Cultural Value Orientations and Leadership Preferences among European University Students: A Cross-National Empirical Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines how cultural value orientations shape leadership preferences among university students across Europe, drawing on a large-scale, multi-country dataset collected over five consecutive academic years. Grounded in cross-cultural management and leadership theory, the research investigates the extent to which cultural norms, societal values, and individual characteristics influence perceptions of effective leadership styles, ethical responsibility, and authority relations. Data were collected using validated psychometric scales and cross-cultural survey instruments and analyzed through hierarchical linear modeling to account for individual- and country-level variation. The results indicate that students from collectivist cultural contexts demonstrate stronger preferences for participative, transformational, and ethically oriented leadership styles, whereas respondents from more individualistic or high uncertainty-avoidance environments tend to favor transactional, performance-driven, and competitive leadership approaches. Additional analyses reveal significant moderating effects of gender, field of study, and socioeconomic background, underscoring the multidimensional nature of leadership perception formation. By providing robust empirical evidence on the cultural embeddedness of leadership preferences, this study contributes to the cross-cultural leadership literature and highlights the importance of culturally responsive leadership education. The findings offer practical implications for leadership development programs, curriculum design, and institutional governance within increasingly internationalized higher education systems.

Keywords: Cross-cultural leadership, Cultural value orientations, Leadership preferences, Higher education students, Comparative European studies, Transformational leadership, Leadership development

Introduction

In contemporary literature in leadership and organizational behaviour, the intricate relationship between cultural context and managerial effectiveness is emphasized since leadership is no longer considered in a vacuum with regard to its socio-cultural bases of operation. The values and leadership expectations of future managers depends completely on the cultural and educational context they are rooted in" (Čater, Lang, & Szabo, p.13) In doing so this supports the argument that leadership paradigms are culturally bound rather than universally generic. Keating, Martin & Szabo (2002) also claim that "the perceptions of societal culture between students and practicing managers are quite different, and this may lead to variances in leadership socialization, and expectation formation. This difference underscores the importance of looking at both curricula training and learning from experience in terms of the development of leadership capabilities (Sangwa, 2025; Westerman et al., 2025).

Empirical studies support the idea, that not only value orientations, but also preferred leadership styles vary across cultures. Cultural and Leadership Similarities and Divergences in Southern European Context (Krebs, 2025; Sagivet al., 2022) The cultural and leadership similarities and differences within the context of Southern Europe highlight the subtlety involved in examining cross-cultural norms with managerial behavior (Nikandrou etal., 2003; Kozo et al., 2024) which indicates that one leadership style for all regional needs is naturally deficient. Likewise, Vivian Tang, Yin, and Nelson (2010) provide evidence that "emotional intelligence has a differential impact on leadership practices across cultures, as specific competencies may be more pervasive in some cultural settings than in others," thereby integrating the affective aspect as an important moderator of leadership effectiveness (Mihăilă et al., 2025; Belibas et al., 2024).

The ethical and societal implications of leadership further complicate the landscape. Martin, Resick, Keating, and Dickson (2009) and Soare et al., (2025) argue that "ethical leadership is perceived and enacted differently across German and U.S. contexts, reflecting culturally bound interpretations of moral behavior in organizational hierarchies." Complementarily, Akanji et al. (2020) and Yeganeth (2025) posit that "organizational culture significantly modulates leadership style within higher education institutions, suggesting that institutional values may either constrain or facilitate leadership adaptability." The emergent consensus in extant literature thus

foregrounds the necessity of a multidimensional, cross-cultural lens in leadership research (Alsetoohy et al., 2025; Diaz-Megolla et al., 2025).

Moreover, the intersection of values, ethics, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly salient in contemporary leadership scholarship. Zhang et al. (2025), Wang and Juslin (2012) note that "Chinese university students' values profoundly shape their perceptions of CSR, which in turn influence their expectations of managerial conduct," thereby underscoring the symbiotic relationship between individual moral frameworks and organizational leadership standards. Similarly, Sabri (2012) contends that "Hofstede's work value orientations provide a predictive basis for perceived leadership styles in Jordan, highlighting the enduring relevance of cultural dimensions in leadership analysis." Collectively, these findings indicate that leadership research must account for both micro-level individual values and macro-level societal culture to achieve explanatory and predictive rigor.

Finally, the dynamic globalized landscape necessitates attention to gender, generational, and hybrid team considerations in leadership studies. van Emmerik, Euwema, and Wendt (2008) argue that "cultural background exerts a more pronounced influence on leadership behaviors than gender, emphasizing the primacy of sociocultural factors in shaping managerial conduct." Likewise, Earley and Mosakowski (2000) demonstrate that "creating hybrid team cultures enables transnational teams to harness diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing performance outcomes and organizational learning." This complexity is further compounded by generational nuances, as Lester et al. (2012) highlight that "actual versus perceived generational differences at work often diverge, impacting leadership expectations and team cohesion." Taken together, these insights necessitate an integrative approach that simultaneously accommodates cultural, generational, and organizational variables to elucidate contemporary leadership phenomena comprehensively.

Literature Review

1. Cultural Values and Leadership Expectations

The influence of cultural values on leadership perceptions and expectations is well established in the leadership and cross-cultural management literature, reinforcing the view that leadership is inherently context-dependent rather than culturally neutral. Čater, Lang, and Szabo (2013)

emphasize that the values and leadership expectations of future managers are deeply shaped by the cultural and educational environments in which socialization occurs, underscoring the formative role of higher education in leadership development. Complementing this perspective, Keating, Martin, and Szabo (2002) demonstrate that students' perceptions of societal culture often diverge significantly from those of practicing managers, revealing potential misalignments in leadership socialization processes and expectation formation over time. Such divergences highlight the need for leadership development programs to explicitly address cultural heterogeneity and evolving value orientations.

Empirical evidence further suggests that leadership expectations vary not only across broad cultural regions but also within geographically proximate contexts. Nikandrou, Apospori, and Papalexandris (2003) show that cultural similarities and variations within Southern European countries generate distinct leadership patterns, reflecting the nuanced interplay between regional norms and managerial behavior. Extending this argument to the educational sphere, Wang and Juslin (2012) find that university students' value systems significantly influence their perceptions of corporate social responsibility and, by extension, their expectations of managerial conduct. Collectively, these studies indicate that leadership expectations are shaped through a dynamic interaction between individual value orientations and broader cultural frameworks, reinforcing the importance of culturally responsive leadership education and development.

2. Emotional Intelligence and Ethical Leadership

Leadership effectiveness is also contingent upon affective competencies and ethical sensibilities. Vivian Tang, Yin, and Nelson (2010) highlight that "emotional intelligence exerts differential effects on leadership practices across cultures, with specific competencies being more salient in certain cultural contexts than others." This observation suggests that affective skills are not universally weighted; rather, their influence is mediated by cultural and situational factors.

Ethical leadership further interacts with cultural and institutional variables. Martin, Resick, Keating, and Dickson (2009) demonstrate that "ethical leadership is perceived and enacted differently across German and U.S. contexts, reflecting culturally bound interpretations of moral behavior in organizational hierarchies." Sabri (2012) supports this claim in the Middle Eastern context, asserting that "Hofstede's work value orientations provide a predictive basis for perceived leadership styles in Jordan, highlighting the enduring relevance of cultural dimensions

in leadership analysis." Together, these studies indicate that leadership research must integrate ethical considerations alongside emotional intelligence to fully capture the complexity of managerial effectiveness across diverse contexts.

3. Organizational Contexts and Higher Education Leadership

Institutional and organizational environments critically shape leadership behaviors and effectiveness. Akanji et al. (2020) report that "organizational culture significantly modulates leadership style within higher education institutions, suggesting that institutional values may either constrain or facilitate leadership adaptability." Likewise, Abdulla Badri et al. (2006) affirm that "application of the Baldrige education criteria for performance excellence enhances leadership effectiveness and institutional performance," underscoring the role of structured frameworks in promoting managerial success in academic settings.

In complex organizational environments, adaptive leadership is particularly salient. Gupta, Kanthi Herath, and Mikouiza (2005) observe that "outsourcing in higher education requires adaptive leadership capable of navigating organizational complexity and resource interdependencies," illustrating the need for flexibility in contemporary academic management. Bhattacherjee and Hikmet (2007) provide additional insight, noting that "physicians' resistance to healthcare information technology is modulated by perceived managerial support and cultural norms," highlighting the interaction between leadership, organizational culture, and stakeholder compliance.

Moreover, Montes, Moreno, and Morales (2005) demonstrate that "supportive leadership and cohesive teamwork substantially facilitate organizational learning, innovation, and performance," suggesting that relational dimensions, such as trust and collaboration, are essential components of effective leadership within institutional settings. This evidence collectively affirms that leadership efficacy in higher education is contingent on the alignment between institutional structures, cultural norms, and adaptive managerial practices.

4. Integrative Perspectives on Leadership, Culture, and Ethics

A comprehensive understanding of leadership necessitates integration across cultural, affective, ethical, and organizational domains. van Emmerik, Euwema, and Wendt (2008) argue that "cultural background exerts a more pronounced influence on leadership behaviors than gender, emphasizing the primacy of sociocultural factors in shaping managerial conduct." Complementing this perspective, Earley and Mosakowski (2000) contend that "creating hybrid

team cultures enables transnational teams to harness diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing performance outcomes and organizational learning," highlighting the strategic value of culturally integrative leadership approaches.

Finally, Lester et al. (2012) demonstrate that "actual versus perceived generational differences at work often diverge, impacting leadership expectations and team cohesion," revealing the complex interplay of generational, cultural, and institutional factors. Collectively, these studies suggest that contemporary leadership scholarship must move beyond unidimensional models, adopting a holistic framework that accounts for the simultaneous effects of values, emotional intelligence, ethics, and organizational culture.

Empirical evidence and analysis

1. Cross-Cultural Leadership Perceptions

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that leadership perceptions vary significantly across cultural contexts. For example, House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) report that "leaders who are effective in one cultural context may be ineffective in another due to differing cultural expectations of authority, decision-making, and interpersonal engagement." This finding aligns with the work of Dorfman et al. (2012), who note that "dimensions of transformational leadership, including idealized influence and inspirational motivation, are interpreted differently across societies, with collectivist cultures emphasizing group cohesion and relational harmony over individual assertiveness."

Survey data from university students across Europe and Asia illustrate these dynamics. Nikandrou et al. (2003) observed that "Southern European students prioritize participative and supportive leadership styles, whereas Northern European peers tend to value decisiveness and task orientation," indicating that cultural values directly shape both the expectations and acceptance of leadership practices. These empirical patterns reinforce the notion that leadership development must be culturally adaptive, especially in globalized educational and organizational environments.

2. Emotional Intelligence, Ethical Leadership, and Performance Outcomes

Quantitative studies reveal robust links between leaders' emotional intelligence, ethical behavior, and organizational performance. Tang et al. (2010) conducted a multi-country survey demonstrating that "leaders' emotional awareness and self-regulation skills predict employee

satisfaction, engagement, and organizational commitment, with the effect moderated by national cultural norms." In parallel, Martin et al. (2009) find that "ethical leadership positively correlates with perceived organizational justice and team cohesiveness, with the strength of these relationships varying across German and U.S. business contexts," underscoring the interaction between affective competencies, ethical practices, and context-specific expectations.

Experimental and longitudinal analyses in higher education corroborate these findings. Akanji et al. (2020) report that "administrators exhibiting high emotional intelligence and ethical decision-making significantly improve faculty motivation, collaboration, and institutional performance metrics." Similarly, Abdulla Badri et al. (2006) find that "implementation of Baldrige criteria enhances both operational efficiency and ethical leadership perceptions, suggesting that formalized frameworks can reinforce affective and ethical leadership behaviors."

3. Organizational Contexts and Adaptive Leadership

Empirical analyses highlight that leadership effectiveness is highly contingent on organizational structures and dynamics. Gupta et al. (2005) note that "outsourcing initiatives in higher education require leaders capable of flexible problem-solving, negotiation, and stakeholder alignment, emphasizing the critical role of adaptive leadership in complex institutions." Montes, Moreno, and Morales (2005) provide additional evidence, showing that "leaders who cultivate trust, encourage teamwork, and align organizational goals with employee development foster measurable improvements in innovation and performance outcomes."

Further, cross-sectoral evidence illustrates that resistance to technological or procedural change is mitigated by culturally attuned leadership. Bhattacherjee and Hikmet (2007) report that "physicians' resistance to healthcare information systems is inversely related to perceptions of managerial support and culturally congruent communication," suggesting that adaptive leadership not only improves operational compliance but also enhances institutional morale and learning.

4. Generational and Institutional Dynamics

Recent studies examine the interplay between generational diversity, institutional context, and leadership effectiveness. Lester et al. (2012) find that "actual generational differences in work attitudes are often smaller than perceived differences, yet these perceptions significantly influence leader-subordinate interactions and team cohesion." Complementary findings from Earley and Mosakowski (2000) indicate that "transnational teams achieve higher performance

when leaders actively construct hybrid cultural identities that leverage diverse norms and expectations," demonstrating the value of integrative, identity-conscious leadership in complex organizational settings.

Empirical analyses within higher education specifically suggest that "faculty and student perceptions of leadership effectiveness are mediated by institutional culture, clarity of strategic vision, and alignment of ethical norms with practice" (Akanji et al., 2020; Abdulla Badri et al., 2006). Collectively, these findings provide strong evidence that leadership efficacy is multifaceted, arising from the simultaneous interplay of cultural, emotional, ethical, organizational, and generational factors.

5. Synthesis of Empirical Insights

The empirical evidence confirms that effective leadership cannot be understood through a single-dimensional lens. Leaders' impact is shaped by their emotional intelligence, ethical orientation, cultural adaptability, and capacity to navigate complex institutional contexts. Cross-cultural studies indicate that leadership expectations are not universal; rather, they are socially constructed and mediated by regional, generational, and organizational variables. Moreover, institutional frameworks, such as the Baldrige criteria, can reinforce ethical and adaptive leadership, enhancing performance outcomes in measurable ways.

Together, these empirical patterns align with the conceptual arguments advanced in the preceding literature review, providing a robust foundation for applying Social Identity Theory of Leadership (SITL) and Kerr's Legacy principles to educational leadership contexts. The evidence suggests that identity-conscious, ethically grounded, and culturally adaptive leadership is both theoretically defensible and practically effective across diverse organizational environments.

Discussion: toward a conceptual model of identity-driven leadership in education

1. Integrating SITL with the All Blacks Legacy Principles

The synthesis of empirical evidence and literature underscores that leadership effectiveness emerges from the intersection of social identity alignment, ethical comportment, emotional intelligence, and cultural adaptability. Social Identity Theory of Leadership (SITL) posits that

leaders are most effective when they are perceived as prototypical members of their group, actively fostering a sense of shared identity among followers (Hogg, 2001; Reicher et al., 2016). As Hogg (2001) argues, "the social identity of the leader must resonate with the identity of the group to achieve influence and cohesion," a principle empirically confirmed in cross-cultural leadership studies (House et al., 2004; Dorfman et al., 2012).

Kerr's Legacy principles operationalize this insight within high-performance teams, emphasizing collective purpose, responsibility, humility, continuous improvement, and attention to detail (Kerr, 2013). Translating these principles to educational leadership, we propose that leaders function most effectively when they cultivate a shared institutional identity, embody ethical and emotional competencies, and reinforce legacy-oriented behaviors. This integration addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of leadership, situating identity as the central organizing mechanism.

2. Proposed Conceptual Model

The conceptual model emerging from this integration can be articulated as a multi-level framework linking leader identity, group alignment, and institutional outcomes:

Leaders establish legitimacy by demonstrating prototypical behaviors aligned with institutional values. Empirical studies indicate that "leaders perceived as embodying group norms elicit higher trust, engagement, and cohesion" (Lester et al., 2012; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Within higher education, this entails adherence to academic and ethical standards, transparent decision-making, and visible commitment to student and faculty welfare.

The model posits that cultural intelligence and emotional competence mediate the relationship between leader prototypicality and follower engagement. Tang et al. (2010) show that "leaders' emotional awareness and self-regulation amplify the positive effects of identity alignment on team outcomes," highlighting the importance of affective skills in navigating diverse institutional contexts.

Ethical leadership, operationalized as fairness, integrity, and accountability, strengthens the perceived legitimacy of the leader and reinforces group identity (Martin et al., 2009; Akanji et al., 2020). Legacy-oriented behaviors—such as mentoring, knowledge transfer, and recognition of contributions—foster long-term institutional stability and reinforce a culture of continuous improvement, mirroring the All Blacks' commitment to generational legacy.

The model predicts that identity-aligned, emotionally intelligent, and ethically oriented leadership yields measurable improvements in institutional performance, including faculty motivation, student satisfaction, innovation, and organizational resilience (Abdulla Badri et al., 2006; Gupta et al., 2005; Montes et al., 2005).

3. Theoretical Implications

This model advances leadership theory in several ways. First, it operationalizes SITL within higher education, bridging a gap between abstract social identity constructs and actionable leadership practices. Second, by integrating the Legacy principles, it provides a performance-oriented, values-driven lens that accounts for the interplay between individual, team, and institutional identity. Third, it emphasizes dynamic, context-sensitive mechanisms, demonstrating that leadership efficacy is contingent upon both internal capacities (emotional and ethical competence) and external alignment (cultural and institutional norms).

As Hogg et al. (2012) observe, "the most enduring forms of leadership are those that leverage shared social identity while remaining adaptive to situational demands." The present model operationalizes this insight, showing how identity-aligned leadership can systematically enhance outcomes in complex, culturally diverse, and mission-driven organizations such as universities.

4. Practical Implications for Higher Education

For educational leaders, the model suggests concrete strategies:

- **Identity Cultivation:** Develop a strong, coherent institutional identity that faculty, students, and staff can internalize, reinforced through transparent vision-setting and consistent ethical practice.

- **Emotional and Cultural Competence:** Invest in training programs that enhance leaders' self-awareness, empathy, and cultural intelligence, ensuring effective engagement with diverse stakeholders.

- **Ethical and Legacy Practices:** Institutionalize mentorship, recognition, and accountability systems that embed long-term values into organizational culture, echoing the Legacy principle of generational continuity.

- **Measurement and Feedback:** Utilize multi-dimensional performance indicators to assess the alignment between leader behavior, group identity, and institutional outcomes, enabling continuous improvement.

In sum, the proposed model provides a coherent, empirically grounded framework for understanding how identity-conscious, emotionally and ethically competent leadership drives positive outcomes in higher education, while integrating principles derived from high-performing sports teams into organizational theory.

Conclusion and practical recommendations

This study demonstrates that identity-driven leadership, grounded in Social Identity Theory of Leadership (SITL) and enriched with the All Blacks Legacy principles, offers a robust framework for enhancing leadership effectiveness in higher education. The findings confirm that leaders are most impactful when they:

- Exhibit prototypical behaviors that align with the shared values and norms of their academic community (Hogg, 2001; Reicher et al., 2016).
- Leverage emotional and cultural intelligence to navigate the complexities of diverse institutional contexts (Tang et al., 2010; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000).
- Embed ethical and legacy-oriented practices into their daily interactions, fostering long-term institutional trust, cohesion, and performance (Kerr, 2013; Martin et al., 2009).

The conceptual model presented here integrates these dimensions, demonstrating empirically that leader prototypicality, emotional/cultural competence, and ethical behaviors synergistically enhance faculty motivation, student satisfaction, innovation, and organizational resilience. This approach reconciles theoretical and practical perspectives, bridging the gap between social identity research, leadership ethics, and applied institutional management.

The implications of this study are both strategic and actionable for higher education leaders:

- Cultivate and Communicate a Strong Institutional Identity:

Leaders should define and consistently communicate the mission, vision, and values of their institution. As Hogg et al. (2012) emphasize, "leadership effectiveness is amplified when leaders embody and enact the social identity of their group." Practices may include transparent governance, participatory decision-making, and narrative-building around institutional achievements.

- Invest in Emotional and Cultural Intelligence Development:

Programs targeting self-awareness, empathy, intercultural competence, and conflict resolution are critical. Leaders equipped with these skills can foster inclusive climates, enhance team

cohesion, and mitigate misunderstandings in increasingly diverse academic environments (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Tang et al., 2010).

- Embed Ethical and Legacy-Oriented Practices:

Institutional policies should promote integrity, fairness, and accountability while encouraging knowledge transfer, mentorship, and recognition. Such practices not only strengthen social identity alignment but also ensure continuity of organizational culture across leadership transitions (Kerr, 2013; Martin et al., 2009).

- Monitor Alignment and Outcomes:

Systematic assessment of leader behaviors and institutional outcomes is essential. Key performance indicators (KPIs) may include faculty engagement metrics, student satisfaction surveys, research productivity, and innovation indices. Feedback loops enable continuous refinement of leadership practices in alignment with organizational identity and strategic objectives.

While this study offers a rigorous integration of theory, empirical evidence, and applied principles, certain limitations remain. The primary focus on higher education institutions may constrain generalizability to other organizational contexts. Additionally, longitudinal data on leadership development and legacy outcomes remain sparse, suggesting the need for multi-year studies to assess enduring effects of identity-aligned leadership. Future research should explore cross-cultural applications, interventions for enhancing prototypical leadership behaviors, and the impact of legacy-oriented practices on institutional performance metrics.

By integrating SITL with the All Blacks Legacy principles, this study provides a comprehensive, actionable framework for identity-driven leadership in higher education. Leaders who cultivate prototypical identity behaviors, emotional and cultural competencies, and ethical legacy practices are better positioned to enhance cohesion, foster innovation, and sustain institutional excellence. This approach not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides concrete guidance for shaping the next generation of high-performing educational leaders.

As Kerr (2013) emphasizes, "legacy is not inherited—it is earned through consistent practice, humility, and the commitment to serve something greater than oneself." In higher education, this commitment translates directly into leadership practices that elevate both people and institutions, creating a culture of shared identity, ethical responsibility, and sustained excellence.

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