholars argue that adaptive capacity—ability to evaluate the context and learn from the situation—is the key to successful leadership (Jain & Kodayya, 2023; Johansen, 2017; Torres et al., 2015). Flexibility and agility are found crucial in ambiguity when frequent revisions of plans are necessary. Adaptive leadership is characterized by self-correction and learning, possessing empathy, and finding win-win solutions. Embracing discomfort of the unknown, resisting oversimplification, letting go of perfectionism are equally important in tackling sudden and unexpected changes.

1) *For HR*

Based on the results analysis, several suggestions can be made for HR to enhance organizational effectiveness and performance as well as employee satisfaction, retention, and productivity. Organizations can use the creative power of diversity by the “integrate and learn” approach discussed in the literature (Ehsan, 2021).

a) Policies and practices

Policies and practices are important for diverse workplaces to reduce discrimination and bias, boost employee morale and productivity, and provide equal opportunities for all employees (Olabiyi, 2024). These include anti-discrimination policies, training programs promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity, performance and reward management. They can promote inclusivity, enhance communication and process transparency, facilitate team building, implement conflict-resolution mechanisms (Minghua, 2022).

b) Training

Policies and practices are communicated through training programs where necessary skills and competencies are built. Starting from senior management, training programs should be implemented to promote diversity-friendly managerial practices, increase inclusion, and minimize stereotyping attitudes (Bhatti et al., 2019; Minghua, 2022). They also standardize practices and organizational perceptions, which is necessary in ambiguity and uncertainty. However, traditional training processes might not be suitable for a multicultural workforce as employees can differ greatly in their needs and preferred training methods. For this

reason, a thorough needs assessment and analysis should be conducted prior to training design.

7. Limitations and Further Research

Despite the strengths and contributions provided by this study, it has some limitations. The findings can be only generalized to some extent. Firstly, as it was limited to a support center in a university, the sample size was small. Secondly, it was conducted in a governmental institution which is certainly different from the private sector in terms of working environment and processes. Nevertheless, because these limitations were considered and mixed methods were used for data collection and analysis, the findings can be generalized within other governmental HE institutions in Oman and other GCC countries with similar cultural values.

Further research can focus on Oman's private sector since employees' perceptions and preferences of leadership styles can be different from those working in a strict hierarchical governmental system. Another potential research direction is investigating leadership preferences of employees of other sectors that can be more homogeneous than HE.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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